

Info minister defends draft media regulation law, welcomes remarks

Penalties only on writers, do not include editors or publications



KUWAIT: Information Minister Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi addresses a meeting of members of the media on a new draft media regulation law on Sept 25, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Faten Omar and B Izzak

KUWAIT: Information Minister Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi on Monday defended a new draft information law aimed at regulating the media industry in the country and welcomed all remarks from journalists, editors and others to improve the draft before finalizing it. The minister said penalties, in most cases, are personal and will not affect editors-in-chief of publications or automatically lead to closing those publications or suspending their licenses.

Mutairi was speaking at a meeting of members of the media to explain the draft law. He emphasized the panel discussion reflects the belief of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah that the media belongs to the people. The minister added authorities are ready to hear all remarks in a bid to develop the media industry in the country in the best way.

Mutairi said the draft law has undergone two of three phases. In the first, authorities compiled challenges and problems facing the media field, and in the second, the ministry contacted all official bodies related to the draft. The ministry started the third phase on Monday to hear from the media industry. Mutairi pointed out the draft law includes nine chapters and 104 articles, calling on media representatives to make suggestions and comments on the draft law for two weeks on the ministry's website.

Mutairi said the most important provisions in the draft law is the one governing penalties related to banned actions, adding that the penalty related to crimes of abusing the Almighty is a prison term of up to one year and a fine not exceeding KD 19,000, adding this penalty does not apply to editors. It also calls for only suspending the license of the publication and not to shut it.

The minister said the second part is for offending HH the Amir, and the penalty in the proposed law is a prison sentence of up to one year and a fine between KD 5,000 and KD 20,000, and it does not apply to editors. The same applies to violations calling to overthrow the government, in which writers will be penalized and not editors-in-chief or publications, the minister said.

Penalties for violators calling for immoral acts or defaming people have been reduced to just a fine of not less than KD 3,000 and personally on violators, he said. Penalties for those who undermine Kuwait's relations with friendly countries or publish classified information banned under the law will also face a fine of not less than KD 3,000. These penalties are also personal, the minister said.

Mutairi said the new draft also regulates advertisements on social media. He said under the draft, the ministry is obliged to respond to applications for

Continued on Page 6

NEWS IN BRIEF

Speaker slams Iraqi ruling

KUWAIT: Speaker of the National Assembly Ahmad Al-Saadoun said the recent verdict of the federal supreme court of Iraq, rescinding the agreement on maritime navigation in Khor Abdullah with Kuwait, runs counter to the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council. "The verdict is also inconsistent with the previously signed agreements," Saadoun told reporters while attending a celebration hosted by the Embassy of Saudi Arabia on Sunday to mark the 93rd National Day of the Kingdom. — KUNA

Picasso painting on show in Dubai

DUBAI: A Pablo Picasso masterpiece expected to fetch at least \$120 million at auction went on show Monday in Dubai, kicking off a set of rare viewings outside the United States. "Femme a la montre", the 1932 portrait of Marie-Therese Walter, Picasso's "golden muse", is being exhibited for two days before heading to Hong Kong and London. — AFP (See Page 12)

Drug may have mutated virus

PARIS: An anti-COVID drug widely used across the world may have caused mutations in the virus, researchers said on Monday, but there was no evidence that the changes had led to more dangerous variants. Pharmaceutical giant Merck's antiviral pill molnupiravir was one of the earliest treatments rolled out during the pandemic to prevent COVID becoming more severe in vulnerable people. However, a new UK-led study has shown that molnupiravir "can give rise to significantly mutated viruses which remain viable," lead author Theo Sanderson said. — AFP

Kuwait open medal account at Asiad with fencing bronze

KUWAIT: Kuwait on Monday claimed its first medal at the Asian Games held in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou, as Yousef Al-Shamlan won a bronze in the men's saber individual fencing competition, falling just short of qualifying for the finals. Shamlan's bronze opens Kuwait's medal account at the Asian Games, the country's fencing federation secretary Hamad Al-Awadhi said in a statement, citing the progress the combat sport has made at home. He expressed his satisfaction over this achievement, dedicating it to Kuwait's leaders, saying it wouldn't have been possible without their support.

This is Kuwait's first medal in fencing in the history of the country's participation in the Asian Games, from 1974. Meanwhile, Kuwait's handball team beat Thailand 49-19 in their first match at the Asian Games on Monday. Kuwait face host country China in their next Group A match. — Agencies



HANGZHOU: Bronze medalist Kuwait's Yousef Al-Shamlan poses on the podium. — AFP

Cabinet approves 2040 masterplan

KUWAIT: The Fourth Kuwait Master Plan 2040, approved by the Cabinet in its weekly meeting on Monday, reflected the country's vision and development goals in urban, economic, social and environmental policies in parallel with future population growth, a minister said on Monday. Speaking to KUNA after the meeting, Minister of State for Municipal Affairs and Minister of State for Communications Fahad Al-Shula revealed the masterplan would focus on the usage of land for private housing and investments, as well as commercial and industrial purposes.

He indicated that the expansion in such parameters also required balanced infrastructure and public utilities

that would reflect the needs in 2040. The Fourth Master Plan includes four regions, Kuwait's urban region, the northern economic region, the third southern industrial region and the fourth western region, he pointed out.

The first region would have a population of around 6,123,500 million people by 2040 with 2,968,200 employment opportunities. The northern international region would have a population of around 519,000 people, with employment opportunities for 171,800 people. The southern region would have a population of 486,000 with 157,000 chances for employment. The western resources region would have around a population of 126,000, with 180,000 jobs available. — KUNA

Egypt to hold presidential vote on Dec 10-12

CAIRO: Egypt will hold a presidential vote on Dec 10-12, election officials said Monday, at a time the Arab world's most populous country is mired in a painful economic crisis. President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, a former army chief in power for nearly a decade, has yet to formally announce his candidacy, but state-aligned media has already published messages of support from pro-government entities.

Sisi, 68, was first elected in 2014, the year after he led the ouster of late Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, and then won a 2018 vote in a landslide

against one of his own supporters. Only two other candidates have so far declared their intention to run this time, including opposition politician Ahmed Al-Tantawi. The election had initially been expected in the spring of 2024.

Some experts have said it was moved forward to schedule it ahead of a possible switch to a flexible exchange rate that could exacerbate social tensions in the country of 105 million. The vote will be held "on December 10, 11 and 12", said National Election Authority chairman Judge Walid Hassan Hamza. Hopefuls can apply from October, with the candidate list to be finalized by Nov 9. The campaign period runs until Nov 29 and the winner will be announced on Dec 18.

Farid Zahran, president of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, has also announced his intention to run. He has called for "guarantees" to ensure "democratic elections that could help choose

Continued on Page 6



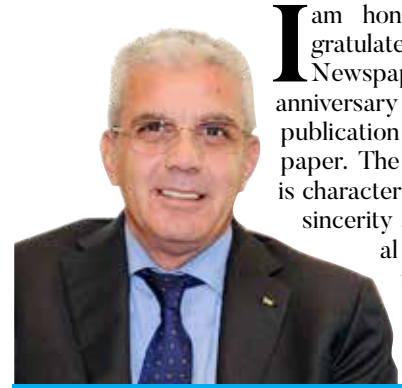
CAIRO: Judge Walid Hassan Hamza, Chairman of Egypt's National Election Authority and Vice President of the Cassation Court, speaks during a press conference on Sept 25, 2023. — AFP



Congratulatory messages pour in



The Consul General of Kuwait in Shanghai Mishaal Al-Shamali sent flowers to Kuwait Times to congratulate the newspaper on its 62nd anniversary.



Palestinian Ambassador to Kuwait Rami Tahboub

I am honored to congratulate Kuwait Times Newspaper on its 62nd anniversary since the first publication of your newspaper. The Kuwait Times is characterized by its high sincerity and exceptional media professionalism. It publishes the truth for readers, making it trustworthy. Your newspaper has always been covering and actively supporting all news related to the Palestinian cause with complete dedication. I wish you all continued success in your media path.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait enjoy deep-rooted historical ties

Embassy celebrates 93rd National Day of the Kingdom

KUWAIT: Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to Kuwait, Prince Sultan bin Saad Al Saud, on Sunday hailed as exemplary the joint action and close ties between the two brotherly countries. The state-to-state and people-to-people relationship reached a new peak thanks to the wise leadership of both countries, he said during a celebration at the Saudi Embassy in Kuwait to mark the 93rd National Day of the Kingdom.

The celebration gathered Speaker of Kuwait's National Assembly Ahmad Al-Saadoun, Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as well as a large number of officials, diplomats and public figures. "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has attained global eminence and came to the fore, leading the region to the rank of the ranks of major powers," Prince Sultan said, recalling the foundation laid by (late) King Abdulaziz Al Saud and the achievements of successors.

On Saudi-Iranian relations, he said the Kingdom was able to bring them back to normal with good will, with a view to promoting stability and progress in the Arabian Gulf region. Prince Sultan noted that all nations in the world applauded the Kingdom's efforts to facilitate the Sudanese and Yemeni peace talks. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Saudi Embassy in Kuwait celebrates the 93rd National Day of the Kingdom. The occasion attracted the presence of the Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and Speaker of Kuwait's National Assembly Ahmad Al-Saadoun, as well as a large number of officials, diplomats and public figures. — KUNA photos



Peru's ambassador visits Kuwait Times

The Ambassador of Peru to Kuwait, Carlos Velasco Mendiola visited Kuwait Times and Kuwait News on Monday. Public Relations and CSR Manager Jana Alnaqeeb took the ambassador on a tour to various departments of Kuwait Times and Kuwait News, including the newsroom, printing press, studio and the artistic co-working space of the newspaper.



Kuwait Cabinet hails Crown Prince's official visit to China

Ministers briefed on Kuwait-China MoUs



KUWAIT: Kuwait Cabinet holds weekly meeting on Monday. The meeting was chaired by Acting Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: Kuwait Cabinet touched on the results of His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's official visit to China to attend the opening ceremony of the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou and hold official talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. This came during the Cabinet's weekly meeting Monday, chaired by Acting Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

After the meeting, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Acting Minister of National Assembly Affairs and Acting Minister of Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah stated the following: The Cabinet was briefed on the memorandums of understanding signed

between Kuwait and China during His Highness the Crown Prince's visit, which are: Green, low-carbon waste recycling system; environmental infrastructure for wastewater treatment plants; electrical energy system and renewable energy development; Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port Project; Free zones and economic zones and housing development.

Moreover, the Cabinet expressed satisfaction with the results of the successful and fruitful visit, which will contribute to advancing development, achieving aspirations, and completing development projects in Kuwait. The Cabinet mourned the late Sheikh Mubarak Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, former Communications Minister



who passed away earlier this week.

Further, the Cabinet discussed the presentation submitted by the Minister of State for Municipal Affairs and the Minister of State for Communications

Fahad Al-Shula and some leaders of the Kuwait Municipality regarding the Fourth Master plan for Kuwait 2040, in which it specified future urban goals and policies. The Fourth Master Plan

includes four regions, Kuwait's urban region, the northern economic region, the third southern industrial region and the fourth western region, the minister pointed out. — KUNA

Debunked: 4 myths about journalism

By Ghadeer Ghloom and Nebal Snan

KUWAIT: Like many professions, journalism is haunted by misconceptions. In this article, we bust four common myths about the news making business.

Ghadeer Ghloom

Myth #1 — Newspapers are decaying

Newspapers are evolving, but certainly not dying. Newspapers that provide a space for creativity and innovation are able to bring about new forms of journalism. This helps them adapt to the modern era.

Myth #2 — People dislike journalists

Before joining the world of journalism, I had the stereotypical idea that journalists were disliked and was uncertain where my passion lay. But when I became a journalist for Kuwait Times, I found that this profession is actually the best fit for me due to the nature of the work, where I have the opportunity to be creative. There is no killer routine — on the contrary, it offers freedom which is the most important element for me to give more and better. There's also the opportunity to engage in various sectors, both public and private. As a journalist, when I go to cover an event, I see that unlike what I believed, people greatly respect and appreciate the work of journalism and journalists. Still, a good journalist makes a lot of enemies. People who commit wrongful actions hate journalists because journalists play a crucial role in holding them accountable. On the other hand, people who look for transparency and democracy admire journalists who pursue the truth.

Nebal Snan

Myths #3 and #4 — Everyone is a journalist these days; they're all not trustworthy

During a meeting with our Kuwait Times summer academy students, they shared that their attempts to interview passersby for the purpose of



engaging public opinion on a topic were often met with rude rejections.

It's not a surprising outcome, especially given the conservative nature of Kuwaiti society. But the students said it wasn't just that — people have come to lose trust in journalists. As we discussed the breadth of reasons behind the erosion of trust, one perspective stood out. Some TikTok influencers, claiming to be journalists, have reportedly been bombarding passersby in some areas with random questions while shoving a smartphone and mic in their face. The irresponsible attitude these influencers have, one of our students told me, has led many people to believe that journalists have no concept of empathy or decency. The misconception left many shying away from anyone claiming to be a journalist, even if they were professionally trained or affiliated with a news organization.

Now, let's be honest here, citizen journalists or influencers can provide excellent documentation of events as they happen, such as the recent hailstorm that hit Kuwait this summer. But maintaining credibility requires knowledge of a few basic principles — in this case, the sound judgement to word questions and the proper etiquette with which to approach the public.

Posting news content on TikTok or Instagram doesn't automatically make someone a journalist.

While it's true that some media organizations have fallen short of reporting fair and accurate news, journalists recognize the standards of the profession and are taught to abide by them as they work in the interest of the people. A journalist's ultimate purpose is not influencing the audience but informing and empowering them to make sense of events and issues.

Journalists are responsible for researching and verifying the information relayed to the audience and providing differing perspectives and analyses. They also use language and imagery thoughtfully while considering context. And most importantly, a journalist has an understanding and commitment to professional ethics throughout the content creation process.

Ultimately, the public is entitled to refuse to speak with media. But the next time you're approached by journalist from Kuwait Times, please trust that upholding high standards is integral to our work.

If you're an aspiring citizen journalist or social media influencer, the onus is on you to educate yourself about how journalism works — take a course (perhaps join our summer academy next year?) or read a book. At a time when the public's trust in journalists is at stake, it's best to learn the fundamentals before claiming the title.



KIPIC records 60m safe working hours at Al-Zour refinery

KUWAIT: Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC) on Monday announced the achievement of 60 million safe working hours without any accidents, loss of life, physical injuries, health or environmental damage, property damage, or interruption in operations at the Al-Zour refinery.

The official spokesman, Abdullah Al-Ajmi, said in a press statement that the achievement of this "extraordinary achievement" comes as a result of strict adherence to the highest health, safety, and environmental standards, in addition to continuous efforts and commitment to provide a safe and more productive work environment.

He explained that this achievement reflects the real commitment to the health and safety of all employees, whether they are workers or contractors, because maintaining their safety is one of the most important values and priorities. He said that recent years have been free from the loss of working days caused by accidents or injuries.

He stressed the company's keenness to en-

courage employees to comply with health, safety, and environmental requirements by organizing incentive programs under the supervision of the CEO. All the programs are aimed at providing specialized training to equip employees technically in line with work requirements, which enhances their skills and contributes to reducing work accidents.

He praised the great efforts exerted by all the work teams at Al-Zour refinery, including employees and contractors, stressing that their continuous dedication around the clock was crucial in ensuring the continuity of operations and production carried out according to the highest safety standards. — KUNA



In my view

Message to Kuwaitis



Dr Khalid A Al-Saleh

Local@kuwaittimes.com

When the doors of the banks are thrown open, and people are allowed to withdraw money without question, blessed by the National Assembly and government's approval, the banking system will inevitably collapse sooner or later. If you voice objections to this risky course of action, neither the people nor the government and National Assembly will likely accept it, potentially leading to unnecessary hostilities.

Those who genuinely care for your well-being will advise you to steer clear of topics that offer temporary gains while jeopardizing the long-term interests of our homeland, which stands as a resilient pillar for us all. The current situation bears some resemblance to the concerns voiced by patriotic economists, who caution against the haste to open budget chapters today rather than tomorrow. Several economists have expressed their apprehension regarding such proposals, driven more by the pursuit of votes than genuine concern for the country's future. These concerns have been articulated through numerous columns and interviews, yet the wave of profligate proposals continues unabated.

As a medical doctor, I can personally attest to an issue within my field: The extravagant spending on medical treatment abroad. This too often occurs under pressure from certain members of parliament, with the government's leniency in approving overseas treatment and the ease of sending citizens abroad for medical care. While this arrangement satisfies most MPs, the government, patients, and their families, the true loser is our nation, which hemorrhages nearly one billion dollars annually, much of it unnecessarily. These funds could be channeled into crucial state projects grappling with budget deficits.

Let us not forget another beneficiary of medical treatment abroad: Western hospitals that Kuwait indirectly supports, helping them offer better healthcare services to their own populations. Regarding the drawbacks of overseas medical treatment, the first casualty is the patients themselves. Many of them can receive equally effective, if not superior, treatment in Kuwait. Medical care is a comprehensive system in which psychological, social and human aspects play a pivotal role in recovery. Patients treated in their home country, surrounded by family and friends, have an entirely different experience from those isolated in a foreign environment where they may not hear the call to prayer or their native language spoken. Moreover, they often encounter numerous bureaucratic hurdles in pursuing their rights.

Another casualty in this scenario is the healthcare system that the state has invested heavily in, training numerous Kuwaiti doctors, pharmacists, technicians, nurses, administrators, researchers and others to provide excellent and world-class services. Unfortunately, confidence in these professionals has eroded, as patients increasingly seek medical care abroad.

The intention here is not to promote medical treatment in Kuwait, but rather to highlight a scientific fact supported by evidence: Many cases have seen more efficient treatment within Kuwait. However, this doesn't mean that citizens with complex cases lacking expertise in Kuwait shouldn't be sent abroad to receive specialized care, a practice embraced by all countries worldwide.

Our top priority should be the health of our citizens, rather than focusing solely on their votes, desires to travel abroad or political interests. Ensuring the well-being of our citizens entails providing them with the best opportunities for treatment and recovery. Certainly, mistakes can occur in Kuwait, as in any other country, and statistics on medical errors are available on the Internet for all countries, including the ones our patients frequently travel to. Criticizing healthcare services is a global phenomenon, but enlightened societies address these issues constructively and do not divert their resources to support another country's healthcare system.

The culture of complaining is pervasive worldwide, and we too share in it. Those who are dissatisfied often voice their concerns loudly, while the content remain silent. This ultimately results in a significant loss for our nation. This message is directed to the Kuwaiti citizen, for it is they who possess the solution. The mismanagement of funds takes various forms, and this is but one aspect of the larger issue. I leave it to the economists to explore the other dimensions of this problem, as their expertise in this field far surpasses my own.

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Abdullah Al-Salem University receives first batch of students



KUWAIT: New students receive lectures at Abdullah Al-Salem University. — KUNA photos



Kuwait denounces Quran desecration

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly denounced the desecration of Holy Quran copies in front of embassies in the Dutch city of The Hague on Monday. The Ministry warned in a statement against the recurrence of such disgraceful acts and renewed its call to the international community to put an end to these provocative and hateful actions that hide under the guise of freedom of expression. It further reaffirmed the importance of cooperation to counter practices that infringe upon religious sanctities and stand in the way of tolerance.

Qatar, Saudi fume

In another development, Qatar strongly condemned the tearing of Holy Quran copies in front of a number of state embassies in the Dutch city of The Hague, considering this vile incident a serious provocation intended to stir up public opinion and inflame the feelings of Muslims. Qatar News Agency (QNA) said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned in a statement that allowing infringement on the Holy Quran under the pretext of freedom of expression fuels hatred and violence and threatens peaceful coexistence.

The Ministry stressed Qatar's complete rejection of all forms of hate speech based on belief, race, or religion, and also warned that hate campaigns against Islam and Islamophobic speech have dangerously escalated with the continued systematic calls to target Muslims in the world. The Ministry renewed Qatar's full support for values of tolerance and its keenness to establish principles of international peace and security through dialogue and understanding.

Also, Saudi Arabia denounced the tearing of Quran pages by an anti-Muslim, far-right group in front of a number of embassies in The Hague. The Saudi Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the recurrence of such obnoxious acts is totally unacceptable and could by no means be justifiable. Such acts clearly incite hate and racism and undermine international efforts to combat extremism and encourage values of tolerance, moderation, and mutual respect among nations, the statement added. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Abdullah Al-Salem University received the first batch of its new students in various academic programs, numbering 605 students, for the academic year 2023-2024 at the campus in the Khalidiya area. The university said in a press release on Monday that the day marked the first academic day for students at a time when the university has completed all the

necessary preparations for the beginning of the academic year, which is considered a historic start for the university.

She pointed out that the university has completed all academic aspects and the preparation of classrooms to ensure an appropriate educational environment for students. The members of the council of the university conducted

an inspection tour of the classrooms to review the equipment and ensure the safety of the educational process, confirming its support and care for the students. The university called on students to adhere to the applicable university laws and regulations and adhere to the student regulations that will benefit them in their academic career. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Artists launch the first public exhibition with the participation of a group of artists and photographers under the patronage of the Minister of Information and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi. — KUNA photos



Kuwait artists, media syndicate launch first public exhibition

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti artists and media syndicate launched its first public exhibition on Sunday with the participation of a group of artists and photographers under the patronage of the Minister of Information and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi. The representative of the sponsors of the exhibition, assistant secretary general of the arts sector at the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Assistant Zamil, said in a press statement during the opening ceremony that the exhibition, which is hosted in the suburb of Abdullah Al-Salem, will last for four days.

The exhibition brings together amateurs and professionals.

Zamil expressed his admiration for the participation of a large number of artists in the first exhibition led by Dr. Nabil. This reflects the great role the group plays in supporting art and artists and organizing exhibitions and workshops. He pointed out that Kuwait was and still is proud of its culture, arts, theater, and drama.

The chairman of the Artists and Media Syndicate, Dr. Nabil Al-Failakawi, said in a statement to the Kuwaiti News Agency (KUNA) that the exhibition is being held for the first time



and will be held annually, noting its importance in providing support to artists. He added that the exhibition, which sees the participation of 115 artists with distinctive paintings, allows the artists to showcase their arts "without any idea or a specific title".

The group has about 1,500 members. More than 300 of them work in the

field of fine art. The members organize seasonal exhibitions in several fields, such as exhibitions on the brutal Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and its liberation, Jerusalem, and others. Artist Soraya Al-Baksami said in a similar statement to KUNA that the great participation of women artists in this exhibition reflects women's ability to innovate. — KUNA



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Mubarak Hospital celebrates World Pharmacist Day

KUWAIT: The director of Hawally Medical Zone, Dr. Mona Abdul Samad, stressed that the development of health services and the provision of health care to all the members of the community fall within the goals of social progress and economic development. Abdul Samad said in a press statement on Monday as Mubarak Hospital celebrated World Pharmacist Day. She added that pharmaceutical services play a key role in the prevention and treatment of diseases in the community, pointing out that pharmacists celebrated their International Day with the aim of raising awareness of medicines and their uses, as well as raising awareness of the risks of misuse of drugs.

She stated that the misuse of medicines occurs when

medicines are used in a different way than the way they were prescribed by doctors. Each drug has side effects that the doctor is aware of and takes into consideration. She emphasized the role of the pharmacist in various sectors of the ministry in Kuwait, as they provide the best care for patients.

On her part, the head of services confirmed the important role played by the pharmacist in the medical field as an important element in the medical sector. He said that pharmacists play important roles in dispensing medicines and in drug consultations. The chief specialist in the pharmacy department at Mubarak Hospital, Dr. Yusra Youssef, said the International Pharmacist's Day celebration is an important occasion for every pharmacist.

Youssef explained that this occasion is used to emphasize the positive and complementary role of the pharmacist as an effective member of the medical team and improve the quality level. She pointed to the establishment of many pharmaceutical departments within the therapeutic services provided by the Ministry of Health amid its keenness to provide medicines and to keep pace with the latest developments. — KUNA

Arabs slam Zionist mosque incursions

CAIRO: The Arab Parliament has condemned the incursion of Zionist forces into Al-Aqsa Mosque and the provocative practices that violated its sanctity and those of Islamic cemeteries. In a statement, the Parliament denounced the violation of the Holy Ibrahim Shrine as they prevented worshippers from entering, saying that the operation violates the freedom of prayer.

The statement also condemned the "aggressive attack" on the Noor Shams camp in Eastern Tulkarm City, which resulted in the martyrdom of two young men and the destruction of the camp's infrastructure, in addition

to increasing brutal attacks on citizens of the Gaza Strip. The Arab Parliament considered the attacks war crimes and crimes against humanity, stressing that "the Zionist violations are an invitation to provoke more violence and complicate the conflict."

It called on the international community, the UN Security Council, law, and humanitarian institutions to practice more pressure on Zionists to stop its continuous attacks and provide international protection to the Palestinian people. It called also for stopping all practices and violations against Al-Aqsa Mosque, respecting its sanctity, and respecting the authority of the Jerusalem Endowments Administration. The statement reaffirmed that Al-Aqsa Mosque, with its entire area of 144,000 square meters, is a pure place of worship for Muslims and under Jordanian custodianship. — KUNA



Thousands of Sudanese in limbo at Egypt border

US Abrams battle tanks arrive in Ukraine: Zelensky

Page 6

Page 7



KORNIDZOR: A refugee carrying a child speaks with a policeman upon his arrival with his family and after crossing the border to Armenia.



NAKHCHIVAN: An image provided by Azerbaijani Presidency on Sept 25, 2023, shows Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (left) and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, taking part in the opening ceremony of a military complex. — AFP photos

Turkey, Azerbaijan leaders meet as thousands flee to Armenia

Moscow slams Pashinyan for 'trying to destroy' ties

GORIS: Thousands of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh streamed into Armenia on Monday, as the leaders of Azerbaijan and ally Turkey hailed Baku's victory over the rebel enclave at a summit. While Azerbaijan showcased its regional alliances, Russia hit back at embattled Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan after he blamed Moscow for the swift defeat of the breakaway territory.

Several days after the fighting, the first refugees arrived in Armenia on Sunday and 6,650 people have so far entered, Yerevan said on Monday. AFP reporters saw the refugees crowding into a humanitarian hub set up in a local theatre in the city of Goris to register for transport and housing. "We lived through terrible days," said Anabel Ghulasyan, 41, from the village of Rev, known as Shalva in Azeri. She arrived in Goris with her family by minibus, carrying her belongings in bags.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought two wars in the last three decades over Nagorno-Karabakh, a majority ethnic Armenian enclave within the internationally recognized border of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan launched a lightning operation on September 19 to seize control of the territory, forcing the separatists to lay down their arms under the terms of a ceasefire agreed the following day. It followed a nine-month blockade of the region by Baku that caused shortages of key supplies.

The separatists have said 200 people were killed in last week's fighting. Baku announced two of its soldiers also died when a mine hit their vehicle on Sunday. Azerbaijan's state media said officials held a second round of peace talks with Nagorno-Karabakh's ethnic Armenian community aimed at "reintegrating" them. But on the road heading to Armenia, more and more residents from the region appeared to be trying to get out as the witnesses said cars were snarling up in traffic.

At the refugee center in Goris, Valentina Asryan, a 54-year-old from the village of Vank who fled with her grandchildren, said her brother-in-law was killed and several other people were injured by Azerbaijani fire. "Who would have thought that the 'Turks' would come to this historic Armenian village? It's incredible," she said, referring to the Azerbaijani forces. She was being housed temporarily in a hotel in Goris and had "nowhere to go".

'Huge mistake'

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan lauded Baku's "historic success" at a meeting with Azerbaijan's leader Ilham Aliyev in the country's western exclave of Nakhichevan. "The window of opportunity has opened to settle the situation in the region. This opportunity must not be missed," Erdogan said. Ali-

yev vowed that the rights of ethnic Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh region would be "guaranteed". "Karabakh's residents — regardless their ethnicity — are citizens of Azerbaijan," he said.

Armenia's premier on Sunday sought to deflect blame for the outcome on long-standing ally Russia, signaling a breakdown in the countries' security pact. In nationally televised comments, the Armenian leader said the security agreements between the two countries had proved "insufficient", suggesting he would seek new alliances. Moscow on Monday slammed Pashinyan's comments in an angry broadcast. "The leadership in Yerevan is making a huge mistake by deliberately trying to destroy Armenia's multifaceted and centuries-old ties with Russia," Russia's foreign ministry said. "It is an attempt to absolve himself of the responsibility for the failures in domestic and foreign policy."

Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) — a Russian-dominated group comprising six post-Soviet states that had pledged to protect each other if attacked. Russia, bogged down in its own war in Ukraine, refused to come to Armenia's aid, arguing that Yerevan had recognized the disputed region as part of Azerbaijan.

Now, Russian peacekeepers — six of whom died in the recent fighting — are helping Azerbaijan dis-

arm the Karabakh rebels. The European Union and the United States — which have been mediating between Azerbaijan and Armenia in recent months — have struggled to have an impact. Top US aid official Samantha Power arrived in Yerevan on Monday to stress Washington's "strong support and partnership with Armenia". Brussels said it will play host to senior envoys from Azerbaijan and Armenia on Tuesday, along with heavyweights France and Germany.

'Accept our citizenship'

Pashinyan is under pressure at home from thousands of Nagorno-Karabakh supporters who have been rallying and blocking roads in Yerevan since Wednesday's ceasefire deal. They plan more disruptions over three days starting Monday. Meanwhile in Azerbaijan's second city Ganja locals reveled in their government's victory. "If Armenians leave Karabakh, it's okay, if they stay it's very beautiful for them, if they accept our citizenship," Shemil Valiyev, a 40-year-old merchant, told AFP.

He stood at a bus stop with posters of a young Azerbaijani soldier killed in the 2020 war. Ramin Najafov, 44, echoed his view. "It will be good if they all leave Karabakh, it's also good if they stay and take the citizenship," he said. "Otherwise we'll have again the problems." — AFP

Mafia boss Messina Denaro dies, taking his secrets with him

ROME: Sicilian Mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro, captured in January after three decades on the run, died on Monday in hospital in central Italy, taking to the grave the secrets of his brutal reign. The 61-year-old had been treated for colon cancer while detained in a high-security jail in L'Aquila but was moved last month to hospital after his condition deteriorated.

L'Aquila mayor Pierluigi Biondi confirmed the mobster's death in hospital overnight "following a worsening of his illness". His death "puts the end to a story of violence and blood", Biondi said and thanked prison and hospital staff for their "professionalism and humanity". It was "the epilogue of an existence lived without remorse or repentance, a painful chapter in the recent history of our nation", the mayor added.

Messina Denaro was one of the most ruthless bosses in Cosa Nostra, the real-life Sicilian crime syndicate depicted in the Godfather movies. He was convicted of involvement in the murder of anti-Mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992 and in deadly bombings in Rome, Florence and Milan in 1993.

One of his six life sentences was for the kidnapping and subsequent murder of the 12-year-old son of a witness in the Falcone case. "No-one should be denied prayers. But I cannot say I'm sorry," Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said of the mobster's death.

'Truth and justice'

Messina Denaro disappeared in the summer of 1993 and spent the next 30 years on the run as the Italian state cracked down on the Sicilian mob. But he remained at the top of Italy's most-wanted list and increasingly became a figure of legend. It was his decision to seek treatment for his cancer that led to his capture. He was arrested on January 16, 2023, when he visited a health clinic in Palermo.

He was initially treated in his jail cell, but was moved to the inmates' ward of the hospital in L'Aquila in August, where he remained under heavy security. Since Friday night, he had been reported to have been in an "irreversible coma". Medics had stopped feeding him and he had asked not to be resuscitated, Italian media reports said. His arrest may have brought some relief for his victims, but the mob boss always maintained his silence.

In interviews in custody after being arrested, Messina Denaro even denied he was a member of the Cosa Nostra. "Unfortunately, his capture did not help the



The latest picture of Matteo Messina Denaro captured in January after three decades on the run. — AFP

search for truth and justice," Borsellino's brother, Salvatore, told LaPresse news agency. After a routine autopsy, Messina Denaro's body is expected to be transferred to his hometown of Castelvetro in western Sicily. But there will likely be no funeral, religious or otherwise, as police normally ban such ceremonies for mafia bosses. The Corriere della Sera newspaper had previously reported that Messina Denaro could be buried in the family tomb, alongside his father, Don Ciccio.

Don Ciccio was also head of the local clan. He was said to have died of a heart attack while on the run, his body left in the countryside, dressed for the funeral. After Messina Denaro went on the run, there was intense speculation that he had gone abroad — and he probably did. But in the months before his capture, he had been staying near his hometown. Castelvetro mayor Enzo Alfano said he hoped the "suffocating cloud" hanging over his town would now lift. "It will take decades to eradicate the mentality, the sometimes rampant culture of lawlessness, of impunity" that Messina Denaro "cultivated for so long", he said.

Investigators had been combing the Sicilian countryside for Messina Denaro for years, searching for hideouts and wiretapping members of his family and his friends. They were heard discussing the medical problems of an unnamed person who suffered from cancer, as well as eye problems — a person who detectives became sure was Messina Denaro. They used a national health system database to search for male patients of the right age and medical history, and eventually closed in. — AFP

Officials detained as Libya inquires into flood disaster

TRIPOLI: Libya's prosecutor general has ordered the arrest of eight officials as part of his inquiry into the recent flood disaster that killed thousands, his office said on Monday. The flash flood, which witnesses likened to a tsunami, broke through two ageing dams on September 10 after a hurricane-strength storm lashed the area around Derna, a port city in Libya's east.

The officials are suspected of "bad management" and negligence, among other offences, a statement from the prosecutor general's office said, adding that seven of them served currently or previously in offices responsible for water resources and dam management. "The mistakes that they made" and their "negligence in the matter of disaster prevention" contributed to the catastrophe, the statement charged.

Derna's mayor Abdulmonem al-Ghathithi, sacked after the flood, is among the detainees. Almost 3,900 people died in the disaster, according to the latest official toll, and international aid groups have said 10,000 or more people may be missing. After opening a probe, Libya's prosecutor general Al-Seddik al-Sur said more than a week ago that the two dams

upstream from Derna had been cracked since 1998.

Years of conflict

But repairs begun by a Turkish company in 2010 were suspended after a few months when Libya's 2011 revolution flared, and the work never resumed, the prosecutor said, vowing to deal firmly with those responsible. According to his office, the investigation is focused on a dam maintenance contract reached between the Turkish firm and Libya's water department.

The 2011 NATO-backed revolt toppled long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi, leading to more than a decade of start-stop conflict in the oil-rich country. Libya is now divided between an internationally-recognized Tripoli-based administration in the west — to which Sur belongs — and another in the flood-struck east backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

Eastern forces years ago launched a failed assault on the capital which ended in a 2020 ceasefire. Since then a period of relative stability has held and allowed war-ravaged Libya to try to rebuild. After the flood, hundreds of protesters rallied in Derna on September 18, accusing eastern authorities of neglect and calling for "a speedy investigation and legal action" against those responsible for the disaster. Protesters later torched the home of Derna's mayor, Ghathithi, and the eastern administration dissolved Derna's municipal council. — AFP



DERNA: People sit among the rubble in Libya's eastern city of Derna. — AFP

International

US Abrams battle tanks arrive in Ukraine: Zelensky

Kyiv claims to have killed commander of Russia's Black Sea fleet



ODESA: This handout combination of pictures taken and published by the Emergency Service of Ukraine shows the seaport and hotel "Odessa" before (L) and after (R) a Russian attack in southern Ukraine. — AFP photos



A woman talks on a mobile phone next to an industrial building damaged after a Russian attack in the Odesa region.

KYIV: Ukraine has received US Abrams battle tanks, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced Monday, boosting Kyiv's forces as they seek to break through heavily-fortified Russian defensive lines. The announcement came just after Ukraine claimed it had killed the commander of Russia's Black Sea fleet in a missile strike on Moscow's naval headquarters in Crimea last week in what would be a major embarrassment for Russia.

"Abrams are already in Ukraine and are preparing to reinforce our brigades," Zelensky said on social media. Ukraine has repeatedly asked for more Western weapons, including longer-range missiles, to help break through Russian positions and launch strikes deep within Russian-controlled territory. Zelensky did not elaborate on how many tanks had arrived, nor on how long it would take for them to be deployed to the front line.

"I am grateful to our allies for fulfilling the agreements. We are looking for new contracts and expanding the geography of supply," he said. Washington had promised to provide 31 Abrams tanks to Kyiv at

the start of the year, part of more than \$43 billion in security assistance pledged by the United States since Moscow invaded in February last year. Russia has repeatedly denounced the arms shipments to Ukraine, arguing they "prolong" the conflict and risk causing it to spiral out of control.

'Beyond repair'

Moments before Zelensky's announcement, Ukraine claimed it killed the commander of Russia's Black Sea fleet in a missile strike on Moscow's naval headquarters in annexed Crimea on Friday. The strike dealt a serious blow to Moscow, which has suffered a string of attacks on the strategically important port of Sevastopol over the past months.

"Thirty-four officers were killed, including the commander of the Black Sea fleet. Another 105 occupiers were wounded," Ukraine's special forces said in a statement. The attack sent plumes of black smoke spiraling over the building in central Sevastopol, the largest city in the Crimean peninsula which was annexed by

Russia in 2014. "The headquarters are beyond repair," the special forces added in the statement.

Russia's defense ministry said on the day of the attack that one serviceman was missing, without providing any further detail. Ukrainian and Russian attacks in and around the Black Sea have increased since Moscow withdrew from an accord that allowed safe passage to civilian cargo ships from three Ukrainian ports. Ukraine said last week it struck a military air base near the Crimean town of Saky, while Kyiv's forces have repeatedly targeted the only bridge that connects the peninsula to the Russian mainland.

Hotel strike

Russia launched attacks on Ukraine Sunday night, with officials reporting at least four deaths in air strikes in the southern Kherson region and the grain-exporting port of Odesa. Since July, when Moscow pulled out of a UN-brokered deal allowing safe grain shipments via the Black Sea, Russia has ramped up attacks on Ukraine's grain-exporting infrastructure.

"A Russian missile hit a warehouse where grain was stored," said Odesa regional governor Oleg Kiper, confirming later that two bodies had been found under the rubble. A hotel near the port was also damaged overnight, officials said, sharing photos of a high-rise building engulfed in flames.

A separate attack on the southern Ukrainian city of Beryslav killed two people. "A 73-year-old man and a 70-year-old woman sustained life-threatening injuries," regional governor Oleksandr Prokudin. The Russian military said in a daily briefing that it launched a strike against Ukrainian facilities used to train "sabotage groups" and "foreign mercenaries", without elaborating. "All facilities were hit. The purpose of the strike was achieved," it said.

The Ukrainian military said Russia directed 19 drones and two Onyx supersonic missiles at Odesa and fired 12 Kalibr cruise missiles. The Ukrainian air force said the Kalibrs were launched from a ship and a submarine. They claimed all 19 Shahed drones and 11 Kalibrs were shot down. — AFP

One year on, Nord Stream sabotage remains a mystery

FRANKFURT: The Sept 26, 2022 explosions that damaged the Nord Stream pipelines cut off a major route for Russian gas exports to Europe and fueled geopolitical tensions already running high over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. But one year on, and despite investigations in three countries, the question of who was responsible for the brazen act of sabotage remains unanswered. In the absence of hard evidence, different theories have emerged pointing the finger at Ukraine, Russia or the United States. All have denied involvement.

What happened?

Late last September, a series of underwater blasts ruptured three of the four pipelines that make up Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2, spewing gas into the Baltic Sea. Russian energy giant Gazprom had in August al-

ready halted flows through Nord Stream 1, the main conduit for Russian natural gas to Germany, amid disputes over the war in Ukraine.

The newly completed Nord Stream 2 twin pipelines never opened as Berlin pulled the plug on the project days before Russian troops entered Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The 10-billion-euro (\$10.6 billion) Nord Stream 2 had long been opposed by Ukraine, the US and eastern European countries who feared it would give Russia too much influence over Germany's energy security.

Tight-lipped investigators

Because the leaks occurred in their exclusive economic zones, Denmark and Sweden opened probes into the attack, as did Germany. All three countries have kept a tight lid on their investigations, which analysts say is unsurprising given the potential diplomatic fallout of what they might uncover.

Sweden's public prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist has said the "primary assumption is that a state is behind it". Sweden was now "in the final phase of the investigation", he told AFP last week. German federal prosecutors searched a sailing yacht in January that may have been used to transport the explosives. They seized objects from the vessel and found traces of explosives.

the media sector and enhancing its role on Arab and global stages.

During the discussion session, editors-in-chief and media professionals stressed the importance of access to information from relevant government agencies. They called for greater media freedom and support for Kuwaiti art to regain its former prominence. Media representatives also requested assistance from the ministry of information to encourage talented young Kuwaiti journalists.

Additionally, they emphasized the need to verify information accuracy and maintain the confidentiality of government agreements to prevent leaks. They said if such agreements were leaked to international media outlets, local news sources should have the right to publish them. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of online media outlets attributing the source of their news and protecting copyright of published articles.

year, the International Monetary Fund approved a \$3 billion loan for Egypt conditioned on "a permanent shift to a flexible exchange rate regime".

"The IMF agreement had certain conditions that Egypt has not fulfilled, chief among which was the full flotation of the pound," Sayyid told AFP, adding that this led to "two IMF visits being postponed this year". The IMF has not issued its first review of the program or released the second tranche of the loan, both of which were originally expected last March. The government has kept the exchange rate pegged at around 31 Egyptian pounds to the dollar since January.

But prices have continued to skyrocket as a parallel exchange market surged amid a severe foreign currency shortage. Annual inflation reached an all-time high for the third month in a row in August, hitting 39.7 percent. Sisi's government has announced a series of social protection measures and raises to the minimum wage in attempts to cushion the economic blow. "The flotation will have a devastating impact on the majority of Egyptians, so the decision came to bring the elections forward and implement the economic measures after," Sayyid said. — AFP

They have refused to comment on media speculation that a team of five men and one woman chartered the "Andromeda" sailing yacht from Rostock port to carry out the operation. "The identity of the perpetrators and their motives" remain the subject of ongoing investigations, the federal prosecution's office told AFP.

Ships and CIA tip-offs

Investigative journalists have been carrying out their own research to solve the Nord Stream whodunnit, leading to sometimes sensational — if unconfirmed — reports. Dutch military intelligence warned the CIA of a Ukrainian plan to blow up the pipelines three months before the attack, Dutch broadcaster NOS and Germany's Die Zeit and ARD said in June. The Washington Post made a similar claim.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly denied his country was behind the sabotage. "I would never do that," he told Germany's Bild newspaper in June, adding that he would "like to see proof". The New York Times wrote in March that US officials had seen intelligence indicating that a "pro-Ukrainian group" was responsible, without Zelensky's knowledge.

German media have focused their attention on the "Andromeda", with reporters from Der Spiegel maga-



This file handout picture shows the gas leak at the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline as it is seen from the Danish Defense's F-16 rejection response off the Danish Baltic island of Bornholm. — AFP

zine and broadcaster ZDF recreating the journey they believe was made by the six-person crew. According to their reporting, a forged passport used to hire the sailboat leads back to a Ukrainian soldier while the charter fee was paid by a company registered in Poland with ties to a woman in Kyiv. — AFP

Info minister defends draft...

Continued from Page 1

media licenses, and if it does not answer, the license is considered granted. Also, media outlets are not required to have offices to operate. He said the ministry is studying the establishment of media cities. The minister also listened to comments and questions by reporters and editors about the new draft.

Mutairi highlighted some of the positive aspects of the draft law, including the elimination of the harshest punishments and the introduction of clear articles. The minister also announced an upcoming media forum at local, Gulf and international levels aimed at developing

Egypt to hold presidential vote...

Continued from Page 1

the right candidate to lead Egypt out of the economic crisis caused by the ruling government". Opposition politician Hisham Kassem had also been "a potential presidential candidate", his Free Current political coalition said last week. But he is barred from running by a six-month prison sentence for defamation and contempt of officials.

"The elections were likely brought forward for reasons related to the economic situation," according to Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, professor of political science at Cairo University. Egypt has battled its worst-ever economic crisis since early last year. The currency has lost half its value since March 2022 in a series of devaluations that have sent consumer prices spiraling in the import-dependent economy. Last

Indicted US senator dismisses calls to resign

NEW YORK: A powerful US senator charged with bribery and extortion after gold bars and hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash were found at his home rejected calls on Monday for him to resign. "I recognize that this will be the biggest fight yet," Democratic Senator Robert Menendez told reporters at a press conference in his home state of New Jersey. "I firmly believe that when all the facts are presented, not only will I be exonerated, but I still will be New Jersey's senior senator," Menendez said.

Menendez, 69, is accused of providing sensitive information to the Egyptian government in order to help an Egyptian-American businessman protect his monopoly. He stepped down "temporarily" as head of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee after the charges were unsealed on Friday. Menendez was defiant on Monday in his first public appearance since the indictment, insisting he had done nothing wrong and there had been a "rush to judgment".

"The allegations leveled against me are just that — allegations," he said. "The court of public opinion is no substitute for our revered justice system." "Prosecutors get it wrong some time," Menendez said. "Sadly I know that," he said in a reference to a 2015 corruption case against him which ended in a mistrial. A number of fellow Democrats, including New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, have urged Menendez to step down.

Prosecutors said they found more than a half-million dollars in cash in Menendez's New Jersey home and in his wife's safe deposit box, allegedly received from three New Jersey businessmen seeking his



UNION CITY, New Jersey: US Senator Bob Menendez speaks during a news conference at Hudson County Community College's North Hudson Campus on Sept 25, 2023. — AFP

help. Gold bars worth around \$150,000 and a luxury Mercedes Benz convertible, gifted by one of the businessmen, were also found.

Menendez, his wife, Nadine, and the three businessmen face two counts of bribery and fraud. Menendez and his wife were also charged with extortion. A senator since 2006 and before that a member of the House of Representatives for 14 years, Menendez has been a Democratic stalwart in Congress for three decades. He is up for reelection to the Senate next year. Democrats head into the 2024 elections with a narrow 51-49 majority in the Senate. — AFP

International

Thousands of Sudanese in limbo at Egypt border

Cairo's toughened visa rules create 'life-threatening delays': HRW

WADI HALFA: In the sandy courtyard of a school turned shelter in northern Sudan, two children idly pass a football back and forth. Around them, dozens of adults wait, trapped between a war and a border. There is little else to do in the border town of Wadi Halfa, where a local support group says upwards of 20,000 displaced people live in limbo, unable to cross the northern frontier into Egypt and escape the five-month war between the Sudanese army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

Of the more than five million who have been forced to flee their homes during the war, according to the United Nations, at least 323,000 have crossed into Egypt. But not everyone has made it. Aref al-Zubeir, an architect, has been in Wadi Halfa since the first month of fighting. "I lost my passport, and I've been waiting to have a new one issued since the middle of May," he told AFP at a classroom that has been turned into a temporary home for the displaced.

There, the 36-year-old sleeps on the floor, propped up only by cushions on top of a thin mat. "I sent my family ahead to Cairo. This was back when travelling was easy," he said. When the war broke out in April, only men under the age of 50 needed to apply for visas to enter Egypt — allowing many to flee in the conflict's first weeks. But in June, Cairo tightened its visa rules to include children, women and older men, which has slowed the flow of refugees across the border and kept many stuck in Wadi Halfa.

Essential goods delayed

"The most recent figures show that 8,150 people are staying in 53 shelters in Halfa," according to Oday Mohammed, 23, the coordinator of the Halfa "Emergency Room", one of many volunteer groups providing aid across Sudan. "There are many more, over 15,000, being hosted by families in local homes or renting accommodation," he said.

Those stuck in what was largely a transit town are

"in need of food, medicine, shelter and health care, as well as the central problem that they need their visas issued and passports renewed," Mohammed told AFP. According to Human Rights Watch, "without ensuring the speedy processing of visas," Egypt's toughened visa rule "violates international standards by creating unreasonable and life-threatening delays in processing asylum seekers."

Egyptian officials said at the time that they tightened the visa procedures to stop "illegal activities by individuals and groups on the Sudanese side of the border, who forged entry visas" for profit. While people find it difficult to get out, goods are slow coming in. In August, the UN refugee agency reported that hundreds of commercial trucks carrying food and hygiene products were stuck at the border waiting to cross into Sudan, causing "the delay of essential goods reaching Wadi Halfa" and other parts of Sudan.

A difficult choice

Families who grabbed whatever cash they could and fled their homes during the war quickly ran out of cash. They have since relied on mutual aid and any assistance that comes their way. The relentless gunfire, air strikes and artillery blasts that have devastated Khartoum, 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) south, have not reached the quiet of Halfa. But the war is never too far off.

Siham Saleh, a 45-year-old journalist, spends her days anxiously refreshing social media feeds on her phone for the latest news about the conflict. "Leaving was an incredibly difficult choice, but for us as journalists, it got too dangerous," she told AFP, carefully weighing each word. Journalists and activists have been routinely targeted by both sides.

Many have been forced to flee, and those who remain work largely in secret to document atrocities committed during the fighting between rival



WADI HALFA: People sit around food cooking on a bonfire at a school that has been transformed into a shelter for people displaced by conflict in Sudan on Sept 11, 2023. — AFP

generals, army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy, paramilitary commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo. "People are risking their lives. They could be targeted or detained at any point. That's why you decide to leave, and you hope maybe then you'll be safe," Saleh said.

She is among the more than 4.2 million people displaced within Sudan who, even if they have reached

relative safety, face other challenges. The war has decimated already-fragile infrastructure, shuttered 80 percent of the country's hospitals and pushed more than six million people to "the brink of famine", global humanitarian organizations said last month. Since April 15, nearly 7,500 people have died in the fighting, according to a conservative estimate from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. — AFP

Philippines removes barrier at disputed reef: Coast guard

MANILA: The Philippine Coast Guard said Monday it had removed a floating barrier at a disputed reef that was allegedly deployed to stop Filipinos accessing the traditional fishing ground. The statement was issued hours after Philippine National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano vowed to take "all appropriate actions" for the removal of barriers installed by the Chinese coast guard at Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

A 300-meter (328-yard) long floating barrier was found across the entrance of the shoal last week during a routine government resupply mission to Filipino fishermen plying the waters near the Chinese-controlled reef. It was not clear from the Philippine statement if the entire barrier had been removed from the water. A video released by the Philippine Coast Guard showed a man wearing a mask, snorkel and fins using a knife to sever a rope attached to white buoys.

Another video showed an anchor being hauled from the water into a wooden outrigger boat. The coast guard announced it had "successfully" removed the barrier "in compliance with presidential instruction". "The barrier posed a hazard to navigation, a clear violation of international law," it added.

China, which seized Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012, deploys coast guard and other vessels to patrol the fishing ground. The floating barrier prevents fishing boats from entering the shoal's shallow waters where fish are more abundant.

Philippine officials previously accused the Chinese coast guard of installing the barrier shortly be-



SOUTH CHINA SEA: A Philippine Coast Guard personnel cuts a rope attached to a floating barrier blocking the entrance to Scarborough Shoal in this handout photo taken on Sept 25, 2023. — AFP

fore the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources ship arrived at the shoal last Wednesday. Several media outlets, including AFP, were on board the BRP Datu Bankaw and saw the barrier. "We will take all appropriate actions to cause the removal of the barriers and to protect the rights of our fishermen in the area," National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano said in a statement Monday.

Ano said the Philippines condemns the installation of barriers, arguing such action "violates the traditional fishing rights of our fishermen whose rights ... have been affirmed by the 2016 Arbitral ruling". Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin hit back Monday, saying Scarborough Shoal was "an inherent part of China" and China

sives, uniforms, logistics, food reserves and equipment for barricades. "We can easily say that the equipment was destined for several hundred other assailants," Svecla added.

'Very, very tense'

In the capital, Pristina, flags flew at half-mast during an official day of mourning to honor police officer Afrim Bunjaku, killed Sunday. Questions remained, however, hours after the standoff ended. Just a handful of alleged suspects were arrested by Kosovo authorities during the clearance operation.

Asked if any assailants managed to escape from the Banjska monastery, Svecla said an "operation" was ongoing but offered no more details. On Sunday, Kurti said at least 30 heavily armed and uniformed men had barricaded themselves in at the monastery,

which was "surrounded" by police.

Newspapers in Serbia on Monday quoted comments Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic made late Sunday, denying involvement in the clashes and blaming the incident on the government in Pristina. On Monday, Vucic met Russia's ambassador to Serbia Alexander Bocan Harchenko in Belgrade, as the Kremlin warned of a "very, very tense and potentially dangerous" situation.

"The fact that provocations are very often organized against Serbs is not a secret to anyone," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called on Kosovo and Serbia to avoid any actions or language that could further inflame the situation. "The perpetrators of this crime must be held accountable via a transparent investigative process," Blinken said. — AFP



ZVECAN: Kosovo police officers display weapons and military equipment seized in the village of Banjska, in Mitrovica on Sept 25, 2023. — AFP

6 suspects in fatal clashes fled to Serbia: Kosovo

PRISTINA: Kosovo's interior minister on Monday said at least six suspected assailants accused of participating in deadly clashes in northern Kosovo on Sunday were now in Serbia and receiving treatment at a hospital. The accusation came a day after the killing of a police officer during an ambush and an ensuing firefight at a monastery near the border with Serbia marked one of the gravest escalations in Kosovo for years.

"Six wounded terrorists are being treated in the hospital of Novi Pazar and we ask Serbia to immediately hand them over to the Kosovo authorities, so they can face justice," interior minister Xhelal Svecla told reporters, referring to a city in southern Serbia.

Earlier Monday, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti said a police operation was ongoing. The site of the firefight was sealed as investigators sifted through evidence following a late-night gun battle that saw the standoff end when authorities stormed the monastery in the village of Banjska. "Many things will be resolved during the investigations," Kurti told Manuel Sarrazin, the German envoy for the Western Balkans, during a meeting on Monday.

The chaotic confrontation began when a police patrol was ambushed near Banjska early on Sunday, leaving one Kosovo law enforcement officer dead and another wounded. The gunmen fled to a nearby monastery, where they barricaded themselves in and traded gunfire with Kosovo police for hours. At least four assailants were killed in the melee.

Earlier on Monday, Svecla said authorities had already recovered "an exceptionally large number of heavy weapons, anti-infantry weapons, explo-

Biden recognizes 2 Pacific nations in move against China

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden said the United States officially recognized the Pacific nations of Cook Islands and Niue Monday, as he hosted regional leaders in a bid to wrest influence from China. The announcement came at the start of a summit with the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum, where US officials said the president was announcing a more assertive American stance in the region.

Biden said in statements that Washington recognized the Cook Islands and Niue as "sovereign and independent" states and would establish diplomatic relations with both. The move would help maintain a "free and open Indo-Pacific region," said Biden. Biden added that the deals to recognize the two nations would also help curb illegal fishing, deal with climate change in a vulnerable region and boost economic growth.

The Cook Islands and Niue together have fewer than 20,000 inhabitants but constitute a sprawling economic zone in the South Pacific. Both are self-governing nations in "free association" with New Zealand, meaning that their foreign and defense policies are in varying degrees linked to Wellington. After decades of being treated as a relative backwater, the South Pacific has become an important arena for competition between the United States and an



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden speaks during the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Summit. — AFP

increasingly assertive China. China has dramatically ramped up its economic, political and military footprint in the strategic ocean region.

There is "no question that there is some role that the PRC has played in all this," a senior White House official said on condition of anonymity, referring to China by the abbreviation of its formal name. China's "assertiveness and influence, including in this region, has been a factor that requires us to sustain our strategic focus."

The forum brings together states and territories scattered across the Pacific Ocean, from Australia to sparsely populated micro-states and archipelagos. But China's influence will be felt through the absence of the prime minister of the Solomon Islands, now closely aligned with Beijing. Manasseh Sogavare, who was in New York last week to attend the UN General Assembly, did not extend his stay in the United States. "We're disappointed that he's chosen not to come to this very special summit," another White House official said.

Biden had been due to follow up last year's inaugural summit with a meeting of Pacific leaders this May, in Papua New Guinea. But he cut short an Asia trip and returned stateside to address a debt-ceiling crisis. For the Washington summit, Biden has prepared a full program, kicking off with an afternoon of American football on Sunday. The leaders traveled by train to Baltimore, where they were guests of honor at an NFL game between the port city's Ravens and the Indianapolis Colts. Monday's agenda features meetings and a lunch with Biden. On Tuesday, the leaders will meet with top officials on climate and the economy and spend time with US lawmakers. — AFP

Business

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2023

Amazon steps up AI race with \$4bn Anthropic investment

Online retail giant enters into AI race ruled by Microsoft, Google and OpenAI

PARIS: Amazon said on Monday it would invest up to \$4 billion in AI firm Anthropic, as the online retail giant steps into an AI race dominated by Microsoft, Google and OpenAI. The success of OpenAI's ChatGPT, a chatbot released last year that is able to generate poems, essays and other works with just a short prompt, has led to billions being invested in the field. Amazon had already announced it aimed to soup up its Alexa voice assistant with generative AI, which the firm said would allow users to have smoother conversations.

San Francisco-based Anthropic is seen as a leader in the field and has its own chatbot, Claude, a competitor to ChatGPT. "We have tremendous respect for Anthropic's team and foundation models, and believe we can help improve many customer experiences, short and long-term, through our deeper collaboration," said Amazon CEO Andy Jassy.

The giant firms and wealthy investors of Silicon Valley have poured money into artificial intelligence as they seek to find a killer application to justify the

interest. ChatGPT's instant success threw much of the focus onto chatbots and sparked imitators and rivals, not least from Google with its Bard chatbot. Chinese titans Tencent and Baidu have also launched bots they claim can rival ChatGPT.

'Transformation' promise

But Monday's deal between Anthropic and Amazon is potentially less significant in the chatbot world and more important in the race to develop chips to power AI. Anthropic agreed to use Amazon's chips to develop its next models and the two firms said they would collaborate on developing the next set of chips. All firms in the space are looking to wean themselves off the chips made by market leader NVIDIA, said Nick Patience, lead AI research analyst at S&P Global Market.

"It'll be difficult for anyone to make a dent in the next 12 to 18 months," he told AFP, but tie-ups like Monday's Amazon deal could help change the picture over five years. Anthropic also agreed to use

Amazon Web Services (AWS) cloud infrastructure — the data centers that store and process data on a vast scale — for "mission critical workloads". Amazon said it would take a "minority ownership position" in the AI firm, which has already raised more than \$1 billion since it was set up in 2021.

The statement promises that "Claude", which is the name of Anthropic's chatbot and its model, will help AWS customers "of all sizes to develop new generative AI-powered applications to transform their organizations". The deal intensifies competition between Amazon and Google, which had earlier opened its cloud services to Anthropic and invested \$300 million to acquire 10 percent of the company. AI models require huge computing power so AI firms rely on data centers provided by the likes of AWS, Google Cloud and Microsoft Azure. As tech giants push their own AI ambitions, they have been increasingly looking at tie-ins with smaller AI firms — Microsoft leading the way with a multibillion-dollar investment in OpenAI. — AFP



BRÉTIGNY-SUR-ORGE, France: This picture taken on October 22, 2019, shows the logo of Amazon on a new warehouse, part of mobile robotic fulfillment systems also known as 'Amazon robotics', in Bretigny-sur-Orge, some 30kms south of Paris. — AFP

Time ticking on US deadline to avert shutdown

WASHINGTON: Four months after barely avoiding a catastrophic default, the world's largest economy is once again on the verge of a major fiscal crisis. President Joe Biden's Democrats are engaged in a bitter feud with Republican rivals in Congress over spending bills, which, if not passed into law soon, may trigger a government shutdown.

US lawmakers have until midnight on September 30 to reach an agreement, before funding for government services is due to dry up. A shutdown would put at risk the finances of hundreds of thousands of workers at national parks, museums and other sites operating on federal funding, but it could also carry significant political risk for Biden as he runs for re-election in 2024.

House Republicans failed to support the government spending levels agreed to between Biden and Speaker Kevin McCarthy, the top Republican in Congress, that would keep government gears turning, the White House has said. "A small group of extreme Republicans don't want to live up to the deal, so now everyone in America could be forced to pay the price," Biden said Saturday.

"It's time for Republicans to start doing the job America elected them to do."

Tensions are mounting around additional aid for Kyiv, after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Congress Thursday pleading for more weapons to battle Russian forces 18 months into the war.

Polish farmers warn of EU threat from Ukraine grain

GRABOWIEC, Poland: At his family farm, Wieslaw Gryn voiced support for Poland's ban on Ukrainian grain imports, but said it had not reversed a price drop that threatens his livelihood and those of other European farmers.

The issue has become a hot-button topic ahead of Poland's general election on October 15 and threatens to create a major rift between Poland and Ukraine, as well as deepening mistrust between Warsaw and the EU. "Since the start of the war in Ukraine, our situation has changed dramatically," said the 65-year-old, who grows wheat, oilseed rape, sugar beet and maize on 900 hectares in eastern Poland near the Ukrainian border.

"Following the Ukrainian grain imports, we do not have anywhere to sell our produce and the prices have fallen so much that they do not cover costs of production." The European Union lifted customs duties on Ukrainian grain in May 2022 after Russia blockaded Ukraine's Black Sea ports — the main route for its exports — following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Grain prices dropped sharply in several EU states. Since his silos are already full, Gryn has filled his garages with grain in the hope prices will go up.

'Significant losses'

Instead of being transported to markets in Africa or the Middle East as intended, much of the grain remained in Central Europe because of major logistical problems, massive fraud and a lack of sufficient surveillance. "Following the opening of the market, a large number of Polish farmers found themselves in a very difficult situation," Polish President Andrzej Duda has said.

Together with several other countries neighboring Ukraine, Poland banned imports. Brussels autho-

Both parties in the Senate support the \$24 billion aid bill. But a handful of hardline Republicans in the House of Representatives are threatening to block it.

"I am not voting for one single penny to go to a war in Ukraine," congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, a close ally of former president Donald Trump, said in a video posted on X, the former Twitter. "I am America First, I work for the United States of America. I work for the American people."

Fellow House Republican Eli Crane echoed that view. "People all over the country are so tired of funding others... We continue to spend and spend and spend, money that we don't have," he said in a video on social media.

Such bluster is putting McCarthy in a bind. "He's in a very difficult position because the holdouts keep saying to Kevin McCarthy: 'Don't bring bipartisan bills to the floor, we don't want you to use Democrat votes to try to avert a shutdown,'" House Republican Mike Turner told ABC News Sunday talk show "This Week."

Recurring spectacle

The budget vote in Congress regularly turns into a standoff, with each party using the prospect of a shutdown to obtain concessions from the other — until a solution is found at the last minute.

But this year the showdown is exacerbated by new levels of polarization on Capitol Hill. In the Senate, debate is led by two political heavyweights, Democratic majority leader Chuck Schumer and Mitch McConnell, the Republican minority leader. "Leader McConnell and I are both strongly for aid for Ukraine," Schumer told CNN Friday. "And I believe the majority of the members of both parties in the Senate agree with that." If no firm agreement is reached, lawmakers could turn to a short-term

restricted restrictions by several member states as long as transit was allowed to continue but it ordered the measures to be lifted on September 15.

Since then, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have defied Brussels by extending their embargo saying they had to protect their farmers — prompting Ukraine to seek an intervention by the World Trade Organization. Ukrainian Economy Minister Yulia Svyrydenko has said Ukrainian exporters "continue to suffer significant losses" because of the bans and voiced hope that the countries would lift their restrictions.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, has said that agreements between Poland and Ukraine after Russia's invasion "did not include a clause to abolish Polish agriculture". "Polish farming must be protected.



DOROHUSK, Poland: This picture taken on September 20, 2023 shows trains with Ukrainian grain stored in wagons covered with white tarpaulin on the second and third tracks in Dorohusk station at the Polish-Ukrainian border. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Deputy Chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus Rep. Ilhan Omar speaks during a news conference on possible government shutdown at the US Capitol in Washington, DC. — AFP

funding measure, called a continuing resolution, which would offer temporary respite to lawmakers to find common ground.

The shutdown prospect comes just four months after the debt ceiling crisis, during which the United States came dangerously close to defaulting on its debt, which could have had disastrous consequences for the American economy and beyond. As part of the deal averting default, Democrats agreed to limit certain spending in hopes the budget would be approved smoothly. "A deal is a deal," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, blaming Republicans for the risk of a "needless shutdown." If the government were to halt operations, low-income families may not receive their food aid checks, air traffic could be disrupted and national parks could close. — AFP

Taking into account the scale of the territory and the climate in Ukraine, it would have no chance to remain competitive," he said.

Following talks between Warsaw and Kyiv on the issue on Sunday, Ukrainian Agriculture Minister Mykola Solsky on Monday said that Poland had shown "maximum solidarity and obviously we all expect this will continue".

Three weeks before the elections, the issue has become particularly sensitive since the current government enjoys strong support in farming regions. Rafal Mladanowicz, who farms 160 hectares in Rzecznica in northeast Poland, said the import ban would "change nothing" since there was still a surplus of grain that had accumulated when imports were allowed. — AFP

Hard-up Indonesia traders urge TikTok sales ban

JAKARTA: As clothing seller Hendri Tanjung struggles to hawk his tunics to Indonesian buyers outside his market shop, he says customers are turning to cheaper versions on TikTok, pummeling his income.

The 35-year-old sells his wares at Tanah Abang, Southeast Asia's largest textile market, where sellers are desperately calling out to passersby. The market in the capital Jakarta is less crowded than usual, with some outlets shuttered, as many of its thousands of merchants selling products made in factories or by tailors and weavers complain about the impact of TikTok's booming e-commerce arm on their business.

"We want the government to close TikTok Shop, or at least regulate them. I feel bad for my employees," said Tanjung. Indonesians spent more money on the Chinese-owned app than anywhere else in the region over the past year, as TikTok Shop rapidly gained a substantial regional market share and millions of sellers since its 2021 launch.

But government ministers in Southeast Asia's biggest economy have threatened to ban the app outright because of its impact on local sellers, including those at Tanah Abang who rely on offline buyers. Tanjung said a tunic he sells at 60,000 rupiah (\$3.90), can be found for 40,000 rupiah on TikTok Shop, undercutting his business.



"I don't know where they source their products to sell at such low prices. Ours are our own products and we cannot sell them at that price," he said.

After a daily revenue drop of more than 80 percent from 30 million rupiah (\$1,948) to five million (\$324) in recent months, he was forced to lay off five of his 30 employees. Laws in the archipelago nation do not cover transactions through social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook or Instagram.

But President Joko Widodo said new regulation on social media transactions could come as early as Tuesday. The draft regulation, expected to be presented soon after Widodo said Monday it was "being finalized in the trade ministry", will aim to curb what Jakarta says are monopolistic practices.

Experts say such regulation would create a level playing field for local businesses. "The key is to regulate social commerce to be on par with e-commerce and traditional offline retailers," said Nailul Huda, a researcher at the Institute for Development of Economics and Finance. "The government should enhance protection for local products by tightening regulations on imported goods and offering disincentives for imports."

TikTok has criticized calls for a ban, saying it would harm Indonesian merchants and consumers. "Close to two million local businesses in Indonesia use TikTok to grow and thrive through social commerce," Anggini Setiawan, TikTok Indonesia's head of communications, told AFP earlier this month. Indonesia is TikTok's second-largest market, with 125 million users, according to company figures. It is owned by Chinese tech giant ByteDance. The country represented 42 percent of TikTok's \$4.4 billion regional gross merchandise value (GMV) last year, according to Singapore-based consultancy Momentum Works. — AFP

Business

GCC sovereign wealth funds' AUM grew to \$3.6tn: Report

KIA second largest SWF in Gulf with estimated assets of \$800bn

KUWAIT: GCC sovereign wealth funds' assets under management (AUM) have grown 70 per cent since 2018 to reach \$3.6 trillion, driven by an increase in oil and gas prices, according to a new report. This represents about 33 per cent of the world's SWF assets, the largest share of any region in the world, credit rating agency DBRS Morningstar said in a report.

The largest SWF in the Gulf, in absolute terms, is the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), with estimated assets of \$993 billion (equivalent to 320 per cent of Abu Dhabi's gross domestic product), the report said, citing data by Global SWF.

Among top SWFs in the Gulf, ADIA is followed in size by the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), with estimated assets of \$800 billion and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, with estimated assets of \$700 billion, the report said. They are followed by Qatar Investment Authority, Investment Corporation of Dubai, Abu Dhabi's Mubadala Investment Company and the UAE capital's investment and holding company ADQ, the data showed.

The financial firepower of the Gulf's SWFs is thus substantial and the impressive increase in AUM in recent years has placed them in an even stronger financial position to invest than in the past. The Gulf SWFs are long-term investors, but their mandates, objectives and investment strategies differ. Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) in the Middle East, particularly in the oil and gas producing Gulf countries, have benefitted notably from the latest boom in oil and gas prices. Boosted by the windfall, most of the Gulf SWFs have seen a significant increase in their assets and have been investing actively. Their investments are in various sectors including sports and gaming, renewable energy, high tech, tourism, and infrastructure. Although the SWFs have different approaches, they are investing in line with their mandates and their governments' reform agendas. Their investments matter for their local economies. The success of their investments will be key for the

long-term economic, social and political prospects of the Gulf countries.

Their overall mandate is to achieve long-term returns to secure the prosperity of their economies for generations. To meet their mandate, they aim at diversifying their financial assets and, in most cases, at supporting the diversification of their domestic economies, including through the creation of new companies and the promotion of giga-projects. In some cases, their objectives also include providing support to economic stabilization when needed, like the QIA. While these are their typical objectives, some funds also aim to increase their international profiles in order to attract foreign investment into their economies. Thus, increasing their countries' attractiveness for investment seems to be partly driving the most recent investment upsurge of some Gulf SWFs, the report further said.

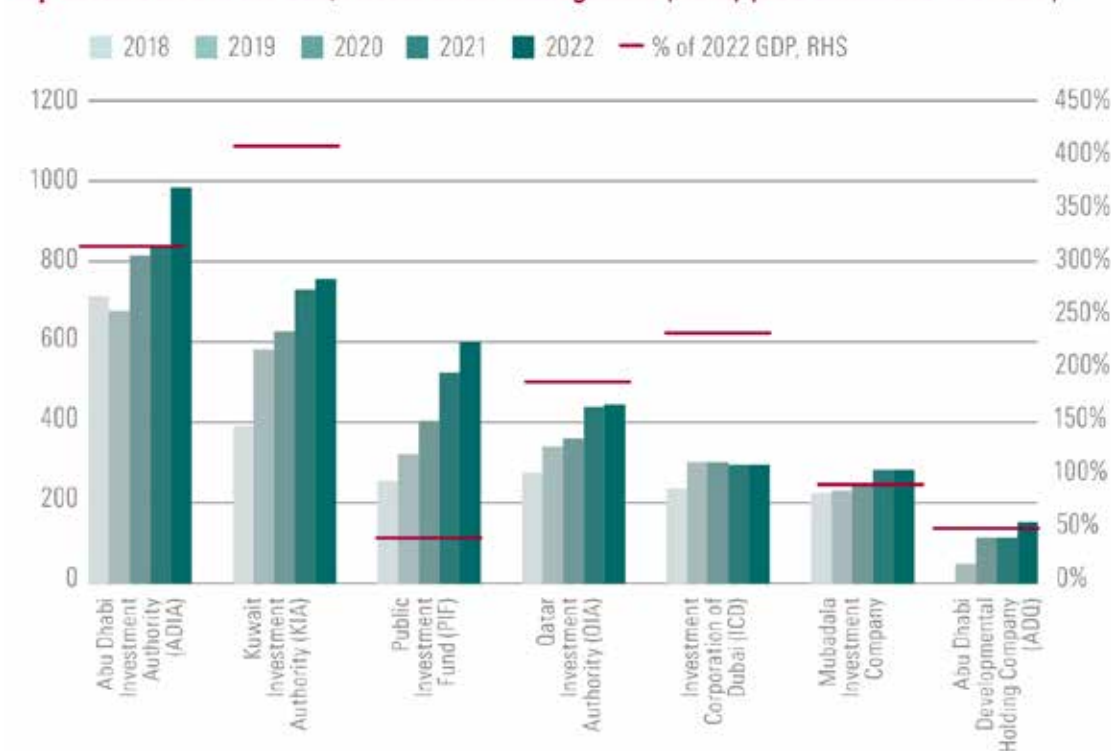
"SWFs in the Middle East, particularly in the oil and gas producing Gulf countries, have benefitted notably from the latest boom in oil and gas prices. Boosted by the windfall, most of the Gulf SWFs have seen a significant increase in their assets and have been investing actively," said report authors Adriana Alvarado, senior vice president of global sovereign ratings, and Nichola James, managing director and co-head of sovereign ratings.

"Their investments matter for their local economies. The success of their investments will be key for the long-term economic, social and political prospects of the Gulf countries," Alvarado said.

Gulf SWFs are expected to become more active and play an even bigger role in global markets this year as they receive large capital injections derived from higher oil revenue, an annual industry report by Global SWF said in January.

Of the top 10 most active sovereign investors in 2022, five were from the Gulf region, according to Global SWF. Of the Gulf SWFs, the PIF has recorded the sharpest growth in assets under management since 2018 of 135 per cent, followed by the KIA,

Top Seven SWFs in the Gulf, Assets Under Management (AUM) (USD billion and % of GDP)



Source: IMF, PIF Program 2021-2025 and Annual Reports, ADIA 2021 Annual Report, Mubadala 2022 Annual Report, QIA website, KIA website, Global SWF, DBRS Morningstar.

QIA and ADIA, the DBRS Morningstar report said.

"We foresee the SWFs to continue increasing their strategic investments and their global profiles," the report said. The Gulf SWFs have an overall mandate to achieve long-term returns to secure the prosperity of their economies and to implement their governments' reform agendas, the authors said.

The Gulf SWFs have been investing in vari-

ous asset classes across a range of sectors, from sports and gaming to renewable energy, high tech, tourism, retail and infrastructure. "We foresee the SWFs to continue increasing their strategic investments and their global profiles," the authors said. The success of the Gulf SWFs' investments will have "considerable implications" for the long-term economic and social prospects of the Gulf countries, the report added.

ECB must not do 'too much' on rates: French central banker

PARIS: The European Central Bank should maintain its interest rates at their current high levels long enough to control inflation but avoid more hikes that could torpedo the economy, the French central bank chief said Monday.

The ECB raised rates for a 10th straight time earlier this month, taking its deposit rate to a record four percent, but analysts believe the bank may now pause its hiking cycle. The ECB, the US Federal Reserve and other central banks have dramatically raised borrowing costs in efforts to tame consumer prices, which jumped higher following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

French central bank governor Francois Villeroy de Galhau said policymakers "now know with growing confidence that we are on the right track" towards bringing inflation back down to their two-percent target by 2025. "Based on our current assessment, we consider that our key ECB interest rates have reached levels that, maintained for a sufficiently long duration, are broadly consistent with the timely return (of) inflation to our target," he said.

The ECB governing council member said the Frankfurt-based institution can now work towards ensuring the eurozone economy goes into a "soft landing" — a slowdown without recession.

"The risk of doing too much needs to be balanced against the risk of not doing enough," Villeroy de Galhau said in prepared remarks at a central bank



BRUSSELS: European Central Bank (ECB) President Christine Lagarde (right) and Chairwoman of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs Irene Tinagli share a joke during the European Parliament Committee on Economic and Monetary Ordinary meeting at the European Parliament in Brussels, on September 25, 2023. — AFP

conference in Paris. "In my judgement, these risks are now at least symmetric," he added, defending an approach of "patience and persistence".

He said the ECB does not need to raise rates for now but could do so again if necessary.

"This is a manageable risk because we always can do more if the risk materializes," Villeroy de Galhau said. "But in the risk of doing too much, with the economy falling into recession and causing a sharp

deceleration of inflation, we would then have to rapidly reverse course," he added.

The ECB's decisions should remain dependent on economic data and the central bank should monitor the current spike in oil prices, the French central banker said, while warning against the "risk of easing too early". "We should now focus on the persistence of policy rather than the constant pushing of rates higher — duration rather than level," he said. — AFP

Murdoch's handover to son Lachlan sparks concern in London

LONDON: Rupert Murdoch's announcement that he will hand over control of his global media empire to son Lachlan has put the group's British media, including the tabloid The Sun, on tenterhooks about its future place in the conglomerate.

Concern about what the future holds for the UK arm of the empire centers on Lachlan's ties to Britain which are widely viewed as much weaker than his father's. In the UK, in addition to The Sun, Murdoch's News Corp owns influential Conservative-leaning newspapers including the Times and the Sunday Times.

News Corp, is one of two legs of the 92-year-old billionaire's media conglomerate, the other being Fox Corporation. The UK arm last year also launched the right-wing television station TalkTV.

The handover will see Murdoch becoming honorary president of the two companies in mid-November. Born in 1931 in Australia, Rupert Murdoch studied at Oxford University before returning in the late 1960s to buy the weekly News of the World and The Sun, making him a hugely influential figure in British political life.

His second wife Anna Torv was also a Scottish-born journalist. Lachlan Murdoch, 52, although born in the UK, was raised in the United States and started his career in Australia.

Until now he has been president of Fox Corporation, parent company of Fox News, and was mainly in charge of the group's US affairs. The transfer of power to a successor who appears to have little personal attachment to the UK has inevitably prompted some concern.

"The inevitable appointment of Lachlan is bad



LONDON: Australian born media magnate Rupert Murdoch (center) flanked by his sons Lachlan (left) and James (right) arrive at St Bride's Church on Fleet Street in central London on March 5, 2016. Murdoch will step down as chairman of his global media empire, handing the post to son Lachlan, Fox Corp and News Corp announced. — AFP

news for the London arm (he has hardly visited here these last ten years)," former Sun editor Kelvin MacKenzie said in a column for the Spectator on Thursday. The UK arm of Murdoch's empire has lost its lustre in recent years amid the digital transition and a phone-hacking scandal that saw victims of crime, celebrities and public figures including members of the royal family snooped on by Murdoch journalists. That scandal led to the closure in 2011 of the weekly News of the World newspaper in 2011, a title the Murdoch had owned since 1969.

For many years The Sun was the most widely read newspaper in the UK. It has not published figures since March 2020 when its circulation stood at just over 1.2 million. It remains, however, the second largest media outlet online with more than 24 million readers each month, behind the

BBC, according to recent data from industry publication Press Gazette. According to Alice Enders, of Enders Analysis which specializes in the media sector, the strength of Lachlan Murdoch's personal connections to the UK are not the real issue.

"That's not the question. The question is who owns the shares" in the group. She said Rupert Murdoch was "not going to leave completely. He remains the owner and retains control."

"Lachlan will not be able to launch a major transaction of sale or acquisition without the approval of his father", she added. It would in any case, she said, "make no sense to part company with The Times" at a time when its direct competitor, the Telegraph, and the influential conservative magazine The Spectator, are being put up for sale after the Barclay family lost control of their media empire. — AFP

German business morale weak in September

FRANKFURT: German business sentiment fell less than expected in September but it was the fifth consecutive decline, a key survey showed Monday, as Europe's biggest economy struggles to recover from a recession.

The Ifo institute's closely watched confidence barometer, based on a survey of 9,000 companies, ticked down to 85.7 points from 85.8 the previous month. Analysts surveyed by financial data company FactSet had expected a sharper fall, at 85 points. "Sentiment in the German economy remains bleak," said Ifo president Clemens Fuest. "The German economy is treading water."

The survey found that companies were slightly less pessimistic than in August about the outlook for the months ahead, but more downbeat about their current business situation.

The mood was especially grim in the construction sector where the confidence index slumped to its lowest level since 2009, as higher interest rates and soaring costs for materials take their toll on the housing market. Germany's crucial manufacturing sector, hit hard by weaker demand from abroad and elevated energy costs, also stayed pessimistic as order books shrank further. The Ifo reading is the latest in a series of gloomy data for the German economy, which sank into a recession at the start of the year and stagnated in the second quarter.

The European Commission earlier this month said it now expects the German economy to contract by 0.4 percent this year, compared to a previous forecast of 0.2 percent growth. The International Monetary Fund has forecast that Germany will be the only major advanced economy to shrink in 2023. — AFP

Britain's business lobby wins funds to carry on

LONDON: Britain's scandal-hit business lobby, the CBI, has received funds to remain operational following reports it was in grave financial trouble in the wake of sexual misconduct allegations. The CBI, which cancelled last week's annual general meeting, has faced an exodus of member companies since the allegations surfaced earlier this year, sparking a dramatic overhaul.

British media said a group of banks had come to the rescue after reports the organization had sought £3 million (\$3.7 million) in emergency funding. "We are satisfied that we have secured the financing necessary to overcome the short-term cash flow challenge and that the organization remains in a strong medium to long term position," the Confederation of British Industry said in a statement received by AFP Monday, confirming the weekend reports. The CBI has faced claims that more than a dozen women were sexually harassed at the organization and two others had been raped.

Police launched an investigation following the allegations first reported by The Guardian newspaper.

CBI director-general Rain Newton-Smith in April replaced Tony Danker, who departed over a separate misconduct allegation. Member firms voted overwhelmingly in favor of a reset under her leadership to overhaul the CBI's culture, governance and purpose. She has declined to comment on how many members have left over the scandal. — AFP

Business

Germany's housing sector slumps into crisis as mortgage costs jump

Scholz calls in leading players in property sector for talks

BERLIN: Valeriy Shevchenko felt like he made the purchase of his lifetime when he beat a queue of prospective buyers to secure a two-bedroom apartment in one of Berlin's most popular districts.

Two years on, the 33-year-old's housing dreams have come crashing down after the developer of his new home, Project Immobilien, went bankrupt. Hit by a sudden jump in interest rates and raw material costs, twice as many developers have filed for insolvency over the last year than the previous 12 months. Like hundreds of homeowners-to-be across the country, Shevchenko found construction of his new home suddenly halted, as workers cleared out of the site where the concrete skeleton of the building stands, with no windows.

"From the middle of August, the construction was frozen. The cabinets for the workers here, the crane in the middle, everything moved away," said Shevchenko at the site, shellshocked by the setback.

With such scenes multiplying across the country, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called in leading players in the property sector for talks on Monday, with the aim of jump-starting construction. For years, record low interest rates and strong demand had spurred new projects and investment in Germany's property market.

But a sharp rise in consumer prices as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced the European Central Bank to aggressively raise interest rates to curb inflation, drastically pushing up mortgage costs and in turn bringing down property prices as well as profit margins of building projects.

Builders are also suffering from higher raw material costs, a problem that had already begun during the pandemic but which has been accentuated by the Ukraine war. "Investors no longer know how to make certain projects profitable," said Tim-Oliver Mueller, president of German building lobby group HDB.

'All my savings'

In a sign of the crisis, developer giant Vonovia recently decided to put 60,000 projects on hold. One in five property companies has reported cancelling building projects in August, while 11.9 percent face financing difficulties, according to a recent survey by economic research institute Ifo, which described the figures as unprecedented in 30 years.

Many of the halted projects are also well advanced, pushing buyers into dire financial straits. In Berlin, investors of the Project Immobilien's construction had already paid half of what is due. "I'm not a rich person. My money is the fruit of my labour," said Shevchenko, who had already paid up 250,000 euros (\$266,100) for the apartment he bought for half a million euros.

With no insurance purchased by the building company or the future homeowners, there is no financial protection against the sudden bankruptcy. Their only hope now is to find someone else to take over the construction, or to finish it themselves. "I never thought that something like that could happen in Germany," said Marina Prakharchuk, 39, with tears in her eyes.

The Belarusian had paid up 175,000 euros for her 45-metre square apartment. "All my savings are in there," said the employee of a logistics company.

'Very bad state'

Beyond the investors left roofless by insolvent developers, the property crisis risks spiraling into a giant social crisis as the knock-on effects from the building slowdown crash into the rental market. Scholz's government had promised to build 400,000 homes a year to alleviate an endemic housing shortage made worse by burgeoning demand from an inflow of refugees and foreign workers.



View of an unfinished residential housing project in Berlin's Wedding district taken on Sept 18, 2023. — AFP

But building permits have nose-dived 25 percent between January and June compared to a year ago.

Experts believe the sector will struggle to even hit 250,000 in new build approvals this year, while next year bodes no better with a forecast of under 200,000. With less new housing stock coming on the market, rents are rising unabated, further eroding households' purchasing power.

Alarmed by the trend, Housing Minister Klara

Geywitz recently announced plans to offer aid to help families get on the property ladder. She also pledged to invest another billion euro up to 2025 for student housing. But the property sector warned that the proposals are far from sufficient.

"We are expecting a comprehensive package of measures," said the HDB's Mueller. "The sector is in a very bad state, people are searching urgently for housing," he added. — AFP

Malaysia boosts China palm oil exports under EU pressure

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia will increase palm oil exports to China by 500,000 tons a year as it faces pressure from new European Union restrictions targeting deforestation, a senior minister told AFP on Monday.

The trading bloc introduced new rules this year that ban goods from land that has been deforested, throwing its muscle into the fight against climate change and environmental destruction. Palm oil is blamed by environmentalists for fuelling the destruction of rainforests in Malaysia and Indonesia, which together produce 85 percent of global output.

But the EU rules have been highly controversial in producer countries, with both Malaysia and Indonesia protesting the move. Malaysia's Plantation and Commodities Minister Fadillah Yusof told AFP that his country was now upping exports to China, a major importer of the commodity.

"China's import of palm oil and palm-based products from Malaysia was 3.14 million tons in 2022," he said. That will grow by the end of the year or early next year with "additional uptakes of 500,000 tons of palm oil" by Beijing, he said. The increase is the result of a deal between Malaysian-headquartered palm oil product firm Sime Darby Oils International and Chinese state-owned Guangxi Beibu Gulf International Port Group.

It will "definitely" help Malaysia counter European curbs, he added. "Chinese importers are buying high value-added downstream palm products produced from Malaysia," he said.

The edible oil is used in foods such as cakes, chocolate and margarine, as well as cosmetics, soap and shampoo. Malaysian palm oil exports to China are now expected to hit 3.2 million metric tons for 2023, Yusof said. But the country has "no intention" of turn-



KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia will increase palm oil exports to China by 500,000 tons a year as it faces pressure from new European Union restrictions targeting deforestation. — AFP

ing away from the European Union, currently the second largest importer of Malaysian palm oil after India, and just ahead of China.

He slammed the regulations as a "trade barrier which curtails free and non-discriminatory market access", but added Kuala Lumpur still hopes the bloc's stand will "evolve over time".

Malaysian and Indonesian officials are actively lobbying Brussels over the rules, which do not come into full effect for 18 months, to give producers time to work out compliance.

Representatives from the two countries are due to meet EU officials in Kuala Lumpur for new discussions in December, Yusof confirmed. — AFP



Executive Vice President and European Commissioner for Trade Valdis Dombrovskis (left) and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng (right) leave a press conference during the tenth China-EU high level economic and trade dialogue in Beijing on September 25, 2023. — AFP

EU trade chief in China calls for open business environment

BEIJING: The EU's trade chief told Beijing on Monday that tough security laws and a more "politicized" business environment have left European companies struggling to understand their obligations and questioning their future in China. China's refusal to condemn ally Russia for its war in Ukraine also poses a "reputational risk" for the world's second-largest economy, Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis said in a speech at Beijing's Tsinghua University.

He said transparency and openness were "a winning strategy in the long run", at a time when trade tensions between the European bloc and China are mounting. "China is navigating a challenging transition from an investment-led economy to a broad-based economy," he said. "For this it needs to remain open." Dombrovskis's four-day trip, which kicked off Saturday, follows a report by the EU Chamber of Commerce that showed business confidence was at one of its lowest levels in years. It also follows Brussels' decision to launch a probe into Beijing's electric car subsidies.

The investigation could see the EU try to protect European carmakers by imposing punitive tariffs on vehicles it believes are unfairly sold at a lower price. China's commerce ministry has condemned the EU's "naked protectionism", and said the measures "will have a negative impact on China-EU economic and trade relations". On Monday, Dombrovskis insisted China remained an attractive investment opportunity for European businesses. "The EU and China both benefited immensely from being open to the world," he said, adding that "European companies still want to invest here—but only if the conditions are right."

From 'win-win' to 'lose-lose'

Growing challenges for European business in China mean that "what many saw as a 'win-win' relationship in past decades could become a 'lose-lose' dynamic in the coming years", the commissioner said. A new foreign relations law aimed, in part, at combating foreign sanctions and a recent update to China's tough anti-espionage regulations are of "great concern to our business community", Dombrovskis said.

"Their ambiguity allows too much room for interpretation," he warned. "This means European companies struggle to understand their compliance obligations: a factor that significantly decreases business confidence and deters new investments in China." Asked about Dombrovskis's remarks, China's foreign ministry insisted the country would "protect the legitimate rights and interests of individuals".

"We will continue to provide a market-oriented, legal and international business environment for companies from all over the world to legally operate in China," foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told a regular briefing. "China is not the source of risks, but rather a firm force for preventing and defusing risks," he added. — AFP

As electric shift stalls, Volkswagen weighs up savings

DRESDEN: Volkswagen's factory in the heart of the east German city of Dresden was conceived as a showcase for the auto giant's electric future but on a September afternoon the production line stands still. Rather than serving as a shining example, the site, where the group's flagship electric model ID.3 is finished, is more of an illustration of the challenges facing Volkswagen's transition away from internal combustion engines.

Production of battery-powered vehicles at the plant is small scale and slower than its foreign rivals, which have left the storied German group for dust. Chinese and American carmakers, such as BYD and Tesla, are well ahead of Volkswagen on the key components needed to make electric vehicles—notably in the area of battery technology.

Volkswagen is pouring tens of billions of euros into its pivot to electric vehicles. But with the economic outlook less than rosy, chief executive Oliver Blume has pledged to "work hard" on cutting costs to boost performance. The slashing of 269 temporary posts at another key e-cars factory in nearby Zwickau recently has raised questions about the future of the workforce in Dresden, where only around 35 cars are produced every day out of the daily total of 40,000 made by Volkswagen worldwide. The group this week admitted that it is "currently examining, with an open mind, how

the (Dresden) site can be oriented in a sustainable and future-proof manner", even as it insisted that "no adaptations are planned in the short-term".

There were "no plans to stop production" of battery-powered cars at the plant, stressed Christian Sommer, spokesman for the Volkswagen unit in Saxony, after talks between workers and management. VW executives were also at pains to underline that the jobs of some 300 people employed at the Dresden plant are safe for the time being.

But the emblematic plant's purpose may have to be reimagined as Volkswagen's electric ambitions struggle to get off the ground.

'Weak market'

On a tour of the "Transparent Factory" in Dresden, the future of the plant is also a question posed by visitors and answered equivocally. One bemused guest wonders why the factory is not running full-time if the wait time for a new VW ID.3 is still around six months. Volkswagen sold 321,000 battery-powered vehicles in the first half of 2023 — about 50 percent more than in the same period last year and roughly seven percent of its total sales.

But the sector has been blighted by low levels of demand. "The car market is weak because the world economy is weak," Ferdinand Dudenhofer of the Centre Automotive Research told AFP.

High inflation and the end of key government subsidy schemes have dampened the clamour for electric vehicles. The gloomy economic context adds to the pressure felt by Volkswagen from foreign competitors, which are producing EVs cheaper and faster.

In China, local manufacturers are eating up the

25 percent by the break, underscoring market concerns as China's property sector faces an unprecedented crisis. On Sunday evening, Evergrande announced that it was unable to issue new debt as its subsidiary, Hengda Real Estate Group, "is being investigated".

That came two days after the company said meetings on the restructuring scheduled for Monday and Tuesday would not take place, saying it was "necessary to reassess the terms" of the plan in order to suit the "objective situation and the demand of the creditors".

Evergrande's enormous debt has contributed to the country's deepening property market crisis, raising fears of a global spillover. The property sector, which along with construction accounts for about a quarter of China's gross domestic product, is a key pillar of the country's growth and has experienced a dazzling boom in recent decades.

But the massive debt accrued by the industry's biggest players—Evergrande had estimated debt of \$328 billion at the end of June—has been seen by Beijing in recent years as an unacceptable risk for

China's financial system and overall economic health.

Authorities have gradually tightened developers' access to credit since 2020, and a wave of defaults have followed—notably that of Evergrande. Earlier this month, authorities in the southern city of Shenzhen said they had arrested several Evergrande employees, also calling on the public to report any cases of suspected fraud. Another Chinese property giant, Country Garden, has narrowly avoided default in recent months, after reporting a record loss and debts of more than \$150 billion. — AFP



DRESDEN: Thomas Aehlig, Chairman of the Works Council of the Transparent Factory (right) and Christian Sommer, spokesman for Volkswagen Saxony (left) answer questions from the media in front of the entrance to the 'Transparent Factory' (Glaeserne Manufaktur) production site building of German carmaker Volkswagen in Dresden, eastern Germany. — AFP

share of the domestic market—a vital source of revenue for Volkswagen, where it had previously been strong.

At a time when price pressures are intense, Volkswagen will however only be able to present its ID.2all, a model with a starting price of under 25,000 euros, in 2025. The group is putting over 100 billion euros (\$106 billion) into its electric turn over the next five years. The bulk of the financing will come from sales of its existing range of fossil fuel-powered vehicles.

"VW has to earn money with internal combustion engines to cross-finance its electric transformation," said Stefan Bratzel, director of the Centre of Automotive Management. — AFP



Model Maud Le Fort

'One day I said stop': Models describe pressure to stay thin

Maud Le Fort won't be seen on the runways of Paris Fashion Week, which kicks off on Monday, having chosen her health over a career on the catwalk. Now in her 30s, Le Fort came to Paris when she was 18 to pursue a career in modeling and was immediately labeled a "commercial model"—i.e. not thin enough for the top-end fashion shows.

"I had a 36.6 cm waist, 85C chest so I was 'curvy,'" she told AFP. "In Paris, I was told that I was only going to do lingerie and perhaps very commercial things, but not much fashion." Le Fort refused to let go of her dream and worked to shed the little weight she carried—though without any exercise since muscles are as unwelcome as fat on the catwalk.

"I was measured almost every day. And the more weight I lost, the more congratulations I received," she said. She got herself down to 49 kilograms (108 pounds) despite being 1.81 meters (5.11-feet) tall and managed to land gigs for Armani, Balmain, Jean Paul Gaultier and Yohji Yamamoto. But then she realized it was madness. "One day, I said 'stop'. I'm going to eat, I'm going to do sport," said Le Fort.

Eating disorders

Now in her 30s, she does theatre classes and therapy in a bid to gain self-confidence and put the years of depression and eating disorders behind her. "I still don't completely accept my body the way it is," she said. "I do not have a completely healthy relationship with food." These days, she does mostly photo sessions where the pressure is much lower. But it also bothers her to see how much her photos are retouched, saying it creates unrealistic expectations for young girls. "It's absolutely shocking and it's sad," she said.

Some are blessed with a situation that allows them to escape the torment. Sophie (not her real name) is a 22-year-old medical student in Paris. She works as a commercial model and dreams of the catwalk, but knows she has a longer-term career to fall back on and is not about to sacrifice her health. "Fashion is not an environment that I would recommend to someone who has psychological weaknesses," she said. "If this was all I did for a living, I would be constantly worried. "For me, if I

go on the catwalk, that's cool, but if I don't get the job, too bad."

'Skinny girls passing out'

Many are not so lucky. Brazilian model Tatiana (not her real name) was dropped by her agency after five years when she gained a few kilos from stress and a hormone treatment. Fashion was the only job she had known since adolescence. "I was fired without notice. Losing fashion was very hard," she told AFP. Both she and Sophie praised the 1980s when sporty, feminine physiques were prized in fashion.

Today, the few examples of curvy models on the top-end catwalks are people who built up a celebrity status before entering fashion. Tatiana remembers seeing "very skinny girls pass out during fittings—they could barely walk on the heels," she said. Now 37, she weighs 53-54 kilos and is 1.78 m tall. She works as a fitting model—used by designers to check the appearance of an outfit when it is adapted for real-world shops, rather than the fantasy land of the catwalk. — AFP



Models walk the runway of the Giorgio Armani show during the Milan Fashion Week Womenswear Spring/Summer 2024 in Milan. — AFP photos

Giorgio Armani closes Milan Fashion Week with good vibes

Giorgio Armani closed Milan Fashion Week on Sunday with good vibes. Armani's Spring-Summer 2024 collection mirrored a sky's shifting colors and light at dusk, an idea conveyed with changing colors on the back wall of the showroom in his historic, central Milan headquarters. The 89-year-

old designer employed translucent, diaphanous fabrics alongside silks and satin to create lightness and movement. The palette captured the mood, moving from bronze on silvery gray to jewel blue, green and purples that bled together, and back to dusky shades of gray and silver that faded to white. "No beige," Armani joked after the show.

The collection conveyed elegance but also practicality: clothes that put the wearer at ease in any context and without prodding toward overt, revealing sexiness. Satiny trousers anchored many of the looks — jackets, transparent blouson layers, shimmering tops and off-shoulder chiffon dresses.

"Vibrations, that means colors, that means movement, that means a structure that moves on the body," Armani said. To demonstrate his vision, a model in a shimmering long dress and a diaphanous cape danced down the runway. Flat shoes finished all of the looks. "Women should not be enslaved to height or to a feline nature, being sexy at all costs," the designer said. "There can be also a normal woman, but who hopefully has a twinkle in the eye."

Armani for years has lamented a Milan fashion scene that tries too hard, focusing on novelty instead

of what he sees as the essence of fashion: dressing women to express themselves. The designer said he sensed a change in this season's Fashion Week, with less frivolity. "Finally, I saw collections, from the photos, with a lot of normality. There is also a little research, which has to be part of this craft," Armani said. — AP



Taylor Swift cheers Chiefs, stoking Travis Kelce romance rumors

Pop star Taylor Swift added fuel to rumors around her possible relationship with NFL star Travis Kelce when she was seen watching him in action alongside the Super Bowl winner's mother on Sunday. Swift attended the Kansas City Chiefs' home game against the Chicago Bears, sitting in a luxury box with the tight end's mother, Donna. The 12-time Grammy winner, sporting a red and white Chiefs jacket, was treated to a 41-10 Chiefs romp and cheered wildly when Kelce caught a three-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Patrick Mahomes in the third quarter.

"I heard she was in the house," Mahomes told Fox Sports' Erin Andrews in an on-field interview after the game. "I felt a little bit of pressure and so I knew I had to get it to Trav. I think he wanted to get in the end zone just as much as all the Swifties wanted him to." Chiefs coach Andy Reid joked that he'd introduced the couple. "I met her before—I set them up," the 65-year-old coach told reporters. Travis Kelce won his second Super Bowl ring with the Chiefs in February while older sibling Jason ended up on the losing side with the Philadelphia Eagles.

Donna Kelce gained nationwide at-



Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift



tention in February when both of her sons featured in the championship spectacle. Swift confirmed in May that she considered herself an Eagles fan. But her legion of fans have spent recent weeks puzzling over possible indicators that she was in a budding relationship with Kansas City's Kelce brother. Travis Kelce said this week

on ESPN's Pat McAfee Show that he had invited Swift to attend a game.

"I threw it out there. I threw the ball in her court. You know, I told her, 'I've seen you rock the stage in Arrowhead, you might have to come see me rock the stage in Arrowhead and see which one's a little more lit,'" he said. "We'll see what happens in the

near future," added the 33-year-old Kelce, who is widely considered one of the best tight ends in NFL history.

Swift is taking a break from her wildly popular international tour that began in March—performances will resume in November and run late into next year. A concert documentary, "Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour" is slated for release on October 13. As media outlets from People magazine to Rolling Stone to ESPN reported Swift's attendance, social media pulsed with reaction from Swifties.

"Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce's mum would be an adorable mother/daughter in law duo just saying," emmamelia95 posted on the X platform. "Also I don't even follow football or anything like that, but Taylor and Travis are both extremely hot people who would be adorable and cute together!" Macktaylor6, meanwhile, wrote: "Did I ever think I'd see @taylorswift13 show up in an @espn notification? No. Am I surprised? No not really. I'm here for it." —AFP



Visitors look at Pablo Picasso's painting 'Femme à la montre' displayed for viewing at Sotheby's Dubai with their back to Andy Warhol's 1980 artwork entitled '14 Small Electric Chairs Reversal Series'. — AFP

Picasso masterpiece begins pre-auction tour in Dubai

A Pablo Picasso masterpiece expected to fetch at least \$120 million at auction went on show Monday in Dubai, kicking off a set of rare viewings outside the United States. The 1932 portrait of Marie-Therese Walter, Picasso's mistress and "golden muse", is being exhibited for two days before heading to Hong Kong and London, a boon for the United Arab Emirates' bid to establish itself as a cultural powerhouse. The viewing "marks the first time a painting of this calibre by the world-renowned artist has ever been exhibited in the UAE", Sotheby's Dubai said in a statement, noting it is the first time the portrait had been

shown outside the US in half a century.

"Over the years the UAE has earned the status of being a global art destination, which receives a further boost as this rare Picasso is unveiled here," said UAE Culture Minister Sheikh Salem bin Khalid Al-Qassimi. The painting titled "Femme a la montre" will be sold in November as part of a two-day auction of late New Yorker Emily Fisher Landau's prestigious collection.

Walter met Picasso in Paris in 1927, when the Spaniard was still married to Russian-Ukrainian ballet dancer Olga Khokhlova, and while Walter was 17.

Walter, whose daughter with Picasso

passed away last year, was also featured in "Femme assise pres d'une fenetre (Marie-Therese)", which sold in 2021 for \$103.4 million by Christie's auction house.

Fifty years after his death in 1973 at age 91, Picasso remains one of the most influential artists of the modern world, often hailed as a dynamic and creative genius. But in the wake of the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and assault, the reputation of this workaholic with a vast output of paintings, sketches and sculpture has been tarnished by accusations he exerted a violent hold over the women who shared his life and inspired his art. — AFP

From K-pop to sales girls: AI goes mainstream in South Korea

Her face is a deepfake. Her body belongs to a team of similar-sized actors. But she sings, reads the news, and sells luxury clothes on TV as AI humans go mainstream in South Korea. Meet Zaein, one of South Korea's most active virtual humans, who was created by Pulse9, an artificial intelligence company that is working to bring corporate dreams of the perfect employee to life. Pulse9 has created digital humans for some of South Korea's largest conglomerates, including Shinsegae, with research indicating the global market for such life-like creations could reach \$527 billion by 2030.

In South Korea, AI humans have enrolled as students at universities, interned at major companies, and appear regularly on live television driving sellouts of products from food to luxury handbags. But Pulse9 says this is only the beginning. They are "working on developing the technology to broaden AI human use", Park Ji-eun, the company's CEO, told AFP. "Virtual humans are basically capable of carrying out much of what real people do," she said, adding that the current level of AI technology means humans are still needed—for now.

The demand for AI humans in South Korea was initially driven by the K-pop industry, with the idea of a virtual idol—not prone to scandals and able to work 24/7—proving popular with the country's notoriously hard-driving music agencies. But now, Pulse9 is "expanding their roles in society to show that these virtual humans aren't just fantasy idols but can coexist with humans as colleagues and friends", Park said.

K-pop face

Zaein's face was created by a deep



A human actor (background right) preparing to deliver a report as Zaein, one of South Korea's most active virtual humans created by Artificial Intelligence company Pulse9, is seen on a screen for a live morning news program on South Korean broadcaster SBS. — AFP photos

learning analysis—an AI method that teaches computers to process complex data—of the faces of K-pop stars over the last two decades. Doe-eyed with delicate features, fair skin and a willowy figure, she is brought to life by overlaying the deepfake on a human actor. More than 10 human actors, each with different talents—from singing, dancing, acting, to reporting—help animate Zaein, which is what makes this particular AI creation so "special", Park said.

On a Monday morning, AFP met with one of the actors as she was preparing to deliver a report as Zaein on a live morning news program on South Korean broadcaster SBS. "I think it can be a good practice for people who want to become celebrities and that's what appealed to me," said the actor, who could not be named due to company policy. A representative for Pulse9 said the identities of all human actors are concealed and their real faces not shown. Despite the strict measures to keep their profiles hidden, the actor said playing as a virtual human opened new doors.

"Typically, a lot of people in their teens and young people become K-pop idols and I'm way past that age, but it's nice to be able to take on that challenge," the actor, who is in her 30s, told AFP. "I'd love to try acting as a man if I can manage my voice well, and maybe a foreigner—something that I can't become in real life."

'Real and fake'

Creating artificial humans will continue to require real people "until a really strong AI is created in future which will be able to process everything by itself", Park said. The potential—and potential perils—of AI have exploded into the public consciousness in recent months, since ChatGPT burst onto the scene at the end of last year. Experts around the world, including AI pioneers, have spoken out about its dangers, and several countries are seeking regulation of the powerful but high-risk invention.

But Park is not concerned. Her company is working on new virtual idols, virtual influencers, and virtual sales agents to take over customer-facing tasks for South Korean conglomerates, which are increasingly struggling with recruitment in the low-birthrate country. South Korea—and the world—needs better, clearer regulations on what AI can do, she said, adding that when done properly, the technology can add to "the richness of life".

The trouble however, is that a deepfake can "make it impossible to tell what is real and fake", Kim Myuhng-joo, a professor of information security at Seoul Women's University, told AFP. "It's an egregious tool when used to harm others or putting people in trouble. That's why it's becoming a problem," he added. — AFP



Park Ji-eun, CEO of artificial intelligence company Pulse9, posing with a poster of virtual idol group 'Eternity' during an interview with AFP at her company in Seoul.



Park Ji-eun speaking as a virtual human is seen on a screen.



Chinese tourists are greeted by Thai dancers at the arrivals gate at Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok. — AFP photos



Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin walks through the arrivals gate after greeting Chinese tourists.

Chinese tourists get VIP welcome in Thailand as visa-free travel begins

Chinese tourists received a personal welcome from the Thai prime minister Monday as they arrived in Bangkok under a new visa-free scheme the government hopes will give the kingdom's vital tourism sector a boost. Traditional dancers accompanied a smiling PM Srettha Thavisin as he greeted visitors arriving from Shanghai at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport, handing out welcome gifts. "I was shocked by the welcoming ceremony, and I'm very happy. It's a great start of my trip," visitor Zhuang Pan, 31, told AFP.

Jin Li, arriving for her honeymoon, told AFP the scheme was great, before she and her new husband grabbed a photograph with Srettha. "I don't need to worry, can go on a trip at any time, just need to book a ticket," she said. Visitors from China accounted for the largest percentage of Thailand's tourists pre-pandemic, with tourism overall making up around 20 percent of the kingdom's GDP.

COVID-19 travel restrictions hammered the sector and recovery has been slow, stymied by a struggling global economy—and safety fears stoked by a Chinese blockbuster thriller about a man being kidnapped and forced to work in a Southeast Asian online scam centre. Zheng Zhengzhou, 36, said he was aware of the dangers of visiting Thailand, referencing "No More Bets"—the film that has spooked many tourists. "So it would be a lie to say I don't have any concerns (on safety issues)," he said. Srettha has sought to reassure visitors about their safety before, emphasizing that visitor security in the kingdom is a priority. "The



Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin walks through the arrivals gate after greeting Chinese tourists.

safety of tourists from their first step in Thailand to their departure when they leave must be safe and spectacular from all sides," he said.

Chinese visitors were greeted by tourism police officers and informed of the details of a 24-hour police hotline. The visa-free scheme was launched in time for China's "Golden Week" holiday period in October, and runs until February 29. Srettha said that under the scheme bookings had already increased "tenfold", and that he was confident it would "significantly stimulate the economy". "Today marks a good day for Thailand and we hope our other policies will continue to stimulate the economy," he added. — AFP

Petition against felling trees in historic Tokyo park area

Campaigners filed a fresh petition with almost 225,000 signatures on Monday against plans to fell large numbers of trees and tear down a historic baseball stadium in a rare green area of central Tokyo. Lush with trees donated to honor Emperor Meiji a century ago, Meiji Jingu Gaien offers respite and shade—Japan saw its hottest recorded summer this year—in one of the world's biggest urban areas. The park area is also home to Jingu Stadium where US baseball star Babe Ruth wowed spectators in 1934 and where celebrated Japanese author Haruki Murakami says he was inspired to become a writer.

Also on the site is a stadium dubbed the spiritual home of Japanese rugby. But the redevelopment project, due to start this month, will see the sports facilities razed and rebuilt alongside several new high-rises to add to Tokyo's thicket of tall buildings. According to the petition submitted on Monday to the government, 1,000 trees will be cut down. The new baseball stadium will also endanger a boulevard of gingko trees, just six meters (20 feet) away, whose stunning autumn leaves attract huge crowds, campaigners say.

"These are all huge beautiful trees," said Rochelle Kopp, a management consultant who organized the petition—one of several—and who is also involved in a lawsuit against the project. "The online petition numbers continue to grow because the more members of the public learn the details of the plan, the more people are unhappy about this plan to cram as many skyscrapers as possible into a small space and forever change a beloved landscape," Kopp told AFP.

'Heritage alert'

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) this month put the number of trees in danger at around 3,000 in a "heritage alert" issued by the advisory body to UNESCO. The redevelopment "will lead to the complete destruction of the urban forest that has been formed and nurtured over the past 100 years," ICOMOS said. "Urban parks are places for people's recreation and also contribute to maintaining rich biodiversity. They mitigate the heat island effect in cities and provide shelter in case of natural disasters such as major earthquakes," it said in a September 7 statement.

According to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's web page, the developers said in January last year they plan to cut down 892 trees. The number has since been reduced to 743 trees after further efforts to preserve



People holds placards saying 'Save Jingu Gaien' during a protest against the Tokyo metropolitan government's redevelopment project for the Meiji Jingu Gaien district in Tokyo.



People take part in a protest against the Tokyo metropolitan government's redevelopment project for the Meiji Jingu Gaien district in Tokyo. — AFP photos

trees, said a spokeswoman for Mitsui Fudosan, one of the major developers. "We continue studying how to preserve trees," she told AFP.

The developers and the Tokyo government say that after work is complete, the number of trees and the amount of green space will in fact increase. At just 7.4 percent as of 2015, Tokyo has one of the lowest percentages of public green spaces such as parks and gardens, according to data compiled by World Cities Culture Forum. This compares to New York's 27.0 percent in 2010, 27.9 percent in Seoul in 2019 and London's 33.0 percent in 2022. — AFP

'BREAK DOWN WALLS': TUNISIA DANCE SHOW CELEBRATES DIVERSITY



Tunisian actress and dancer Sondos Belhassen performs during a dance show aimed at raising awareness of children with disabilities in Tunis. — AFP photos



People attend a music parade, aimed at raising awareness of children with disabilities in Tunis.

A performer on a wheelchair, another who is blind and a third with Down syndrome share the stage for a pioneering new dance show seeking to push the boundaries in Tunisia. Choreographer Andrew Graham says "the show is not about disability at all" but rather a celebration of diversity and inclusion that also involves migrants and other artists. "The idea is to break down all the walls," said Graham, 35, whose production "Lines" premiered this weekend and runs until October 8 at the Dream City Festival in Tunis.

The performance brings together 15 dancers from different segments of society in the north African country. It offers an opportunity for "sharing and mutual aid", said Gabonese dancer Cedric Mbourou, 29. The performance comes at a difficult time for Tunisia, which recently saw a wave of racial violence mainly targeting migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.

Mbourou himself was forced to go into hiding after an anti-migrant speech by President Kais Saied set off a wave of attacks. "We see people just dancing for an hour non-stop," said Graham, a Franco-British dance artist and teacher based in Marseille with his company L'Autre Maison. "And very quickly the onlooker becomes interested in the dance and not necessarily who they are but in what they actually do."

'A lot of energy'

Graham hopes that this "very ambitious" show can "travel around the world, in Europe, the Middle East and Africa". As the ensemble performs together, the audience is captivated by 16-year-old Rayen descending from his wheelchair onto the stage to perform his mesmerizing dance number.



Tunisian actress and dancer Sondos Belhassen performs during a dance show aimed at raising awareness of children with disabilities.

Graham conceived of "Lines" after directing workshops in Tunis in 2021 for L'Art Rue, the organizer of Dream City, and activities aimed at making art accessible to underprivileged children.

The choreographer said he also drew inspiration from the stories of his grandfather, a Sicilian from Tunisia, and from "this extremely mixed

country that has blended many cultures". The show features rhythmic "hadra" chants from the Muslim Sufi tradition and electronic music beats.

On stage, the singer and dancer Iyed - who at just 13 years old studies at the prestigious music conservatory in Tunis, and who is visually impaired - is gently hoisted into the air by the

other performers. His mother Hakima Bessoud, 49, is proud to join her son as they live out a passion that she said was a "childhood dream". She left a tourism sector job in 2018 to accompany her son to the conservatory and said that, since rehearsals started for "Lines", her life has been "turned upside down". "Before, I had the routine of a homemaker: children, the house," she said. "Now, I have a lot of energy, and I rush to do everything to attend rehearsals."

'Readjust everything'

Bessoud, who says she hails from a conservative background, said she welcomed being around the show's openly gay dancer and actor Ahmed Tayaa. "I have no problem with differences," she said. "We must accept everyone, even Iyed is different." Tayaa, meanwhile, said he was amazed to see his sister Nourhene, 21, who has Down syndrome, perform.

He marveled at having "discovered the artist that is Nourhene". "We all have a disability," he said. "The people who see the show will discover their disability on the inside." "Lines", he said, is "a paradise for people with all kinds of differences". One of the show's professional dancers, Sondos Belhassen, 55, hailed the experience as "unique for a dancer", saying they had experienced "something wonderful".

"I wonder what weight it will leave in their universe, what memories they'll keep?" She said the performance had forced her to "readjust everything". "We are forced to experiment," she said about working with performers whose physique is not "typical of a dancer". "We have a free body that can do anything, even the unexpected." — AFP



People attend a music parade, aimed at raising awareness of children with disabilities.



Dancers perform during a show aimed at raising awareness of children with disabilities.



Dancers perform during a show aimed at raising awareness of children with disabilities.

SOPHIA LOREN, 89, RECOVERING AFTER A FALL

Italian screen legend Sophia Loren was recovering Monday after undergoing hip surgery following a fall at her Geneva home. The star suffered fractures when she fell on Sunday just days after her 89th birthday, but a subsequent operation was successful, according to a statement from Loren's eponymous chain of restaurants. "Now she will have to observe a short period of convalescence followed by a course of rehabilitation," it said.

"Fortunately everything went well and the Signora will be back with us very soon." Born into poverty in Naples, Loren rose to become a Hollywood star, earning two Oscars along the way. She was Italy's best known cinematic export. But she was dismissive of relying on looks alone, once saying: "Being beautiful can never hurt, but you have to have more. You have to sparkle, you have to be fun, you have to make your brain work, if you have one."

In 2020, she interrupted a decades-long absence from films to play the lead role in Netflix's "La



Sophia Loren

Vita Davanti a Se" (The Life Ahead) directed by her son Edoardo Ponti, about a Holocaust survivor who develops an unlikely friendship with a Senegalese orphan.

She garnered critical acclaim for her performance, almost six decades after winning an Oscar for Vittorio de Sica's film "La Ciociara" ("Two Women") about a wartime mother's rape. She was also given an honorary lifetime achievement Oscar in 1991. — AFP

Hollywood writers, studios reach tentative deal to end strike

Striking writers whose industrial action has paralyzed Hollywood said Sunday they had reached an "exceptional" deal with studios that could see them go back to work. The apparent breakthrough will raise hopes that striking actors can also reach terms with studios to end a months-long impasse that has seen film and TV production largely halted, costing the California economy billions of dollars. "We have reached a tentative agreement on a new 2023 (minimum basic agreement), which is to say an agreement in principle on all deal points, subject to drafting final contract language," said a letter the Writers Guild of America sent to members. "We can say, with great pride, that this deal is exceptional — with meaningful gains and protections for writers in every sector of the membership."

The letter, which AFP has seen, gave no details. It said language was being ironed out and that the final say on whether to



SAG-AFTRA members and supporters walk the picket line as members of the Screen Actors Guild strike in New York. — AFP

accept what was on offer rested with the membership. "To be clear, no one is to return to work until specifically authorized by the Guild. We are still on strike until then. But we are, as of today, suspending WGA picketing," it said. A terse joint statement from the WGA and the AMPTP, the umbrella group representing studios and

streamers confirmed an agreement.

Actors strike

Thousands of film and television scribes downed their pens in early May over demands including better pay for writers, greater rewards for creating hit shows, and protection from artificial intelligence. They have manned picket

lines for months outside offices including Netflix and Disney, and were joined by striking actors in mid-July, leaving normally busy Hollywood lots all but vacant, in an ebullient and united show of force. Actors' union SAG-AFTRA congratulated the WGA, praising the "incredible strength, resiliency and solidarity on the picket lines."

"While we look forward to reviewing the WGA and AMPTP's tentative agreement, we remain committed to achieving the necessary terms for our members," it said. Negotiations between studios and writers had been moribund for weeks until a new sense of urgency appeared to have been injected into the process in the last few days, with the heads of Netflix, Disney, Universal and Warner Bros Discovery personally attending the talks. Among their demands, writers say their salaries have not kept up with inflation, and that the rise of streaming has diminished the "residuals" they earn when a show they work on becomes a smash hit. — AFP

Sports

India powers up for Cricket WCup

India goes it alone with 48 matches being played over 46 days at 10 different venues

NEW DELHI: India target a third World Cup triumph when the country hosts cricket's seven-week global showpiece, buoyed by an economic boom and growing, international self-confidence. India shared hosting with Pakistan in 1987, then Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 1996 before another three-way split with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in 2011.

This time India goes it alone with 48 matches being played over 46 days at 10 different venues. However, the build-up has been far from smooth after arch-rivals Pakistan reportedly considered a boycott when India refused to travel across the border for the Asia Cup.

As a result, the announcement of the schedule for the World Cup was delayed until just three months before the first ball was to be bowled. Fears over security for the India-Pakistan blockbuster clash in Ahmedabad then saw the match moved back a day, sparking a domino effect of nine rescheduled fixtures.

Pakistan's visit to India will be their first since the 2016 Twenty20 World Cup. The opening match on October 5, between champions England and New Zealand, as well as the final on November 19 are being staged at Ahmedabad's Narendra Modi stadium, named after the prime minister, the world's biggest cricket arena boasting a capacity of over 130,000.

India will face Pakistan at the mega-venue on October 14. The city which independence hero Mahatma Gandhi called home for 15 years is tipped as a potential host city should India bid for the 2036 Olympics.

The gathering of the best players of India's favourite game will be the sporting culmination of a year that saw India overtake China as the world's most populous country, after displacing former coloniser Britain as its fifth-biggest economy in 2021.

Modi's global stage?

Now Modi is seeking a place on the global stage to match. Courted by the West – despite rights concerns – as a bulwark against Beijing, the prime minister used the G20 summit he hosted this month as a catalyst to position New Delhi as a representative of many others outside traditional power blocs.

India are two-time champions having added the 2011 title on home soil to their 1983 triumph, a Kapil Dev-inspired breakthrough performance. They boast superstar Virat Kohli who has made more than 13,000 runs in the ODI format.

Second on the current active list is skipper Rohit Sharma with just over 10,000. Fiery seamer Mohammed Siraj recently became the world's top ranked ODI bowler while Kuldeep Yadav is likely to thrive with his leg-spinning box of tricks.

'Create new memories'

"The memories of past World Cup victories, especially the iconic 2011 win, are etched in our hearts, and we want to create new memories for our fans," said Kohli who featured in the 2011 victory. Pakistan, the 1992 champions, have lost seven times out of seven to India at past World Cups.

However, skipper Babar Azam will be key to turning around that run as he leads the way in the batting rankings. His average of over 58 betters even that of Kohli. Despite the loss of fast bowler Naseem Shah to injury, Pakistan can call on Shaheen Shah Afridi, the sport's most imposing opening quick bowler.

Still just 23, Afridi has 86 ODI wickets at a meagre average of 23.36. Defending champions England, who triumphed in a nail-biting 2019 final against New Zealand at Lord's, can harness the destructive firepower of Ben Stokes who smashed 84 in that game which went to a Super Over conclusion.

In the build-up to the World Cup, Stokes struck the highest score by an England batsman in a ODI, his 182 setting up a thrashing of New Zealand at The Oval earlier this month. The tournament will likely see the farewell ODI performances of Bangladesh all-rounder Shakib al Hasan and Kiwi opening bowlers Trent Boult and Tim Southee.

Shakib is the top-ranked all-rounder in ODI cricket. The 36-year-old has made more than 7,000 runs in the format with 55 half-centuries and 308 wickets. Southee and Boult, both 34, have claimed a combined 409 wickets in the format.

Australia are five-time champions, comfortably the most successful nation at the World Cup, but preparations were hit when opener Travis Head fractured his hand. However, they still boast veteran run-getter David Warner who has amassed over 6,300 ODI runs.

South Africa, who have endured a roller-coaster relationship with the World Cup, undone by rain rules in 1992 and 2003, have also been hit by injuries, losing key pacers Anrich Nortje and Sisanda Magala. For Afghanistan, slow bowlers Rashid Khan, Mohammad Nabi, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, who made his international debut at 16, and Noor Ahmad will be key on welcoming Indian pitches.

Sri Lanka, the 1996 winners, will be fired up by the indignity of being bowled out for just 50 and losing the Asia Cup final to India by 10 wickets. Matheesha Pathirana, just 20, and thriving in his role as a 2023 version of Lasith Malinga with his deceptive, sly action, is likely to be Sri Lanka's go-to fast bowling surprise.

Netherlands complete the line-up and are match-tough after negotiating the qualifying round in July where two-time champions West Indies crashed out. — AFP



HYDERABAD: The ICC Men's Cricket World Cup 2023 trophy is seen on display as part of an official trophy tour at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Hyderabad. — AFP

NZ eye Bangladesh series win ahead of World Cup

DHAKA: New Zealand wrap up preparations for the upcoming World Cup hoping to achieve a rare series win in Bangladesh in their third and final one-day match on Tuesday. "When we came into the series, it was always a goal to win every match you play, and we certainly hope so," Kiwi batsman Henry Nicholls told reporters in Dhaka on Monday.

"It's an exciting opportunity for the group to have an opportunity to win a series here." The series is the last for both teams ahead of the World Cup in India, which opens on October 5. The Kiwis lead the hosts by 1-0, and their 86-run win in the second match on Saturday was the side's first win against Bangladesh in the country in nearly 15 years. The first match was washed out by rain.

The Kiwis last beat Bangladesh in their own backyard in October 2008. They then lost the next two series in 2010 and 2013, respectively, by 4-0 and 3-0. Lockie Ferguson will lead the Kiwis in Bangladesh, where they brought only five members of the World Cup squad, including the stand-in skipper, pacer Trent Boult, all-rounder Rachin Ravindra, spinner Ish Sodhi and batsman Will Young.

Bangladesh initially rested key players, but with the series at stake, they brought back stalwarts Najmul Hossain Shanto, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Taskin Ahmed and Shoriful Islam. Najmul was named captain of the side for the series decider, as regular captain Shakib Al Hasan took a break.

Liton Das, who led in the first two matches, is being rested. "If we win this game, definitely it will give the team a good feeling," Najmul said. "But in case of a bad result, I don't think it will affect our World Cup form much." Bangladesh were unbeaten at home in ODI series for nearly seven years until they lost to England and Afghanistan this year. — AFP

Kuwait Badminton Challenge to begin on Sept 27: IBAK

KUWAIT: The grand and much-awaited International Badminton Tournament of 2023, the Kuwait Badminton Challenge, hosted by Indian Badminton Association-Kuwait (IBAK) is all set to enthrall badminton fans and showcase the splendid skills of international badminton stars in the Kuwait region. The inauguration is set for Sept 27, 2023. Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika will inaugurate the tournament as its chief guest.

The tournament which will be held over three days is sure to wow badminton lovers in Kuwait with an array of top-ranking international stars from Kuwait, India, Malaysia and the Middle East taking part. The tournament is conducted in two disciplines. Team event and open event will feature more than 40 international players along with local players from Kuwait. The 8th edition of the event promises to be another feather in the cap for the IBAK which is being supported by some of the top corporate houses in Kuwait.

The IBAK All Stars who are the defending champions and six times champions in the past will be looking to defend their title against five other teams in the team event category. The open category will have players vying for the top prize in six disciplines namely, elite men's doubles, men's singles, professional men's doubles, advance men's doubles, intermediate doubles (for IBAK members only), above 50 men's doubles and mixed doubles categories.



Kuwait's Kite Surf team

Kuwait wins best team award in Kitesurfing tourney

CAIRO: Kuwait's Kite Surf team won Sunday the best team award in the 14th Egypt's King of Lagoon Kitesurfing Tournament. Kuwait's Wajid Al-Sabah won the second place in the girls' Airstyle division, while Najla Al-Sabah won the Rising Star Award in the tournament organized by the Cham-

ber of Diving Tourism and Marine Activities.

In a statement to KUNA, the Secretary General of the Kuwaiti Marine Sports Club, Khaled Al Foudari, praised the results of the Kuwaiti team in light of its first participation in the tournament, hailing the support provided by the General Sports Authority in Kuwait in order to develop the game.

Kitesurfing is a sport that involves using wind power with a large power kite to pull a rider across a water, land or snow surface. It combines the aspects of paragliding, surfing, windsurfing, skateboarding, snowboarding and wakeboarding. Kiteboarding is among the less expensive and more convenient sailing sports. — KUNA



Najla Al-Sabah and Wajid Al-Sabah

Nigerian scores first Invictus gold medal

ABUJA: Three years ago, Peacemaker Azuegbulam lost his left leg when his Nigerian army unit came under fire from Boko Haram jihadists in the north of the country. Now Azuegbulam is an African champion.

Last month, Azuegbulam won gold in the Invictus Games in Dusseldorf, Germany—the first Nigerian and the first African to secure the top prize in the games. "I feel great to become the first champion in Invictus Games from Africa," he told AFP in Abuja. "Invictus means unconquered, we are still unconquered because we are still alive."

Started in 2014, the Invictus Games were founded by Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, himself a veteran, as a way to help in the rehabilitation of wounded servicemen and women through sports. The event now involves 23 nations, and includes sports from weightlifting to volleyball and table tennis.

Azuegbulam, 27, won gold in a powerlifting category, and also competes in sitting volleyball and other sports. It has been a painful journey for Azuegbulam. In October 2020,

he was part of an army unit fighting to dislodge jihadists in the northeast of Nigeria, where the military has been battling Islamist militants for more than a decade.

Jihadists opened fire with an anti-aircraft gun, wounding Azuegbulam, and forcing doctors to amputate his leg. "After being injured, I got into a lot of things emotionally, physically, and even mentally, I was thinking a lot of things, I was not myself, it was very tough," he said.

With the help of local organisation Nigeria Unconquered, he started to become involved in sports recovery for wounded servicemen and veterans and eventually to a team heading to the Invictus Games in September.

Bobby Ojeh, director of Invictus in Nigeria, said Azuegbulam's gold would bring hope to others and saw more African nations joining the event. Nigeria's jihadist conflict in the north has killed more than 40,000 people and displaced more than 2 million more since 2009.

The country's security forces are also battling bandit gangs and sep-



ABUJA: Peacemaker Azuegbulam, 27, poses for a portrait whilst holding the Nigerian national flag at the national stadium in Abuja, on September 23, 2023. — AFP

ararists in different parts of Nigeria. For Azuegbulam, originally from the southeast state of Imo, sports brought him back to life.

"I am recovered now, it is due to sports. Nothing more than you seeing yourself doing something," he said. But he said he found more inspiration at Invictus Games from the support of other wounded servicemen and women.

"I have new friends now, I have

new family now that can encourage me, advise me and know where to help me," he said. After gold at Invictus, the Nigeria champion said he intends to keep on with more sports competitions.

"As it stands now, I am ready. The ability is there I am ready to go further in any sports. Even in the Olympics I am ready," he said. "I want to continue in sports. Let me focus on sports and let me focus on winning." — AFP

Sports

Ajax-Feyenoord scrapped after flares thrown on pitch, violence erupts

Ajax-Feyenoord to be replayed without crowd: Federation

AMSTERDAM: The 'Klassieker' between bitter rivals Ajax and Feyenoord was abandoned Sunday after fans lobbed flares on the pitch in Amsterdam, with violence later erupting outside the stadium in the latest unrest to blight Dutch football.

Feyenoord had taken a 3-0 first-half lead at the Johan Cruyff Arena, sparking ugly scenes from the hardcore supporters of Ajax, who are suffering one of the worst crises in their storied 123-year history. The unrest spilled out of the stadium, as furious Ajax fans smashed into the main entrance, prompting riot police on horseback to fire tear gas to disperse the crowd.

The clashes were the latest in a string of violent incidents to plague Dutch football that have prompted soul-searching within the game and from politicians across the spectrum. "If you go to a football game you also want to go with your family and you can't go here with your family because there's always violence," Bryan Buffing, a communication advisor for a translation company, told AFP.

"We have a real, real big issue in the Netherlands," said the 32-year-old. Sunday's match had already been suspended twice during the first half, once for flares on pitch, the other time after a cup was lobbed from the stands.

A double from Santiago Gimenez and one from Igor Paixao had given the team from Rotterdam a comfortable first-half lead. With 55 minutes on the clock, TV images showed three flares burning on the pitch with smoke from other flares billowing from the notorious south stands of the arena, where the hard-

core "F-side" fans sit. "After the abandoned Ajax-Feyenoord game, 'supporters' forced their way into the entrance. Order has now been restored. Mounted police carried out several charges and deployed tear gas," Amsterdam police said in a statement.

The coaches and players were confined to their dressing rooms over fears for their safety. Ajax have made a miserable start to the season. After winning their first match, they have drawn two and lost one in the Eredivisie. They are 13th in the table.

The club is in chaos off the pitch as well, with technical director Sven Mislintat under investigation for potential conflict of interest over a recent transfer. Defending champions Feyenoord, in contrast, remain unbeaten in the top flight this season.

Meanwhile, the remaining 35 minutes of the 'Klassieker' between Ajax and Feyenoord will be played Wednesday behind closed doors, the Dutch football federation said, after the referee abandoned this weekend's match due to flares fired onto the pitch.

The KNVB association said it had been guided by the principle that in such cases "a match should preferably be decided on the field... the match must then be resumed as soon as possible." Dutch giants Ajax were 3-0 down after 55 minutes on Sunday, as their bitter rivals from Rotterdam humiliated them in front of their home fans, taking an unprecedented first-half lead. The rescheduling of the match sparked immediate anger from Ajax and from FC Volendam, who were supposed to be playing Ajax that night. "Ajax does not agree with this," the club said in a statement. It suggested the match be



AMSTERDAM: Ajax' supporters set off fireworks during the Dutch Eredivisie match between Ajax Amsterdam and Feyenoord at The Johan Cruyff Arena in Amsterdam. — AFP

moved to the first week of November.

"Not only the clubs, but also the supporters are victims of this (rescheduling). That is why Ajax is considering legal action." For their part, FC Volendam declared themselves "surprised" by the decision and also said they were considering their legal options.

Sunday's ugly scenes represented a new low in the crisis suffered by Ajax, a four-time European Cup winner struggling both on and off the field. With only five points from four games, the 36-time Dutch champions are having their worst start to an Eredivisie season since 1964/65. — AFP

Rapinoe makes triumphant US farewell in win

CHICAGO: Megan Rapinoe was a winner in her farewell game for the United States on Sunday, setting up a goal with a corner kick in a 2-0 triumph over South Africa. The iconic 38-year-old striker, celebrated for off-field activism as well as glories on the pitch, ended her epic US career with 63 goals in 203 caps over more than 17 years with a 54th-minute exit at Chicago's Soldier Field.

"It makes me really proud to know we've been as successful on the field as we have, but also that we've helped make the world a little bit better of a place," Rapinoe said after the victory. Rapinoe sparked the Americans to crowns at the 2015 and 2019 Women's World Cups and gold at the 2012 London Olympics, but was a champion for social causes as well.

A vocal advocate for LGBTQ rights who has supported an array of US social justice issues, Rapinoe was presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's top civilian award, in 2002 by President Joe Biden. Rapinoe, FIFA's 2019 Women's Player of the Year, also was among the leaders of the US women's successful fight with US Soccer for equal pay and conditions with the men's squad.

"She has affected so many people's lives in a positive way. She has changed this sport forever," US forward Trinity Rodman said of Rapinoe. "I'm so grateful I'm able to play on the same field with her as well as learn from her so she's a legend."

Rodman scored on a right-footed volley in the 18th minute off an assist from Alex Morgan for the Americans, who also beat South Africa 3-0 Thursday at Cincinnati. Rapinoe, the 14th player to make 200 career appearances for the US women, made her magic four minutes into the second half.

US midfielder Emily Sonnett scored on a header in the 49th minute off a deflection of a Rapinoe corner kick, nodding the ball over a defender and just under the crossbar for a 2-0 US lead. Players gathered to celebrate around Rapinoe, who struck a pose after encouragement from teammates.

Rapinoe was replaced by Margaret Purce in the 54th minute and departed to a standing ovation, teammates coming over to share a hug before she stepped off the pitch for the last time in a USA uniform. "So overwhelming. It has been amazing," Rapinoe said of the day. "It has been really wonderful, to hear all the nice things, to have a closure moment, to play in front of a big crowd again. 'I'll miss it forever. I don't think I'll ever be at a moment where it will feel perfect but this is pretty close."

"Trailblazer. Icon. Inspiration," the US women's team posted on social media after Rapinoe's exit. "You've made this sport, this country and this world a better place. Thank you." Morgan, in a video trib-



Megan Rapinoe

ute, told Rapinoe, "Your legacy is so much bigger than what you did on the field... you've literally done it all. I'm just so proud of how you get to go out on your own terms."

Rapinoe thanked fans worldwide and her teammates in speaking to the crowd after the match, saying, "I feel like I've been able to grow up in front of all of you." "It has been such an honor to be able to wear this shirt and play with all these amazing players and to just live out my childhood dream, casually, just like in front of the world," she said. "We fought so hard off the field to continue to create more space for ourselves to be who we are but hopefully in turn more space for you guys to be who you are." Rapinoe told fans: "I'm not going to go away forever. Don't worry. I'm one of you guys now." — AFP

Newcastle thrash Sheffield Utd 8-0

LONDON: Newcastle came close to matching the Premier League's record margin of victory as they thrashed Sheffield United 8-0 at Bramall Lane on Sunday. Eddie Howe's side ran riot with goals from Sean Longstaff, Dan Burn, Sven Botman, Callum Wilson, Anthony Gordon, Miguel Almiron, Bruno Guimaraes and Alexander Isak. The biggest winning margin in the Premier League era is 9-0, a score recorded by Manchester United against Ipswich and Southampton in 1995 and 2021 respectively. Liverpool won 9-0 against Bournemouth last year, while Leicester managed it against Southampton in 2019.

Sheffield United's largest ever league defeat sent the Blades to the bottom of the Premier League table. With just one point from their first six games back in the English top flight, Paul Heckingbottom's future as manager is now in doubt. "The first-half goals we con-

ceded were really poor, but it's the second half I'm upset with," said Heckingbottom. "The errors that led to goals, a lot of things I'd never seen before, and there's certain things that aren't acceptable."

Newcastle had lost three of their opening five league games of the season to dampen expectations that the Saudi-backed Magpies could challenge for the title. Howe's men had been in the Champions League for the first time in 20 years on Tuesday as they played out a 0-0 draw away to AC Milan.

But Newcastle showed no signs of fatigue and they exhibited their strength in depth as they became the first side in Premier League history to have eight different scorers in one match, not including own goals. "I thought we were really good, and once the goals came the confidence returned," said Howe.

"What a response from the players in the past week." Sheffield United had started the game brightly at an emotional Bramall Lane as tributes were paid to Maddy Cusack. The 27-year-old, who was the longest-serving player in the club's women's side and also worked in the club's commercial department, died earlier this week. — AFP

Wales reach Rugby WCup last eight

PARIS: Wales became the first team to qualify for the quarter-finals of the Rugby World Cup as they produced a record-breaking performance to hammer Australia 40-6 in Lyon on Sunday. Scotland also remained in contention for the quarter-finals with a 45-17 bonus point win over Tonga, although they will likely need to beat Ireland in their final Pool B match to progress.

Warren Gatland's Wales side, who had laboured to victory in their previous matches against Fiji and Portugal, looked to be in trouble when they lost influential fly-half Dan Biggar after just 12 minutes.

However, tries from Gareth Davies, Nick Tompkins and skipper Jac Morgan, and an exemplary kicking display from replacement fly-half Gareth Anscombe, who mustered 23 points in total, saw Wales into the

Asian Games medals table

Medals table after day two of the Asian Games in Hangzhou on Monday (gold, silver, bronze, total):

China	39	21	9	69
South Korea	10	10	13	33
Japan	5	14	12	31
Uzbekistan	4	4	6	14
Hong Kong	3	4	7	14
India	2	3	6	11
Taiwan	2	1	3	6
Indonesia	1	1	4	6
Thailand	1	0	2	3
Macau	1	0	1	2
Tajikistan	1	0	1	2
Iran	0	3	5	8
North Korea	0	2	2	4
Vietnam	0	1	5	6
Kazakhstan	0	1	4	5
Mongolia	0	1	3	4
UAE	0	1	1	2
Brunei	0	1	0	1
Sri Lanka	0	1	0	1
Philippines	0	0	2	2
Afghanistan	0	0	1	1
Bangladesh	0	0	1	1
Kuwait	0	0	1	1
Singapore	0	0	1	1
Turkmenistan	0	0	1	1

last eight. It was the most points they have ever scored against the Wallabies and the 34-point gap eclipsed their 28-3 win in Cardiff back in 1975. "We've played well in the last two games but there were a few things we could improve on and today the discipline was better and we were great," said Morgan.

"I'm very proud of the boys, we're prepared to go to the well for each other and everyone's prepared so well." With Australia's hopes of qualifying now depending on Fiji losing to Georgia or Portugal, the pressure will mount on coach Eddie Jones.

It was his side's seventh defeat in eight Tests since he took over the reins for the second time in January. Australia's only victory since then was over Tier II Georgia. "I would like to apologise to all Australia supporters," said Jones. "Our performances was not up to the standards required. I take full responsibility for it. It is very disappointing." Wales got off to a dream start with a line-out move straight off the training ground as Morgan hit a beautiful line onto Tompkins's inside pass to break through the defensive line and tee up Davies to score by the posts. — AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707	Qibla	22459381
Rawda	22517733	Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Adaliya	22517144	Mirqab	22456536
Khaldiya	24848075	Sharq	22465401
Kaifan	24849807	Salmiya	25746401
Shamiya	24848913	Hospitals	
Shuwaikh	24814507	Sabah Hospital	24812000
Abdullah Salem	22549134	Amiri Hospital	22450005
Nuzha	22526804	Maternity Hospital	24843100
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764	Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Qadsiya	22515088	Chest Hospital	24849400
Dasmah	22532265	Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908	Adan Hospital	23940620
Shaab	22518752	Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
		Al-Razi Hospital	24846000

Change of Name

I, Abubakar Mohammed Yusuf, holder of passport No. L8617774, do hereby change my name to Abubakar Mohd Yusuf (as given name), Ansari (surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name Abubakar Mohd Yusuf Ansari and i also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (#4235) 25/9/2023

I, Habibullah Khader Abdul Khader (old name), residing at, 1188/A, Laxman Tirtha road, Honavar, Uttara Kannada, Karnataka, Pin: 581334 India (address) have changed my name as Habibulla Abdul Khader Sahed (new name) for all purposes, vide affidavit dated: 01-07-2023 before notary S.G. Hegde. (#4234) 25/9/2023

I, Manukumar Sinh holder of Indian passport No. V7432529 having permanent address Ghurapali, Banpura, Saran, Bihar 841212 resident in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will read as Manu Kumar Singh. (#4233) 25/9/2023

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Emergency call 112

India fires first world record of Games

Swimming ace Qin breaks Games record as skateboarder, 9, has 'fun'



HANGZHOU: Winner China's Qin Haiyang (C), second-placed China's Yan Zibei (L) and third-placed South Korea's Choi Dong-yeol (R) pose with their medal after the final of the men's 100 breaststroke swimming event. — AFP photos



HANGZHOU: Philippines' Mazel Paris Alegado competes in the women's park skateboarding event during the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, in China's eastern Zhejiang province on September 25, 2023.

HANGZHOU: India claimed the first world record of the Hangzhou Asian Games on Monday as hosts China snapped up more gold medals and a nine-year-old skateboarder melted hearts. The Indian trio of Divyansh Panwar, Rudranksh Patil and Aishwary Tomar blew away the field with a new world best 1,893.7 points to win the men's 10m air rifle team event on day two of the multi-sports extravaganza.

They beat the previous mark of 1,893.3 set by China last month and in doing so won India's first gold of a Games where the hosts have swept 32 of the 51 titles decided so far. "In the 10m event they are both perfect athletes," Tomar said of his teammates. "Playing with them is huge, it's really good."

India claimed their second gold in the afternoon when they defeated Sri Lanka in the final of the women's cricket by 19 runs. Another shooting world record fell to Chinese teenager Sheng Lihao in the men's 10m air rifle with his 253.3 points surpassing teammate Yu Haonan's 252.8 from Rio four years ago.

"I had good luck in the final. I did quite well today, I was basically smooth," said the 18-year-old, a Tokyo Olympic silver medallist. In other action, Mazel Paris Alegado—aged just nine—said it was "so fun" competing in skateboarding.

Thought to be the youngest athlete in Hangzhou and representing the Philippines, she qualified for the

"women's" park final and came seventh out of eight.

The competition was won by comparative veteran Hinano Kusaki from Japan, aged 15. China's Chen Ye, also just 15, won the men's park in skateboarding.

Swimming sensation Qin Haiyang added another title to his name to inflate China's already bulging gold-medal haul on Monday at the Asian Games, while a nine-year-old skateboarder melted hearts.

The hosts enjoyed success in gymnastics, fencing, rowing, shooting, taekwondo and mountain biking to top the medals table in Hangzhou with 39 golds at the end of the second full day of action. South Korea and Japan are their closest competitors with a distant 10 and five golds respectively.

China romped to all seven titles on the opening day of swimming on Sunday in an ominous display ahead of next summer's Paris Olympics, but they did not have it all their own way a day later. South Korea's Ji Yu-chan set a new Asian Games record in the men's 50m freestyle of 21.72secs in a shock win ahead of Hong Kong's Ian Ho (21.87) and teenage Chinese star Pan Zhanle (21.92).

Olympic silver medallist Siobhan Haughey clinched Hong Kong's first Asian Games swimming gold ever with an emphatic victory in the 200m freestyle in a sizzling 1min 54.12sec, another Games record.

"It's very special," she said.

South Korea's night got even better when they took gold ahead of the hosts in the men's 4x200m freestyle relay in another surprise. The other four races all went the way of China's swimmers, with the hulking 24-year-old Qin adding Games 100m breaststroke gold to his recent world title.

Qin, also the 50m and 200m world champion, romped home in a new Games-record time of 57.76secs, a gaping 1.33sec ahead of teammate Yan Zibei. But don't call him the "Breaststroke Prince".

"Maybe just call me a breaststroke swimmer," he said modestly. The hosts rounded off another dominant day with gold ahead of Japan in the women's team event of the artistic gymnastics.

"Whilst in the match we both cheered each other on and we respect each other," Chinese gymnast Zhang Xinyi said of regional rivals Japan.

'So fun!'

World records fell in shooting with India and China both displaying pinpoint precision. The Indian trio of Divyansh Panwar, Rudranksh Patil and Aishwary Tomar blew away the field with a new world best to win the men's 10m air rifle team event.

In skateboarding, Mazel Paris Alegado probably ought to have been in primary school, but instead she was in the "women's" park final. Thought to be

the youngest athlete at the Games and representing the Philippines, she just about avoided the wooden spoon by coming seventh out of eight.

Japan's Hinano Kusaki, a comparative veteran at 15, won gold. China's Chen Ye, who is the same age, won the men's event. Alegado, who turned nine in March and reportedly comes from California, said she got into skateboarding when she saw her brother doing it while they were at a cousin's house.

Asked what it was like to take part in a major international competition, Alegado said: "I was so excited because I was about to skate the Asian Games—and I just did, so it was so fun!" North Korea, competing in their first major international sporting event since the pandemic, added silvers in men's team shooting and women's judo to their lone bronze.

Away from the action, between 150 and 200 athletes have been tested for doping, the Olympic Council of Asia said, with no positive results. — AFP

Kuwait beat Thailand 49-19 in handball at Asian Games



HANGZHOU: Kuwait's handball team beat Thailand 49-19 in their first match at the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, China on Monday. Kuwait plays host country China in their next Group A match.

China gets to grip with cricket

HANGZHOU: There's a reverential hush from the respectful crowd as Pakistan's Sadia Iqbal opens the bowling to Bangladesh's Shathi Rani in the Asian Games women's bronze medal match in Hangzhou. The sound of leather on willow echoes around the purpose-built cricket ground, which until recently was full of sunflowers.

The atmosphere is more village green than the fever pitch of, say, Pakistan's Gaddafi Stadium, but the few hundred spectators are fully engaged—even if many admit to never seeing the game before. Almost entirely Chinese, the crowd "oohs and aahs" and clap when a wicket falls, cheer every boundary and then look bewildered when a loud lbw appeal pierces the serenity of the Zhejiang University of Technology (ZJUT) Cricket Field.

"I didn't ever see cricket before so I

was interested to know more about this sport," said spectator Huang Dapeng, who runs his own business in Hangzhou. "I'm starting to understand it a little, but I am really enjoying it anyway."

A few have some knowledge of the game and seem captivated. "I travelled to Sri Lanka before and a friend invited me to watch cricket, so I became interested," said Liang Xiaoqian, a travel agent.

"When I heard it was in the Asian Games I wanted to learn more about this game," she added, ahead of Monday afternoon's final between India and Sri Lanka. "I am enjoying watching. I will be supporting Sri Lanka in the gold medal match."

Others are there just because it is the Asian Games and they want to watch sport, any sport. "It's the only Asian Games tickets we could get," said a smiling Jeff Wang, an engineer who was sitting in the stand with his father Wang Hang. "It's my first time to watch cricket. It's unknown to me before, I don't really know what is going on. But I did hear this game is very famous in South Asia." — AFP

India's women strike cricket gold on debut

HANGZHOU: India struck gold on their Asian Games cricket debut when they beat in-form Sri Lanka by 19 runs in the women's final in Hangzhou on Monday. They had declined to enter any teams on the two previous occasions cricket was played at the multisport event, at Guangzhou in 2010 and Incheon in 2014.

"It's a gold medal for the whole of India," said batter Richa Ghosh. Batting first India reached 116-7 in their 20 overs with Smriti Mandhana (46) and Jemimah Rodrigues (42) putting on 73 for the second wicket. "Winning a gold medal is something you dream about," said Rodrigues.

Sri Lanka's chase started badly when they were reduced to 14-3 in the fifth over by a devastating spell from right-arm seamer Titas Sadhu. She took two wickets in her first four balls and another in her third over to finish with remarkable figures of three wickets for six runs.

Sri Lanka, who had beaten England in a white-ball series for the first time earlier this month, were always behind the run rate despite Hasini Perera looking to accelerate, hitting four fours and a six in a rapid 25.

When Nilakshi de Silva was out after a battling 23, Sri Lanka were 78-5 needing 39 more with only 23 balls remaining. Two more wickets saw them face a near-impossible 25 off the last over and could only muster five as India began to celebrate.

"It's a golden first for us," India assistant coach Rajib Dutta told AFP. "Many more to come I hope. It's a low-scoring wicket so we thought 110 would be a good score, but when Jemimah and Mandhana were together we thought 130-135 might be possible so we were a little disappointed by 116," he added. Sri Lankan all-rounder Oshadi Ranasinghe said they had missed a good opportunity to win gold. "Looking at the way we batted, we have to get more disciplined," she said.

'The pitch was turning'

Accumulating runs has not been easy all tournament at the Zhejiang University for Technology Ping-feng Cricket Field, on a flaky wicket affected by rain last week. India won the toss and opted to bat even though both semi-finals and the bronze medal match were won by the team chasing. They lost star opener Shafali Verma with the score on 16, but steadied to



HANGZHOU: India's Smriti Mandhana (R) plays a shot during the 2022 Asian Games women's final cricket match between Sri Lanka and India in Hangzhou in China's eastern Zhejiang province on September 25, 2023. — AFP

35-1 at the end of the six-over power play where only two fielders are allowed outside the 30-metre circle. When Mandhana fell for 46 with the score on 89 in the 15th over, it sparked a succession of dismissals that stalled India's momentum when a testing total in excess of 130 had looked more likely.

Rodrigues, who had been not out 47 and 20 in her two previous Asian Games outings, was finally dismissed in the last over for 42. "We had also struggled while batting on this pitch, so we thought we could defend this total,"

said Ghosh, who smashed a huge six in her cameo of nine off six balls.

"The pitch was turning and holding up a little bit." Bangladesh took the bronze after restricting Pakistan to 64-9 and crawling to their target of 65 in 18.2 overs in their medal playoff. It meant Pakistan, who won the gold on both previous occasions that cricket was played in the Asian Games, return home empty-handed. "It's not a good feeling. We never got enough runs on the board," said Pakistan coach Mohtashim Rasheed. — AFP