

**3** World leaders continue to pay tribute to late Amir

**5** Zionist entity strikes Gaza as pressure grows for ceasefire

**8** Restrictions on dollar weigh on Iraq daily life

**16** Arsenal beat Brighton to top Premier League



## Sheikh Nawaf laid to rest

Amir attends funeral • Kuwait shrouded in sadness • Prayers in absentia held in Makkah, Madinah



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, members of the Al-Sabah Family and senior officials attend the funeral prayers and burial of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Dec 17, 2023. — KUNA photos

**KUWAIT:** The late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was laid to rest on Sunday in the presence of HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal led the mourners, namely HH Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah and members of the gracious Al-Sabah Family, looked on by a throng of tearful mourners deeply saddened, along with many Kuwaiti citizens and others here and abroad, watching the sorrowful event live on television.

Earlier in the day, HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal performed the funeral prayers of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf at Belal bin Rahab Mosque in Siddeeq. Also present were

National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun, senior sheikhs, HH Sheikh Nasser, HH Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, HH Sheikh Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad, senior officials and citizens.

Upon their departure from the mosque with uniformed elite personnel carrying the coffin, wrapped in the green, black, white and red Kuwaiti flag, HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal was visibly sad while sitting in his vehicle. The coffin was laid in a large dark-colored Amiri Diwan vehicle, and the motorcade proceeded to the cemetery.

Meanwhile, the grieving people of Kuwait on Sunday paid tribute to late Amir Sheikh Nawaf as life came to a standstill throughout the country. Kuwait was shrouded in an air of sorrow and sadness

with businesses, schools and government facilities shut down. Kuwait has declared a closure of businesses and facilities for three days amid 40 days mourning on the demise of Sheikh Nawaf. Media stopped regular programs, broadcasting Quranic verses round the clock.

Funeral prayers in absentia were held in the Prophet's (PBUH) Mosque and Al-Haram Al-Shareef in the holy cities of Madinah and Makkah respectively for late Amir Sheikh Nawaf on Sunday. Attendees prayed for the late Sheikh Nawaf in a gesture demonstrating the loss of a great figure for the Arab and Islamic worlds. The prayers were performed at both holy sites after Dhuhr (midday) prayers. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Mourners pray by the grave of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Jaber Al-Sabah at Sulaibikhat cemetery after his funeral on Dec 17, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## Foreign leaders arrive to offer condolences

**KUWAIT:** Foreign leaders and envoys began arriving in Kuwait on Sunday to pay their final respects to late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at the Amiri Airport Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, Jordanian King Abdullah II, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Al-Sudani, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Tunisian President Kais Saied, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal also received UAE President's representative Member of the UAE Higher Council and Fujairah Ruler Sheikh Hamad bin Mohammad Al-Sharqi, Iranian President's representative FM Hussein Amir-Abdollahian, European Union Special Representative in the Gulf Luigi Di Maio and representative of the government of India Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Hardeep Singh Puri among other officials. — KUNA



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives at Amiri Airport (clockwise from top left) Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Jordanian King Abdullah II on Dec 17, 2023. — KUNA



# Kuwait bids farewell to Sheikh Nawaf



KUWAIT: Tearful Kuwait bid farewell to the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah who was laid to rest on Sunday in the presence of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.



## Muslim nations lost a wise leader, says info minister

KUWAIT: Minister of Information and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi said with the demise of Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait, the Arab and Muslim nations lost a wise leader.

In a statement to KUNA on Sunday, the minister said Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad throughout his life, had worked hard to serve Kuwait and its people supporting humanitarian work around the world.

### OIC, WML

Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Hussein Taha conveyed deepest condolences to the State of Kuwait, Al-Sabah Family and Kuwaiti people for the passing of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf.

He paid tribute for the late Amir for his contributions to the development, security, stability and prosperity of Kuwait. The World Muslim League also condoled with the passing away of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad. Secretary General Mohammad Al-Essa said he received with great sorrow the news of the passing of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad.

## MPs pay tribute to late Amir, pledge loyalty to new Amir

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MPs on Sunday paid rich tributes to late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who passed away on Saturday, describing him as a humble man who will be missed by Arabs and Muslims. At the same time, they pledged loyalty to the new Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who was proclaimed Amir by the Cabinet



KUWAIT: Absentee funeral prayers in Kuwait mosques for late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. —KUNA

Meanwhile, mosques in Kuwait preformed absentee funeral prayer for late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah who was laid to rest early on Sunday. In a showing of sincere emotions and gratitude

hours after the late Amir passed away.

Sheikh Mishal will assume his constitutional power only after he takes the constitutional oath before the National Assembly, which is due to convene a special session within a few days for this purpose. Arab and world leaders and senior officials started arriving in Kuwait on Sunday to offer their countries' condolences to HH Sheikh Mishal.

Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun expressed his deepest condolences on the passing of HH Sheikh Nawaf, recalling the historical stances of the late Amir and his wise leadership of the country, during which the country witnessed major political and legal reforms that led to a state of stability and construction. Saadoun also sent a letter of condolences on his behalf and on behalf of lawmakers to the new Amir HH Sheikh Mishal.

to the late Amir, mosque attendees prayed for Sheikh Nawaf who had a long illustrious career as a statesman and father figure to all Kuwaitis and residents alike during his tenure as the leader of the nation. —KUNA

MP Marzouq Al-Ghanem expressed his sadness and sorrow over the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf, saying it was a great loss for the Kuwaiti people as well as for Arabs and Muslims. Ghanem said he frequently met the late Amir during the 10 years he was the speaker of the Assembly, firstly when Sheikh Nawaf was Crown Prince and later when he became the Amir, adding he was an extremely humble man. He also pledged loyalty to HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal.

MP Mohammad Al-Huwailah expressed warm condolences to HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal, the Kuwaiti people and the Arab and Muslim people for the great loss of Sheikh Nawaf. He said he greatly served his people and the Arabs and Muslims as well. Huwailah said he will be remembered by the Kuwaiti people for a long time as a great leader.

## KJA mourns demise of late Amir

KUWAIT: Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) expressed on Sunday its deepest and sincere condolences to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Al-Sabah Family and the Kuwaiti people on the passing away of the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In a statement, the KJA voiced hope for security, stability and unity in the country under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah as he constantly emphasized unity of Kuwaiti people and their devotion in serving the country and boosting its development.

The statement added as the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah loved his people, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah affirmed that his leadership of the country would be aimed for the benefit of the people of Kuwait, praying to Allah the Almighty to bestow His blessing upon His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad.

### Arab journalists

The Federation of Arab Journalists (FAJ) on Sunday eulogized the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber who passed away Saturday recalling his long record of accomplishments at the domestic and external levels. The Cairo-headquartered union said in a statement that the late Amir was a wise and faithful leader for his country and people, was keen on boosting relations among Arab States and supporting causes of the Arab and Muslim nations. It also expressed sympathies and solace to the State of Kuwait, the people the gracious Al-Sabah Family, praying for his soul and voiced sympathies with Sheikh Nawaf's bereaved family.

### OPEC

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries offered its "deepest and heartfelt condolences" over the passing of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf to the leadership, the ruling family and people of Kuwait. The Organization, recalled in a press release, that during the late Amir's reign --(from Sept 29, 2020, to Dec 16, 2023 --), the global oil industry has witnessed a number of challenges, including the severe impacts resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak. "The late Amir's astute leadership and wise counsel guided his country and the Organization to overcome many of these challenges. — KUNA

## Local

# Amir: Sheikh Nawaf's legacy will be engraved in people's memory

## Sheikh Mishal receives condolence messages

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday a cable of condolences from National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun over the demise of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In his cable, Al-Saadoun expressed his deepest sorrow on behalf of the parliament members over the demise of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Al-Saadoun also paid his condolences to the people of Kuwait over this great loss, remembering the late Amir's historic stance and wisdom in leading the country to more progress. The parliament speaker prayed to Allah Almighty to bestow mercy on the late Amir, protect Kuwait and its people under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal also received a cable of condolences from His Highness Chief of the National Guard Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah over the demise of the late Amir, offering consolations to His Highness the Amir and to the people of Kuwait over the loss of an exceptional ruler adding that his demise is a loss for the Arab nations and the world, as he was a wise leader, who dedicated his life to support humanitarian efforts and serve his people.

With his passing, Kuwait has lost one of its key figures who added to the country's history and helped it overcome various challenges, steering Kuwait to be a more prosperous nation, His Highness Sheikh Salem added.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal received an identical cable from His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the prime minister expressed his deepest sympathy over the demise of the late Amir and implored Allah Almighty to bestow mercy on him, protect Kuwait and its people. He added that Kuwait, the Arab and Islamic nations have lost a prominent ruler who dedicated his life to make great achievements, supported humanitarian values and philanthropic action, and left prominent marks in rebuilding the country, promoting its renaissance and achieving the aspirations of the people. His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal sent reply cables to Al-Saadoun, His Highness Sheikh Salem Al-Ali and His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf, expressing gratitude for the cables he received, stressing that the demise of His Highness the late Amir is a great loss to Kuwait and its people.

His Highness the Amir added that the late Amir dedicated his life to Kuwait and its people and his legacy will be engraved in his people's memory as he had always called on them to cherish the country's democracy and traditions, affirming that Kuwaitis would be strong and productive through their unity and sacrifice. HH the Amir prayed to Allah Almighty to bestow mercy on the late Amir and wished good health and prosperity to the people of Kuwait.

Deputy Commander of Kuwait National Guard (KNG) Sheikh Faisal Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah mourned on Sunday over the demise of late Amir. In a press release, the National Guard stated that Sheikh Faisal expressed condolences to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people. — KUNA



## Kuwaiti diplomatic missions abroad mourn late Amir

**KUWAIT:** The State of Kuwait's diplomatic missions and consulates abroad mourned on Sunday the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, remembering in their statements this great man and leader of the country. Starting from Doha, Qatar, Ambassador of Kuwait Khaled Al-Mutairi announced that the embassy would be opening its doors to receive condolences from officials on the passing of the late Amir of Kuwait.

A number of Qatari, Arab, and foreign officials had visited the embassy to offer their condolences, said the ambassador, noting that the period of mourning will be lasting for three days. Qatar had announced a period of mourning for three days, lowering the Qatari flag at public institutions at half-mast in honor of the late Amir.

In neighboring Bahrain, the Kuwaiti Embassy revealed it would be receiving condolences on the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf. In a statement, the embassy lamented the demise of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, saying that it was a great loss for Kuwait, the Arab and Muslim countries, and the world. The mourning period will be three days, added the statement. Still in the Arab world, the Kuwaiti consulate



Kuwait Embassy in Bahrain opens doors to receive condolences.

in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, said that a mourning period would be observed in honor of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

General Consul in Jeddah and Permanent Representative at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Mohammad Al-Mutairi expressed sorrow over the demise of late Sheikh Nawaf affirming that it was a great loss to the Arab and Islamic worlds. Several General consulates in Jeddah as well as officials and representatives from the OIC had offered their condolences over the demise of Sheikh Nawaf with the Kuwaiti consulate opening its quarters for

three days to receive mourners. In the holy cities of Madina and Makkah particularly in the Prophet and Al-Haram Mosques, absentee funeral prayers were offered for the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf.

In the Indian subcontinent at the General Consulate of Kuwait in Mumbai announced a three-day period of mourning for the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. The consulate released a statement lamenting the passing away of Sheikh Nawaf, saying that it was a great loss to Kuwait and its people. Westwards to Europe, the Embassy of the State of Kuwait in Brussels, Belgium, expressed gratitude

to all embassies and diplomatic missions accredited to the Kingdom of Belgium, the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for their condolences over the demise of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad. The statement sadly conveyed with profound grief and great sorrow the passing of the late Amir of the State of Kuwait, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, on December 16, 2023. The embassy said in a statement that a book of condolences would be opened at the Residence of the Ambassador of the State of Kuwait on December 17-19. — KUNA



Kuwait Embassy in Baghdad opens doors to receive condolences. — KUNA photos

## World leaders continue to pay tribute

### United States of America

US President Joe Biden expressed grief for the passing away of Kuwait's late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday. "(US First Lady) Jill (Biden) and I were saddened to learn of the passing of the Amir of Kuwait," the President wrote in a White House statement. "Sheikh Nawaf was a valued partner and true friend of the United States throughout his decades of service. I offer my condolences to Sheikh Nawaf's family and the people of Kuwait on behalf of the United States of America and the American people. Today, we mourn his passing and we honor his life and the vision we shared for greater peace and stability across the Middle East. We will continue to strengthen the longstanding ties between the governments and people of the United States and Kuwait as we pursue that future together," President Biden added.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed grief over the passing of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday, saying he was a "deeply respected leader." "I was saddened to learn of the death of Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. On behalf of the United States, I extend my sincere condolences to the late Amir's family and to all Kuwaitis," he said in a press release. "I had the opportunity to know His Highness personally and appreciated his dedication to the welfare of the Kuwaiti people and the many ways he nurtured the Kuwaiti-American partnership.

"His perseverance and resolve helped shape Kuwait into the prosperous and modern state it is today, and his public service over his lifetime contributed to a lasting and positive change in Kuwait and the entire Middle East region. The late Amir Nawaf was a deeply respected leader and a friend



A file photo of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

to all nations. We honor his legacy and remain committed to our strong partnership and friendship with Kuwait," he added.

### Turkey

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed grief for the passing away of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday. On behalf of the Turkish people, he expressed sincere condolences to "the brotherly people of Kuwait." "The late Amir Sheikh Nawaf will be always remembered as a sincere and credible friend of Turkiye," President Erdogan wrote on his X account. He expressed best wishes for His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the new Amir of Kuwait.

### European Union

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell ex-

pressed condolences for the passing away of Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. "The European Union has learnt with sadness of the passing of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, late Amir of the State of Kuwait," they wrote in a joint statement on Saturday. "The EU expresses its condolences and sympathy over his loss to the Al-Sabah family, the people, and the government of Kuwait." The EU remembers late Amir's unwavering dedication and commitment to serving his country, even in turbulent times. "He will be remembered by all who work for regional stability and mutual understanding between nations," according to the statement. "The European Union will continue to work towards consolidating a solid and enduring partnership with the State of Kuwait and its people," it added.

### United Kingdom

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on

Saturday offered his deepest condolences to the Kuwaiti people and the Al-Sabah family on the death of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In a statement to Kuwait TV and KUNA, Premier Sunak said that His Highness the late Amir was a great friend for the UK and that he will remember fondly all what His Highness the late Amir did for the bilateral relationship and his work to promote stability in the Middle East.

The British government, in a statement, said "with great regret that we learn of the death of His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah." It also noted that Union flags would be flown half-mast on all government buildings in the UK on the sad occasion until tomorrow (Sunday) at 8 pm local time.

In the same vein, Foreign Minister David Cameron, in a statement, said the late Sheikh Nawaf "leaves behind a great legacy, the result of a long and distinguished career in the Interior Ministry, as Defense Minister, Crown Prince and then as Amir. "His contribution to regional stability, his personal commitment to global development and his work to bridge gaps between nations will long be remembered. I offer my profound condolences to Kuwait and its people at this sad time."

### Japan

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Saturday expressed his sincere condolences on the demise of the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, saying it is a serious loss for the international community. "We cannot help but be saddened to learn of the passing of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf. On behalf of the government of Japan and the Japanese people, I extend our deepest condolences to the government and people of the state of Kuwait" Kishida said in a message released by the government. "His Highness Sheikh Nawaf played an important role in building close relationships with other countries and achieving peace and stability in the Gulf region and the Middle East. His Highness Sheikh Nawaf also dedicated

his efforts to reconciliation and the maintenance of peace and stability in the Middle East region with his outstanding wisdom and tolerance," the premier said. "The passing of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf is not only a great loss for the people of Kuwait, but also for the international community. "Japan will always stand with Kuwait, while the people of Kuwait overcome this great sadness," Kishida added.

### Yemen

His Highness the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah had always supported Yemen and its people, said Premier Maeen Saeed on Saturday. In a cable of condolences to his Kuwaiti counterpart His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Saeed said the late Amir's wise leadership was instrumental in supporting Arab and Islamic causes, pointing out Kuwait's influential role in the stability and development of Yemen through many vital projects. Expressing deep sorrow over the sad occasion, Saeed said by the "loss" of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf, the Arab and Muslim nations "lost" one of their "kind" symbols.

Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council Rashad Al-Alimi praised the late Amir's legacy in serving his people. According to Yemen's news agency, Al-Alimi, in a cable condoling with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, said His Highness late Sheikh Nawaf holds a special place in the hearts of the Yemeni people due to the support the late Amir extended to Yemen all the way through, especially during the hard times.

### Sudan

The President of the Transitional Sovereignty Council in Sudan, Abdelfattah Al-Burhan, mourned with great sadness late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday. In a statement issued by the Council, Al-Burhan, on behalf of the government and people of Sudan, extended sincere condolences and sympathy to the government and people of brotherly Kuwait on the demise of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf.

# Embassies offer condolences

KUWAIT: The Ambassadors and the diplomatic community in Kuwait continued to express condolences on Sunday over the sad demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah who passed away on Saturday.

## Australian Ambassador Melissa Kelly



Today, the Australian Embassy in Kuwait offers our deepest sympathies and condolences to the people of Kuwait for the loss of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness upheld Kuwait's long-standing role as a friend to all and a staunch advocate of peaceful dialogue. His dedication to Kuwait's development and prosperity significantly contributed to the stability of the region. His Highness was also a steadfast advocate for Australia's warm and longstanding relations with Kuwait. Our thoughts are with the Kuwaiti people during this time of mourning.

## Bulgarian Ambassador Dimitar Dimitrov



I express deep sadness and grief at the passing of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. Recognizing the late Amir as a wise leader who took immense pride in Kuwait and contributed to regional and global peace and stability.

I recall my personal encounter with Sheikh Nawaf during the presentation of credentials, the late Amir demonstrated a positive and friendly attitude and a genuine desire to enhance the friendly and cooperative relations between Kuwait and Bulgaria.

## Chinese Ambassador Zhang Jianwei



We are saddened to learn of the passing of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. During this difficult time, I would like to express, in my own name and on behalf of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the State of Kuwait, deep condolences to the government and people of Kuwait over the passing of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and extend sincere sympathy to his family.

His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is an outstanding leader of Kuwait. He devoted his life to the people and the country, made a notable contribution to promoting solidarity and stability of the Gulf region and played an active role in deepening friendly relations between China and Kuwait. His death is a great loss to Kuwait, to the Arab world and to the Islamic world.

We pay high tribute to His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. We are ready to work with the Kuwaiti side to keep traditional friendship between China and Kuwait as alive and strong as ever, implement the important consensus reached between President Xi Jinping and His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah during their meeting and the cooperation documents signed under their witness, and deepen our practical cooperation in various areas, in an effort to forge a more solid and substantial strategic partnership for the benefit of the two countries and peoples.

## Greek Ambassador Ioannis Plotas



The Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic in the State of Kuwait Ioannis Plotas expresses his deep and sincere condolences to the Al-Sabah Family and the people of Kuwait on the passing away of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and praying for the Almighty God for his soul to rest in peace.

## Indonesian Ambassador Lena Maryana



"Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return." It was with profound sadness when we received the news of the passing of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness was a noble and one of the greatest heads of state and was a deeply respected leader.

On behalf of the Embassy and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, I would like to extend our deepest and sincere condolences on His Highness demise to the bereaved Royal Family and the people of Kuwait. May His Highness soul rest in eternal peace!

## Pakistani Ambassador Malik Muhammad Farooq



The Pakistani ambassador to Kuwait said: "On behalf of the people of Pakistan and the Pakistani community residing in Kuwait, the embassy expresses its sincere and deepest condolences to the Al-Sabah family, the leadership and the people of Kuwait on the demise of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah."

## Polish Charge d'Affaires Anna Marta Godoj-Ciszkowska



We are deeply saddened by the news of the passing of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the royal family and the people of Kuwait. We mourn the loss of a remarkable leader and statesman.

## Charity organization mourns demise of Sheikh Nawaf

KUWAIT: The Chairman of the International Islamic Charity Organization Dr Abdullah Al-Matouq mourned on Sunday the demise of the late Amir stressing his journey which was filled with humanitarian and giving stances. In a press release Dr Al-Matouq said that the world have lost a wise and sincere leader that was loyal to his country and people.

"Until the last moment of his life, His Highness the late Amir left behind, a journey that demonstrates his support for the humanitarian and development path of the State of Kuwait" as well as sustainable projects in different parts of the world", he stated. Al-Matouq added that the history would record the wise directives of His Highness the late Amir to launch humanitarian initiatives and popular relief campaigns one after the other to support the afflicted and needy around the world.

These directives topped the humanitarian scene with the earthquake in southern Turkey and northern Syria, the earthquake in Morocco, the violent storms in Libya, and the conflicts in Sudan, to extend Kuwaiti relief bridges to the victims of these crises and disasters. He pointed out also the Kuwaiti relief bridge, on which His Highness the late Amir ordered to help the people of Gaza and the Palestinians, which has to date reached 30 relief trips to alleviate the suffering of the afflicted and provide medical, shelter, food and other assistance.

### Boursa Kuwait

Boursa Kuwait declared on Sunday its closure from Sunday until Tuesday in homage to demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The Kuwait bourse (the national stock exchange) said on its website the halt of operations was due to the tragic event; demise of "His Highness the State of Kuwait Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah who passed away yesterday."

The Amiri Diwan has issued a statement expressing deep sorrow and sadness, mourning the deceased Amir to the Kuwaiti people, the Arab and Muslim nations. The Cabinet had also declared 40 days of official mourning for Sheikh Nawaf's demise and shutdown of official departments and institutions for a three-day period ending on Tuesday.

### ICESCO

The Director-General of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), Dr. Salem Al-Malik, expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy on the death of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on Saturday, praising His Highness' great role in serving cultural issues and developing the fields of science, and His Highness' keenness on humanitarian work and promoting sustainable development.

In a statement on his behalf and on behalf of all the organization's employees, the owner expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy to the ruling family and the people of Kuwait, asking Allah Almighty to bless His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah with His mercy and inhabit the highest paradise. Al-Malik praised the role of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to serve cultural issues and develop the fields of science, and his keenness on humanitarian work and the promotion of sustainable development, and the development witnessed by cooperation between ICESCO and the competent Kuwaiti authorities during the reign of His Highness.

### Private Universities Council

The Private Universities Council (PUC) decided to suspend classes and exams at all private universities for three days as of Sunday in mourning for late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Classes will resume on Wednesday, Dec 20, based on the declaration of national mourning for 40 days, the PUC Secretariat said in a press release.

Meanwhile, Secretary General of the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Zurab Pololikashvili, expressed sincere condolences and sympathy over the death of late Amir. Pololikashvili said on his X account that he was deeply saddened to learn about the passing. My thoughts are with the people of Kuwait, he noted.

### Kuwait NOC, Sport Authority

Chairman of Kuwait National Olympic Committee Sheikh Fahad Nasser Al-Sabah and Director General of The Public Authority for Sport Yusuf Al-Baidan expressed condolences for the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf. Sheikh Fahad mourned the late Amir and said the sport movement lost a great leader. Al-Baidan expressed condolences of the authority and sportsmen for passing away from Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. Kuwait lost a leader and a father for all Kuwaitis, he said. -KUNA

## Tajik Ambassador Zubaydullo Zubaydzoda



With deep sadness, we express our heartfelt condolences, on behalf of the government of the Republic of Tajikistan, to the leadership, government, and people of the State of Kuwait. The passing of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, late Amir of Kuwait, is met with profound sorrow.

Wish the Almighty's mercy for the late Amir, seeking solace for his family, relatives, and the people of Kuwait, and praying for strength, patience, and protection for Kuwait and its citizens in this challenging time.

## Vietnamese Ambassador Ngo Toan Thang



I had the honor to present credentials to His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Feb 2, 2021. Even in the COVID pandemic, I could still feel the warm and heartfelt welcome the late Amir gave me back then.

On the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, I would like to express my deepest condolences, personally and on behalf of the Embassy of Vietnam in Kuwait, to the Amiri Diwan, the government and people of Kuwait.

May His Highness rest in eternal peace!

## UAE Ambassador Dr Matar Hamed Al-Neyadi



## South Korean Ambassador Chung Byung-ha



On behalf of the government and people of the Republic of Korea, I would like to extend my heartfelt condolence to the people of the State of Kuwait on the passing away of the late HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Kuwait has lost a great leader who throughout his life has provided outstanding services to his country with wisdom and vision. His Highness has cherished and contributed to deepening the friendly relationship between our two countries. May His Highness rest in eternal peace!

## Somali Ambassador Dr Abdullah Mohammed Odowa



On my own behalf and on behalf of the members of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Somalia and the Somali community in the State of Kuwait, I extend my sincere condolences to the government and people on their great loss, the demise of "the late Amir of the country, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah."

We ask God Almighty to bless the deceased with His vast mercy and to reward him with the best reward for the great deeds he performed for his country, the Kuwaiti people and the Arab nation.

## Nigerien Ambassador Ousseini Tinni



On behalf of the Government and the people of the Republic of Niger, I express my sincere condolences to the authorities and the people of Kuwait on the demise of late Amir HH Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. May His Highness's Soul Rest in Peace!

## Turkish Ambassador Tuba Nur Sonmez



In deep sorrow, the Islamic world mourns the loss of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His visionary and benevolent leadership resonated beyond Kuwait, leaving a lasting impact.

Amidst this, we find solace in the enduring positive relations between Türkiye and Kuwait, showcasing the strength of diplomatic ties. Our heartfelt condolences go to Kuwait's leadership, government, and people. May the memory of His Highness inspire continued collaboration, fostering stability and prosperity.

We extend our sincere condolences to the leadership, government and people of Kuwait on the demise of the late Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Amir of the country, hoping the memory of His Highness to remain immortal in everyone's memory for his wise leadership and his many exploits at the Arab and international levels. We share the great grief of the Kuwaiti people and we pray to God Almighty to give the patience and solace to his family. We take this occasion by congratulating His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on assuming the position of Amir of Kuwait, while wishing His Highness good luck and success, and the Kuwaiti government and people progress and prosperity.



Thousands flee as RSF gains ground in Sudan's safe city

## Zuma calls for boycotting ANC in S African election

Page 6

Page 7



RAFAH: A Palestinian youth reacts amid debris following Zionist bombardment on Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, on Dec 15, 2023. — AFP

# Zionist army strikes Gaza as Europe split on ceasefire

## Zionist sniper kills 2 Christian Palestinian women seeking refuge in church

**JERUSALEM:** The Zionist entity kept up deadly strikes on the besieged Gaza Strip on Sunday despite growing international calls for a ceasefire and pleas from desperate relatives to bring home the remaining hostages.

The health ministry in the Gaza Strip said 24 Palestinians were killed by Zionist bombardment in Jabalia camp in the north, with many still "missing under the rubble". It said at least 12 died in strikes on the central city of Deir al-Balah, while witnesses reported bombardment of Bani Suhaila east of Khan Yunis, Gaza's second largest city, in the south.

Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu again vowed "we will fight until the end. We will achieve all of our aims — eliminating Hamas, freeing all our hostages and ensuring that Gaza will not again become a center for terrorism."

But French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna was the latest envoy to call for an "immediate and durable" truce leading to a lasting ceasefire as she visited Tel Aviv, stressing that "too many civilians are being killed".

Her British and German counterparts, David Cameron and Annalena Baerbock, also bemoaned the high civilian toll but said it was not the right time for a ceasefire because it would not be sustainable. "Calling right now for a general and immediate ceasefire, hoping it somehow becomes per-

manent ... ignores why (the Zionist entity) is forced to defend itself: Hamas barbarically attacked (the Zionist entity) and still fires rockets to kill (Zionist) citizens every day. Hamas must lay down its arms," they wrote in Britain's Sunday Times.

The recent Gaza war started when Hamas fighters infiltrated through Gaza's high-security border fence and launched an attack on the Zionist entity, which killed 1,139 people, according to revised Zionist numbers.

The Zionist retaliatory offensive, including over two months of aerial bombardment and a ground invasion, has killed 18,800 people, mostly women and children, according to the Gaza health ministry. The Zionist army says it has lost 121 soldiers in the ground operations that began late October.

### Hospital 'bloodbath'

Pope Francis deplored the death of a Christian mother and daughter reportedly shot dead by a Zionist soldier at Gaza's only Catholic church, where families were sheltering. "A mother and her daughter ... were killed and other people injured by sniper fire," the pope said.

"This happened even inside the parish of the Holy Family where there are no terrorists, but families, children, sick or disabled people." The Zionist bombardment has left much of Gaza in ruins, with the UN

estimating 1.9 million Gazans — some 85 percent — have been displaced by the war and warning of a "breakdown of civil order".

"I would not be surprised if people start dying of hunger, or a combination of hunger, disease, weak immunity," said Philippe Lazzarini, head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

The UN's World Health Organization also sounded the alarm after visiting the largest hospital, Gaza City's Al-Shifa, weeks after it was raided by Zionist forces. The WHO team said the emergency department was "a bloodbath, with hundreds of injured patients inside, and new patients arriving every minute". "Patients with trauma injuries were being sutured on the floor," the WHO said, while "tens of thousands of displaced people are using the hospital building and grounds for shelter" amid "a severe shortage" of water and food.

### 'Russian roulette'

The Zionist government has come under growing pressure, including from its top ally the United States, but also from families of hostages, to either slow, suspend or end the military campaign.

There are 129 hostages still in Gaza, the Zionist entity says, and relatives again rallied in Tel Aviv on Saturday to call for an urgent deal to bring them home after the army admitted to mistakenly kill-

ing three captives in Gaza. Ruby Chen, father of 19-year-old soldier Itai, who is among the captives, said: "We feel like we're in a Russian roulette game (finding out) who will be next in line to be told the death of their loved one."

Netanyahu said the killing of the three hostages "broke my heart. It broke the whole nation's heart." But he added that, "with all the deep sorrow, I want to clarify: the military pressure is necessary both for the return of the kidnapped and for achieving victory over our enemies".

Talks involving mediator Qatar have resumed toward another truce like the one last month that saw scores of hostages exchanged for jailed Palestinians. News platform Axios said Zionist spy chief David Barnea met Friday in an unspecified European location with Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani.

Qatar in a statement Saturday reaffirmed its "ongoing diplomatic efforts to renew the humanitarian pause". But Hamas said on Telegram it was "against any negotiations for the exchange of prisoners until the aggression against our people ceases completely". US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Saturday he was travelling to the Zionist entity, Bahrain and Qatar to highlight Washington's "commitments to strengthening regional security and stability". — AFP



SHEFAYIM: Relatives and friends mourn as they gather for the funeral of Alon Shamriz, mistakenly killed by Zionist forces in Gaza. — AFP

## Brother of killed Zionist hostage says army 'murdered' him

**SHEFAYIM:** A Zionist hostage who was "mistakenly" killed by Zionist soldiers in the Gaza Strip this week was buried on Sunday, with his brother slamming the army for having "abandoned and murdered" him. Alon Shamriz, 26, was one of the three Zionist hostages shot dead by soldiers during an operation in the Gaza City suburb of Shejaiya, even as they carried a white flag and cried for help in Hebrew.

Shamriz, Yotam Haim and Samer El-Talalqa were killed when troops mistook them for a threat and opened fire, the army said. "Those who abandoned you also murdered you after all that you did right," Ido, brother of Shamriz said at the funeral in kibbutz Shefayim north of Tel Aviv attended by dozens of rel-

atives and family members. "You survived 70 days in hell," Shamriz's mother, Dikla, said in her eulogy. "Another moment and you would have been in my arms."

Zionist media reported that Talalqa was buried on Saturday, while the funeral for Haim was scheduled on Monday. The deaths of the three men, all in their twenties, have sparked protests in Tel Aviv as demonstrators demanded that the authorities offer a new plan for bringing home the remaining hostages held in the Gaza Strip. On Sunday military spokesman Richard Hecht said the deaths were being investigated and what the soldiers did was "violation of the rules of engagement".

Some 250 people were taken hostage when Hamas fighters attacked southern Zionist entity on Oct 7, killing about 1,140 people, mostly civilians, according to updated Zionist figures. Vowing to destroy Hamas and bring back the hostages, the Zionist entity launched a massive military offensive which has left much of the Gaza Strip in ruins and killing 18,800 people, mostly women and children. At least 129 hostages are still held captive in the Gaza Strip. — AFP

## Zionist Oct 7 toll revised down by social security data

**JERUSALEM:** A more precise picture of Hamas's October 7 attack on the Zionist entity has emerged from social security data, confirming the unprecedented scale of the violence but also challenging some initial testimonies.

The final death toll from the attack is now thought to be 695 Zionist civilians, including 36 children, as well as 373 security forces and 71 foreigners, giving a total of 1,139. This excludes five people, among them four Zionists, still listed as missing by the prime minister's office. On Oct 14, Zionist authorities announced a preliminary toll of more than 1,400 people killed by "Hamas terrorists". On Nov 10, the foreign ministry published an "updated estimate", saying the number "murdered in cold blood" was around 1,200 people, without further details.

### Social security figures

The identities and ages of civilian victims are available via Bituah Leumi, the Zionist social security agency. Its website lists 695 people killed during the attack, with names and the circumstances of their deaths. Among them are 36 children, including 20 under 15 years old and 10 killed by rockets.

The Bituah Leumi data does not distinguish between those killed by Hamas and civilians killed by Zionist forces in the fighting to retake control, an operation in which the army used shells and rockets on inhabited areas, according to testimonies collected by AFP and Zionist media.

The youngest victim was 10-month-old Mila Cohen, shot and killed at Kibbutz Beeri. An entire family, including three children aged between two and six, were killed in their home at Kibbutz Nir Oz. Elsewhere, two brothers aged five and eight were shot

dead in their car with their parents. A five-year-old boy was killed in the street by a rocket.

The data invalidates some statements by Zionist authorities in the days following the attack. In particular, a claim made on Oct 10 on the government's official X account spoke of "40 babies murdered" at Kfar Aza kibbutz, based on a report by i24NEWS channel. Questioned by AFP the following day, the Zionist foreign ministry, which runs the X account, said it could not "confirm any number at this stage". According to Bituah Leumi, 46 civilians were killed in Kfar Aza, the youngest 14 years old.

Another testimony called into question was that on Oct 27 by Colonel Golan Vach, head of the army's search and rescue unit, who told a group of journalists, including one from AFP, that he "personally" transported "a decapitated baby" found in the arms of his mother in the Beeri kibbutz. According to Bituah Leumi, only one baby was killed in Beeri: the 10-month-old Mila Cohen, whose mother survived. Army spokespersons did not respond to queries by AFP.

### Trauma and 'misinterpretation'

The extreme nature of the violence can make it hard for responders to be accurate in their testimonies, said members of Zaka, an emergency response NGO that helped collect victims' bodies. "When we find bodies that are burned or in a state of decomposition, we can easily be mistaken and think the body is a child's," said Haim Otmazgin, a Zaka leader.

One Zaka volunteer had, for example, spoken on Oct 11 of 20 children with their "hands tied in the back, shot and burned" in Beeri, but ultimately only nine children died there. "Our volunteers were confronted with traumatic scenes and sometimes misinterpreted what they saw," said Otmazgin.

There were also 71 foreign victims on Oct 7, mostly Thai workers. And in the fighting to regain control of the southern parts of the Zionist entity, 58 police, 10 members of internal security service Shin Bet, and 305 soldiers were killed, including several dozen unarmed soldiers guarding the border with Gaza. — AFP

## International

# Zuma calls for boycotting ANC in S African election

## ANC government to be led by 'apartheid collaborators', bring 'more misery': Ousted president

**SOWETO:** Former South African president Jacob Zuma on Saturday drove a new split in the ruling African National Congress, calling for a boycott of the party in a landmark 2024 election. Driven out of office in 2018 over corruption accusations but retaining significant influence, the 81-year-old Zuma launched an angry new attack on his successor President Cyril Ramaphosa.

The ANC, which has ruled the country since Nelson Mandela led it to victory in the first post-apartheid election in 1994, has lost or expelled several top members in recent months. With South Africa ailing from daily power cuts, repeated corruption scandals, rising crime figures and a somnolent economy, polls say the ANC could score less than 50 percent of the vote for the first time in the anniversary election next year. It already saw its vote fall below 50 percent in 2021 local elections. Zuma, who has never hidden his bitterness at the way he was kicked out of office, pointedly told a press conference: "It would be a betrayal to campaign for the ANC of Ramaphosa."

### ANC war

It was "widely expected that the ANC will lose the national election for the first time since 1994", he added in a statement read for him by his daughter Duduzile sat next to him. Zuma said he would vote for the radical new left-wing Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK) party, named after the ANC's old armed wing, and urged all South Africans to reject the ANC.

"I call on all South Africans to join me in taking the important step and to vote for the MK Party and any other progressive party which seeks total liberation,"

he said. Zuma slammed what he called "the death of democratically elected structures", "the role of money" in determining votes and "the suspected fraudulent manipulation" of ANC conference decisions.

Zuma, president from 2009 to 2018, said he had been "ready to die" during the ANC's armed campaign against white-minority rule and "I will die a member of the ANC" but added that it had to be "rescued". He said a return of an ANC government "will lead our people to more misery, poverty, racism, unemployment, deepening load-shedding (power cuts) and a government led by sellouts and apartheid collaborators".

Zuma was sentenced to 15 months in jail in June 2021 after refusing to testify to a panel probing financial corruption and cronyism under his presidency. He was freed on medical parole just two months into his term. But his jailing sparked protests, riots and looting that left more than 350 dead in South Africa's worst violence since the advent of democracy.

An appeals court later ruled Zuma's release was illegally granted and ordered him back to jail. But on returning to a correctional center he immediately benefited from a remission of non-violent offenders approved by his arch-rival Ramaphosa. Besides his 2021 contempt conviction he is facing separate charges of corruption in an arms procurement scandal in the 1990s, when he was vice president.

Ramaphosa has sought to put a calm front on his rivalry with Zuma and attacks from other ANC leaders, including past president Thabo Mbeki. In August another ANC figurehead, former secretary general Ace Magashule, set up his own



**SOWETO:** Former South African president Jacob Zuma (center) waves to his supporters after delivering a press briefing on Dec 16, 2023. — AFP

party after being kicked out of the Congress in 2021 for corruption. Asked ahead of Zuma's press conference what he would do if the former president left the party, Ramaphosa told reporters:

"We note that, what else can I do." He said Zuma's attacks were being made "much larger than what it should be". If Zuma does not campaign for the ANC, "that's it, the work goes on". — AFP

## Russia's isolation takes toll on Arctic climate science

**LONGYEARBYEN, Norway:** Glaciologist Andrew Hodson used to collaborate with his Russian colleagues in the Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic, but snowmobile excursions to see them have come to a halt since the war in Ukraine. "We used to work with Russian permafrost scientists and hydrologists in the Barentsburg region. This doesn't happen now," the British scientist told AFP.

"We're sad that we can't use this basis for collaboration, but we're not at all happy with the actions of the Russian government, obviously," he said at his office at Longyearbyen University in the archipelago's capital.

Although a part of Norway, the islands have long had a strong Russian presence. But the frequently-cited diplomatic mantra of cohabitation there — "High North, low tensions" — no longer applies. In the Arctic, as in the rest of the world, Western and Russian researchers have cut almost all ties since the start of the war in Ukraine.

Moscow's February 2022 invasion was the final nail in the coffin of their cooperation, already in decline in recent decades amid President Vladimir Putin's more aggressive policies. The deep freeze has significantly affected scientific research in a region warming around four times faster than the planet as a whole, and which is therefore crucial to climate studies — and where Russia plays a major role due to its vast size.

### Missing data

"It's damaging because Russia is more than half of the Arctic," said Rolf Rodven, executive secretary of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP). The exchange of data from Russia has now completely dried up. "We do not know what's happening on the ground there and of course, what's happening there will also affect the European, US and Canadian part of the Arctic," he said.

This deprives scientists of crucial information about permafrost — present predominantly in Russia and a ticking time bomb for the climate of the entire planet — and recent wildfires,



**LONGYEARBYEN:** A warning sign depicting a polar bear is erected at the side of a road outside Longyearbyen airport on May 2, 2022. — AFP

which are believed to have been as devastating as those in North America.

Some data can be obtained through international databases such as the World Meteorological Organization or through satellite observations, but those are incomplete. "We know that there will be more uncertainty in our estimates and as a consequence also more uncertainties in projections for the future," Rodven said.

Studies written by AMAP — one of the Arctic Council's six working groups — are all the more important since they are used in reports by the UN's IPCC climate panel. The Arctic Council is a regional forum long held up as a model of cooperation, but now stands divided between the West (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States) and Russia. A number of projects have been suspended and some studies have been delayed.

Not only have relations with Russian research institutes — almost all state-run bodies — been halted, but even the few independent researchers are reluctant to cooperate for fear of being accused of treason or espionage. Already in 2019, Russian scientists expressed concern about restrictions im-

posed on their contacts with foreign colleagues, raising fears of a return to conditions that existed during the Soviet era.

### Brain drain

Russia's research community has been plagued by a "brain drain" — which began even before Moscow's invasion of Ukraine — and funding that has been slashed in order to pay for the war effort. "It's a double whammy," said Salve Dahle, a marine biologist at Norway's independent Akvaplan-niva institute. "Not only do we no longer benefit from the exchange of data, but the collection of data in Russia itself is also cut back."

Dahle, who used to frequently work on projects in Russia, said his primary concern was for Siberia's main rivers, the Arctic Ocean's biggest source of freshwater. Without being present in the field, it's impossible to measure the effects on the rivers of oil and gas drilling, industrial activities and mining.

"Everything that can be dissolved in water or be captured in ice is transported into the transpolar drift stream (an ocean current that flows from east to west) and flows out between Greenland and Svalbard," he said. — AFP

## Over 60 migrants drown after boat capsizes off Libya

**TRIPOLI:** At least 61 migrants were missing and presumed dead after their boat sank off Libya's coast, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said Saturday, in the latest such tragedy off North Africa. The migrants are believed to have died because of high waves which swamped their vessel after it left from Zuwara, on Libya's northwest coast, the IOM's Libya office said in a statement to AFP.

Citing survivors, it said there were approximately 86 migrants aboard — including women and children — from Nigeria, The Gambia and other African countries. Twenty-five people were rescued and transferred to a Libyan detention center, said the IOM. It said the survivors were all in good condition and had received medical support from IOM staff. Libya and Tunisia are principal departure points for migrants risking dangerous sea voyages in hopes of reaching Europe, via Italy. More than 153,000 migrants arrived in Italy this year from Tunisia and Libya, according to the United Nations refugee agency.

Italy's far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni won elections last year after vowing to stop illegal migration. Meloni's hard-right government has so far taken numerous measures to restrict the activities of charity ships that save people attempting the perilous crossing from North Africa. Her approach to tackling illegal migration won praise from British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak during a visit to Rome on Saturday. The two leaders vowed to stop migrant boat landings on their countries' shores and to step up efforts to combat people smugglers.

The United Nations has described the central Mediterranean migration route as the world's deadliest, claiming hundreds of lives each year. Flavio Di Giacomo, an IOM spokesperson, wrote on social media platform X on Saturday that more than 2,250 people died this year on the central Mediterranean migrant route, a "dramatic figure which demonstrates that unfortunately not enough is being done to save lives at sea". In Libya, more than a decade of violence since the overthrow and killing of dictator Moamer Kadhafi in a NATO-backed uprising helped turn the country into a fertile ground for human traffickers who have been accused of abuses ranging from extortion to slavery. — AFP

## NATO membership strains Russian ties with Finland: Putin

**MOSCOW:** Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned of "problems" with neighboring Finland after it joined NATO earlier this year, saying Moscow will create a new military district in north-west Russia in response, in an interview published Sunday. "They (the West) dragged Finland into NATO. Did we have any disputes with them? All disputes, including territorial ones in the mid-20th century, have long been solved," Putin told a state TV reporter.

"There were no problems there, now there will be, because we will create the Leningrad military district and concentrate a certain amount of military units there." The comments come as Finland again shut its border with Russia this week, accusing it of orchestrating a migrant crisis on its border.

Finland said Friday it will sign a defense agreement this week giving the United States access to 15 military bases in NATO's newest member. "The Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) is to be signed in Washington DC" on Monday by Defense Minister Antti Hakkanen and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the foreign affairs ministry said. The treaty must then be approved by the Nordic country's parliament.

"The DCA will strengthen Finland's defense because it enables the presence and training of US forces and the prepositioning of defense material in the territory of Finland," the foreign ministry contin-



**Russia's President Vladimir Putin**

ued. "It will also support the implementation of NATO's deterrence and defense."

Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen will be present in Washington during the signing to meet Blinken. The United States signed a similar pact with Sweden on December 6 that gives Washington access to 17 military bases.

Moscow has warned of counter-measures to Helsinki's NATO accession. Putin also said Russia had no reason to be at war with NATO countries, after US leader Joe Biden said this month that Moscow "won't stop" in Ukraine if it is successful there. "It is rhetoric to justify false policy on Russia," Putin said.

He said Moscow had "no interest — either in geopolitical, economic or military terms — to fight with NATO countries." The Kremlin's Ukraine campaign has reawakened fears of Russian aggression in the eastern flank of NATO. — AFP

## British teen found after vanishing for 6 years repatriated

**LONDON:** British teen Alex Batty, who was found this week in France after he went missing six years ago while on holiday, has arrived back in the UK, police said Saturday. Alex never returned from that vacation in 2017, when he was just 11 years old, but resurfaced in the middle of the night this week when a driver picked him up along a mountainous area of southern France. "It gives me great pleasure to say Alex has now made his safe return back to the UK after six years," Matt Boyle of Greater Manchester Police told reporters at the force's headquarters.

Now aged 17, Alex will be returned to his maternal grandmother, with whom the British justice system had entrusted his custody before his mother "abducted" him. "I can't wait to see him when we're reunited." Alex's grandmother Susan Caruana — who according to British media reports remains his legal guardian — said in a statement released by Greater Manchester Police. "The main thing is that he's safe, after what would be an overwhelming experience for anyone, not least a child," she said.

Alex's mother, Melanie Batty, has yet to be found but could be in Finland, Toulouse assistant prosecutor Antoine Leroy said earlier. For the past six years, including two in France, Alex has lived a "nomadic" life in a "spiritual community", never staying more than several months in the same place, he told investigators. The teen was found by a delivery driver

after he had walked for four days, the deputy prosecutor told a news conference on Friday evening. He is in good health and does not appear to have been abused in the years since his abduction, according to the doctor who examined him.

Alex told investigators he had not suffered any physical violence during the past six years. Earlier Saturday, the 17-year-old boarded a KLM flight in Toulouse, headed to London via Amsterdam. He was accompanied by British police officers and a family member, according to the force.

### 'Meditation and reincarnation'

Prosecutor Leroy said on Friday that the teenager had decided to escape when his mother announced she was going to Finland, where she is "likely" to be now. The teenager told French investigators they had spent time in Morocco before moving to the French Pyrenees, along the border with Spain. Alex also told investigators that he had spent time in a spiritual community center focused on "work on the ego, meditation and reincarnation", the prosecutor said. It was when his mother said she was moving to Finland that he decided to leave, he said.

He had been walking along the road by night to avoid detection, foraging food from gardens and fields along the way. A student working as a delivery driver, Fabien Accidini, picked Alex up between two villages in the pouring rain in the small hours of Thursday morning. "He clearly needed help," Accidini told AFP, and since Alex did not speak French very well, he spoke to him in English. "He was a bit suspicious at first," he added, initially giving a false name. But as the boy helped him with his deliveries to local pharmacies, he began to open up. "When he told me he'd been abducted, I made him say it again — it was crazy!" said Accidini. — AFP

## International

# Thousands flee as RSF gains ground in Sudan safe city

## Concerns mount for already displaced families with many having nowhere to go

**WAD MADANI:** Paramilitary forces established a base Sunday in the formerly safe city of Wad Madani in war-torn Sudan, an AFP correspondent reported, sending thousands fleeing, many of them already displaced. Thousands have sought to escape the former aid hub since the war between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) reached Wad Madani on Friday, according to the United Nations. But they faced prohibitive costs and other hurdles, according to AFP's correspondent.

Previously, the city had been "one of Sudan's few remaining sanctuaries", according to the Norwegian Refugee Council's Sudan director William Carter. Echoing the brutal urban warfare in the capital Khartoum, 180 kilometers (110 miles) north, fighter jets flew overhead as the sound of explosions echoed across the Wad Madani, according to an AFP correspondent who said the RSF had set up a base in the city's east.

American Ambassador John Godfrey urged the RSF to "cease their advance" on Al-Jazirah state, where nearly half a million displaced people had sought refuge, and to "refrain from attacking" state capital Wad Madani. "A continued RSF advance risks mass civilian casualties and significant disruption of humanitarian assistance efforts," Godfrey said in a statement Sunday. Regional bloc IGAD's executive secretary Workneh Gebeyehu said he was "extremely concerned by the resurgence of conflict" and

called for the cessation of hostilities.

Wad Madani alone houses more than 86,000 displaced people, according to figures from the UN, which has suspended all humanitarian field missions in Al-Jazirah state. More than 270,000 of the city's 700,000 residents had been dependent on humanitarian aid, the UN said.

The war between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, has destroyed the country's already fragile infrastructure, economy and health care system.

By early December, it had killed at least 12,190 people, according to a conservative estimate by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Over 5.4 million people are internally displaced, while about 1.3 million have fled abroad, according to UN figures. Families scrambled Sunday to once again flee to safety but found bus tickets had quadrupled to \$60 a head, and many had nowhere to go.

"A continuous flow of people, many of them who already ran for their lives just a few months ago, are now rushing towards already heavily burdened and resource-depleted cities in neighboring states," the NRC's Carter said.

"We are also extremely worried for highly vulnerable families in Wad Madani who have been crammed into displacement sites in schools for months and



**WAD MADANI:** People displaced by the conflict in Sudan walk with their belongings along a road in Wad Madani on Dec 16, 2023. — AFP

have nowhere to hide from violence, no means to escape and nowhere else to flee," Carter added.

Sudan's doctors' union said Sunday the situation in the city has become "catastrophic" after phar-

macies were forced shut. Both forces have been accused of indiscriminate firing on residential areas, as well as targeting civilians, activists and health-care personnel. — AFP

## Chad votes on new constitution ahead of military rule end

**N'DJAMENA:** Polls opened in Chad on Sunday for a referendum on a new constitution, a vote seen as a key step toward elections and the return of civilian rule promised, but postponed, by the ruling military junta. A large section of the opposition and civil society in the central African country have called for a boycott.

They say the vote is designed to pave the way for the election of the current transitional president, General Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, and the continuation of a "dynasty" begun by his late father 33 years ago following a coup. The "yes" camp seems assured of victory after a well-financed campaign by the ruling junta against a divided opposition, whose members have faced arrest, intimidation and threats for more than a year.

The capital N'Djamena has been plastered with posters championing a "yes" vote to bring in a constitution for a "unitary and decentralized state". It is not very different from the constitution that the military repealed in 2021, enshrining a regime in which most of the power is concentrated in the head of state.

The "yes" camp says a unitary state is the only way to preserve unity, while federalism, sought by opposition groups, would encourage "separatism" and "chaos". Deby was first to place his vote at a polling station in N'Djamena near the presidential palace. "Each ballot placed in the ballot box is a further step towards stability and prosperity for our country," he said. Provisional results are scheduled to be published on December 24, with the Supreme Court due to validate them four days later.

### 'Voting makes no difference'

Voter turnout at midday in the capital appeared limited, according to AFP journalists. The head of the body organizing the referendum, Limane Mahamat, said that Sunday was a day of worship, suggesting that more people would head to polling stations later in the day. But some electors in the capital remained defiant. "Voting or not voting makes no difference, the result is known in advance," said Mahamat Issa, a civil servant who refused to cast a ballot. In southern parts of the city, often opposition strongholds, AFP



**N'DJAMENA:** Women queue to cast their votes during the constitutional referendum at a polling station in N'Djamena, on Dec 17, 2023. — AFP

journalists observed a relative enthusiasm for the vote. "I'm going to vote 'no' to respect the instructions of my party," said Gilbert Alain, adding that he was a "federalist". In the north of N'Djamena, Zenana Mahamat was one of the few people out to vote at midday. "I voted 'yes' for peace," she told AFP.

### 'Deby dynasty'

The two main groupings of parties and civil society organizations hostile to the junta hope a low turnout will discredit a leader they accuse of perpetuating a 33-year "Deby dynasty". The referendum is "purely and simply legitimizing the dynasty that they want to impose on us," said Max Loalngar, coordinator of one of the groups, Wakit Tamma, who spoke to AFP by telephone from exile.

Deby, 37, was proclaimed transitional president by the army in April 2021 after the death of his father Idriss Deby Itno, who was killed by rebels on his way to the front line. Deby senior had ruled Chad, the second-least-developed country in the world according to the United Nations, with an iron

fist for more than 30 years. His son promised elections after a transition period of 18 months, but his regime later extended the transition by two years and authorized him to run in a presidential election now scheduled for late 2024.

### Opposition repressed

On October 20, 2022, between 100 and 300 young men and teenagers were shot dead in N'Djamena by police and military, according to the opposition and national and international NGOs. They had been peacefully demonstrating against the two-year extension of the transitional government.

More than 1,000 others were imprisoned before being pardoned, while dozens more were tortured or have disappeared, according to NGOs and the opposition. Most were supporters of prominent opposition figure Succes Masra, a longtime opponent of the Deby dynasty. Yet in late October, Masra signed a reconciliation agreement with the regime and has been encouraging his followers to vote "yes" on Sunday. — AFP

## North Korea fires suspected ballistic missile, slams US talks

**SEOUL:** North Korea fired a ballistic missile on Sunday, Seoul's military said, as the United States and South Korea warned any nuclear attack would lead to the end of Pyongyang's regime.

"Our military detected a suspected short-range ballistic missile launched from the Pyongyang area towards the East Sea at around 22:38 today," Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said, referring to the body of water also known as the Sea of Japan.

The JCS added the military had heightened its alert posture and was "closely sharing information regarding North Korea's ballistic missile with the United States and Japan". Japan's defense ministry also said North Korea launched "what appears to be a ballistic missile", with its coastguard adding that it seemed to have already fallen.

Kyodo News, citing unnamed Japanese government sources, said it was a short-range missile and had fallen outside Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone. The test comes as Seoul and Washington warned Pyongyang that any nuclear attack on the United States and South Korea would result in the end of the North Korean regime.

The two allies held their second session of the Nuclear Consultative Group in Washington on Friday, where they discussed nuclear deterrence in the event of conflict with the North. A spokesperson for the North's defense ministry on Sunday slammed the allies' plans to expand a key annual joint military drill next year to include a nuclear operation drill and warned of "a preemptive and deadly counteraction".

"This is an open declaration on nuclear confrontation to make the use of nuclear weapons against the DPRK a fait accompli," the statement carried by the KCNA news agency said, using the official acronym for North Korea. — AFP

## Zionist occupation kills Christmas joy in 'grieving' Bethlehem

**BETHLEHEM:** Outside Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity in the Palestinian West Bank, the throngs of tourists and pilgrims who normally rub shoulders with costumed Santas and marching bands are missing this year. There are no festive lights strung overhead and no sign of the huge tree normally erected to celebrate the event that Christians believe took place on this spot 2,000 years ago: the birth of Jesus Christ.

As the war between the Zionist entity and Palestinians in Gaza rages around 100 km away —leaving thousands of Palestinians dead and nearly two million displaced and trapped in a humanitarian catastrophe — Christmas will be a muted affair in the occupied West Bank. In a normal year, Bethlehem would be a "city full of people, full of tourists", said 30-year-old Abood Suboh, standing in his empty shop where he sells cashmere scarves and leather handbags. "This war stopped everything."

Church leaders in Jerusalem and the Bethlehem city council took the decision last month to forego "any unnecessarily festive" Christmas celebrations in solidarity with Gazans. The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem will still come to deliver his traditional midnight mass on Christmas Eve, but with pilgrims staying away and access to the city restricted by Zionist authorities, turnout is likely to suffer. The war could not have come at a worse time for locals who depend on the Christmas tourist trade.

Jack Giacaman, of the Christmas House souvenir shop, said 80 percent of their sales came at the end of the year. "Suddenly, in October, tourists disappeared from the streets. And now Bethlehem is completely closed from all directions," he said, referring to the Zionist checkpoints that restrict movement into the walled-off West Bank. In the workshop behind Giacaman's store, half-finished shepherds and magi stood watch over deserted workstations. He had already been forced to borrow money to tide over the business after the slump caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but had a three-year plan to get back on track. "Now we don't know how to cover this year," he said. — AFP

## Zionist army kills five Palestinians in West Bank raid

**RAMALLAH:** Zionist forces killed five Palestinians Sunday morning at a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian health ministry said, as the Zionist army launched air strikes on the camp.

The death toll from the raid on the Nur Shams camp in the West Bank city of Tulkarm climbed to five after the announcement of the deaths of two men aged 19 and 21 in hospital, the ministry said. The Zionist operation at the camp began during the night, according to witnesses. The director of the Thabet Thabet hospital, Amin Khader, told AFP that "five people arrived at the hospital with wounds, including one to the head".

Sources told Palestinian state media agency Wafa that at least two of the victims were killed in a drone strike which targeted them while they were in the Nur Shams refugee camp. The strike also left several others wounded. Simultaneously, the Zionist forces initiated widespread arrests, infrastructure destruction, and declared the camp a closed military zone as large-scale forces stormed the city and the refugee camp from multiple directions.

Wafa correspondent reported the murder of Jihad Aarneh, 25, Mahmoud Samer Jaber, 22, Ghayth Yasser Shahada, 25, Waleed Asa'ad Zahra, 22, and Asa'ad As'ad Zahra, 33, as a result of the Zionist airstrike, reportedly carried out by an unmanned drone. The two were left bleeding, as he occupation forces prevented ambulance access to the camp.

The Palestinian Red Crescent reported that the Zionist forces obstructed emergency medical



**TULKARM:** Palestinians inspect the damage after a Zionist raid in the Nur Shams camp for Palestinian refugees near the northern city of Tulkarm in the occupied West Bank on Dec 17, 2023. — AFP

teams from entering Nur Shams camp to reach a critically injured person with a head injury, despite coordination with the International Committee of the Red Cross. A volunteer paramedic was also arrested by Zionist forces from inside an ambulance, the sources added.

A Zionist military spokesperson said air strikes had targeted "terrorist groups who opened fire and threw explosives, putting IDF (army) forces in danger". "At least four terrorists were killed and others were injured" during the raid, the spokes-

person said, adding that four others were arrested. "During searches, combatants found a bomb in a clinic where wanted people were hiding," the spokesperson added.

More than 290 Palestinians have been killed by Zionist forces or settlers in the West Bank since October 7, health officials say. The Zionist entity has occupied the West Bank since the 1967 Arab-Zionist war. Jenin in particular has been the scene of repeated raids in recent months that have left dozens dead. — Agencies

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2023

# Dollar curbs weigh on Iraq daily life

## Baghdad struggles to rein in a booming currency black market



BAGHDAD: A currency exchange agent mans his kiosk on Al-Kifah Street in central Baghdad. — AFP photos

**BASRA:** In Iraq's southern city of Basra, Al-Harith Hassan has been struggling to withdraw his salary in dollars for months as the government tries to curb the country's addiction to US currency. "When we go to withdraw our salary, they only give us a fraction of it, in instalments," said Hassan, who is paid in dollars for his oil field logistics job.

Oil-rich Iraq is hardly short of dollars—it has foreign currency reserves of more than \$100 billion (93 billion euros). But in its fight against a booming currency black market, Baghdad has imposed ever-tighter restrictions on the use of American bucks. For people like Hassan, this can mean a severe cut in his earnings. He used to withdraw his money and change it at semi-tolerated exchange shops for rates up to 1,600 dinars per dollar.

But increasingly, he says he can only withdraw his cash in dinars at the official rate of 1,320 dinars

per dollar. The banks and central bank have traded blame for who is imposing the new restrictions.

"This is a problem. It means that our salary is losing 20 percent of its value," said Hassan. More restrictions are coming as the government tries to stop dollars dominating the economy.

From January, Iraq's central bank will require every commercial transaction to be made in dinars. Existing US currency deposits will still be accessible in dollars, but new money wired from abroad will only be available in dinars, at the official rate.

### 'Illicit trade'

One of the main factors feeding the demand for foreign currencies in Iraq is "the smuggling of US dollars to countries and entities facing US sanctions, including Iran and Syria", said Hayder Al-Shakeri, a researcher at the Chatham House think-tank. Shak-



BASRA: A currency exchange agent counts Iraqi dinars at his company in Iraq's southern city of Basra.

eri also noted the "illicit trade" of certain highly taxed goods, such as cigarettes. Prime Minister Mohamed Shia Al-Sudani acknowledged in September that sanctions preventing dollar transfers to Iranian banks had driven Iraqi traders to the black market.

Iraq and Iran's central banks were working on a mechanism to regulate such trading, he said. In late November, the government announced steps to encourage importers of goods like cigarettes, cars, gold and mobile phones to use official channels to obtain dollars. And, at least officially, the Hawala over-the-counter money transfer system, no longer transfers money in dollars.

A year ago, Iraq adopted the international electronic transfer system known as SWIFT in order to monitor dollar usage, help tackle money laundering and ensure the respect of international sanctions. In February, the prime minister said the new regulations had cut foreign currency trades from around \$200-

300 million per day to \$30-50 million. "We are consolidating our monetary sovereignty," Mudher Salih, financial policy adviser to the prime minister said. "We cannot accept dealing with two currencies within the national economy", he told AFP. Seeking to stave off inflation, the government allows importers to obtain dollars at the official rate in key sectors like food, medicine, and construction.

And it is encouraging banks and importers to favor alternative currencies like the euro, Emirati dirham, and Chinese yuan, to reduce dollar demand. For now, the gap between the official and unofficial dollar rates is still causing headaches for authorities. Police recently caught several people at Baghdad airport as they were planning to travel with dozens of debit cards and use them abroad to withdraw thousands of dollars at the official rate, which they could sell for a profit on the Iraqi parallel market. — AFP

## Advertisers returning to X, says Musk

**ROME:** Elon Musk claimed that advertisers were returning to X (formerly Twitter) after an exodus, at a Rome meeting where he also warned Italy's low birth rate could put off investors. The billionaire was a star guest at the Atriju political festival organised by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy party.

Asked about advertisers who had abandoned his platform over concerns about extreme posts, Musk said: "I think X will be fine, and we are actually already seeing advertisers return to X."

He added: "Brand advertisers are always worried about their brand.... But I think it's a short-term issue." Musk's comments were more upbeat than previously, when he said the advertising boycott could "kill the company". On Saturday, he said some of the organizations which had abandoned X were infected by a "woke mind virus", using the derogatory term "woke" used to condemn those seen as excessively socially aware. He said identity politics was "very divisive", "anti-meritocratic" and "just no fun", drawing applause from the audience that included Meloni—who herself has railed against "woke ideology".

Her party came top in 2022 Italian general elections on the back of a promise to end mass migration and to defend traditional Christian family values. Musk said he was "very much in favor of legal migration", saying countries should welcome anyone honest who was willing to work hard. But he said that it was not possible to assess who fulfilled these characteristics without controls, concluding: "Let's increase legal immigration, but we should stop illegal immigration."

He also warned that migration is not a substitute for domestic population growth, and that without an increase in the birth rate, "people will disappear". He highlighted Italy's low fertility rate—something Meloni often talks about—and warned it poses a risk for companies wanting to invest in the country. Asked directly if Italy was a good place in which to invest, he said: "I do worry about the low birth rate."

"If a company is to invest in Italy, will there be enough people to work there?" The interviewer scoffed, saying it was a problem in 50 years, but Musk said it could be "even sooner than that". He concluded: "I agree it's a good place to invest and a wonderful country—please make more Italians, is what I'm saying." —AFP

## More shipping giants suspend passage via Red Sea after attacks

**PARIS:** Two more major shipping firms, Mediterranean Shipping Company and CMA CGM, said Saturday they were suspending passage through a Red Sea strait vital for global trade after Yemeni rebel attacks in the area.

The announcement by Italian-Swiss giant MSC and France's CMA CGM follows a similar decision Friday by two of the world's largest shipping companies, Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd. The announcements were in response to a warning by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who control much of Yemen but are not recognized internationally.

The Houthis said they were targeting vessels near the strategic Bab Al-Mandeb strait to pressure the Zionist entity over its devastating war with Palestinian Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip. Thousands of ships every year transit through the strait, which runs between Yemen, on the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, and the African continent.

The tensions have added to fears that the Gaza conflict could spread. Ships belonging to the Zionist entity or heading to its ports "will remain vulnerable to targeting until the aggression stops, the siege on Gaza is lifted, and humanitarian aid continues to flow" to Gaza, Houthi spokesperson Mohammed Abdul Salam said on X, formerly Twitter.

Oman was sponsoring discussions "with a number of international parties" regarding operations in the Red and Arabian Seas, he added. An American de-



MARSEILLE, France: The "CMA CGM Palais Royal", the world's largest container ship powered by natural gas, sails in the bay of Marseille, southern France. — AFP

stroyer on Saturday shot down more than a dozen drones in the Red Sea launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said. The UK government said one of its destroyers had also brought down a suspected attack drone in the area.

MSC, one of the world's largest freight shipping lines, said one of its container vessels had been targeted in the Red Sea on Friday and it was halting traffic through the strait until it was safe.

No one on the MSC Palatium III was wounded but the ship suffered fire damage, the company said. CMA CGM said it had ordered all its vessels to leave the area and stay there until further notice.

"The situation continues to deteriorate and there are increasing concerns about security," it said.

On Friday, the International Chamber of Shipping condemned the Houthi attacks which "threaten the lives of innocent seafarers and the safety of merchant shipping". The incidents breached international law and states in the region should work to de-escalate the situation, it said.

Diverting Asia-bound shipping from the Red Sea to South Africa's Cape of Good Hope would increase costs and delays, the body noted. Consultancy S&P Global estimated that the detour would increase the distance between Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Singapore by 40 percent. — AFP

## Sri Lanka records first growth after debt default

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's economy grew in the September quarter, the central bank said Saturday, its first expansion since a foreign exchange shortage forced a debt default last year. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka said the economy had grown by a modest 1.6 percent in the quarter ending September, up from a contraction of 11.5 percent a year earlier.

The latest growth was due to improvements in the transport, services and agriculture sectors, the bank said in a statement. Despite the positive data, overall figures from the first nine months of the year showed a contraction of 4.9 percent.

The International Monetary Fund has forecast Sri Lanka's full-year GDP growth in 2023 at negative 3.6 per-

cent. The IMF, which on Tuesday released a second tranche of \$337 million as part of a four-year, \$2.9 billion bailout for the island nation, said Sri Lanka had shown signs of economic stabilization but was not yet out of the woods. Its economy had shrunk for nine consecutive quarters since the third quarter of 2021. The country of 22 million people defaulted on its \$46 billion external debt in April last year after running out of foreign exchange to finance imports of food, fuel, medicine and other essentials.

At the height of last year's economic crisis, civil unrest forced the ouster of then president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, when protesters stormed his residence. His successor Ranil Wickremesinghe has doubled taxes, withdrawn gener-



COLOMBO: Vegetables on sale at a market in Colombo. — AFP

ous energy subsidies and raised prices of essentials to shore up state revenue. Sri Lanka announced last month it had struck an "agreement in principle" with

its lenders, including China, to restructure nearly \$6 billion in bilateral loans, a key prerequisite for sustaining the ongoing IMF program. — AFP



## Business



CAMPECHE, Mexico: This handout picture released by the Mexican Presidency shows Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador holding a press conference during the inauguration ceremony of the Maya Train at the San Francisco Campeche train station in Campeche, Mexico on December 15, 2023.



CAMPECHE, Mexico: This handout picture released by the Mexican Presidency shows train cars of the new Maya Train during its inauguration at the San Francisco Campeche station in Campeche, Mexico on December 15, 2023. -- AFP photos

# Mexico's Maya Train underway, despite environmental concerns

## Obrador hails his flagship project as a 'magnum opus' built in 'record time'

CAMPECHE, Mexico: Mexico's Maya tourist train glided into action on Friday, promising prosperity for one of the country's poorest regions, but tainted by allegations of environmental devastation. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador hailed his flagship project as a "magnum opus" built in "record time" ahead of the inauguration, during which he boarded one of its green-and-white cars for the train's first run between the colonial city of Campeche and the Caribbean resort of Cancun.

Cancun is Mexico's leading tourist destination and welcomed 34 million foreign visitors between January and October, according to official figures. The stretch of rail inaugurated Friday is the first of seven sections that will cover a total of 1,554 kilometers (965 miles) around the Yucatan Peninsula, an

area rich in flora, fauna and archaeological ruins. The others will be operational in the first quarter of 2024.

The route includes parts of the Mayan Riviera, which covers a jungle region considered the second-most important forest reserve in Latin America after the Amazon, as well as cenotes—freshwater caves—and underground rivers. Activists and environmental organizations said the project caused massive damage to the region's ecosystem, dubbing it an "ecocide," and succeeded in temporarily halting work through legal appeals.

But Lopez Obrador issued a decree declaring the infrastructure works a matter of "national security" and construction resumed. Greenpeace and other NGOs have warned that the train threatens to contaminate cenotes and underground rivers in particu-

lar. They also point out the danger of the ground collapsing due to the weight of the structure, in addition to affecting flora and fauna. The Mexican president has called the protesters "pseudo-environmentalists" and has defended the work, promising to plant millions of trees in the area.

The train, whose cars were built by the French company Alstom in Mexico, is one of the main infrastructure projects of Lopez Obrador's government, along with an oil refinery in Tabasco, a new airport serving the capital, and an interoceanic corridor billed as an alternative to the Panama Canal.

Lopez Obrador has said a second phase of the train project will include freight cars, and vows it will lead to a boom in the southeast of the country, which has long lagged behind the more industrialized

north. Dozens of people attended the ceremony in Campeche, where on Saturday the train will be open to the public. "It helps us get to the city of Campeche to continue our studies," said student Lisandro Belen, noting that many of his classmates "don't have a way to get around."

Crescencio Rosales, who had come to the event from the state of Mexico, which is next to the nation's capital, said he was excited. "I have not seen an inauguration of a train in 70 years. No president... has done what this one has done," he said.

The inauguration comes six months before a presidential election in which the left is the favorite to remain in power, fronting former mayor of Mexico City, Claudia Sheinbaum against an ex-opposition senator Xochitl Galvez. --AFP



## US transition moves to cleaner energy carry risks of layoffs

NEW YORK: US efforts to transition to cleaner energy carry risks of mass layoffs in mature industries, say experts, who warn that policies to cushion the blow may not live up to hype. The Biden administration, through measures such as the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, points to billions of dollars in support targeting communities disfavored in the energy transition.

The push for change got a boost at the UN-led COP28 summit in Dubai on Wednesday, where governments approved an agreement that favors "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner." The Biden program includes grants for projects in places that have lost coal mining jobs, plus billions of dollars to enable manufacturing conversion investments for electric vehicles, including from internal combustion engine (ICE) auto plants or even oil refineries. The goal is to ensure "a strong and just transition to electric vehicles" and the retention of "high-quality jobs in communities that currently host manufacturing facilities," according to the Department of Energy statements.

Such programs sound promising, but not everyone is convinced they will work. Funding under the programs go to businesses with growth plans—not workers whose factories close.

Gordon Hanson, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of government, predicted the Biden policies were more likely to succeed in boosting greener output than in supporting workers from industries that lose out. He notes that much new electric vehicle (EV) investment has gone to southern states like Georgia and Tennessee where companies have hired younger workers—not the traditional auto manufacturing base of the industrial Midwest.

Of particular concern is a potential mass-layoff event such as the shuttering of an ICE assembly plant or an oil refinery. The United States could lose at least two to three million jobs over the next 15 years between the energy transition and the knock-on effects on communities, Hanson estimates.

"We have to plan for it to be disruptive," he said.

"If we don't, it's going to look a lot like what happened to manufacturing due to globalization and technological innovation over the last three decades, and that's not been pretty."

On November 27, the Department of Energy announced \$275 million in funding for seven projects targeting regions that experienced coal mine or coal-fired power plant closures.

The funds will go towards the manufacturing of wind turbines, key metals for power grid storage and the production of parts used in EV batteries. One of the recipients, Alpen High Performance Products, will use \$5.8 million from Washington to buy state-of-the-art equipment to boost output of flat glass for high insulation. The equipment will be used in a Colorado plant located near a recently closed coal-powered power station and in another plant near Pittsburgh in a region that has lost coal-mining jobs, said Alpen Chief Executive Brad Begin. "Demand is exploding right now," said Begin, who expects to add another 100 workers in light of new building codes that favor high-performance glass.

As part of the grant application, Alpen said it would contact a coal workers union in Pennsylvania about job openings. "We'll be proactive about that," said Begin, adding that a boost for former coal industry workers is "sort of indirect" under the program.

While there has been some increase in workers transitioning from disfavored sectors into green jobs, fewer than one percent of workers who leave a "dirty job" have landed in a "green job," according to a July 2023 paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research. E Mark Curtis, an economist at Wake Forest University who co-authored the paper, welcomed targeting coal-affected regions, but said his study underscored the challenges, especially for older workers and those without a college degree. One reason for optimism "is that 30 percent of workers leaving a fossil fuel industry go to manufacturing," Curtis said in an email.

"To the extent that the IRA generates manufacturing jobs in fossil fuel communities, this will be good for those communities," Harvard's Hanson said the government should develop a separate policy for vulnerable workers that doesn't seek to boost green energy at the same time. He additionally recommends boosting spending for community colleges in hard-hit regions, extra unemployment benefits for communities that lose jobs and encouraging small business loans to such areas. --AFP

## Japan-ASEAN summit: China, climate in focus

TOKYO: Leaders from Southeast Asia and Japan will hold talks this weekend on boosting security ties with an eye on China, as well as Tokyo's contentious efforts on energy cooperation. Beijing claims almost the entire South China Sea, a vital trade corridor, and its increasingly aggressive behavior in areas also claimed by Southeast Asian nations has stoked regional tensions. Close US ally Japan, which also has competing territorial claims with China, is upping its military spending and has boosted security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

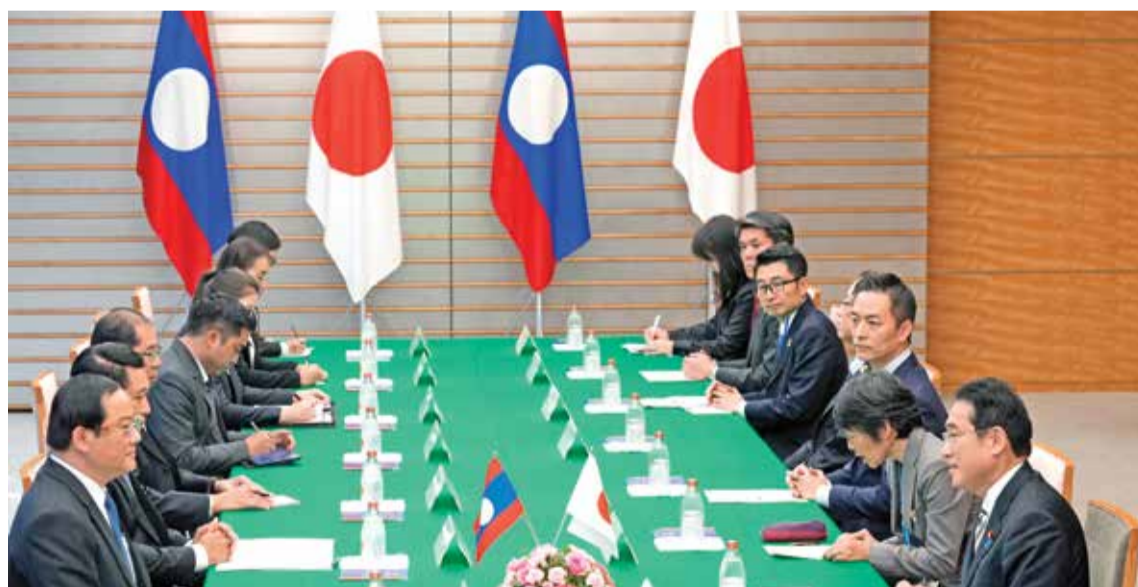
Japan agreed last month to help the Philippines—which has seen a spate of incidents involving Chinese vessels in recent weeks—secure new coast guard vessels, to supply a radar system and to start talks on a deal for deploying troops on each other's soil. According to a draft final statement from the summit this weekend seen by AFP, Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will commit to "(strengthen) security cooperation, including maritime security cooperation". The leaders are also

expected to stress the need for a "rules-based Indo-Pacific region that is free and open", the peaceful settlement of disputes and respect for territorial integrity. In September militaries from ASEAN nations held their first-ever joint exercises, although host Indonesia insisted they were non-combat drills, focusing on areas such as disaster relief and maritime patrols. Japan is also expected to use the summit to push energy cooperation, with a meeting of the Asian Zero Emission Community (AZEC) platform scheduled on Monday together with Australian premier Anthony Albanese virtually, officials said.

Tokyo is boosting its renewables sector but it has also come under fire from environmental groups for providing large-scale public finance for fossil fuel projects around Asia. Japan has also been seeking to push the export of tech aimed at reducing emissions by coal plants, such as co-firing with ammonia and carbon capture. But critics say these methods are unproven and expensive.

"We can't ask all the ASEAN countries to switch to renewable energy drastically because they don't have sufficient technology, they don't have sufficient resources," a Japanese government official said.

ASEAN includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Myanmar is also a member but leaders of its junta have been banned from the bloc's high-level meetings since failing to implement an agreed five-point peace plan following a 2021 coup. --AFP



TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (right) delivers an opening address at the start of a bilateral meeting with Laos' Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone (L) at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo on December 16, 2023. -- AFP

## UK's dependency on China for rare metals criticized

LONDON: The UK has been left "vulnerable" over its dependency on China for critical minerals needed to make key everyday items such as smartphones, British lawmakers said in a report.

The Foreign Affairs Committee, a cross-party panel of parliamentarians, highlighted the fallout from the UK's dependence on the world's second biggest economy for rare metals such as lithium and cobalt. "The UK's critical minerals supply chains are vulnerable due to our continuing dependence on autocracies—in particular China—and the inaction of successive UK governments," the report concluded. Entitled "A rock and a hard place: building critical mineral resilience", the study described critical minerals as possessing

"strategic significance to the UK". It added they were "essential" to the nation's "economic security and to meeting... climate change targets". The report follows the government's launch last year of the UK's first critical minerals strategy aimed at improving security of the key commodities.

The committee criticized "the government's decision not to assess the vulnerabilities and dependencies in the UK's industrial supply chains before producing" the strategy. It called on the Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, "to publish specific targets for priority sectors and to provide a more detailed implementation plan". Committee chair Alicia Kearns, a lawmaker within Sunak's party, noted that "from F35 fighter jets to the batteries in our phones, critical minerals are the building blocks of many modern technologies."

"They are integral to every-day living, the green transition and our nation's defense." But she added that the UK needed "to confront the weakness created by our dependency on a single state: China. These minerals power modern life and if China pulls the plug, we will all pay the price." --AFP

# South Africa's 'staggering' visa quagmire bogs down economy

## Foreign executives, engineers have endured a year-long wait

**JOHANNESBURG:** Tens of thousands of foreign executives, engineers and other key workers have endured a year-long wait for South African visas that business groups say is costing investment and threatening the country's position as a continental hub. Already suffering from lackluster growth and high unemployment, the government has acknowledged that a skill shortage is throttling development. And a huge backlog in visa processing has worsened the problem.

Long visa waits are common in much of the world but South Africa has some of the biggest jams, business groups say. "We have various cases of people who have been waiting for more than a year," said Pamina Bohrer, secretary general of the Italian-South African Chamber of Trade and Industries.

Besides the "psychological stress" caused to families whose lives are put on hold, firms are suspending or scrapping expansion plans in the country, she said. "The backlog is staggering," Busisiwe Mavuso, head of Business Leadership South Africa, which groups dozens of international companies including BP, Nestle and Unilever, wrote in a newsletter in November.

"The fact that companies can't fill the positions means they can't invest and expand."

Home Affairs Minister Aaron Motsoaledi told a parliamentary committee in September that severe understaffing meant 74,000 applications for all types of visas were awaiting processing. The ministry did not reply to a request for comment on latest figures. Concerns have surged since the coronavirus pandemic, however.

In 2021, only 3,047 critical skills visas were processed, down 45 percent on 2019, according to official figures. About two-thirds were rejected. At a time when South Africa badly needs skilled workers, its vetting is cumbersome and erratic, experts say. Applicants have to provide medical reports, criminal records and travel plans. Business groups complain about inconsistent decision making.

Some applications are processed in weeks while others languish, they said. In some cases applicants get a permit but their spouses do not. Some are refused for minor issues like a missing phone number.

A team tasked by President Cyril Ramaphosa to investigate visa delays said South Africa needs engineers, information technology experts and managers. But getting a work visa can take 48 weeks or longer, it said. Waiting times in Nigeria and Kenya were

more than four times shorter.

An entrepreneur replying to an anonymous survey by the EU Chamber of Commerce in South Africa last year said the visa quagmire pushed his firm to choose Ghana for a new Africa market office.

"My company would like to further expand in South Africa... but uncertainty on visas has put a temporary hold on this expansion," the entrepreneur wrote. In a report published last year, the team highlighted how every new skilled worker creates jobs for less qualified labor. A one percent increase in skilled immigration could increase GDP by 1.2 percent, it said. Already hobbled by widespread power cuts and troubles running ports and the rail network, the economy is expected to grow by only 0.8 percent this year, according to the central bank. Unemployment is at 32 percent. The team recommended reforms including new visas for remote workers and start-ups, along with a points system and a trusted employer scheme to ease hiring.

Authorities said proposed changes would soon be announced. But with 2024 elections looming, some believe the wait could get longer. Many South Africans blame immigrants, particularly from neighboring countries, for the high jobless rate and increased crime.



Tens of thousands of foreign executives, engineers and other key workers have endured a year-long wait for South African visas.

The government's security-oriented approach to immigration undermines official efforts to attract investment, said Jakkie Cilliers, of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) think tank. "We have a department of Home Affairs and a Department of Labor that actively work to frustrate foreigners coming to South Af-

rica," Cilliers said, noting that his firm is also struggling to secure visas for staff.

Mavuso Msimang, the head of the presidential study group, this month condemned "endemic corruption" that he said was leaving businesses "failing, downsizing or simply deciding not to invest any more". — AFP

## Activists block Belgian Alibaba hub, private jets

**BRUSSELS:** Hundreds of climate protesters on Saturday blocked a distribution hub for Chinese online giant Alibaba and an airport for private jets in Belgium, activists said. The anti-fossil fuel Code Red coalition said hundreds of demonstrators were detained by police during the action aimed at disrupting the aviation industry.

"In Liege, activists are blocking Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba. Planes filled with consumer goods from China cannot be unloaded and trucks cannot leave the site," Code Red said in a statement. "In Antwerp, with 40 activists still on location, the air traffic of private jets is paralyzed despite over 700 other activists being arrested." An AFP journalist at the airport near the city of Antwerp said that police had fired tear gas and forcefully detained protesters dressed in white overalls as they tried to storm into the facility.

The protest is the latest in a string of civil disobedience actions by the Europe-wide Code Red coalition in Belgium. Chinese giant Alibaba opened its 30,000-square-metre European distribution hub in Liege in 2021. "Liege airport is the fastest growing airport in Europe," said Code Red activist Louis Droussin in a statement. "Millions of euros of public money support this expansion, which is to the detriment of hundreds of hectares of agricultural land." — AFP

## Canada print media to get two-thirds of Google's payment

**MONTREAL:** Canada's print media will receive nearly two-thirds of an annual Can\$100 million (US\$75 million) payment from Google to the country's news outlets in exchange for distribution of their content, the federal government announced Friday. At the end of November, after months of negotiations, Ottawa and Google announced a "historic" agreement, where the tech giant would pay Canadian media companies compensation for the loss of advertising revenue.

"The share that television and radio will receive is capped at 30 percent, that of CBC/Radio-Canada (the Canadian public broadcaster) at seven percent, which leaves the remaining 63 percent for the written press," a federal official told journalists at a briefing.

Most of the payout will go to the print media because it is "really dependent" on online platforms to distribute its content, the official added.

"Canada has accomplished something historic," Minister of Canadian Heritage Pascale St-Onge told reporters.

She recalled that "newsrooms are experiencing a crisis which affects journalism, a foundation of our democracy." The agreement between Canada and Google is part of the Online News Act, which aims to support a struggling Canadian news sector that has seen a flight of advertising dollars and hundreds of publications closed in the last decade. It comes into force on Tuesday.

Meta, the Facebook parent company which is also affected by the new legislation, still opposes the text which it called "fundamentally flawed."

Since August 1, Facebook and Instagram have blocked news content in Canada to avoid having to compensate media companies. Many Canadian media outlets are financially struggling, with several announcing layoff plans in recent weeks. — AFP

## Has the Fed won the battle against inflation?

**WASHINGTON:** The US Federal Reserve's decision to hold its key lending rate on Wednesday and pencil in three interest rate cuts next year has fueled optimism that its inflation battle is won. Following the Fed's decision, the Dow Jones Industrial Average index surged to an all-time high, while yields on US government bonds plummeted, reducing borrowing costs on everything from car loans to home mortgages.

Against the backdrop of falling inflation, low unemployment and persistent economic growth, analysts are increasingly asking the question: Has the Fed won the battle against inflation?

What has the Fed accomplished? As the US economy was rebounding from the COVID-19 pandemic, a supply-side crunch caused a rapid surge in inflation. In March 2022, amid a rise in energy prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Fed began aggressively hiking interest rates in a bid to control rising prices. Over the next 18 months, policymakers lifted the Fed's key lending rate to a 22-year high, and successfully cooled consumer inflation from a 40-year high of 9.1 percent last year to just over 3.1 percent in November 2023.

The economic picture today is a surprisingly positive one, with unemployment at close to historic lows, and an economy that is on track to avoid a damaging recession.

Fed policymakers are increasingly confident that they are on track to achieve this rare monetary policy success known as a "soft landing." The Fed now expects economic growth to rise to 2.6 percent this year, before slowing down in 2024. But despite the good news, the Fed's favored inflation gauge remains stuck stubbornly above its long-run target of two percent, underscoring the challenges that still remain. What happened this week?

On Wednesday, the Fed voted to hold interest rates steady for a third straight meeting, and predicted 0.75 percent points of interest rate cuts in the year ahead. Fed Chair Jerome Powell told



US Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell holds a press conference at the end of Monetary Policy Committee meeting in Washington, DC. — AFP

reporters that the language of the Fed's decision had been changed as "an acknowledgement that we believe that we are likely at or near the peak rate for this cycle."

He added that policymakers had even discussed when it would be "appropriate" for the Fed to begin cutting interest rates—while refusing to rule out another hike.

On the face of it, Powell expressed a cautious view of unfolding events, as is often the case among central bankers. But when compared against his recent threats to raise interest rates further, Powell's remarks were seen as a sign that the Fed is confident it is winning the inflation fight.

"The Fed thinks that it is done," KPMG Chief Economist Diane Swonk wrote in a note published shortly after Powell's remarks on Wednesday.

The Fed's statement and economic projections "provided a more dovish signal than we or the market were expecting," Steve Englander, Standard

Chartered Bank's head of North America macro strategy, wrote in a note to clients.

### What risks remain?

The financial markets are increasingly convinced that the Fed is done hiking rates, and are pricing in as many as six cuts next year, according to CME Group data. This is more aggressive than the Fed's own forecast, reflecting optimism that the US economy has turned the corner on inflation. The major risk facing the Fed as it looks to pivot from its prolonged pause to interest rate cuts is that inflation returns.

An external shock, such as an escalation of the wars in Ukraine or Gaza, could cause another surge in food or energy prices, and complicate the Fed's battle to definitively slow the rate of price increases to two percent. "Inflation is still too high, ongoing progress in bringing it down is not assured, and the path forward is uncertain," Powell told reporters on Wednesday. — AFP

## Vivendi files legal challenge to Telecom Italia deal

**MILAN:** French media giant Vivendi on Friday filed a legal challenge against Telecom Italia's plans to sell its fixed-line network to US investment fund KKR, according to a source close to the matter.

Vivendi, the main shareholder in the Italian telecommunications firm with a holding of 23.75 percent, had slammed the deal approved last month as "illegal." Its appeal to a Milan court aims to cancel the sale but without an emergency suspension of the transaction, meaning the sale process continues, the source told AFP.

Vivendi did not respond to requests for comment. Telecom Italia (TIM) said in a statement that Vivendi had informed it of the legal challenge, but said the sale to KKR was

going ahead as planned. Telecom Italia is seeking to sell its fixed network to pare down a huge debt pile that stands at more than 26 billion euros (\$28 billion). In early November, its board approved a deal with KKR worth up to 22 billion euros, which it said at the time would reduce the debt by "around 14 billion euros".

Vivendi, which says this significantly undervalues the network, had called for an extraordinary general meeting of shareholders to approve the deal—where Vivendi would carry considerable weight.

"The rights of Telecom Italia shareholders are being trampled on," the firm said at the time. The Italian government is the second-largest shareholder in TIM,



which was privatized in 1997.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government intends to take a stake of up to 20 percent in the fixed-line network, viewing it as strategic infrastructure. If the deal goes through, TIM would become the first major

operator in Europe to sell its fixed network on its domestic market to slash debt. The debt load is hampering TIM's efforts to invest in rolling out fiber optic networks, where Italy is lagging behind other advanced economies. — AFP

## Report: Number of US homeless people hit record level in 2023

**WASHINGTON:** The number of homeless people in the United States rose to record levels this year, according to a government report released on Friday. More than 653,100 people were homeless

across the country in January, according to a head count conducted for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

That was 70,650 more homeless people—or 12 percent—than a year earlier and the highest number since figures began being collected in 2007. African Americans make up 13 percent of the total US population but account for 37 percent of all people experiencing homelessness, the report said.

It said the largest jump in homelessness was among people who identify as Hispanic, increasing

by 28 percent, or 39,106 people, between 2022 and 2023. The number of families with children experiencing homelessness also rose by 16 percent, reversing what had been a downward trend since 2012, the report said. Of the more 653,100 people counted as homeless in January, six out of 10 were in shelters or other temporary accommodations while four out of 10 were "in places not meant for human habitation," it said. California has the largest homeless population -- 181,399 -- according to the report, followed by New York (103,200), — AFP

Lifestyle



Shine Muscat grape farmer Yuki Nakamura harvesting the fruit on his farm.



This photo shows China-grown Shine Muscat grapes on sale at a market in Hong Kong.



A vendor selling fruits including Shine Muscat grapes at a market in Hong Kong.



A worker packing a bunch of Shine Muscat grapes on Yuki Nakamura's farm.

**T**he variety of juicy grape that Yuki Nakamura is harvesting as the sun rises over his farm took scientists 33 years to develop and can sell for \$100 a bunch in Tokyo department stores. But in the view of Japanese farmers and officials, the chunky emerald-green Shine Muscat, one of many fruit varieties created by Japan, has been “stolen” by China and South Korea.

“The great things about Shine Muscat are that each grape berry becomes big, it’s easy to grow, and it’s sweet but not too much,” Nakamura told AFP in the country’s central Nagano region. Calling the grapes his “partner”, the 35-year-old said he wants to export to places such as Hong Kong and Thailand, where Japanese fruits are popular. But waiting on the shelves there—and online—are copycats grown by China and South Korea that are nearly the same as Shine Muscat grapes, but much cheaper.

According to the Japanese government, China and South Korea took Shine Muscat seedlings out of Japan and grafted them onto local vines to produce fruit that looks and tastes—almost—as good. Customers definitely “look at the prices”, said Sau, a fruit vendor in a busy market in Hong Kong where Japanese Shine Muscats often cost two or three times as much as their Chinese counterparts, even with a weak yen making Japanese imports cheaper.

“But you can taste the difference,” the vendor, who only gave her first name, told AFP. “Japanese Shine Muscats are refreshing, sweet, and have stronger grape flavour. Chinese ones are sweet, but lack the grape flavor.”

**‘Fruits are special’**

The Chinese Shine Muscat copycats were discovered in 2016, a decade after the variety’s registration in Japan, when the National Agriculture and Food Research Organization (NARO) investigated samples. But Japan cannot stop China or South Korea from growing the fruit because Tokyo—some say naively—failed to register the variety overseas within the six years required under international rules. This was confirmed by South Korea’s agriculture ministry, which told AFP that the “current situation permits Shine Muscat grapes to be grown and distributed here without royalty requirements”.

Chinese authorities did not respond

to requests to comment. Japan cannot export grapes to China itself because of Beijing’s quarantine rules, so Chinese growers are not technically cannibalizing Japanese sales.

“But we would expect licensing fees... would be over 10 billion yen (\$69 million) a year, assuming we obtained rights in China,” Yasunori Ebihara, director of plant trademark protection at the Japanese agriculture ministry, told AFP. The ministry admits that Japan also failed to register new kinds of Japanese-origin strawberry, cherry and citrus varieties that have been found in China, South Korea and also Australia.

The first auctions for seasonal fruits routinely attract massive sums in Japan, with a single pair of premium melons fetching five million yen (then \$45,500) in 2019. “Fruits are special for Japanese people,” Ebihara said.

## Sour grapes: Japan battles to protect premium fruits



Shine Muscat grape farmer Yuki Nakamura harvesting the fruit on his farm.

“Japanese consumers seek sweet, big, beautiful fruits in a fancy box,” he said. “Therefore, Japanese farmers make efforts to produce better quality, sweeter and more delicious fruits.”

**Testing times**

Japan has been developing new fruit varieties since the 1920s. Fuji

apples—named for Japan’s famous volcano—emerged in the 1930s as a cross between two varieties and are now among the world’s most popular. But the full-scale mission started after World War II, and continues to this day at NARO’s research sites across the country. On a recent sunny autumn day, researchers were harvesting dozens of new pear varieties, measuring their sweetness and hardness with special equipment, as well as with the occasional bite.

Takehiko Shimada, head of NARO’s fruit variety research unit, said it takes years of painstaking work to develop a new variety fit to hit stores. “It’s normal” that it took over 30 years to produce the Shine Muscat, he said. The research organization has begun using DNA analysis to try to catch copycats of new fruit varieties.

“There are genome sequences that only the Shine Muscat has, so we can check whether (a grape) has such a sequence and determine whether it is a Shine Muscat,” Shimada said. Japan tightened its rules in 2020, prohibiting registered seeds and seedlings from being taken abroad.

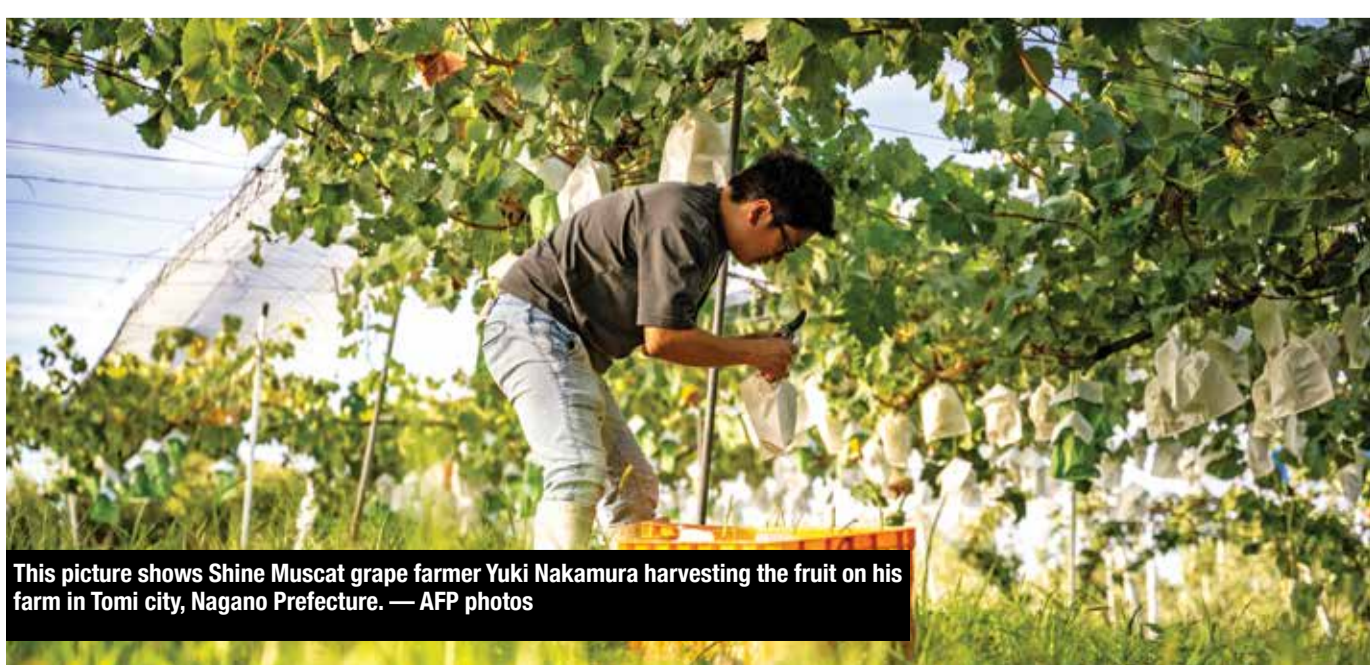
Violators can face a prison term of up to 10 years or a fine of up to 10 million yen (\$69,000). Japan is also making efforts to better protect domestic growers against foreign copycats. Back on the farm, Nakamura is happy that Shine Muscats are well-known across Asia. “But I don’t like it when I see that something Japan worked so hard to produce is easily brought overseas and sold there.”—AFP



A view of grapevines growing on farmland in Tomi city, Nagano Prefecture.



Shine Muscat grape farmer Yuki Nakamura (left) on his farm.



This picture shows Shine Muscat grape farmer Yuki Nakamura harvesting the fruit on his farm in Tomi city, Nagano Prefecture. — AFP photos



## Lifestyle

# Matthew Perry died of accidental ketamine overdose, examiner finds

**"F**riends" actor Matthew Perry died from an accidental ketamine overdose, medical examiners said Friday, concluding their investigation into the death of the beloved but troubled TV star.

Perry, who played Chandler Bing on the hit TV sitcom from 1994-2004, died at the age of 54, having been found unconscious in a swimming pool at his house in Los Angeles in October.

He had struggled for decades with addiction to drugs, including ketamine, and related serious health issues, but had reportedly been clean for 19 months prior to his passing. "Matthew Perry's cause of death is determined to be from the acute effects of ketamine," the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner's office said in a statement.

"Contributory factors in his death include drowning, coronary artery disease and buprenorphine effects. The manner of death is accident."

Ketamine is illegally used as a recreational drug for its numbing and hallucinogenic effects. The drug can also



Actor Matthew Perry attends the 2003 TV Land awards at the Palladium theatre in Hollywood.—AFP

be used by doctors as an anesthetic, and researchers are exploring its use as a mental health treatment.

Perry wrote in his memoirs of how he had relied on using ketamine daily at points during his battles with addiction. He said the drug eased his pain and helped with depression.

"Has my name written all over it -- they might as well have called it 'Maty,'" he wrote, of ketamine. "Taking K is

like being hit in the head with a giant happy shovel. But the hangover was rough and outweighed the shovel," explained Perry.

## 'The Big Terrible Thing'

"Friends," which followed the lives of six New Yorkers navigating adulthood, dating and careers, drew a massive global following. But even as he delivered on-air gag after gag -- and earned a fortune -- Perry was struggling.

He attended multiple rehabilitation clinics to combat addiction to painkillers and alcohol. In 2018 he suffered a burst colon, related to drug usage, and underwent multiple surgeries.

In his memoir "Friends, Lovers and the Big Terrible Thing," published last year, Perry described going through detox dozens of times. He dedicated the book to "all of the sufferers out there," and wrote in the prologue: "I should be dead."

"I have mostly been sober since 2001," he wrote, "save for about sixty or seventy little mishaps over the years."

The examiner's report does not specify how or when Perry had consumed the fatal dose of ketamine.

But it found that trace amounts were detected in his stomach, and that prescription medications and loose pills were present at his home.

Perry was undergoing medical treatment involving ketamine -- but his most recent known infusion was more than a week before his death, meaning that dose would no longer have been in his system.

The examiner's report says the levels of ketamine in Perry's blood were comparable to higher-range levels used as general anesthetic in surgeries, and would cause overstimulation of the heart and problems breathing.

This could have caused Perry to lapse into unconsciousness, with drowning then becoming a contributory cause of death.

Perry's coronary artery disease, and his use of buprenorphine to treat severe pain, would have made him more vulnerable to the effects of ket-

amine, the report finds. No alcohol was detected in his system by the autopsy report. Nor were there any traces of other drugs such as cocaine, heroin or fentanyl.

## 'The 6 of us'

Perry's sudden passing in October drew shocked reactions from Hollywood A-listers, his co-stars, and "Friends" fans worldwide. "Oh boy this one has cut deep," said Jennifer Aniston, who played Rachel on the show about six close-knit friends navigating adult life in New York.

"He was such a part of our DNA. We were always the 6 of us. This was a chosen family that forever changed the course of who we were and what our path was going to be," she wrote on Instagram.

"The times we had together are honestly among the favorite times of my life," wrote Matt LeBlanc, who played Perry's roommate and best friend on the show.—AFP

## Depardieu behavior 'shames France': Culture minister

The behaviour of French cinema superstar Gerard Depardieu, charged with rape and facing new scrutiny after sexist comments were broadcast in a television documentary, shames France, the culture minister said on Friday. Culture Minister Rima Abdul-Malak also said that the Grand Chancery of the Legion of Honour would initiate a "disciplinary procedure" to decide whether to strip Depardieu of the country's top honour.

Depardieu, 74, was charged with rape in 2020 and has also faced 13 accusations of sexual harassment or assault. A documentary titled "The Fall of the Ogre" shows the actor on a 2018 trip to North Korea repeatedly making explicit sexual comments in the presence of a female interpreter and sexualising a small girl riding a horse. It was aired last week on France 2 television.



French actor Gérard Depardieu is awarded with the Legion of Honour at the Elysée Palace, in Paris on May 2, 1996.—AFP

"Directors will decide if he has roles in films in the future or not," Abdul-Malak told reporters in the southern town of Moissac. "I don't think he has many offers arriving now on his desk."

She said the comments broadcast in the France 2 report were "absolutely shocking" and she was "disgusted" by his behaviour. She denounced "an attitude which is intended to be joking and provocative, but is in fact disrespectful and undignified and shames France, because he is a monument of cinema throughout the world."

## 'Disciplinary procedure'

Speaking on France 5, the culture minister indicated the actor might be stripped of the Legion of Honour he received from then-president Jacques Chirac in 1996. "A Legion of Honour distinguishes a man, an artist, an attitude, values," she said.

"It so happens that I spoke with the Grand Chancellor of the Legion of Honour, General (Francois) Leconte," she said, adding that a "disciplinary procedure" would be initiated to decide whether the award should be revoked.

"It will be up to them to decide," she said. "It's important to raise this issue." At the same time she said the French would not stop watching films featuring Depardieu. The actor -- who has more than 200 titles to his name, including 1990 comedy "Green Card" and Netflix series "Marseille" -- has denied any wrongdoing.

"Never ever have I abused a woman," he wrote in Le Figaro newspaper in October. The Canadian province of Quebec on Wednesday stripped Depardieu of its top honour over his "scandalous" comments against women in the France 2 report. French investigators are also looking into the death of an actress who was one of the first to accuse Depardieu of sexual assault, prosecutors said this week. Several media outlets have reported that Emmanuelle Debever died by suicide aged 60 on December 7, the day the France 2 documentary was aired.—AFP



(From left) Bradley Cooper, Carey Mulligan, and Steven Spielberg attend Netflix's "Maestro" Los Angeles photo call at Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles, California.—AFP photos



(From left) Carey Mulligan, Bradley Cooper, and Lady Gaga attend Netflix's "Maestro" Los Angeles photo call.

## BRADLEY COOPER: 'I BECAME AN ADULT' MAKING 'MAESTRO'

Bradley Cooper said transforming into the legendary composer Leonard Bernstein for his new film "Maestro", released on Netflix on December 20, forced him to grow up. The 48-year-old actor spent years researching, writing, directing and starring in the film about the most famous American conductor and composer of the 20th century. The film focuses on the deep and complex relationship between Bernstein and his wife Felicia, played by Carey Mulligan -- one of real love burdened by his many dalliances with young men. AFP sat down with the two stars backstage at the Theatre de Chatelet in Paris, where they had stopped by to meet the cast of "West Side Story", Bernstein's most famous composition.

**Q: Bradley, you spent months learning to conduct for the role. Could you jump in and lead the orchestra here?**

**Cooper:** Absolutely not! It would be a calamity (laughs). I learned to conduct six minutes of Mahler. If we did that, I could get away with it -- maybe!

**Q: What did you learn about conducting?**

**Cooper:** It's like riding a stallion. You're leading the orchestra but you're also recognising that they're a breathing organism that's very powerful and has its own mind. Lenny's genius was that he could be hard but he always did it with love. And he knew what he was doing. He married romanticism and passion with real musical acumen.

**Q: Carey, was Felicia a victim in this marriage?**

**Mulligan:** She was determined in her own mind not to be. Of course she sacrificed a lot, but she did it wholeheartedly, without question, and it was only later in her life that it caught up with her.

**Q: How would she feel about being portrayed on screen?**

**Cooper:** The children said Felicia would be horrified because she was such a private person, but secretly joyous that Carey Mulligan was playing her (both laugh). Mulligan: I wrote her a letter when we were about to start filming. Obviously I didn't send it anywhere. But I wrote 'I hope this is alright, don't be cross with me.' (laughs) I played Nina in "The Seagull" (Chekhov's play) when I was 21 and it changed my life. I spent the next 15

years trying to find something that felt like that, and I found it in Felicia.

**Q: How has the experience of becoming Bernstein changed you?**

**Cooper:** I became an adult through this film, by incorporating the traits Lenny lived his life by, which is an unrelenting pursuit of what one wants to do. I've always been apologetic about it before, at least to myself, and I wasn't on this movie, partly because I had an incredible partner in Carey, who allowed me to be bold.

**Q: What drew you to the story -- the music or the relationship?**

**Cooper:** The first thing was being obsessed with conducting. I thought I could pull off playing a conductor because I was so in tune with it since I was a kid.

But in researching and writing, the intriguing thing was this relationship between Lenny and Felicia, and that became the north star. The conducting became just a story point.

**Q: What would you like to ask Lenny?**

**Cooper (long pause):** I would ask him if he feels lost. In those last years after she died -- did he feel free to live his best life? Does he wish he could have spoken to somebody to find a sense of peace?

**Q: You've made a film about rock music ("A Star is Born") and now classical. What's next?**

**Mulligan (interrupting):** Techno!  
—AFP

## Love, grief and Grammys: Jon Batiste creates an 'American Symphony'

As Jon Batiste completed his dazzling triumph at the 2022 Grammys, winning trophy after trophy on music's biggest stage, his wife watched the same way most of us did -- on the sofa, at home. Suleika Jaouad was unable to attend that night because she was battling leukemia. That stark juxtaposition of stratospheric success and brutal reality underpins "American Symphony", an intimate new documentary about the couple, out now on Netflix.

"I wanted it to not just show the artistic process, but to show what it takes to achieve a level of greatness in artistry," Batiste told AFP. "I also believe that a lesson that we didn't know we were really putting on display... is creativity as a mechanism of survival." The film began life as a straightforward documentary about Batiste's plan to write and perform a one-night-only contemporary symphony, drawing on music from around the world -- but morphed overnight when Jaouad's cancer returned after nearly a decade.

The result is equal parts love story, meditation on illness, chronicle of family life, and an unflinching examination of the creative process itself. Jaouad herself is a bestselling writer who penned a New York Times column about her first bout with cancer. For seven months, cameras followed Batiste as he conducted rehearsals, lay restlessly awake at night with severe anxiety, talked to his therapist about wanting to quit his job, and visited Jaouad in various hospital wards.

"Allowing the camera into these sacred moments of our lives... it was in real time, negotiating," recalled Batiste. "Setting boundaries, them pushing against those boundaries, us pushing back." During that same period, his album "We Are" topped the 2022 Grammy nominations, and went on to triumph over Taylor



US singer Jon Batiste and his wife writer Suleika Jaouad arrive at the White House to attend a state dinner in Washington on Dec 1, 2022. - AFP

Swift, Kanye West and Billie Eilish to win album of the year.

But by the time Batiste returned home from Las Vegas with his five Grammys, Jaouad was back in the hospital, battling the effects of chemotherapy and a second bone marrow transplant. One powerful scene in the film finds Batiste on stage, in front of a packed auditorium, during a two-hour piano recital. He dedicates the next passage of music to Jaouad, then pauses with his fingers on the keys for a full minute that feels like an eternity, before playing a spellbindingly emotional -- and cathartic -- improvisation. "There's just so much that happens, so much that goes on in a life, that is hard to even put into words," said Batiste. "I was processing it in real time in front of the audience."

The movie, produced by Michelle and Barack Obama's film company, is tipped to be a frontrunner for best documentary at the Oscars in March. Batiste already has an Academy Award, for writing the score to Pixar animation "Soul". Hailed as an artist's artist, the classically trained scion of a prominent New Orleans musical dynasty first found fame as the bandleader on Stephen Colbert's popular late-night talk show. The Grammys success of "We Are" took Batiste's celebrity to the next level and, less than two years later, the jazz polymath is nominated for six more Grammys with his next album, "World Music Radio."—AFP



## Historic Warren Beatty teenage sex lawsuit dismissed

Lawsuit accusing actor Warren Beatty of coercive sex with a teenager five decades ago was dismissed Friday. The suit, lodged in Los Angeles last year, was one of a number of historic abuse claims filed under a California law allowing complaints that would otherwise have passed the statute of limitations.

Kristina Charlotte Hirsch alleged in the suit that she met the "Bonnie and Clyde" actor on a movie set in 1973 when she was 14 or 15 years old. She claimed he later invited her to the hotel in which he was living and took her for car rides. Beatty -- who would have been aged around 35 at the time -- "used his position and status as an adult and a Hollywood movie star to coerce sexual contact with Plaintiff on multiple occasions with the minor child," the suit said. Beverly Hills Superior Court Judge Edward Moreton Jr dismissed the case "with prejudice" at a hearing Friday meaning it cannot be refilled.—AFP



Oman's Muttrah Fort.



Muttrah Fort overlooking a harbor used to receive merchant ships from across the world.



Tourists and visitors enjoy a tour in the fort.

## With great past, bright future, Oman's Muttrah Fort catches visitors' eyes

Dating back to the 16th century, Oman's Muttrah Fort sits majestically as a rocky outcrop near the beach, becoming a major tourist attraction that lures visitors from inside and outside the Sultanate. Based on a great past and bright future, the fort was established in 1507. Throughout

history, it has acted as a defensive wall against attacks, while also allowing observation of the surrounding territory from its three monumental towers. The fortress used to be a famous harbor for merchant ships sailing from across the world.—KUNA



The fort's tower on top of the mountain.



Oman's Muttrah Fort.

# THE DUDE ABIDES: 'BIG LEBOWSKI' GEAR UNDER THE HAMMER

If sipping White Russians while you go bowling with your odd-ball friends is your thing, you might like to bid on the bathrobe Jeff Bridges wore in "The Big Lebowski." But you know, that's just, like, my opinion, man. The brown flannel robe is one of a number of items from the Coen brothers' slacker-noir film going under the hammer in California this weekend. "These are the items that ... bring the story to life," said Martin Nolan, chief executive of Julien's Auction. "When (Bridges) shows up in this outfit... wearing his shorts, his T-shirt, the robe, just incredible."

The 1998 movie stars Bridges as The Dude, a wastrel whom criminals mistake for a millionaire in a caper that also showcases the comedic talents of John Goodman and Steve Buscemi. The film became a cult classic, and spawned a number of memorable lines that fans often trot out, including: "That rug really tied the room together." In addition to the robe, which is expected to fetch up to \$50,000, fans can also bid on The Dude's sunglasses and bowling pin props used in the movie and signed by Bridges.

The lot is part of "Hollywood Legends," a four-day event that will see thousands of items of memorabilia put up for sale. They include an animatronic model of the head of "E.T. The Extra-



The special effects head of E.T. is displayed during Julien's Auction's press preview ahead of the public exhibition and auction "Hollywood Legend" presented by Julien's Auction and Turner Classic Movies (TMC).--AFP photos

terrestrial", which could go for as much as \$1 million, Nolan said. "These items are now considered an asset class ... not just memorabilia items or a storyline from a time in our lives," he said.

"Something like this is much more fun than stocks or bonds, or a lot of the other items you have in your invest-

ment portfolio, and a great conversation piece." Also up for sale this weekend will be the blouse that Britain's Princess Diana wore in her engagement photo in 1981, which auctioneers expect could fetch up to \$100,000.

Designed by Elizabeth Emanuel and David Emanuel, who also designed her



Tim Burton's original paintings are displayed during Julien's Auction's press preview.

wedding dress, the pink chiffon blouse has a bow at the neck. "This tells so much about Diana; nothing flamboyant nothing crazy just very subtle, beautiful, elegant and that's who she was," said Nolan. Other items on offer include a jacket worn by Audrey Hepburn

in "Charade" (1963) and the computer used by Carrie Bradshaw, Sarah Jessica Parker's character in "Sex and the City."—AFP



Executive Director/Co-Founder of Julien's Auction Martin Nolan shows one of the "The Big Lebowski" signed film replica bowling pins during Julien's Auction's press preview.



Princess Diana's 1981 engagement portrait blush pink chiffon Emanuels blouse (left) and Jacques Azagury 1985 ballerina-length evening dress (center) are displayed during Julien's Auction's press preview.



Complete storyboards by J Todd Anderson from "The Big Lebowski" are displayed during Julien's Auction's press preview.



Complete storyboards by J Todd Anderson from "The Big Lebowski" are displayed during Julien's Auction's press preview.



Sarah Jessica Parker's Carrie Bradshaw "Sex and the City" Apple PowerBook G3 laptop is displayed during Julien's Auction's press preview.



The "Dude" shirt, robe and sunglasses, signed film replica bowling pins from "The Big Lebowski" are displayed during Julien's Auction's press preview.

## Sports

# 'Proud' Lyon joins elite club with 500th Test wicket

## 'I still pinch myself when I see my name next to those guys'

**PERTH:** Australian off-spinner Nathan Lyon claimed his 500th Test wicket on Sunday to join an exclusive club of just seven others to achieve the feat, with skipper Pat Cummins believing he has another 200 in him. The 36-year-old veteran, whose longevity is partly due to having not played international white-ball cricket since 2019, reached the milestone in his 123rd match.

He began the first Test against Pakistan in Perth on 496 and was left stranded on 499 after their first innings. But he finally reached 500 on day four by dismissing Faheem Ashraf lbw on review, with his teammates mobbing him in celebration. Lyon then bowled Amer Jamal in the same over for his 501st.

"It's something I'm very proud about, I don't think it's hit me yet," said Lyon. "There's obviously been a lot of hard work gone into the journey and I've had a lot more bad days than good days, but to be back out there in the middle ... it's pretty special.

"I still pinch myself when I see my name next to those guys," he said of the exalted company he has joined, including fellow spin kings Muttiah Muralitharan and Shane Warne.

Affectionately known as "Garry" after former Australian rules football player Garry Lyon, he made his debut in 2011 and has best figures of 8-50, collecting 23 five-wicket hauls and 10 wickets four times so far.

He told reporters before the Perth match that he wanted to continue playing at international level until Australia's next Ashes sojourn to England in 2027.

Lyon would not say how many more wickets he could get, but Cummins suggested he had another 200 in him. "I still think he's got 40-50 Test matches," he said.

"That's four or five years at 10 a year, probably average what four (wickets) a game, that's another couple of hundred (wickets) and that's 700."

That would move him close to fellow Australian Warne, who has 708 and is second on the all-time list behind Sri Lanka great Muralitharan on 800. A classical spinner who flights the ball, the right-armed could feasibly catch West Indian great Courtney Walsh (519) during the current three-Test series.

### Important cog

If not, the milestone should be in sight during Australia's two-Test home showdown with the West Indies that follows later in January. After that, fellow Australian Glenn McGrath on 563 would be his next target. English pair Jimmy Anderson (690) and Stuart Broad (604), along with India's Anil Kumble (619) fill out the 500 club.

"I don't think it's any secret that he is probably the most important cog in our bowling line-up," added Cummins. "Most games he's probably bowling 30 overs a day and basically you can just put him down one end, he's not going to go for many runs, take some wickets, then us quick bowlers can just rotate through the other end. "As a captain, it makes it lots easier knowing you have a bloke who's played 100-odd Test matches, who knows his craft and can bowl in pretty much any conditions."

Long-time teammate Steve Smith echoed those comments before the Perth Test. "What he brings to



**PERTH:** Australia's Nathan Lyon bowls on day four of the first Test cricket match between Australia and Pakistan in Perth on December 17, 2023. — AFP

the attack and the control and different tempos—he can play defensive roles, he can play an attacking role and he's got all the tricks," he said.

"He's continually learning and trying to get better as well. He's a valuable—if not the most valuable—member in this team for our attack." — AFP

## New Zealand see off Bangladesh in first ODI

**DUNEDIN:** Opener Will Young cracked a rapid century as New Zealand recovered from a dreadful start to beat Bangladesh by 44 runs on Sunday in the rain-affected first one-day international. The match was shortened to 30 overs each after three rain delays to New Zealand's innings in Dunedin.

The home side burst into life in the final stages to post an imposing 239-7. Needing an adjusted target of 245 to win the first ODI of the three-match series, Bangladesh were restricted to 200-9 in a chase that lost momentum. New Zealand bounced back after losing two wickets in the game's opening over when seamer Shoriful Islam had Rachin Ravindra and Henry Nicholls both caught without scoring.

A brilliant 171-run stand for the third wicket between Young, who hit 105 off 84 balls, and captain Tom Latham, who finished with 92 runs, handed the advantage back to the hosts in a match played in overcast conditions throughout. Their stand straddled two stoppages, which reduced the innings from 46 overs to 40 and then to 30.

The pair hit out in brutal fashion over the last 10.4 overs, when the hosts chalked up a remarkable 131 runs. Latham fell short of his eighth ODI century, bowled by off-spinner Mehidy Hasan Miraz, but Young forged on to reach three figures for the third time in the 50-over format before being run out in the final over.

Young said his first priority was to steady the innings after its disastrous start. "Tommy and I set up a nice partnership although it was on and off with the rain," Young said. "We came back on with 10 overs to go and we thought why not have a crack? And it came off today. It was nice to get a few out of the middle at the end and it's the icing on the cake to finish with a win."

Shoriful was comfortably Bangladesh's best bowler, taking 2-28 off six overs. The chase began brightly, with opener Anamul Haque reaching 43, supported by Towhid Hridoy (33) and Liton Das (22), who all scored at better than a run a ball.

However, the pursuit tailed off when Afif Hossain fell for a



**DUNEDIN:** Bangladesh's Tawhid Hridoy bats during the first one day international cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh at University Oval in Dunedin on December 17, 2023. — AFP

hard-hit 38 in the 24th over, with his team still needing 80 runs. Visiting captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said the result was "very disappointing" after Islam's early fireworks.

"If we'd taken a third wicket, it could have been a different ball game," said Shanto, before singling out the expensive spin bowling of Mehidy and Afif as a weak point. "I think our fast bowlers bowled really

well but our spinners need to learn quickly before the next match."

New Zealand's best bowling figures of 2-24 were recorded by all-rounder Josh Clarkson, who made his debut along with seamer William O'Rourke. The remaining games are in Nelson and Napier next week as Bangladesh seek their first ODI win over the Black Caps on New Zealand soil after 17 defeats. — AFP



**ST. GEORGE'S:** Phil Salt (R) of England hits 4 and Nicholas Pooran (L) of West Indies during the 3rd T20I between West Indies and England at Grenada National Cricket Stadium, Saint George's, Grenada. — AFP

## Salt century as England fightback stuns WI in T20

**ST. GEORGE'S:** Phil Salt smashed a brilliant unbeaten century as England defeated West Indies by seven wickets to keep their Twenty20 international series alive in Grenada on Saturday. Salt led an improbable English fightback with 109 not out while middle order batsman Harry Brook also emerged as a hero with an unbeaten 31 as England finished on 226-3 with a ball to spare to eclipse the West Indies' mammoth total of 222-6.

Brook's blistering late knock included 24 off the final over, the 24-year-old Yorkshireman sealing a remarkable victory with a six off West Indies bowler Andre Russell over third man. The win leaves the best-of-five series finely poised, with West Indies leading 2-1 with two games to play.

Man-of-the-match Salt's century from 56 balls included four fours and nine sixes, while Brook's unbeaten 31 came off just seven balls and included four sixes. Set a target of 223 to win, England made a rollicking start to their run chase, with Salt aided by 51 from skipper Jos Buttler. But a tight spell of bowling from the West Indies and the dismissal of Buttler stunted the flow of English runs and the hosts looked to be on course for victory as the run rate crept ever higher. Yet England yanked the initiative back spectacularly, with Liam Livingstone hitting 30 off 18 balls before Brook's remarkable late cameo dragged the tourists over the line.

"It feels like it's been a long time coming in an England shirt," Salt said of his century. "It's special to do it today with the series on the line. Brook came in and played a hell of a knock at the end." Earlier, West Indies appeared well set to clinch the series after Nicholas Pooran smashed 82 from 45 balls, following a shaky start from the home side.

The West Indian wicketkeeper's superb knock came after England had the hosts reeling at 8-2 with the early dismissals of openers Brandon King and Kyle Mayers. Pooran's knock was the centerpiece of a sustained middle order onslaught with Royman Powell adding 39, Sherfane Rutherford 29 and Shai Hope 26.

The hosts devoured England's bowling, putting on a breathtaking exhibition of power hitting that yielded more sixes (16) than boundaries (14). England had made two changes to the side beaten by 10 runs in the second T20 on Thursday, bringing in Reece Topley and Gus Atkinson for Rehan Ahmed and Chris Woakes.

But both Topley and Atkinson struggled to make much impression with the ball. Topley made an early breakthrough to remove Mayers for a duck but conceded 32 runs from his four overs at eight an over. Atkinson meanwhile was battered for 33 runs off two overs. Game four of the series takes place in Trinidad & Tobago on Tuesday.

### Brief scores:

**West Indies 222-6** (N. Pooran 82, R. Powell 39, S. Rutherford 29; M. Ali 1-26, A. Rashid 2-32).

**England 226-3** (19.5 overs) (P. Salt 109 not out, J. Buttler 51, H. Brook 31 (not out); G. Motie 1-30, J. Holder 1-52).

Result: England won by seven wickets. — AFP

## Williamson to lead NZ in Bangladesh

**WELLINGTON:** Captain Kane Williamson will make his return to international Twenty20 cricket in the three-match home series against Bangladesh. New Zealand Cricket said Sunday. Williamson has not played 20-overs cricket for more than a year after missing the T20 series against

England in September while recovering from a long-term knee injury.

The 33-year-old world-class batter recovered to help New Zealand reach the semi-finals of the 50-over World Cup in India last month, followed by the drawn Test series in Bangladesh. Williamson joins Tim Southee, Daryl Mitchell, Mitchell Santner and Glenn Phillips, who will contest the three-match T20 series after being rested for the current ODI games with Bangladesh.

The injured players include Lockie Ferguson (Achilles), Matt Henry (hamstring), Henry Shipley (back) and all-rounder Michael Bracewell (Achilles). Opener Devon Conway is being rested for

both the ODI and Twenty20 series, because of a "heavy workload in 2023", according to a New Zealand Cricket statement.

New Zealand have home Tests against South Africa and Australia in early 2024. Coach Gary Stead said the T20 series, starting in Napier on December 27, represents the start of New Zealand's preparation for the World Cup next June in the West Indies and United States.

New Zealand T20 squad: Kane Williamson (capt), Finn Allen, Mark Chapman, Kyle Jamieson, Adam Milne, Daryl Mitchell, James Neesham, Glenn Phillips, Mitchell Santner, Ben Sears, Tim Seifert, Ish Sodhi, Tim Southee. — AFP

## Shiffrin misses out as Brignone dominates super-G in Val d'Isere

**VAL-D'ISERE:** Federica Brignone closed the gap on Mikaela Shiffrin at the top of the overall World Cup standings by winning a challenging Val d'Isere super-G on Sunday, the Italian's third victory of the season. Shiffrin, however, failed to register a point as she misjudged a gate in the mid-section and left the course, a rare "DNF" for the five-time winner of the big globe.

The American was one of 26 of the 58 starters to retire, including Olympic super-G champion Lara Gut-Behrami and world champion Marta Bassino. The non-finish rate of 44.8 per cent is the highest for a women's super-G World Cup race since at least as far back as the 1999/2000 season.

No such problems for Brignone who showed all her skill and experience on the Oreiller-Killy piste, completing the run without a single technical fault. "Almost perfect," said Brignone who finished 0.44 seconds ahead of the Norwegian Kaja Vickhoff Lie and 0.59secs in front of her compatriot Sofia Goggia.

"Today it was really hard to do the perfect run," she added. "The super-G was not easy for sure. There were big turns but also a lot of speed, so you were going fast and arriving at some big turns where you had to be ahead."

"I tried always to push, always to be ahead, and never be happy with my speed but wanting more. So that was my goal today and I was really aggressive but I let my skis go." It marked a 24th World Cup



**VAL-D'ISERE:** (From L) Second-placed Norway's Kaja Vickhoff Lie, First-placed Italy's Federica Brignone and third-placed Italy's Sofia Goggia celebrate on the podium of the Women's SuperG race at the FIS Alpine Skiing World Cup event in Val d'Isere, in the French Alps, on December 17, 2023. — AFP

victory for the 33-year-old Italian and her third this season, following her double on the two giants at Tremblant, Canada a fortnight ago.

She is second in the overall standings with 557 points, 63 behind Shiffrin. Gut lies third on 429. "It's a

dream right now," said Brignone. "I'm free, I'm skiing good, I'm having fun and I'm motivated to try to ski faster, and I think that's the best thing for the beginning of the season." The women's World Cup continues on Thursday with the Courchevel night slalom. — AFP

## Sports

# Warriors hold off Nets, Thunder stun NBA champion Nuggets

## Bucks hand hapless Detroit Pistons their 23rd straight defeat

LOS ANGELES: Stephen Curry scored 16 of his 37 points in the fourth quarter as the Golden State Warriors held on for a much-needed 124-120 NBA victory over the Brooklyn Nets on Saturday. Curry made seven of seven attempts in the final period and Klay Thompson made a pair of key three-pointers in the last four minutes as the Warriors—who had led by as many as 18 points—avoided a second-half collapse and ended their three-game losing streak.

Cam Thomas scored 41 points and Spencer Dinwiddie added 16 for the Nets, who took their first lead since the first quarter on Mikal Bridges' three-pointer with 9:12 left in the fourth quarter. After a tense exchange of leads, a Curry layup gave the Warriors a one-point lead with 6:46 remaining and they wouldn't trail again.

It was a morale-boosting win for a Warriors team that has struggled to hang on to leads, and which is still digesting the indefinite suspension of star Draymond Green after he struck Phoenix's Jusuf Nurkic while flailing his arms in the latest in a long line of on-court incidents.

"It's been a lot of conversations, a lot of noise around us," Curry said. "The game of basketball presents a lot of challenges on the court, but the friendships that you have and the connections that you have—especially with a guy like Draymond who we've been to war with for over a decade—all that stuff does weigh on you."

In Denver, Nikola Jokic and the reigning champion Nuggets couldn't hold off the Oklahoma City Thunder, who triumphed 118-117 on Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's turnaround jump shot with 1.4 seconds remaining.

Gilgeous-Alexander finished with 25 points, Jalen Williams added 24 and rookie Chet Holmgren had 17

points, 11 rebounds and nine blocked shots for the Thunder. Jokic had 24 points and 12 assists for the Nuggets, who led by eight points with 3:33 to play but lost at home for just the second time this season.

### Three-point barrage

Keegan Murray was the star in Sacramento, draining 12 three-pointers—two shy of Warriors star Thompson's NBA single-game record—on the way to 47 points in the Kings' 125-104 victory over the Utah Jazz. King missed just one of his first 13 attempts from beyond the arc, setting a record with 11 straight, but missed his last two.

In Minneapolis, Karl-Anthony Towns scored a season-high 40 points and pulled down 12 rebounds and Anthony Edwards added 37 points for the Minnesota Timberwolves in a 127-109 victory over the Indiana Pacers.

Jimmy Butler was the hero in Miami, drilling a step-back jump shot as time expired to lift the Heat to a 118-116 victory over the Chicago Bulls. Butler finished with 28 points to lead the Heat, who were again without injured Bam Adebayo and Tyler Herro.

DeMar DeRozan led the Bulls with 27 points and Patrick Williams added 25 in a tense game that featured four lead changes in the fourth quarter. In Portland, Luka Doncic delivered 40 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists to lead the Dallas Mavericks to a 131-120 victory over the Trail Blazers.

Doncic scored 30 points in the first half and had his fifth triple-double of the season secured in the third quarter. Things were even easier for Eastern Conference contenders Milwaukee and Philadelphia, who both posted blowout wins.

Damian Lillard scored 33 points, Bobby Portis added 31 off the bench and Giannis Antetokounmpo



DENVER: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander #2 of the Oklahoma City Thunder goes to the basket against Christian Braun #0 of the Denver Nuggets in the fourth quarter at Ball Arena on December 16, 2023 in Denver, Colorado. — AFP

chipped in 22 points with eight rebounds and six assists as the Bucks handed the hapless Detroit Pistons their 23rd straight defeat, 146-114.

Milwaukee out-scored the Pistons 43-20 in the first quarter, and Detroit didn't get the deficit below 18 points the rest of the way. The 76ers, fueled by 42 points and 15 rebounds from reigning NBA

Most Valuable Player Joel Embiid, crushed the Hornets 135-82 in Charlotte. It was the largest margin of victory in the league this season, topping Boston's 51-point win over Indiana last month. Embiid notched his 10th straight game with 30 points and 10 rebounds despite sitting out the entire fourth quarter along with the rest of the Sixers starters. — AFP

## Barca 'give away' points at Valencia, Atletico stumble

BARCELONA: Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez said his team "gave away two points" to Valencia in a tense 1-1 draw on Sunday in La Liga. The champions moved third, a point clear of Atletico Madrid, but trail Real Madrid by four and surprise leaders Girona by six, having played one game more than all three sides.

Atletico fell 2-0 at Athletic Bilbao earlier Saturday but the Catalans could not take full advantage in an entertaining clash on the east coast. Joao Felix sent Barcelona ahead in the second half after a slick team move, but Hugo Guillamon's fine strike pegged them back.

"We have to be much stronger in the opponent's box, the chances are so clear (and) we didn't win the game," Xavi told Movistar. "I think we gave away two points, because the team had a very good game... we take away a point that leaves us very unsatisfied."

Barcelona have won just one of their last four league matches, including being ripped apart by a rampant Girona last weekend at home. They were further shaken by a midweek Champions League defeat by Belgian side Royal Antwerp, which created further questions over Xavi's management even though the Catalans were already through to the last 16. In the subsequent days, club figures, including president Joan Laporta, showed him support, ahead of what Spanish media billed a 'final' at Valencia's rowdy Mestalla stadium. "Anything that wasn't three points was a tough blow for us," Barca midfielder Pedri told Movistar.

"We did a lot of things right but we didn't get the goal—I think our play was a lot better than in the Girona game, where we weren't good." The Spain international said the team were backing Xavi. "We're with the coach, these aren't good moments for any of us... we have to be united to turn it around."

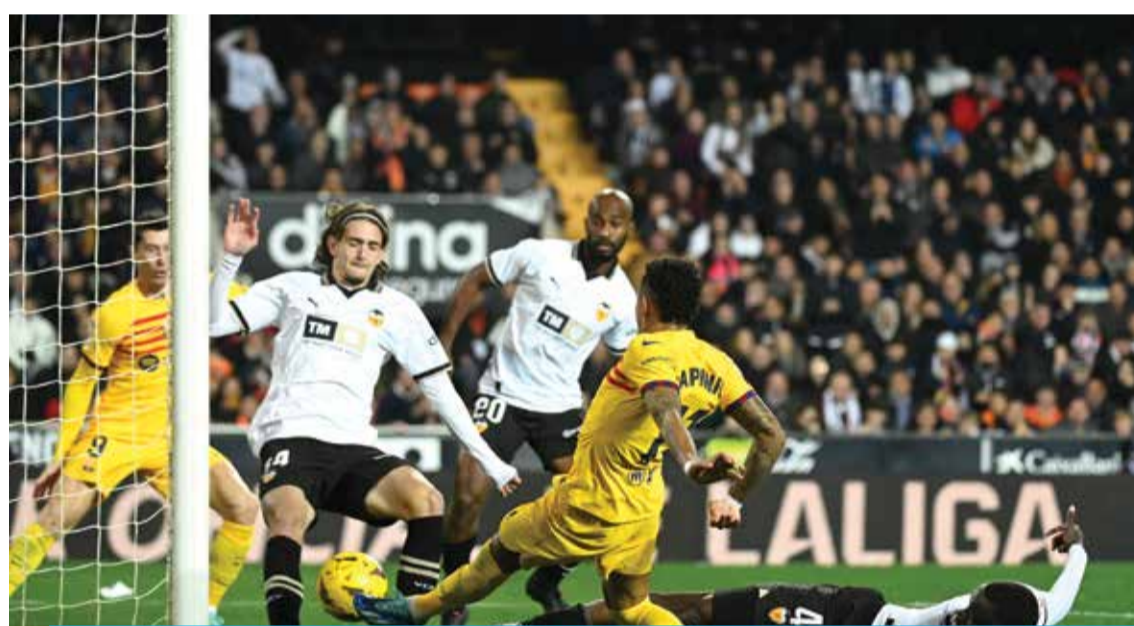
## Libbok piles on agony for Cup holders La Rochelle

PARIS: South Africa's World Cup fly-half Manie Libbok broke French hearts again on Saturday with a last-minute conversion for the Stormers that sent holders La Rochelle spinning to a 21-20 defeat in Cape Town, while last season's beaten finalists Leinster came from behind to win against Sale.

Three-time champions Saracens, meanwhile, got their first win in a 55-36 romp at home to Irish province Connacht, while Bordeaux-Begles overpowered Bristol 36-17. La Rochelle, who were beaten at home last week by Leinster in a repeat of the last two finals, began strongly with former All Black scrum-half Tawera Kerr-Barlow crossing in the first half for a 13-6 lead. Yoan Tanga then appeared to put the French out of sight with a third try. But Ben Loaders pulled a try back for the South African franchise before a double twist firmly shifted momentum their way. La Rochelle fly-half Antoine Hastoy had a try ruled out for an infringement in the build-up by Joel Sclavi, who was then given a yellow card.

Using the man advantage, Andre-Hugo Venter crashed over in the last minute with Libbok, so often criticised for his goalkicking during the World Cup, sending the ball between the posts to claim the win. "We're disappointed, we came here to win," said La Rochelle's Australian lock Will Skelton.

"Against a team like the Stormers, you can lead the whole match but if you give away penalties, it's going to cost you in the end. That's what happened." With games to come in January against English sides Leicester and Sale, there is a real danger that the



VALENCIA: Valencia's Guinean defender #04 Mouctar Diakhaby tackles Barcelona's Brazilian forward #11 Raphinha (2L) during the Spanish league football match between Valencia CF and FC Barcelona at the Mestalla stadium in Valencia. — AFP

As in Barca's defeat by Girona, the game flowed from end-to-end. Both goalkeepers were called into action before Felix sent Barca ahead early in the second half. Frenkie de Jong played in Raphinha with a delightful pass and the Brazilian teed the ball up for the Portuguese forward to tap home.

Guillamon equalised in the 70th minute after Barcelona defender Ronald Araujo allowed a ball to bounce instead of clearing his lines. The Spain midfielder found the top corner from the edge of the box to put Ruben Baraja's team level. Ferran Torres and Raphinha missed big chances in the final stages as Barca searched for a winner. The draw takes Valencia 10th, with Baraja's side significantly more solid than last season when they battled relegation. Leaders Girona host Alaves on Monday, after Real Madrid welcome Villarreal on Sunday.

Athletic Bilbao powered to a convincing 2-0 vic-

two-time champions could be eliminated before the knockout stage. Leinster, meanwhile, trailed 13-3 to Sale just before half-time in Dublin but turned the game around with a thrilling performance in the second half. Josh van der Flier dotted down just before the break and that was followed by further touch-downs for Jamison Gibson-Park, Robbie Henshaw, Ryan Baird and Cian Healy.

"We were a bit sluggish and not as good as we'd have liked to be at the start," Van der Flier said after the game. "We brought good momentum and physicality in the second half. Disappointing to coincide two tries in the last few minutes but overall (we're) very happy with that. Leinster's 37-27 win earned them a bonus point and they top Pool 4, with a four-

point lead over Leicester in second.

Saracens got their quest for a fourth European title back on track following a defeat against the Bulls in Pretoria last weekend with a bonus-point triumph over Connacht in Pool 1. It was not all plain sailing, with the Irish province nine points ahead coming up to half-time but two tries from England hooker Jamie George gave Saracens a 21-17 lead at the break.

That came in the middle of an extraordinary passage when Saracens scored 35 unanswered points between the 33rd and 61st minutes. Centre Olly Hartley scored twice in the second half as the English club eased clear but Connacht's five tries, including one for Ireland centre Bunde Aki, saw them collect a losing bonus point. — AFP



CAPE TOWN: La Rochelle's Judicael Cancoriet (C) catches a pass during the European Rugby Champions Cup Pool 4 Rugby Union match between Stormers and Stade Rochelais (La Rochelle) at the DHL Stadium in Cape Town. — AFP

## Abdul-Jabbar hospitalized with broken hip

LOS ANGELES: NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has been hospitalized after falling at a concert and suffering a broken hip, according to a statement by his long-time business partner Deborah Morales on Saturday. Abdul-Jabbar, 76, was a six-time NBA champion and six-time Most Valuable Player in his 20 league seasons.

He was set for surgery later Saturday to repair the injury, Morales said in a statement. "Last night while attending a concert, Kareem had an accidental fall and broke his hip. He will have surgery today," Morales said. "We are all deeply appreciative of all the support for Kareem, especially from the Los Angeles Fire Department, who assisted Kareem on site, and the amazing medical team and doctors at UCLA Hospital, who are taking great care of Kareem now." The statement did not say what concert Abdul-Jabbar was attending when he fell.

The iconic 7-foot-2 (2.18m) superstar center made his NBA debut with the Milwaukee Bucks in 1969 and in 1971 led the Bucks to their first NBA crown. Abdul-Jabbar was traded to the Los Angeles Lakers in 1975 and together with playmaker Magic Johnson combined for a "Showtime" era to bring the Lakers five titles in the 1980s before retiring in 1989. — AFP



NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

## Osimhen, Khvicha fire Napoli past Cagliari into top four

NAPLES: Victor Osimhen and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia combined to give Napoli a 2-1 win over struggling Cagliari on Saturday and send their side into Serie A's Champions League places. The inspiration behind last season's stunning league title triumph, Napoli's attacking stars struck a goal each as the reigning champions moved up to fourth.

Kvaratskhelia swept home the decisive strike in the 75th minute, six minutes after Osimhen's headed opener and shortly after Leonardo Pavonetti had equalised for the away side. Walter Mazzarri's side are two points ahead of fifth-placed Roma and Bologna, who face off on Sunday, following their third home win of what has been a troubled league season to date.

And Matteo Politano insisted that Napoli's title defence is not over even though they are 11 points behind Inter Milan ahead of the league leaders' match at Lazio on Sunday night. "We're slowly recovering some ground," the forward told DAZN.

"We'll keep taking it one game at a time but we want to fight for the Scudetto. There's still a long way to go." Claudio Ranieri's Cagliari stay 16th on 13 points, one point above the relegation zone and Empoli who lost 1-0 at Torino in Saturday's late match.

Napoli won a match whose kick-off was delayed by 30 minutes after strong winds in Naples led to concerns over stadium safety. Turnstiles at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona were left closed longer than usual while inspections to the ground's roof were carried out. — AFP



LONDON: Arsenal's English midfielder #10 Emile Smith Rowe (R) shoots but fails to score past Brighton's English defender #05 Lewis Dunk during the English Premier League football match between Arsenal and Brighton and Hove Albion at the Emirates Stadium in London on December 17, 2023. — AFP

## Gunners secure dominant victory

### West Ham crush Wolves 3-0

LONDON: Arsenal beat Brighton 2-0 on Sunday to dislodge Liverpool from the top of the Premier League as Jurgen Klopp's men prepared for a blockbuster clash against struggling Manchester United. Aston Villa, fresh from potentially season-defining wins against Manchester City and Arsenal, came from behind to beat 10-man Brentford 2-1, while West Ham crushed Wolves 3-0.

Mikel Arteta's Arsenal, runners-up to City last season, dominated at the Emirates, wasting a succession of openings but they finally broke through in the 53rd minute. Brighton defender Jan Paul van Hecke jumped to head a corner away but could only flick it into the path of Gabriel Jesus, who headed the ball into an empty net.

Kai Havertz doubled the lead for the Gunners in the closing minutes, slotting past goalkeeper Bart Verbruggen after being found by Eddie Nketiah. Across London, Unai Emery's Villa fell behind to a Keane Lewis-Potter goal on the stroke of half-time at Brentford.

However, Brentford's Ben Mee was sent off in the 71st minute and six minutes later Villa were level when Alex Moreno got on the end of a Leon Bailey cross. Ollie Watkins completed the turnaround against his former club when he headed in a Boubacar Kamara flick-on from a corner with five minutes to go. Villa now have 38 points from 17 games, one behind Arsenal and one ahead of Liverpool, who kick off later in the day.

**Paqueta shines**  
Mohammed Kudus scored twice and Lucas Paqueta provided all three assists at the London Stadium as West Ham put last week's 5-0 drubbing by Fulham behind them. The Ghana forward netted midway through the first period following a swift counter-attack, finishing powerfully after he was found by the impressive Paqueta.

West Ham doubled their advantage in the 32nd minute, when Paqueta and Kudus again combined to deadly effect and top-scorer Jarrod Bowen hit the post with goalkeeper Dan Bentley a bystander. Wolves thought they had pulled a goal back just before the hour mark but Pablo Sarabia's tap-in was

ruled out for a marginal offside.

West Ham put the result beyond doubt when Bowen finished unerringly after receiving the ball from Paqueta. On Saturday, Manchester City let slip a 2-0 lead to draw 2-2 with Roy Hodgson's Crystal Palace, before jetting off to Saudi Arabia to play in the Club World Cup.

It means Liverpool can go six points clear of the defending champions if they beat struggling United at Anfield in the late afternoon kick-off.

Erik ten Hag's men who last season suffered a 7-0 drubbing at Anfield, have lost 12 of their 24 games in all competitions this season. With the exception of last season's 2-1 win at Old Trafford,

United's recent record against Liverpool is dire—they have lost four of the past five meetings, conceding 21 goals in the process.

United captain Bruno Fernandes is suspended while out-of-form Marcus Rashford was once again left on the bench. Saturday's Premier League action was overshadowed by a shocking incident at Bournemouth, where Luton captain Tom Lockyer suffered a cardiac arrest, forcing the game to be abandoned.

Luton confirmed Lockyer was responsive before being taken to hospital and was in a "stable" condition. In an update on Sunday the club said he was undergoing tests and scans. — AFP



MILAN: AC Milan French defender Theo Hernandez (R) fights for the ball with Monza's Italian midfielder Roberto Gagliardini during the Italian Serie A football match AC Milan vs Monza on December 17, 2023. — AFP

### Reijnders delivers early Christmas present for Milan

MILAN: A brilliant early goal from Tijjani Reijnders inspired AC Milan to a comfortable 3-0 win over Monza on Sunday to consolidate their place in Serie A's Champions League positions. Milan are six points behind leaders Inter Milan who face Lazio later on Sunday, in large part thanks to a stellar display from Reijnders who set his team on the way to victory with his third-minute strike.

The Netherlands midfielder collected Christian Pulisic's pass just outside the area and then set off on a mazy dribble past five Monza defenders before poking his first home goal for Milan past Michele Di Gregorio.

Building on their midweek win at Newcastle United which ensured a spot in the Europa League knockouts, third-placed Milan moved up to 32 points. "It's an honour to play here of course, to score here at the San Siro is very nice," said Reijnders, who believes Milan can still fight for the league title.

"Of course, you always have to believe, we are not finished yet. We are now halfway through the season and we have to keep going. Today was a good start." Also on target for Stefano Pioli's team were teenage debutant Jan-Carlo Simic, who netted his first Milan goal shortly before the break, and Noah

Okafor whose 76th-minute strike came following more fine play from Reijnders. Born in Germany, centre-back Simic represents Serbia at youth international level. The 18-year-old was brought on midway through the first half for Tommaso Pobega, the latest in a long line of Milan players to suffer a muscular injury this season.

#### Simic 'dream'

He doubled the hosts' lead three minutes before half-time, ramming home Rafael Leao's low cross before charging off to celebrate. And the San Siro faithful then began chanting Simic's name as his parents wept with joy in the stands. "I'm pleased for them... I'm grateful for how they've helped me, even in difficult times," said Simic to Sky.

"It's a dream for any kid to make your debut for a club like AC Milan and scoring on your debut is incredible. But I've worked very hard for moments like this." Milan are five points ahead of Fiorentina after the Viola squeezed past Verona 1-0 to move up to fifth, level on 27 points with fourth-placed Napoli. Verona stay in the relegation zone following a defeat which extended their run of games without a win to 14. Marco Baroni's Verona are two points behind Udinese who sit just outside the bottom three after throwing away a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 with Sassuolo.

Bologna host Roma later on Sunday, one day after the first anniversary of Sinisa Mihajlovic's death, with a win for either side ensuring a top four spot at the end of this weekend's fixtures. Mihajlovic began his long playing career in Italy at Roma in 1992 while his last job as a coach before succumbing to leukaemia was at Bologna. — AFP

### Arshdeep, Avesh on fire as India crush Proteas in 1st ODI

JOHANNESBURG: Pace bowlers Arshdeep Singh and Avesh Khan set up a convincing eight-wicket win for India in the first one-day international against South Africa at the Wanderers Stadium on Sunday. Left-arm Arshdeep took five for 37 and Avesh claimed four for 27 as South Africa crashed to 116 all out.

New cap Sai Sudharsan and Shreyas Iyer hit half-centuries as India needed just 16.4 overs to reach the target. Indian captain KL Rahul said he had expected India's spinners to play a prominent role on the same pitch on which spin had prevailed in a Twenty20 international on Thursday.

"It was completely different to what we expected," Rahul said at the post-match presentation. "There was a lot of help in the wicket and the boys bowled really well." Kuldeep Yadav was the only spinner used, taking the last wicket at a cost of three runs in 2.3 overs. South African captain Aiden Markram said there had been more help for the seam bowlers than he anticipated when he won the toss and decided to bat. "Credit to the Indian bowlers," he said. "There was a bit of lateral movement and we weren't able to settle and build partnerships."

#### Threadbare Proteas

India's dominant performance was testimony to their

strength in depth in a match in which both teams were without key players — including their front-line fast bowling attacks — ahead of a Test series starting on December 26.

Arshdeep, who had not taken a wicket in three previous ODIs, and Avesh, with three wickets in five appearances, stepped up to the challenge in emphatic fashion. By contrast, South Africa's bowling looked threadbare as they tried to defend the second-lowest total made in ODIs at the Wanderers.

Arshdeep struck twice off successive balls in the second over, dismissing Reeza Hendricks and Rassie van der Dussen for nought. With the pitch offering help to the seam bowlers, Arshdeep took the first four wickets in a seven-over opening spell and Avesh followed up by taking the next four, also in a seven-over spell.

The left-handed Sudharsan hit his first ball in international cricket for four, striking fellow one-day debutant Nandre Burger through the covers. Sudharsan could have been out in the same over but South Africa failed to review a not-out decision for leg before wicket. There were two sounds but replays showed his bat hit his boot and not the ball. Sudharsan went on to make an elegant unbeaten 55 off 43 balls with nine fours.

India included only three players from the side that played in the World Cup final against Australia last month, while South Africa fielded six from the side that lost to the Australians in the semi-final. "With the amount of international cricket being played you have to rest some players," said Rahul.

"Chopping and changing is a must in the modern game. We believe in whoever's here to win the game and do their best for the team." The second encounter in the three-match series takes place in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth) on Tuesday with the third in Paarl two days later. The first Test begins at Centurion on December 26. — AFP



JOHANNESBURG: India's Sai Sudharsan (R) watches the ball after playing a shot during the 1st ODI cricket match between South Africa and India at The Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on December 17, 2023. — AFP