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Sheikh Mishal to take oath as new Amir on Wednesday

Speaker calls for special session • Amir receives condolences from citizens, foreign leaders



By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah will take the oath in the National Assembly on Wednesday to assume his powers as the new Amir of Kuwait following the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Sheikh Mishal was declared as Kuwait's 17th ruler by the Cabinet on Saturday, hours after announcing the passing of Sheikh Nawaf. Under the Kuwaiti constitution, the appointed Amir must take the constitutional oath to be able to assume his constitutional powers like issuing decrees.

The oath must be taken before the National Assembly during a special session to be convened by the Assembly for this purpose. National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun on Monday called for a special public session to be held on Wednesday for HH Sheikh Mishal

to be sworn in as Amir. Under the constitution, the new Amir has one full year to appoint a crown prince, who must be from Mubarak Al-Kabeer's descendants of the Al-Sabah Family that has been ruling Kuwait for more 250 years.

The crown prince must be approved by a majority vote of the National Assembly. But if the Assembly rejects the appointment, HH the Amir will have to propose three names, and the Assembly will elect one of them by voting to become the country's crown prince.

Meanwhile, the ruling family headed by HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal started receiving condolences on Monday from citizens at Bayan Palace. Condolences will also be accepted on Tuesday. Later on Monday, HH Sheikh Mishal received a number of foreign leaders and envoys at the Amiri Airport, who arrived to pay their respects.

KUWAIT: (Left) HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and members of the Al-Sabah Family receive condolences from citizens at Bayan Palace on Dec 18, 2023. (Right) HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal receives Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq at the Amiri Airport, who offered his deepest condolences on the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA photos

Cyberattack cuts Iran fuel supplies



TEHRAN: People wait at a gas station on Dec 18, 2023 as fuel distribution across 60 percent of Iran's petrol stations is disrupted. — AFP

TEHRAN: Iran said it suffered a cyberattack by the Zionist entity and the United States that disrupted fuel distribution across 60 percent of petrol stations on Monday. "Some gas stations across the country suffered a cyber attack and the fuel distribution stopped," Oil Minister Javad Owji told state TV. Owji blamed the attack on external powers, saying that since "the Zionist enemy and the United States suffered blows on other fronts, they sought to create trouble."

Deputy Oil Minister Jalil Salari earlier said there were problems with the cards Iranians use to buy subsidized petrol. Iran, a major oil producer, has among the cheapest petrol prices in the world, with a card that allows Iranians to buy up to 60 liters per month at a subsidized rate of 15,000 rials (around 3 US cents) per liter.

Following the system failure, petrol stations "disconnected the online system" and fuel was being supplied offline, Salari said. Monday's disruption caused long car queues outside some

Continued on Page 6

Zionists pound Gaza, starve Palestinians

GAZA: The Zionist entity kept up heavy bombing of Gaza on Monday as it faced accusations from a human rights group that it is deliberately starving Palestinians in its campaign against Hamas. Fighting raged on in the third month of the bloodiest ever Gaza war, with the Gaza health ministry reporting another 110 people killed in strikes on Jabalia, outside Gaza City, since Sunday.

Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin was back in the Zionist entity on Monday as part of a Middle East tour aimed at stopping the conflict from spreading further.

Gaza's health ministry says the Zionist entity has killed more than 19,400 people, mostly women and children, while reducing vast areas to rubble.

International alarm has mounted over the dire plight of 2.4 million Gazans now enduring bombardment, food and water shortages, mass displacement and plummeting winter temperatures. The New York-based campaign group Human Rights Watch charged that the Zionist entity "is using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare in the occupied Gaza Strip, which is a war crime".

"(Zionist) forces are deliberately blocking the delivery of water, food and fuel, while willfully impeding humanitarian assistance, apparently razing agricultural areas, and depriving the civilian population of objects in

Continued on Page 6



GAZA: A child who was injured following Zionist bombardment grimaces as he receives medical care at Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 17, 2023. — AFP

Houthis attack Red Sea ships as firms halt transit

DUBAI: Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels said Monday they had attacked two "(Zionist)-linked" vessels in the Red Sea in solidarity with Gaza, as more companies halt transit through the troubled

but vital waterway. The attacks on the Norwegian-owned Swan Atlantic and another ship identified by the Houthis as the MSC Clara are the latest in a flurry of maritime incidents that are disrupting global trade in an attempt to force a stop to the Zionist entity's campaign against Hamas militants in Gaza.

In a statement, the rebels said they had carried out a "military operation against two ships linked to the Zionist entity" using naval drones after they refused to respond to calls. They vowed to "continue to prevent all ships heading to (Zionist) ports... from navigating in the Arab and Red Seas" until more food

and medicine is allowed into Gaza.

The Swan Atlantic's owner, Norway's Inventor Chemical Tankers, said in a statement that the ship was carrying biofuel feedstock from France to Reunion Island. It said the vessel has "no (Zionist) link" and was managed by a Singaporean firm. It added there were no injuries among the Indian crew and the vessel sustained only limited damage. "The crew and the ship are now being assisted by the US Navy and will be brought to safety under protection by naval forces," it said.

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Sisi reelected president with 89.6% of vote

CAIRO: Egypt's President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi has won a third term with 89.6 percent of the vote in the Arab world's most populous nation, the national election authority said Monday. The outcome of the Dec 10-12 poll was widely expected after the former army chief with a fondness for infrastructure mega-projects campaigned against a small field of relative unknowns. It secures 69-year-old Sisi his third and, according to the Egyptian constitution, final term in office, starting

in April and set to run for six years. HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a congratulatory cable on Monday to Sisi, expressing his sincere congratulations on winning the presidential elections. HH Sheikh Mishal expressed wishes, success, and prosperity to the republic under his leadership. He also praised the historical, distinguished and established relations between the two countries, and asserted on the importance of the permanent and common aspiration to strengthen the bonds of these relations and advance the frameworks of cooperation between them in various fields.

It is the third time in a decade Sisi wins a landslide victory, albeit with his smallest margin. In both 2014 and 2018, Sisi won over 96 percent of the vote.

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CAIRO: Hazem Badawy, head of Egypt's National Elections Authority, announces the results of the 2024 presidential elections on Dec 18, 2023. — AFP



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Amir leaves great legacy of solidarity for generations

KUWAIT: The late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah left a great legacy of national solidarity, which will be remembered by future generations. The late Sheikh Nawaf's wise words will always be ingrained in stone, as he always stressed the importance of the Kuwaiti people's role in preserving their country's security and stability and not harming its national unity. He has always been keen to remember the necessity of cooperation between the

state's authorities, which he considered the base of successful national action as it helps reach further progress and achievements and avoids slowing Kuwait's development.

He also stressed the importance of maintaining a calm and purposeful dialogue without insults or accusations, as well as seeking accuracy to find the truth. The late Amir has always prioritized the youth and called for opening future horizons to qualify them with

the best modern scientific and academic means and instill authentic cultural values, as they are the future of Kuwaiti development.

He affirmed his pride in Kuwait's constitution and its democratic approach, stressing the need to strengthen Kuwait's stability, security, and safety for its citizens and protect their lives and property. The late Amir has passed away, but his wise words remain present and will be passed down through generations. — KUNA

Amir receives condolence messages from world leaders

Britain's King Charles III

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday a cable of condolences from Britain's and Northern Ireland's King Charles III, in which he expressed his sincere condolences and sincere sympathy over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In his cable, King Charles praised the late Amir's contributions and service to his country and efforts to help those in need in various parts of the world. In turn, His Highness the Amir sent a cable to the British leader, expressing his deep thanks and appreciation for the sincere sentiments on the occasion.

Indian leaders

India's President Droupadi Murmu said "It is with a sense of great sorrow and deep regret that we have learnt of the passing away of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of Kuwait. His contribution to the development and prosperity of Kuwait was considerable. He will always be remembered for the tireless efforts he made for the well-being of the Kuwaiti people. In his passing away, India has lost a good friend and the large expatriate Indian community in Kuwait has lost someone whose care and benevolence they enjoyed. India is united in grief with the leadership and the people of Kuwait in mourning the demise of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah."

In his message addressed to HH the Amir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned that "The government and the people of India are deeply saddened by the news of the passing away of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber

Al-Sabah, the late Amir of Kuwait. Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was an exemplary leader whose wisdom, vision, and dedication have left an indelible mark not only on the history of Kuwait, but also on India-Kuwait relationship. His efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation in all areas further reinforced the historic ties between our two countries."

Brunei Sultan

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a cable on Sunday from Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkhiah Muiz'zaddin Wad'daula expressing his sorrow over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. In the cable, the Bruneian leader expressed grief on behalf of his government and people on the occasion, extending his sentiments to the Kuwaiti government and people. His Highness the Amir sent a reply enclosed with utmost appreciation.

Chad President

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a cable on Sunday from the President of the Republic of Chad, General Mahamat Deby. In the cable, President Mahamat expressed grief over the passing away of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday, praising the contributions of the late Amir and extending his sorrow to the Kuwaiti government and people. His Highness the Amir sent a reply enclosed with the utmost appreciation for the heartfelt sentiments.

South Korean President

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a cable on Sunday from South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol expressing grief over the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In his cable, the Korean leader praised the contributions of the late Amir in sustaining bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and prayed to Almighty Allah to bestow mercy upon his soul. His Highness the Amir sent a reply enclosed with the utmost appreciation for the heartfelt sentiments.

Maldives President

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a cable on Sunday from the Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu. In the cable, President Muizzu expressed deep sadness over the passing away of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday, praising the contributions of the late Amir in sustaining bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and praying to Almighty Allah to bestow mercy upon his soul. His Highness the Amir sent a reply enclosed with the utmost appreciation for the heartfelt sentiments.

Djibouti President

Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh expressed in a statement on Sunday his condolences and sorrow over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In a statement from the Djibouti Presidential Office received by KUNA, President Guelleh

expressed deep sorrow over the demise of the late Amir, praising the positive changes that were witnessed in the country under his leadership. President Guelleh added that the late Amir was experienced, respected, and committed to stability and security in the Arab world.

Azeri President

Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev expressed in a statement on Sunday his condolences and sorrow over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who passed away on Saturday. In a statement received by KUNA, President Aliyev expressed deep sorrow to the Kuwaiti leadership, government, and people on the occasion.

Chinese President

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a condolence message from Chinese President Xi Jinping, in which he expressed his sincere condolences and sincere sympathy over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In his cable, the Chinese leader remembered the outstanding contributions of the late Amir to the renaissance and progress of the dear homeland in various fields and his constant endeavor to strengthen the bonds of distinguished relations between Kuwait and the friendly People's Republic of China. In turn, His Highness the Amir sent a cable to the Chinese leader, expressing his deep thanks and appreciation for the sincere feelings of sympathy and affirming the historical and close relations that bind the two countries and peoples. — KUNA



Kuwait Embassy in Morocco mourns the demise of late Amir. — KUNA photos



The head of Kurdistan Democratic Party, Masoud Barzani, visited the Kuwaiti Consulate in Erbil to offer condolences and sympathy on the occasion.



Kuwaiti Consulate in Istanbul opened a book of condolences ceremony on the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad.

Kuwaiti Embassies mourn Amir's demise

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Embassies in Czechoslovakia, Romania, Azerbaijan, Algeria, and Morocco, and the Kuwait Consulate General in the Italian city of Milano, mourned on Sunday the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, releasing statements and receiving condolences over this sorrowful event. In Prague, the Kuwait Embassy issued a statement, mourning the great loss of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and opening a condolence book for three days starting Sunday.

Kuwait's Ambassador Rashid Al-Hajiri and the embassy staff received mourners at the official residence of the Ambassador in Prague. In Bucharest, the Kuwait Embassy in Romania announced a three-day mourning for the demise of the late Amir. The Embassy opened a condolence book for three days, starting Sunday, and Ambassador Talal Al-Hajiri and the embassy staff received mourners.

In Baku, the Kuwait Embassy to the Republic of Azerbaijan issued a similar statement lamenting the demise of the late Amir and announced it would receive mourners and open a condolence book at the official residence of the Ambassador in Baku for three days starting Monday. In Algiers, the Embas-



India's Minister of External Affairs Dr S Jaishankar visited the Embassy of Kuwait in Delhi on Monday morning to express condolences and pay his respects on the passing of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the late Amir of the State of Kuwait.

sy of the State of Kuwait mourned the demise of the late Amir. Kuwait's Ambassador there, Mohammad Al-Shabu, recalled the great stances and legacy of the late Amir. The embassy opened a condolence book and announced receiving mourners for three days starting Sunday.

In Morocco, the Embassy of Kuwait in Rabat mourned the late Amir, opened a condolence book, and received mourners as of Sunday until Tuesday. Ambassador Abdullatif Al-Yahya and staff mem-



The Kuwait Embassy in Lebanon opened a book of condolences on the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

bers expressed deep sorrow over the demise of the late Amir. In the Italian city of Milano, the Consulate General issued a statement mourning the passing of the late Amir, and the Consul General Sheikh Jaber Duaij Al-Sabah received mourners at the consulate.

Embassy in Argentina

Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Embassy in Argentina lamented on Sunday the loss of the late Amir Sheikh

Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, declaring a three-day mourning period and the opening of the condolences book. A statement by the embassy said that Ambassador Abdulaziz Al-Besher and staff expressed their sincere condolences over the passing of Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad, who was a great leader and father figure for Kuwaitis and residents alike.

The statement also expressed condolences to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the government, and the Kuwaiti people, asserting that His Highness the Amir would continue the legacy of progress and development set by his predecessors. In the statement, Ambassador Al-Besher affirmed that the demise of Sheikh Nawaf was a great loss for the Arab and Islamic nations, indicating that Kuwait and its people would seek solace from Allah Almighty on this great loss.

Embassy in Russia

The Kuwait Embassy in the Russian Federation mourned the demise of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In a statement, the embassy said, "With great sadness and sorrow, the Embassy mourns, along with the Kuwaiti people, the Arab world, the Islamic nation, and the friendly people of the world, the demise of Sheikh Nawaf, who passed away on Saturday, December 16, 2023." The Embassy would start receiving people wishing to offer their condolences for three days, starting Sunday. — KUNA

Pakistani senators offer condolences

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Senate Chairperson Sadiq Sanjrani arrived at the Kuwaiti Embassy in Islamabad on Monday, along with a delegation of senators, to offer condolences on the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Sanjrani, in his condolence message, expressed his great sorrow at the passing of the late Amir, saying that he left behind him a great legacy and that his demise is a huge loss not only for the royal family and people of Kuwait but also for the people of Pakistan.

"His contribution to regional stability,

his personal commitment to global development, and his work to bridge gaps between nations will long be remembered," he added. The Embassy of Kuwait in Pakistan opened on Sunday a condolence book for three days where ambassadors of different countries, diplomats, renowned religious scholars, and politicians are coming to offer their condolences.

The Ambassador of Kuwait to Pakistan, Nasser Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, mourned the demise of the late Kuwaiti Amir, recalling the Amir's exceptional legacy and devotion to the country. Ambassador Al-Mutairi expressed his gratitude to the government of Pakistan for announcing a Day of Mourning on Monday in the country and flying the national flag at half-mast

throughout the country. He also thanked Pakistani parliamentarians and the people of Pakistan for their solidarity with Kuwait and Kuwaiti citizens at this time of sorrow.

A day of mourning

Meanwhile, Prime Minister of Pakistan, Anwar ul Haq Kakar, declared Monday a day of mourning in Pakistan on the sad demise of the Amir of Kuwait. According to the state-owned Radio Pakistan, PM Kakar has taken the decision to express fraternal solidarity on behalf of the people and government of Pakistan with the royal family, the government, and the people of Kuwait. The national flag shall fly at half-mast throughout the country on that day. — KUNA



Pakistan Senate Chairperson Sadiq Sanjrani with senators offer condolences to the Kuwait Ambassador Nasser Al-Mutairi. — KUNA

Foreign leaders, delegations arrive to offer condolences

US representative offers condolence



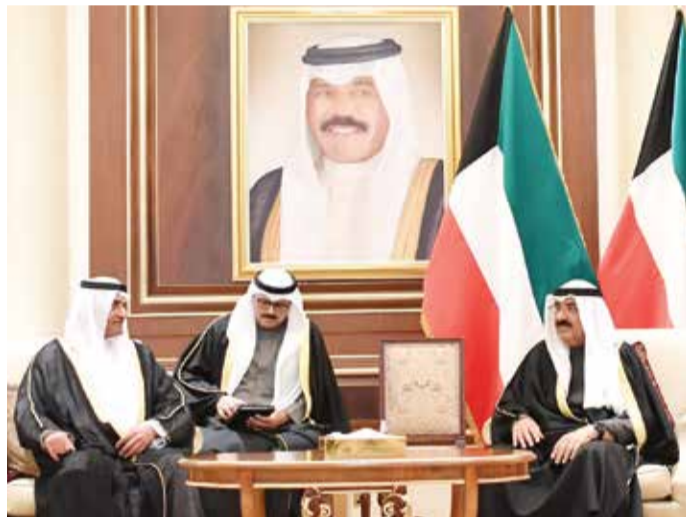
KUWAIT: Representative of US President Joe Biden, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his accompanying delegation arrived in Kuwait on Sunday and offered condolences to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on the demise of late Amir HH Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA photos

Saudi royal delegation



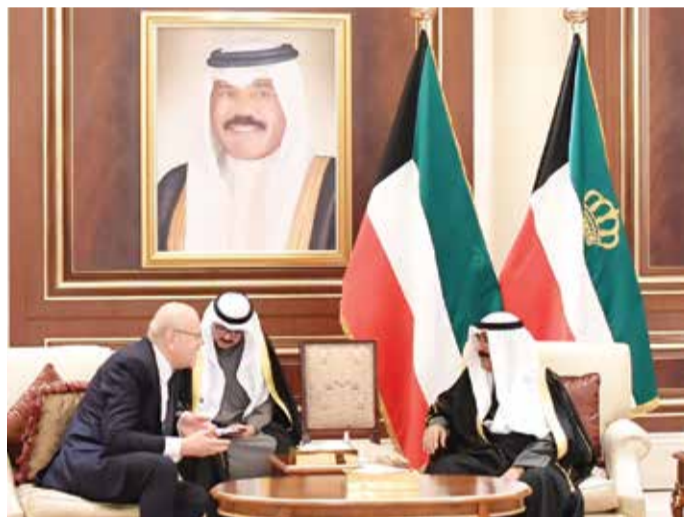
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received in Bayan Palace on Monday a Saudi royal delegation offering deepest condolences over the demise of Kuwait's late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The delegation included Saudi's Prince Turki Al-Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Prince Khaled bin Saud bin Khaled Al-Saud, Prince Bandar bin Saad bin Khaled Al-Saud, and Prince Fahad bin Khaled bin Saud Al-Saud.

UAE President's Representative



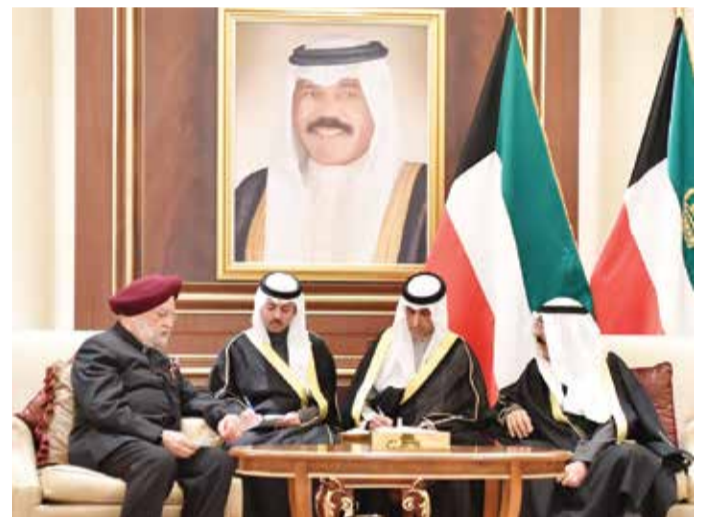
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday at the Amiri Airport the Representative of the President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayid Al-Nahayan, Member of the UAE Higher Council, and Al-Fujairah Ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Mohammad Al-Sharqi, and his accompanying delegation, who arrived in Kuwait to offer condolences over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Lebanese Prime Minister



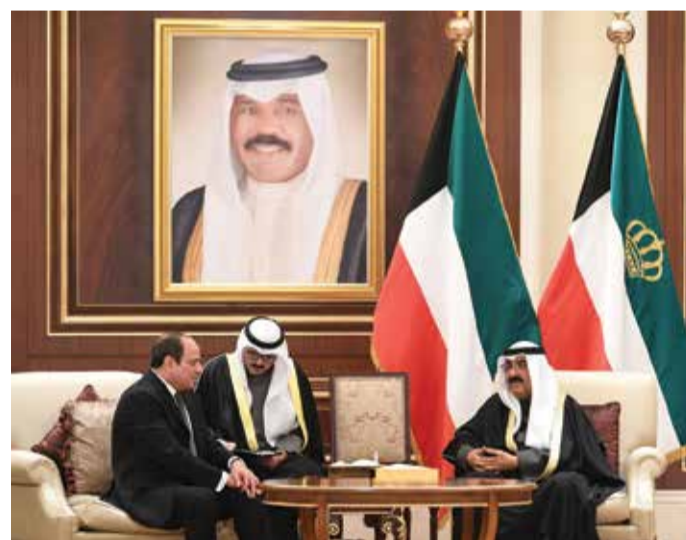
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday at the Amiri Airport Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, who are in Kuwait, to offer condolences over the passing away of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Indian Representative



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday at the Amiri Airport Representative of the Indian Government and Minister of Oil and Natural Gas Hardeep Singh Puri and his accompanying delegation who arrived in Kuwait to offer condolences over the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Egyptian President



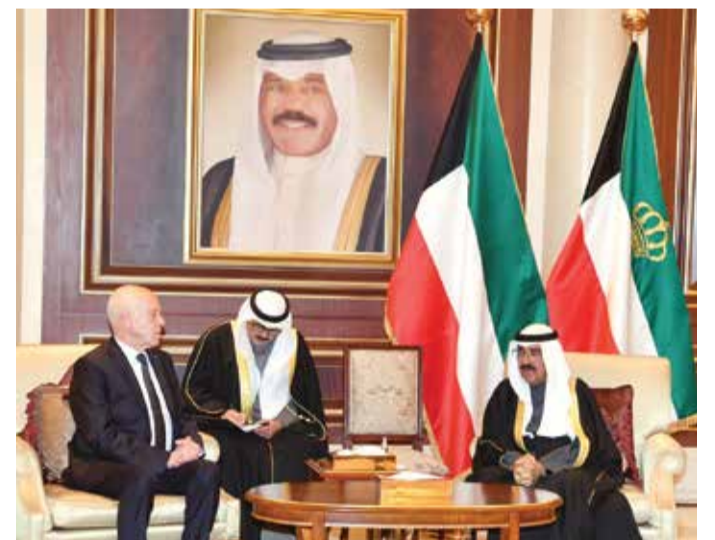
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday at the Amiri Airport the President of the Republic of Egypt, Abdelattah El-Sisi, and his accompanying delegation, who arrived in Kuwait to offer condolences over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Iranian President's Representative



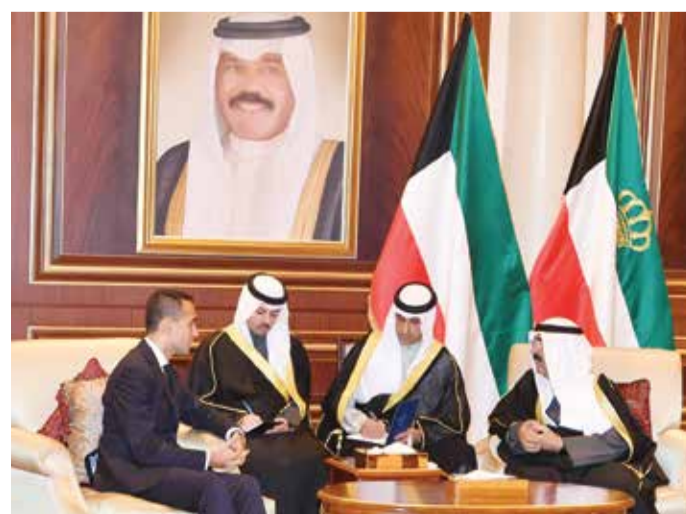
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Iran's Foreign Minister and Iranian President representative Hussein Amir-Abdollahian and the accompanying delegation, who are in Kuwait, to offer condolences over the passing away of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Tunisian President



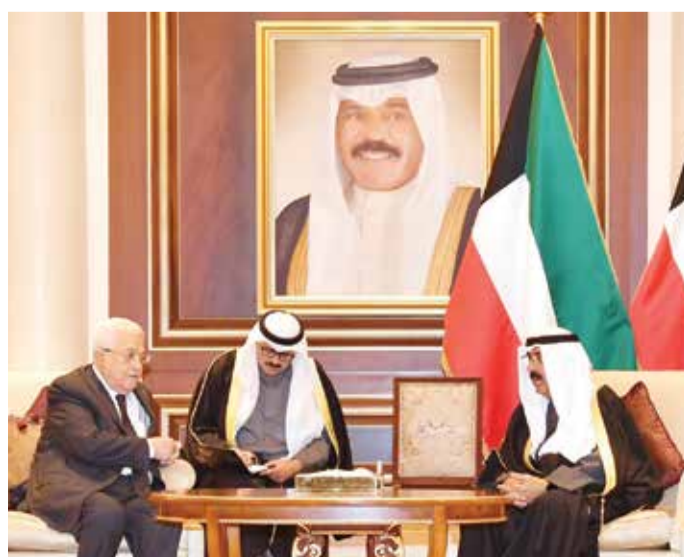
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received the Tunisian President Kais Saied and the accompanying delegation, who are in Kuwait, on Sunday to offer condolences over the passing away of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

EU Special Representative



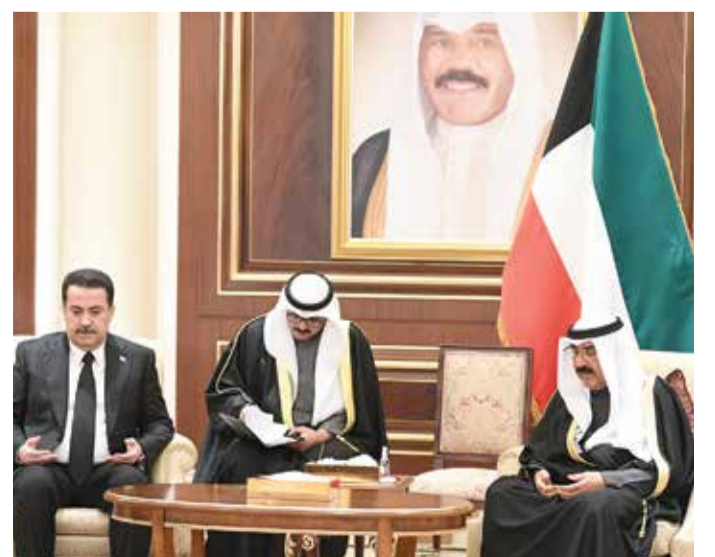
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday at the Amiri Airport the European Union (EU) Special Representative in the Gulf Luigi Di Maio and his accompanying delegation. Di Maio expressed grief over the passing of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday, praising contributions of the late Amir in sustaining bilateral relations between the two sides.

Palestinian President



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday at the Amiri Airport Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the accompanying delegation, who are in Kuwait, to offer condolences over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Iraqi Prime Minister



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Sunday at the Amiri Airport Iraq's Prime Minister Mohammad Al-Sudani and the accompanying delegation who arrived in Kuwait to offer condolences over the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Local

Kuwait Times
Established 1961THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961

Founder and Publisher

YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief

ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
ADVERTISING : 24833199 Extn. 301
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 220
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125
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I am deeply saddened to learn of the passing away of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. On behalf of Bangladesh Embassy and Bangladesh community in Kuwait, I express my sincere and deepest condolence to the government and the brotherly people of Kuwait on his sad demise. His Highness was a visionary statesman who made significant contribution for peace, progress and prosperity of his people and played important role in fostering understanding and cooperation in the region. Bangladesh has lost a true friend and will always value His Highness's personal contribution to strengthening of the close relationship between Bangladesh and Kuwait. He was a great leader. Throughout his life, His Highness had been a unifying figure who guided Kuwait with grace and compassion.

As a mark of respect to His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, late Amir, Bangladesh has declared a day of state mourning on Monday, 18 December 2023. The day of mourning will be observed throughout Bangladesh and at all Bangladesh Missions abroad. Marking the day, the national flag will be hoisted half-mast atop all government, semi-government and autonomous bodies and all government and private buildings including educational institutions and all Bangladesh missions abroad.

Special prayers will be held in all mosques of Bangladesh and special prayers will be offered at other religious institutions praying for the eternal peace of the Amir's departed soul. We, at the Embassy and the Bangladesh community in Kuwait and the people of Bangladesh, who have long admired His Highness's charismatic and humanitarian personality, share the grief of the people of Kuwait.

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: Billboards show messages of condolences and the pictures of Kuwait's late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah across Kuwait City.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Zionists executing
'satanic scheme'

CAIRO: Arab League Secretary General Ahmad Abul-Gheit said on Monday that the brutal war waged by the occupation army against Gaza mirrors an explicit satanic scheme with illicit goals, namely relocating the Gazan natives. The Zionist occupation does not aim at wiping out a certain movement (Hamas), as it alleges, but at annihilating a whole community by tearing apart the social fabrics and erasing all living prospects for a long period in the Gaza Strip, Abul-Gheit said.

He alluded to the occupation forces' wide-scale bombardment of the enclave, where thousands of buildings have turned into heaps of rubble and hundreds of thousands of Gazans, many of whom are children, have lost their lives. "This satanic plot is solely aimed at liquidating the Palestinian cause by uprooting the people from their land and wiping off any life prospects. Forcing the Gazans to evict their lands at gunpoint will never happen, he stressed in an address during the 31st ministerial session of the ESCWA (the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia).

Leaders of the Zionist occupation have disclosed these objectives, saying plainly that there will be no Palestinian state in the future. They have also declared renunciation of the Oslo (peace) accord and its outcome, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. And shamelessly, they have stated that the Palestinians will have no sovereignty over their territories, he added. These occupiers neither hide their true faces nor beautify their goals; rather, they



31st ministerial session of the ESCWA - KUNA

brazenly boast of their schemes.

Such a stand belittles the nations that have voted in favor of a resolution at the United Nations General Assembly recently demanding an immediate ceasefire to halt the bloody massacre and collective punishment practiced against the Gazans. "Every day, we are detached further from the aspired two states' settlements that have been accepted by the Palestinians, the Arabs, and the whole world, except for the

Zionist entity that wrongly believes that it can inflict a new Nakba against the Palestinians."

However, the occupiers, even if they kill thousands of innocent civilians, will not be able to kill their dreams or coerce them to back down from their rights in the land and their lives, as Abul-Gheit emphasized in his speech, marked with scathing rebukes of the occupation and recurring aggression on the Palestinians. — KUNA

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Indian Ambassador
Dr Adarsh Swaika

On behalf of the Embassy of India in Kuwait, I convey my deepest condolences on the passing away of the late Amir, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Under his visionary leadership, Kuwait has made great strides towards progress and prosperity and continued to be at the forefront of humanitarian efforts around the world. In his demise, Kuwait and the region have lost a tall leader.

The bilateral relations between India and Kuwait continued to strengthen under his patronage. As a mark of respect to the departed leader, the Government of India declared State mourning on 17 December. Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi conveyed his heartfelt condolences immediately on receiving the unfortunate news. Minister of Petroleum & Natural Gas and Housing & Urban Hardeep Singh Puri visited Kuwait on 17 December as Indian Prime Minister's Special Envoy to convey sincerest condolences on behalf of the government and people of India to the Amir, HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

He carried with him letters of condolences from the president and PM of India to HH the Amir and HH the Prime Minister of Kuwait. The minister joined the Indian Embassy officials and the Indian community in Kuwait in observing 2-minutes silence to pay respects to the late Amir on 17 December. Obituary references and observance of silence by the Upper and Lower Houses of the Indian Parliament were made on 18 December to pay respects to the late Amir.

The External Affairs Minister of India Dr S Jaishankar visited the Embassy of Kuwait in New Delhi on 18 December to sign the condolence book. The government and people of India stands united in mourning with leadership and people of Kuwait. The large Indian community in Kuwait will miss the presence and compassionate care of His Highness the late Amir.

Laos Ambassador
Boun Inthabandith

On behalf of the government of Laos and its people, I express our deep sorrow on the demise of His highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Amir of Kuwait, who was one of the excellent and great leader who served for his country and the people of Kuwait. We share the heartfelt condolences to the ruling family of Kuwait. May almighty Allah bless His Highness' soul.

Representative of World
Bank Group Dr Ziad Nakat

It is with great sadness that I extend my sincere condolences to the state and people of Kuwait on the passing of the late Amir HH Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. During his life, the late Amir worked hard on the development and prosperity of Kuwait, leaving behind an honorable legacy. May he rest in peace.



Zionists ban freed Palestinian teens from returning to class

Hundreds evacuated as flood disaster unfolds in Australia

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After decade, Iraqis vote in first provincial election

'The candidates change, and our situation stays the same'



NAJAF: An Iraqi woman shows her ink-stained finger after voting in the first provincial council elections in a decade, at a polling station in the central city of Najaf, on Dec 18, 2023. — AFP photos



BAGHDAD: Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani registers to vote at a polling station in this handout image by Sudani's press office.

BAGHDAD: Iraqis voted Monday in the first provincial council elections held in a decade, which were expected to strengthen the dominance of pro-Iranian Shiite Muslim groups. The vote comes at a time of widespread political apathy and disillusionment in the oil-rich country of 43 million that is still recovering from years of war and plagued by corruption.

Turnout at noon had reached just 17 percent, said election commission official Omar Ahmed, who urged voters to come out and "contribute to the success of the electoral process". The vote is seen as a key test for Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani — who rose to power just over a year ago backed by pro-Tehran parties — ahead of a general election due in 2025.

The provincial councils set up after the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator

Saddam Hussein choose provincial governors and manage budgets for health, transport and education. Critics see them as hotbeds of corruption and clientelism, and they were abolished in late 2019 after mass anti-government protests before being re-established under Sudani. Influential Shiite cleric and political king-maker Moqtada Sadr, a one-time militia leader who has launched anti-government protests in the past, has boycotted the vote.

Vote on 'economic populism'

Sudani, after casting his ballot in Baghdad, hailed the councils as "a pillar of the executive" which help the government implement policies. The premier has pledged to boost public services and rebuild infrastructure ravaged by decades of conflict and turmoil.

He urged Iraqis to elect "honest" representatives. Some 17 million people are eligible to vote, with 6,000 candidates vying for just 285 council seats. But many voters in the young democracy voiced little interest. "What use are these elections to us?" said a Baghdad taxi driver who gave his name only as Abu Ali, 45. "The years pass, elections come around again, the candidates change, and our situation stays the same."

Civil servant Amin Saleh, 63, voiced greater enthusiasm as he cast his ballot in the capital. "If I don't come and vote, and nobody else does either, there'll be chaos," he told AFP. "We need someone to represent us. How do you achieve that except by voting?"

In the end, turnout will be "the ultimate gauge of satisfaction," Renad Mansour, a senior research fellow at think tank Chatham House, told

AFP. It will show "whether the Sudani government's economic populism — the policy of giving out (public sector) jobs — can be successful and can capture the young population".

Pro-Iran groups expect boost

Elections were held in 15 provinces, but not in the three which make up an autonomous Kurdish region in the north. Voting was held amid tight security, and polls were due to close at 6:00 pm (15:00 GMT), with preliminary results expected 24 hours later, the electoral commission said.

One quarter of candidates are women under a system that also reserves quotas for the Christian, Yazidi and Sabian minorities. The vote was expected to boost the ruling Iran-aligned bloc called the Coordination Framework coalition.

It brings together Shiite Islamist parties with

factions of the Hashed al-Shaabi, a network of former paramilitary units that have been integrated into the regular security forces. Mansour said some alliance heavyweights hope the elections will "prove they have a social base and that they are popular" following disappointing results in 2021 national elections.

Tensions around the Zionist war in Gaza were not seen as a major factor in the elections, despite recent drone attacks against US-led coalition troops based in Iraq. No security breaches were reported during the morning, Interior Minister Abdel Amir al-Chammari told reporters. Observers kept a close eye on the oil-rich northern province of Kirkuk where historic rivalries could resurface between parties representing its Arab, Kurdish and Turkmen communities. — AFP

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
يَا أَيُّهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَةً فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي وَادْخُلِي جَنَّاتِي
صَدَقَ اللَّهُ الْعَظِيمُ

J.P.Morgan

Extends its deepest condolences
to the people of Kuwait and
the honorable Al-Sabah family
on the passing of

His Highness the Amir
**Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad
Al-Jaber Al-Sabah**

May he rest in eternal peace



إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

International

Hundreds evacuated as flood disaster unfolds in Australia

Floodwaters wash 'crocs and all sorts of other things' into residential areas

CAIRNS, Australia: Stranded residents sheltered on a hospital roof as flash floods swamped northeastern Australia on Monday, with raging waters severing roads and flushing crocodiles into towns. Rescue teams evacuated more than 300 people overnight, police said, and military helicopters were dispatched to help inundated areas cut off by the floods.

Damage was reported along an expanse of coastline that stretched about 400 kilometers (250 miles) across northern Queensland state. Resort manager Cassie Hounslow said entire houses were submerged in Mossman, a small inland town at the foot of the heritage-listed Daintree rainforest. "Houses have gone under. I mean some houses have been fully engulfed," she told AFP.

Tumbling boulders triggered by a landslide had "smashed one of the roads", Hounslow said, and a major highway out of Mossman was "pretty much bugged", she said. With another deluge expected Monday, Queensland Treasurer Cameron Dick said the unfolding disaster would have a "billion-dollar impact" on the state.

'Sea of mud'

Nine people, including a seven-year-old patient, huddled for safety overnight on the roof of a hospital in the largely Aboriginal settlement of Wujal Wujal. "We know that those people are in a desperate way now," said Kiley Hanslow, the chief executive of the Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Shire Council.

Police said the group clambered to a safer location before floodwaters rose again on Monday afternoon. An attempt to evacuate those remaining in the town had to be abandoned, the shire council said. "Unfortunately, the helicopters couldn't get through... it was too dangerous to get the choppers through," the council said in a statement on social media. "They



INGHAM: This handout taken and released on Dec 18, 2023 courtesy of Jonty Fratus shows a crocodile being wrangled from floodwaters. — AFP photos



A car is swamped in floodwaters at Cairns Airport in northeastern Australia.

will try to get through again as soon as they can."

Surrounded by a mountainous hinterland of tropical rainforest, hard-to-reach Wujal Wujal is one of the most disadvantaged regions in Australia. Hanslow told national broadcaster ABC the town — typically home to 300 people — was a "sea of dirty water and mud". "There's also crocodiles swimming around in that water now," she said.

Queensland Police Commissioner Katarina Carroll said floodwaters would likely wash "crocs and all sorts of other things" into residential areas. "You would recall from past events we've had sharks, crocs, you name it," she told reporters. Wildlife officers in the rural town of Ingham used a lasso to catch a crocodile that had

been bathing in shallow water next to houses.

'Next level' rains

Queensland has been pummeled by damaging winds and driving rain in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Jasper, which barreled in off the Coral Sea late last week. The tourist hub of Cairns has been almost completely surrounded by the floods, which have washed over major highways running into the city of 150,000 people.

Locals used ropes to try and rescue helpless livestock swept away by the torrents on the outskirts of Cairns. Stagnant pools of floodwater lapped against the wings of planes parked at the Cairns international airport. "This level of rainfall is next level,"

Queensland Premier Steven Miles told reporters on Monday. "We deployed literally every boat we could get our hands on in Cairns to evacuate those who couldn't safely evacuate themselves."

Miles said authorities were starting to worry about the dwindling supplies of clean drinking water, urging people to conserve "as much as they can". The Australian military used two heavy-lifting Chinook helicopters to ferry supplies and personnel into flood-stricken towns. Police Commissioner Carroll said authorities were thankful they had not seen any deaths or serious injuries during the emergency so far. Researchers have repeatedly warned that climate change amplifies the risk of natural disasters such as bushfires, floods and cyclones. — AFP

Explosion, blaze at Guinea fuel depot kill 13

CONAKRY, Guinea: Thirteen people have been killed after a powerful explosion at the main fuel depot in Guinea followed by a fire that rocked the center of the capital Conakry early on Monday. Schools were closed and workers told to stay at home as thick black smoke filled the sky. Residents fled the area where the blast occurred, images on social networks showed.

The incident happened at around midnight at the state oil company's main depot in the Kaloum district of Conakry, near the port. "Thirteen charred bodies were brought to the morgue of the Ignace Deen hospital," a senior official at the facility said. Dozens of people were injured, a doctor and local residents told AFP. "It was a deafening noise that woke us up," a resident told AFP. "The windows of our home and those of our neighbors were smashed. We managed to get away from the place," he added. Dansa Kourouma, head of the National Transitional Council (CNT) — the parliament appointed by the ruling military junta — said the fire had caused "extensive damage including loss of human life".

Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, who seized power after a 2021 coup, called for "solidarity and prayer for the nation in this difficult time" while the results of an investigation ordered by the government are awaited. The government announced that schools were closed and urged workers to stay at home in Conakry and its surrounding area.

At the end of the morning, the fire was still burning in the port district but less intensively. Dozens of civil

protection vehicles and water company trucks were at the site, an AFP journalist saw. "Additional resources are being dispatched to contain the fire and minimize its consequences," the government said.

It also urged people in the immediate area "to move away from the site not only for their safety but to allow responders to operate safely". Service stations would also remain closed and "in the coming hours, a progress report will be issued and an investigation will be launched to establish the cause and those responsible," the government said.

'Thrown to ground'

The cause of the fire was unclear, officials said, and its "scale and consequences could have a direct impact on the population". A doctor and local residents had told AFP earlier that dozens of people were injured. "Dozens of injured people are arriving at two of Conakry's main hospitals — Ignace Deen and Donka," said Mamadou Sylla, a surgeon at Donka hospital.

"We heard a loud bang which threw us to the ground without understanding what was happening," local resident Marietou Camara told AFP. "We prayed, hoping for God's favor. Others didn't try to understand, opting to head for the suburbs," she added. The normally lively port district was quiet early on Monday, with some locals having left the central area and others staying indoors. "The power is completely cut off in the area," resident Thierno Diallo, who identified himself as a customs officer, told AFP by telephone.

Guinea has been ruled since September 2021 by a junta led by Doumbouya, who stormed the presidential palace with soldiers and overthrew civilian president Alpha Conde. Conde was Guinea's first democratically elected president and took office in 2010 after decades of authoritarian rule. Doumbouya has promised to hand the reins of government back to elected civilians by January 2026. — AFP



CONAKRY: This image grab taken from AFTV video footage on December 18, 2023 shows flames from the fire at Conakry's main fuel depot. — AFP

Man missing as tropical storm hits Philippines

MANILA: A man went missing and thousands of people in the Philippines were sheltering in evacuation centres Monday as Tropical Storm Jelawat hit the large southern island of Mindanao, causing scattered flooding and power cuts. The storm weakened as it raked across Mindanao after making landfall in the morning, but the state

weather service said the threat of floods and landslides remained. Police in Manay municipality, where Jelawat made landfall, reported one man missing at the swollen Casaoman River that bisects the coastal town of about 40,000 people. "A local man ignored warnings and went to gather coconuts floating on the river. It is suspected he's been swept away," acting Manay police chief Major Meliton Sango said.

Two areas of Manay reported knee-deep floodwaters as the river overflowed, the officer told AFP by telephone. The civil defense office in Manila reported two damaged houses in Cortes, another town on Mindanao's east coast, along with power cuts in three other towns. — AFP

Zionists pound Gaza, starve...

Continued from Page 1

dispensable to their survival," it wrote in a report. The Zionist government hit back, accusing HRW of being an "anti-Semitic and anti-(Zionist) organization".

The head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, Philippe Lazzarini, earlier said he "would not be surprised if people start dying of hunger, or a combination of hunger, disease, weak immunity". At the Rafah crossing, many families had gathered in the hopes of finally being allowed across to safety. "I pray that everyone will leave this border crossing, we've been here for about a month," said Safa Fathi Hamad. "We are going to die, food is very limited and we have no protection."

The Zionist army has reported 127 deaths in Gaza since it launched ground operations in late October. The Zionist entity has faced mounting global pressure to either slow, suspend or stop hostilities — including from families of the remaining 129 captives believed held in Gaza. EU top diplomat Josep Borrell accused the Zionist entity of displaying an "appalling lack of distinction" in its campaign in Gaza.

And South African President Cyril Ramaphosa

Cyberattack cuts Iran fuel...

Continued from Page 1

stations in Tehran while others were completely shuttered, according to an AFP correspondent. Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi called for an investigation and urged "immediate measures" to resolve the crisis.

Authorities formed a "crisis committee" and announced that repairs were underway to fix the fuel distribution system and that pumps would work manually "until further notice". Iran suffered a sim-

ilar weeklong disruption in Oct 2021 which officials blamed on an unprecedented cyberattack by outside actors. Fuel cards were first introduced in 2007 with a view to reforming the subsidies system and curbing large-scale smuggling.

Iran's economy has been battered both by external pressure and internal mismanagement. In 2018, the US withdrew from a landmark nuclear agreement and reimposed sanctions that had been lifted for a few years. The government has accused arch-nemesis the Zionist entity of a wave of sabotage attacks and assassinations targeting its nuclear program. The US and the Zionist entity accuse Iran of orchestrating attacks against allied forces and ships in the region. — AFP

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Sisi reelected president with...

Continued from Page 1

He is Egypt's fifth president to emerge from within the ranks of the military since 1952. The runner-up Hazem Omar, who leads the Republican People's Party, received 4.5 percent of the vote. Next came Farid Zahran, leader of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, and Abdel-Samad Yamama from the Wafd, a century-old but relatively marginal party. The election authority said turnout was "unprecedented" at 66.8 percent of 67 million registered voters. This was up from 41 percent in 2018 and 47 percent in 2014.

In much of Cairo, however, the only sign Egypt was holding an election were the ubiquitous campaign posters for Sisi, while banners for other candidates were few and far between. Several voters told AFP they "did not know the other candidates", while much of the country ignored the polls entirely. Sisi, a retired army field marshal, was first voted in as president after leading the overthrow of elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

He later extended the presidential mandate from four to six years and amended the constitution to raise the limit on consecutive terms from two to three years. The

Houthi's attack Red Sea ships as...

Continued from Page 1

The incident came as British oil giant BP became the latest to suspend transit. Frontline, one of the world's largest tanker companies, also said Monday it was rerouting ships away from the Red Sea. "We only allow new business to be concluded if routing via" South Africa's Cape of Good Hope is an option, it said. Taiwan shipping giant Evergreen said on Monday that it was suspending its Zionist cargo shipments with immediate effect due to the "escalation of war situation".

German transport company Hapag-Lloyd, which

all-but-decimated opposition had built some momentum this year ahead of the election, before media and public attention were diverted by the Gaza war.

When he was first elected, the president's popularity was dubbed "Sisimania" and adoring supporters put his image on everything from baked goods to key chains. The enthusiasm has ebbed from those highs but Sisi is not without his supporters. He is credited with engineering a return to public order after a period of political violence and chaos that followed the 2011 uprising that overthrew Hosni Mubarak.

From 2016 onward, he undertook a host of economic reforms in pursuit of loans from the International Monetary Fund that have required severe austerity measures and multiple currency devaluations. Those policies, coupled with expensive mega projects — including a \$58 billion-dollar new capital city in the desert east of Cairo — have more than tripled Egypt's debt.

Virtually all imports to Egypt are paid for in dollars, and a severe foreign currency shortage has caused a parallel market to surge and pushed up consumer prices. Nearly a decade after Sisi first promised Egyptians security and prosperity, the economy is in freefall. The election was initially expected in the spring of 2024. But experts have said Sisi wanted to secure a third term before enacting another widely expected currency devaluation that is expected to fuel public discontent. — AFP

had said it was halting Red Sea container ship traffic until Monday, announced that it was rerouting ships via the Cape of Good Hope. "This will be done until the passage through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea will be safe again for vessels and their crews," it said in a statement. The Belgian-headquartered Euronav shipping company said it too was avoiding the Red Sea "until further notice".

The latest announcements followed similar moves by Danish shipping giant AP Moller-Maersk — which accounts for 15 percent of the global container freight market. Italian-Swiss giant Mediterranean Shipping Company and France's CMA CGM have also taken similar measures. The Red Sea attacks have forced insurance companies to significantly increase premiums on ships transiting the area, making it uneconomical for some to transit through the Suez Canal. — AFP

International

Zionists ban freed Palestinian teens from returning to class

New Zionist decision violates entity's law on mandatory education: Lawyer

JERUSALEM: Like many other imprisoned Palestinian teenagers released as part of an exchange deal with the Zionist entity, Mohamed al-Salaymeh hoped to regain a semblance of normality after months in detention. But he found himself in limbo yet again, unable to go back to school due to a new Zionist education ministry decision. The ruling bans students in annexed east Jerusalem from resuming classes after imprisonment. "My dream is to return and for this gate to be opened," said Mohamed, 16, standing in front of his school in his east Jerusalem neighborhood of Ras al-Amoud.

The Zionist entity last month agreed to a temporary truce deal that saw the release of 80 Zionist hostages held by Hamas militants in exchange for 240 Palestinians detained in Zionist prisons. All those released on both sides were women and minors.

Hamas gunmen seized a total of about 250 hostages on Oct 7 when they broke through the militarized border of the Gaza Strip in an attack that killed 1,139 people in the southern Zionist entity, according to Zionist figures.

In retaliation the Zionist entity vowed to destroy Hamas and began a relentless bombardment of Gaza, alongside a ground invasion, that has killed 18,800 people, according to Gaza's health ministry. The Zionist entity occupied east Jerusalem during a 1967 war with Arab states, and later annexed it in a move considered illegal by most of the international community. Around 230,000 Zionists now live in the territory, alongside at least 360,000 Palestinians.

Mohamed was arrested alongside three of his cousins, Moataz, 15, and brothers Ahmed, 14, and Ayham, 13. Ayham was later placed under house arrest, where he remains. The others spent about four months in a Zionist prison accused — but never formally charged — of throwing rocks at a Jewish settle-

ment near their Jerusalem neighborhood.

"Where will I go? There is nowhere. I will stay at home. I can't work because I'm under 18," said Ahmed, the youngest of the Palestinians freed under the deal. Moataz said he fears "losing my education. If things remain this way, I will have to repeat a year." But Mohamed appears the hardest hit by the decision, as he was expecting to graduate next year. "God only knows when we will return. I want to achieve my dreams," he told AFP.

'No future'

The Zionist ministry's decision affects 48 of the minors released in the hostage-prisoner deal. The ministry told AFP that the teens' status would be re-evaluated after the end of winter holidays on Jan 10. Jerusalem municipality, responsible for implementing the decision, told AFP it was "assessing and examining the pedagogical and emotional needs of each and every student, and building individual educational programs aiming to prevent the recurrence of unlawful acts in the future".

On Tuesday, municipal officials summoned Ahmed's father, Nayef al-Salaymeh. The officials "suggested that they be moved to other schools and institutions according to vague criteria," said Salaymeh, whose son hopes to become a lawyer. "We refused to move them because they all grew up in this school in our neighborhood," the father said, clad in a traditional Palestinian keffiyeh checkered scarf.

"If this decision becomes effective ... we will see young people in the streets with no future," he continued. "They destroy their thoughts and ambitions, to turn us into a backwards people." Nayef al-Salaymeh said civil society groups are helping the family continue its "struggle to return our children to their classrooms."



JERUSALEM: Palestinian teenagers (from left) Mohamed, Ahmed, and Moataz al-Salaymeh, cousins imprisoned by the Zionist entity before their release as part of an exchange deal, walk next to Ahmad's father in their neighborhood of Ras al-Amoud in Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem. — AFP

'A human right'

Unlike the Salaymehs, Amin al-Abbasi, 17, opted to move to a school run in east Jerusalem by the Palestinian Authority, which has partial administrative control in the Zionist-occupied West Bank. He said he decided "not to lose the year" but fears he won't be able to adapt to the new school in Sur Bahr and is trying to convince his former cellmates to join him.

His mother, Abir, complained that the school is "very far from all public transportation." Amin was serving a 20-month sentence for involvement in clashes in his neighborhood of Silwan, adjacent to Jerusalem's walled Old City, where tensions previously flared between Palestinian residents and Jewish settlers. He served 13

months before the exchange deal freed him. Khaled Zabarqa, a lawyer who has examined such cases but does not officially represent any of the minors, said the ministry ban on ex-prisoners returning to school contravenes the Zionist entity's law on mandatory education. "Education as a human right should not be subject to political considerations," he said.

Tal Hassin, who works with a civil rights association in the Zionist entity, said many of the students "have not been convicted. They are just suspects". She said the association is awaiting the end of the holidays to see what official decisions come next, and what legal avenues might be pursued. Until then, Mohamed clings to the hope of returning to school. "My education is my only weapon," he said. — AFP

Navalny's 'enforced disappearance' alarms: UN expert

GENEVA: A United Nations rights expert said Monday that the "enforced disappearance" of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was alarming, demanding that Moscow immediately release him. The Kremlin critic's lawyers have been prevented from meeting him since Dec 6, and he did not appear for a scheduled court hearing last Friday.

"I am greatly concerned that the Russian authorities will not disclose Mr Navalny's whereabouts and well-being for such a prolonged period of time which amounts to enforced disappearance," said Mariana Katzarova, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Russia. Navalny, 47 — who has been a thorn in the side of Russian leader Vladimir Putin — was first jailed in 2021 after surviving a poisoning assassination attempt. His sentence was earlier this year extended to 19 years on extremism charges.

Katarzova said she had raised her concerns with the Russian authorities after Navalny's team were told on Friday that he had been removed from the

Vladimir region near Moscow on Dec 11 and taken to an undisclosed location. Navalny's family and lawyers had sent letters to all penal colonies trying to identify his whereabouts, she said. "They have received initial information that he might be at an Omsk penal colony, but that information was later rejected," Katarzova said in a statement. A court earlier this year ruled that Navalny be moved to a harsher prison. Katarzova said the extremism charges he was convicted of were "baseless" and warned that detainees face high risks of serious rights violations during transportation.

The independent expert, who was appointed by the UN Human Rights Council but who does not speak on behalf of the UN, insisted that "the term 'extremism' has no basis in international law". "When it triggers criminal liability, it constitutes a violation of human rights."

Her statement slammed "the unrelenting criminal persecution of Mr Navalny", which had been "widely condemned internationally, indicating blatant abuse of the court system for political purposes." She said three of Navalny's lawyers were arrested in October, also on extremism charges, and now risked lengthy imprisonment themselves. "I call on Russian authorities to abide by their international human rights obligations," Katarzova said. "Mr Navalny and all those arbitrarily detained should be released immediately and provided remedies and reparations for all the harm suffered." — AFP



Members of the public enter the West Kowloon court for the opening day of the trial of pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai on Dec 18, 2023.

Pro-democracy figure Jimmy Lai stands 'unfair' trial

HONG KONG: Pro-democracy tycoon Jimmy Lai went on trial in Hong Kong Monday on national security charges that could see him jailed for life, with the United States and Britain demanding his release. Lai, 76, is accused of "collusion" with foreign forces under a sweeping national security law that Beijing imposed on the finance hub in 2020. He is the founder of the now-shuttered Chinese-language tabloid Apple Daily, which often criticised Beijing and supported the huge protest movement that roiled Hong Kong in 2019. The trial, which will continue into the New Year, is being closely watched as a barometer of Hong Kong's political freedoms and judicial independence.



HONG KONG: Jimmy Lai poses during an interview with AFP in this file photo. — AFP photos

A rags-to-riches millionaire who made his fortune selling clothes before expanding into media, Lai will be tried without a jury and has been denied his first choice of lawyer. Lai, who has rarely been seen publicly since 2021, appeared in court on Monday in a suit, looking thinner than in previous appearances. He smiled and waved at the gallery where his family sat.

He is a British citizen and representatives from the US, British, Australian and Canadian consulates were present to observe the trial. His case has drawn widespread condemnation from the international community but Beijing has dismissed the criticism as smears and interference. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin accused the United States and Britain of double standards and described Lai as an "errand boy of anti-China forces". "The United States' and United Kingdom's remarks on the case ... are in serious violation of the spirit of the rule of law, and ... they constitute blatant political maneuvering," Wang told a regular news briefing.

The European Union said Lai's trial "undermines confidence in the rule of law in Hong Kong and is detrimental to the city's attractiveness and its position as an international business hub". British Foreign Secretary

David Cameron said before proceedings began he was "concerned at the politically motivated prosecution" of Lai. "As a prominent and outspoken ... publisher, Jimmy Lai has been targeted in a clear attempt to stop the peaceful exercise of his rights to freedom of expression and association," Cameron said in a statement. "I call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their prosecution and release Jimmy Lai."

US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller also called for Lai's release and said actions stifling press freedom "have undermined Hong Kong's democratic institutions". Hong Kong leader John Lee said Monday the city had a "long tradition of rule of law" and had "full confidence" that the courts would rule fairly and impartially.

Speaking in Beijing after meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Lee warned against any interference in the court process, adding that "nobody should try to do anything to exert pressure simply because of their political motive and political gain".

'Very unfair'

Imprisoned for more than 1,100 days, Lai has already been convicted in five other cases, including for organizing and participating in marches during the 2019 democracy protests. Dozens of activists have been charged under the national security law but Lai is the first to contest a foreign "collusion" charge.

The trial will include a raft of other charges against him, including "conspiracy to publish seditious material". Lai's lawyer Robert Pang argued Monday that the charge should be thrown out because Hong Kong's criminal law imposes a time limit for such prosecutions and that the government had waited too long. "(Prosecutors) are out of time, therefore there is no jurisdiction of the court," Pang said, the point taking up all of Monday's session.

Heavy security was deployed outside the court, along with an armored vehicle and police wearing tactical gear. However, there were some signs of dissent. Police stopped Alexandra Wong, a democracy activist better known as "Grandma Wong", from approaching the court's entrance. "Support Apple Daily, support Jimmy Lai!" she shouted while waving the UK flag before police escorted her to the other side of the road. "The trial is very unfair, very unreasonable."

Other familiar pro-democracy faces, such as former legislator Emily Lau, also came out. "I come here to support the defendant and to hope that Hong Kong still has an independent judiciary, the rule of law," Lau said. Hong Kong operates under a common law system inherited from its British colonial past. But critics say Beijing's national security law has curtailed civil liberties, silenced dissent and eroded the judicial independence that once attracted foreign businesses to the city.

Lai's Apple Daily was forced to close in 2021 after authorities used the security law to raid it twice and freeze assets worth HK\$18 million (US\$2.3 million). "(Hong Kong authorities) are really weaponizing the legal system to attack people like my father, people who believe in democracy and democratic values," Lai's son Sebastien told AFP at the weekend. — AFP



BELGRADE: Serbian president, Aleksandar Vucic (center), addresses the media at the Serbian Progressive Party's headquarters late on Dec 17, 2023. — AFP

Monitors slam Serbian polls after Vucic hails party win

BELGRADE: A team of international observers on Monday slammed Serbian elections over a string of "irregularities", including "vote buying" and "ballot box stuffing", after the opposition accused the ruling party of committing voter fraud. The accusations aired by the monitors, which included representatives from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), came just hours after Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said his party had secured a commanding victory during parliamentary and local elections.

"Election day was smooth but marred by isolated instances of violence, procedural irregularities and frequent allegations of organizing and bribing of voters to support the ruling party in local elections," the International Election Observation Mission said in a statement. "Further instances of serious irregularities, including vote-buying and ballot box stuffing were observed," it added.

Vucic and his ruling right wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) looked poised to tighten their grip on power after claiming to have captured 127 out of the 250 seats in parliament late Sunday. However, opposition groups have cast doubts over the validity of the contest following accusations that the government allowed unregistered voters from neighboring Bosnia to cast ballots illegally in the capital Belgrade during the

election. The government has dismissed the claims, with Prime Minister Ana Brnabic saying the allegations were designed to spread chaos.

'Absolute majority'

Even though Vucic was not personally on the ballot during the parliamentary and local elections over the weekend, the contest was largely seen as a referendum on his government. "My job was to do everything in my power to secure an absolute majority in the parliament," Vucic told reporters as he celebrated what he said was the SNS's victory late Sunday. To his supporters, Vucic's decade in power has brought stability and billions in investments to the once chaotic country ravaged by a string of wars in the former Yugoslavia and bouts of hyperinflation in the 1990s. "I want Serbia to continue on the same path. It seems that this path is the most reasonable for the greatest number of people, whether rich or poor," Svetlana Nikolic, a 70-year-old Vucic supporter in Belgrade, told AFP.

But Vucic's opponents have long accused the president and the SNS of overseeing a government defined by autocracy and corruption during their decade in power. Vucic has been particularly deft at balancing ties between east and west, vowing to keep Serbia on a course for European Union membership — while also remaining friendly with Russia and courting China and Washington. On Monday, Moscow congratulated Vucic and the SNS on their victory, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying he hoped the win would lead to the "further strengthening of friendship" between the countries. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban also praised Vucic, calling the win an "overwhelming election victory." — AFP

Business

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2023

Kenya, EU ink 'historic' trade deal

Agreement to give Kenya duty-free and quota-free access to EU

NAIROBI: Kenya and the European Union on Monday signed a long-negotiated trade agreement to increase the flow of goods between the two markets, as Brussels pursues stronger economic ties with Africa. The Economic Partnership Agreement will give Kenya duty-free and quota-free access to the EU, its biggest export market, while European goods will receive progressive tariff reductions.

The agreement is the first broad trade deal between the EU and an African nation since 2016 and follows a spending spree by China on lavish infrastructure projects across the continent.

"Although today represents a moment of monumental promise, it is also the beginning of a historic partnership for historic transformation," Kenyan President William Ruto said at a ceremony attended by European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen in Kenya's capital Nairobi.

"The core of this arrangement is to put real money into the pockets of ordinary people," said Ruto.

EU chief von der Leyen said the partnership was a "win-win situation on both sides" and called on other East African nations to join the pact, which came after years of negotiations that concluded in June. "We are deepening trade ties and building up our economic resilience," she said.

"We are opening a new chapter in our very strong relationship and now our effort should be focused on implementation," von der Leyen added. Both the Kenyan and the European parliaments must ratify the deal before it comes into force. The European Union said that the deal was "the most

ambitious economic partnership" it had with a developing country.

It includes commitments to sustainable development in areas such as labor rights and environmental protection, the EU said in a statement. "A dedicated chapter has been included on economic and development cooperation, aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of the Kenyan economy," the EU said. EU's trade commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis said the "historic agreement" would unlock new areas for cooperation and benefit.

The 27-nation bloc accounts for more than 20 percent of Kenya's overall exports, according to government data, mainly agricultural products, including vegetables, fruits and the country's famous tea and coffee.

Total two-way trade between the markets hit 3.3 billion euros (\$3.6 billion) in 2022, up 27 percent since 2018, according to EU figures.

Africa has become a renewed diplomatic battleground since the Ukraine war began, with Kenya and other countries on the continent aggressively courted by Russia and China and the West. An economic powerhouse of east Africa, Kenya is seen by the international community as a reliable and stable democracy in a turbulent region. The EU has taken steps to counter China's Belt and Road program announcing in February it would increase investments in Kenya by hundreds of millions of dollars through its own Global Gateway initiative. Kenya's biggest infrastructure project, a \$5 billion railway line connecting Nairobi to the port city of Mombasa, which opened in 2017, was built by a Chinese com-



NAIROBI: President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (left) and President of Kenya William Ruto (right) observe how their representatives sign a new trade agreement at the State House in Nairobi on December 18, 2023. — AFP

pany with Chinese financing.

Kenya is also negotiating a trade deal with the United States. The new trade deal with Europe is the culmination of trade talks between the EU and the regional East African

Community (EAC) that started roughly a decade ago. Kenya signed and ratified an initial trade agreement with the EU in 2016 alongside the EAC but it fell through after some countries failed to greenlight the

pact, with Kenya eventually pursuing its own deal. "This agreement leaves the door wide open for our EAC partners to join so that together as a region we can benefit," Ruto said. — AFP

Kuwait's non-oil growth remains above 3%: IMF

KUWAIT: The Gulf Cooperation Countries are experiencing healthy non-oil growth, said a report titled "Economic Prospects and Policy Priorities" issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Despite global risks and unfavorable conditions, this growth is being driven by increased investment and capital flows. The IMF report highlights that Saudi Arabia's non-oil GDP experienced an average growth rate of approximately 4.5 percent in the first half of the current year, mainly due to private non-oil activities. The IMF also mentions that non-oil growth in Bahrain and Kuwait has slowed but remains above 3 percent, while in the Sultanate of Oman, it stands at 2 percent. Similarly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) witnessed strong growth of 5.9 percent during the same period, propelled by robust domestic demand.

Regarding Qatar, the IMF states that non-oil activity experienced significant growth in 2022, supported by hosting the World Cup. This growth reached 6.8 percent and was driven by sectors such as tourism, hospitality, and construction. How-

ever, the IMF expects the strong growth of the current year to moderate to a more normal rate of 2.5 percent. This moderation will primarily be driven by investments in public projects and the expansion of the North LNG field project.

The report further indicated that inflation in the GCC countries remained in 2022 well-managed, averaging around 3.3 percent year-on-year. Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE experienced the highest increases in inflation, while Oman had the lowest. However, inflation in Saudi Arabia decreased towards the end of the year.

Real estate prices in Dubai were rising rapidly, while they remained relatively low in Saudi Arabia. In Kuwait, rents saw a significant increase. The IMF predicted that Saudi Arabia and the UAE would lead the growth of the non-oil sector in the current period. The Fund noted that the Gulf states were maintaining strong growth momentum in their non-oil sectors, driven by domestic demand, increased inflows, and the implementation of reforms.

The increase in non-oil revenues reflects the ongoing financial and structural reforms undertaken by the GCC countries. The IMF recommended that the GCC countries continue to focus on strengthening the non-oil sector, which it considers to be the driving force behind the region's economic growth as oil production declines. It also suggested implementing a comprehensive package

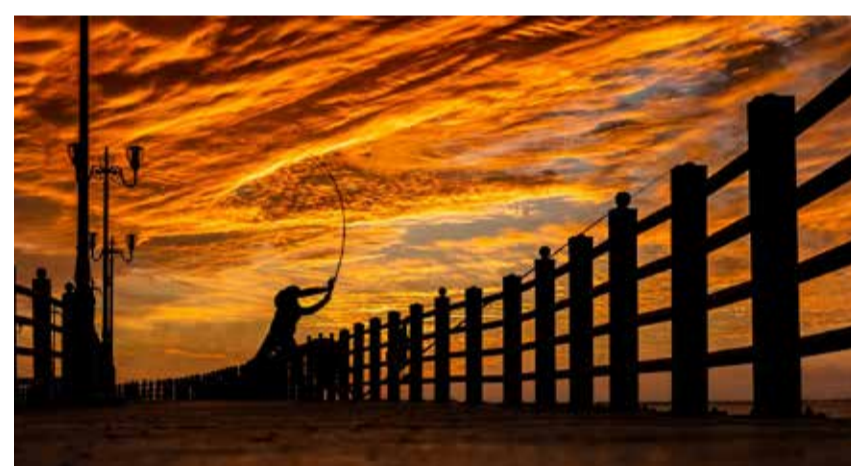
of policies to address short-term shocks and uncertainties in the global economy, as well as medium and long-term challenges.

In the short term, the Fund advised the countries to exercise caution in public financial policies, rebuild fiscal buffers, and take advantage of rising oil prices. It also recommended closely monitoring financial stability risks while following the lead of the US Federal Reserve. In the medium term, the IMF recommended that the countries in the region continue their efforts to manage public finances in a manner that ensures intergenerational equity and sustainability. This can be achieved through mobilizing non-oil revenues, phasing out energy subsidies, rationalizing expenditures, improving their efficiency, and strengthening social safety nets.

According to the report, oil production in the GCC region, which is influenced by decisions made by the OPEC+ alliance, is expected to decline in the near future.

In light of this, the fiscal policies of GCC countries in the near term should avoid cyclical spending and instead capitalize on the unexpected gains from rising oil prices to rebuild reserves.

Moody's Investor Ratings predicts that Saudi Arabia's non-oil GDP will experience annual growth rates between 3 percent and 4 percent until 2030. This projection reflects the Kingdom's efforts to diversify its economy away from oil by increasing



spending in various sectors. The Saudi's General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT) recently announced that the non-oil sector in the country grew by 3.5 percent in the third quarter of the year. Catarina Noro, an economic analyst at Moody's, highlighted in a webinar on the economic prospects of the Middle East and North Africa region in 2024 that the Saudi economy has undergone a transformation over the past decade, with the non-oil sector playing an increasingly significant role in GDP growth. According to the projection the non-oil economy is expected to grow between three and four percent annually until 2030, while

the oil sector's growth is anticipated to be between 0.5 percent and 1.5 percent after 2025.

Noro highlighted that the Kingdom's continued provision of credit facilities to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is expected to stimulate growth in vital sectors such as tourism and construction. She further stated that sustaining this momentum requires concurrent growth in the labor force. Increasing the participation of women and the growth of the diaspora will play crucial roles, as the expansion of the labor force will, in turn, drive growth in the private sector and the non-oil economy.

EU launches illegal content probe into X

BRUSSELS: The EU announced "formal infringement proceedings" against Elon Musk's X platform on Monday, under a law cracking down on illegal online content, after identifying disinformation related to Hamas's Oct 7 attack in Zionist entity. The action against the company formerly known as Twitter is the first against a major online platform since Brussels implemented the Digital Services Act (DSA), a sweeping piece of European Union legislation that strengthens online companies' responsibility for content moderation. "Today's opening of formal proceedings against X makes it clear that, with the DSA, the time of big online platforms behaving like they are 'too big to care' has come to an end," said the bloc's digital enforcer, EU commissioner Thierry Breton. "We will now start an in-depth investigation of X's compliance with the DSA obligations concerning countering the dissemination and amplification of illegal content and disinformation in the EU, transparency of the platforms and design of the user interface."

The European Commission said a preliminary information-gathering investigation it launched against X in October, which included looking at "the dissemination of illegal content in the context of Hamas' terrorist attacks against Zionist entity", led to Monday's probe. On the basis of that information, "the Commission has decided to open formal infringement proceedings against X under the Digital Services Act", it said.



ROME: X CEO Elon Musk makes a heart with his hands during the Atréju political meeting organized by the young militants of Italian right wing party Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) on December 16, 2023 at the Sant'Angelo Castle in Rome. — AFP

The formal probe will examine four areas: the dissemination of illegal content; the effectiveness of X's efforts to combat disinformation; suspected restrictions on giving researchers access to its data; and suspected deceptive practices—known as "dark patterns"—related to its Blue Tick subscription product. In the event of proven infringements, the DSA carries penalties that can include fines going up to six percent of an online company's global revenues. For serious and repeated violations, the EU can ban a platform operating in the 27-nation bloc. The commission said that, under the formal probe against X, it would now "continue to gather evidence, for example by sending

additional requests for information, conducting interviews or inspections". It noted that the proceedings gave it powers to order X to undertake interim or remedial steps, pending the conclusion of the probe. There is no deadline for the proceedings to wrap up. Weeks after starting its initial information-gathering exercise against X, the commission also launched preliminary investigations along the same lines against TikTok, YouTube and Facebook owner Meta.

Brussels back in September raised concerns over X's disinfo-fighting capacities after noting its bad score in that regard in a pilot study of several platforms. Since buying Twitter for \$44 billion in October 2022, Musk has gutted its content moderation staff, and reinstated accounts of banned extremists and conspiracy theorists. He has got rid of the platform's system for verifying high-profile users, replacing it with a subscription blue tick offer open to any willing to pay. Musk rebranded the company X, with ambitions of turning it into a multi-service platform to include identity verification and payment transactions in the mould of China's WeChat.

Last month, he grossly insulted advertisers who have abandoned his platform and declared a tweet espousing an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory to be the "absolute truth". According to information provided to AFP by market data analysis company SensorTower, as many as half the top 100 US advertisers the company had in October 2022 have already stopped spending altogether on X. Musk's company is now worth less than half of what he paid for it—around \$19 billion, according to internal documents sent to staff and reported by tech publication The Verge. — AFP

Polish truckers resume blockade of Ukraine checkpoint

WARSAW: Polish hauliers on Monday resumed their blockade of the largest freight border crossing with Ukraine following a court order that allowed the truckers to go back to the Dorohusk checkpoint.

The truckers have been blocking the border for over a month to demand the reintroduction of permits to enter the European Union for their Ukrainian competitors. The bloc had waived the permits system after Russia invaded Ukraine, but the Polish road carriers say the move took a toll on their earnings.

Last week the local authorities in Dorohusk withdrew permission for protests at the border crossing, but the decision was later overturned by the court. On Monday, the police confirmed that the truckers were once again blocking cargo traffic.

"Currently, there are around 25 people at the protest site. One bus and a caravan are parked there," a spokeswoman for the local police, Ewa Czyn, told AFP. Around 1,800 trucks were queued up at the Dorohusk crossing when the protest restarted, with the line stretching for nearly 46 kilometers (28 miles), the police said. Ukraine relies heavily on road transport with EU member Poland for its exports and imports, particularly since the Russian invasion nearly two years ago. — AFP

Oman, India make progress in talks on comprehensive economic deal

CEPA aims to eliminate import duties in key sectors

NEW DELHI: Oman and India have made significant progress in discussions over a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), bilateral investments, and potential bilateral rupee trade on Saturday during the state visit of Oman's ruler, Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. This marks a pivotal moment in bilateral relations, with Sultan Haitham being the first Omani ruler to visit India since 1997, according to reports.

The proposed CEPA aims to eliminate import duties, benefiting key sectors like motor gasoline, textiles, electronics, machinery, and iron and steel. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sultan Haitham discussed the multifaceted aspects of economic cooperation, with a focus on the release of the third tranche of the Oman-India Joint Investment Fund, totaling \$300 million. The objective of this joint venture between the Oman Investment Authority and the State Bank of India is to direct investments towards the rapidly expanding sectors of India.

According to a report by the Hindustan Times, Modi expressed optimism about the ongoing CEPA discussions, stating, "I am glad that discussions on CEPA are ongoing between the two sides. Two rounds of talks have been successfully completed, in which consensus has been reached on many important issues."

The leaders adopted the "India-Oman Joint Vision: A partnership for the future," outlining concrete action points for 10 sectors.

Beyond economic ties, the discussions between India and Oman delved into various other sectors as well. Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra highlighted the exploration of financial technologies, the possibility of establishing rupee trade, and cooperation in space-related activities, including services, satellite building and launching, and capacity building. The talks also extended to green hydrogen, renewable energy, and the strategic utilization of Oman's Duqm port by Indian navy ships for logistical and humanitarian purposes.



NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Oman's Sultan ruler Haitham bin Tarik during their talks in New Delhi.

The joint vision document, shaped by the Oman Vision 2040 and India's development vision till 2047, focuses on 10 key areas. These include maritime cooperation, energy security, space cooperation, digital payments, health, tourism, disaster management, agriculture, and the use of cricket to enhance people-to-people ties. Sultan Haitham and Modi expressed confidence that the joint vision would pave the way for a new and modern shape to their partnership.

The discussions also addressed challenges in West Asia, with a specific mention of the crisis in the region. Kwatra emphasized a shared appreciation of the challenges arising from the Zionist-Hamas conflict, describing it as an "important element of the discussions."

The leaders exchanged perspectives on terrorism, advocating for a two-state solution as a way forward. Additionally, agreements were signed on cooperation in combating financial crimes, information technology, culture, and the establishment of a Hindi chair of the

Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in Oman.

India and Oman reaffirmed their partnership in maritime security in the western Indian Ocean, with robust defense engagement. Maritime cooperation is extensive, and Oman's Duqm port is positioned as a logistical base for joint efforts in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Kwatra underscored the vital role of the Indian community in Oman, with 700,000 members contributing significantly to the country's economic development. —Agencies

Drones help solve forest carbon capture riddle

CHIANG MAI, Thailand: On a hillside overlooking cabbage fields outside the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, a drone's rotors begin to whirl, lifting it over a patch of forest. It moves back and forth atop the rich canopy, transmitting photos to be knitted into a 3D model that reveals the woodland's health and helps estimate how much carbon it can absorb.

Drones are part of an increasingly sophisticated arsenal used by scientists to understand forests and their role in the battle against climate change. The basic premise is simple: woodlands suck in and store carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas that is the largest contributor to climate change.

But how much they absorb is a complicated question. A forest's size is a key part of the answer—and deforestation has caused tree cover to fall 12 percent globally since 2000, according to Global Forest Watch. But composition is also important: different species sequester carbon differently, and trees' age and size matter, too.

Knowing how much carbon forests store is crucial to understanding how quickly the world needs to cut emissions, and most current estimates mix high-level imagery from satellites with small, labor-intensive ground surveys. "Normally, we would go into this forest, we would put in the pole, we would have our piece of string, five meters long. We would walk around in a circle, we would measure all the trees in a circle," explained Stephen Elliott, research director at Chiang Mai University's Forest Restoration Research Unit (FORRU).

But "if you've got 20 students stomping around with tape measures and poles... you're going to trash the understory," he said, referring to the layer of vegetation between the forest floor and the canopy.

That is where the drone comes in, he said, gesturing to the Phantom model hovering overhead.

"With this, you don't set foot in the forest." Three measurements are needed to estimate a tree's absorptive capacity: height, girth and wood density, which differs by species. As an assistant looks through binoculars for birds that might collide with the drone, the machine flies a path plotted into a computer program. "We collect data or capture (images) every three seconds," explained Worayut Takaew, a FORRU field research officer and drone op-

erator. "The overlapping images are then rendered into a 3D model that can be viewed from different angles." The patch of woodland being surveyed is part of a decades-long project led by Elliott and his team that has reforested around 100 hectares by planting a handful of key species. Their goal was not large-scale reforestation, but developing best practices: planting native species, encouraging the return of animals that bring in seeds from other species and working with local communities.

The drone's 3D model is a potent visual representation of their success, particularly compared to straggly untouched control plots nearby. But it is also being developed as a way to avoid labor-intensive ground surveys. "Once you've got the model, you can measure the height of every tree in the model. Not samples, every tree," said Elliott.

A forest's carbon potential goes beyond its trees, though, with leaf litter and soil also serving as stores. So these too are collected for analysis, which Elliott says shows their reforested plots store carbon at levels close to undamaged woodland nearby.

But for all its bird's-eye insights, the drone has one major limitation: it cannot see below the canopy. For that, researchers need technology like LiDAR—high-resolution, remote-sensing equipment that effectively scans the whole forest. "You can go inside the forest... and really reconstruct the shape and the size of each tree," explained Emmanuel Paradis, a researcher at France's National Research Institute for Sustainable Development. He is leading a multi-year project to build the most accurate analysis yet of how much carbon Thailand's forests can store.

It will survey five different types of forests, including some of FORRU's plots, using drone-mounted LiDAR and advanced analysis of the microbes and fungi in soil that sustain trees.

"The aim is to estimate at the country level... how much carbon can be stored by one hectare anywhere in Thailand," he said. The stakes are high at a time of fierce debate about whether existing estimates of the world's forest carbon capacity are right. "Many people, and I'm a bit of this opinion, think that these estimates are not accurate enough," Paradis said. "Estimations which are too optimistic can give too much hope and too much optimism on the possibilities of forests to store carbon," he warned.

The urgency of the question is driving fast developments, including the launch next year of the European Space Agency's Biomass satellite, designed to monitor forest carbon stocks. "The technology is evolving, the satellites are more and more precise... and the statistical technologies are more and more precise," said Paradis. —AFP

Bulgaria scraps gas transit tax to win Schengen bid

SOFIA, Bulgaria: Bulgaria scrapped on Monday a tax on the transit of Russian gas through its territory after Hungary threatened to veto the country's long-time bid to join the Schengen free-travel zone. In a hasty vote, lawmakers unanimously backed a proposal to abandon the exceptional tax of 20 leva (10 euros) per megawatt hour (MWh) for Russian gas coming from the TurkStream gas pipeline that it channelled to Hungary and Serbia.

The measure was approved on October 13 and aimed to "reduce the profits" of Gazprom but it turned out difficult to enforce as the Russian gas giant never paid any sum for the volumes it transited.

Both Budapest and Belgrade, still heavily dependent on Russian energy sources and keen to maintain their good ties with the Kremlin, had slammed the exceptional tariff as "a hostile move" that jeopardized their energy security. Over

IMF: Higher interest rates testing banks in MENA, Pakistan

DUBAI: Central banks will likely keep interest rates higher for longer in economies with persistently elevated core inflation (excluding food and energy prices). The high-interest-rate environment, which recently triggered banking sector stress in some advanced economies, could be a harbinger of more systemic risks. It could tighten financial conditions, trigger credit stress, and reduce funding for financial institutions, including in the Middle East, North Africa, and Pakistan. Such stress could threaten bank profits and willingness to lend, materially impacting financial stability and economic growth, according to a report by the International Monetary Fund.

Financial stability risks such as a high reliance on external funding can leave banks in some countries vulnerable to sudden changes in investor sentiment. In addition, where lenders hold a significant share of domestic sovereign debt, a lengthy period of higher interest rates could lead to losses, particularly if the market value of that debt declines and the assets are at a lower price, the report said.

In its recently published Regional Economic Outlook for the Middle East and Central Asia, it details the first region-wide stress test. It uses four scenarios to assess the risks of higher-for-longer interest rates in the region's emerging market and middle-income countries and the six Gulf Cooperation Council economies.

The results suggest banks across most countries in the region would be able to withstand individual stress scenarios, but could be tested by a combination of higher interest rates, corporate sector stress, and liquidity pressures. Importantly, state-owned banks are more vulnerable than privately-owned banks. This is due to the lower profitability and higher securities holdings of state-owned banks, which raise interest-rate risk. Few banks would breach minimum regulatory capital ratios in the combined shock scenario. Still, less capital would likely result in reduced lending to the private sector and a decline in economic activity, which is comparable to previous episodes of credit contraction. For example, the inflation-adjusted economic output loss in the combined shock scenario could be as high as 1.5 percent over two years. The estimated loss for the Gulf economies would be 0.9 percent.

Monetary policy is an important factor in these

the weekend, Hungary's Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto threatened to veto Bulgaria's bid to join Schengen if the country continues to maintain the tax that he said was "punitive."

Hungary was ready to lift the veto as soon as tax is abolished, Szijarto said.

"I've told (Hungarian PM) Victor Orban several times that this tax is not aimed against Hungary. They probably have some suspicions or are using it as an excuse (to block us)," Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov told Nova television in an interview Sunday. "It is important to remove this hindrance and to know that with Hungary we should not have problems for Schengen," he however added.

Bulgaria and neighboring Romania joined the EU in 2007 but their bid to join the free travel zone met with opposition from member states over the years. Of the remaining two reluctant countries that opposed Bulgaria's accession last year, the Netherlands decided on Friday that Sofia now fulfilled the conditions and Austria has also softened its opposition recently.

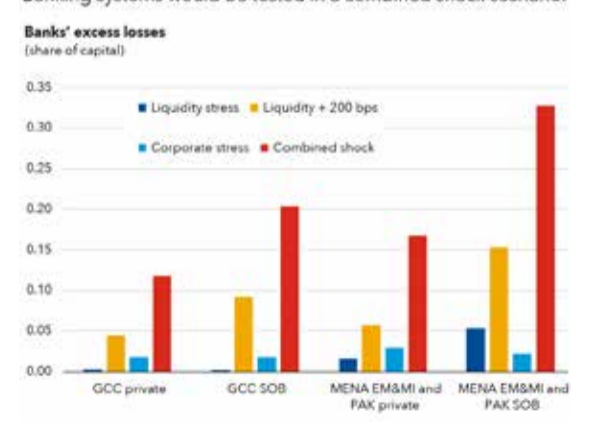
Vienna has proposed what it calls "Air Schengen", saying it was prepared to relax the rules governing air traffic for Bulgaria and Romania if Brussels strengthened the EU's external borders. —AFP

countries. Central banks are facing difficult policy tradeoffs at a time when measures of core inflation, which exclude volatile food and energy prices, remain above target in many countries.

In a low-inflation environment, central banks can respond to financial stress by cutting interest rates. However, when inflation is high during periods of stress, policymakers must balance safeguarding financial stability and keeping inflation under control. Policymakers need appropriate tools to tackle banking sector turmoil that could impact financial stability. Strengthening prudential standards, for example, by encouraging banks to accumulate capital during expansions so that they can sustain lending during downturns, can better manage risk. Vulnerabilities from bank holdings of government debt should be accounted for in stress testing to improve resilience to shocks. Over the next few years, efforts by pol-

Banking sector stress tests

Banking systems would be tested in a combined shock scenario.



Source: Bloomberg Finance L.P., Fitch Connect, and IMF staff calculations. Notes: Figure 1 shows losses, measured in excess of net income, as a fraction of Tier 1 regulatory capital. State-owned banks are defined as banks with at least 50 percent government ownership. GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council; MENA EMS&I and FAK = Middle East and North Africa emerging market and middle-income countries and Pakistan, including the GCC SOB = state-owned bank.

IMF

icy makers to foster a deep and diversified investor base to help reduce the interconnectedness between the health of the banking system and the sovereign should continue, especially where state-owned entities dominate the marketplace.

Establishing emergency liquidity tools, such as central bank emergency lending, to stem systemic financial stress is also critical. However, governments should communicate clearly to ensure that liquidity support is not perceived to be working at cross-purposes with monetary policy. Finally, developing effective plans to wind down firms in distress would reduce risks to financial stability and economic growth.



CHIANG MAI: This picture taken on November 22, 2023 shows a drone being flown by Chiang Mai University's Forest Restoration Research Unit (FORRU) field research officer Worayut Takaew during a mapping survey of a reforested area on a hillside near Chiang Mai. — AFP

German govt faces backlash over plan to end e-vehicle subsidies

Move to deal a blow to already struggling automotive industry

BERLIN: The German government faced a backlash after abruptly ending an electric car subsidy scheme in a blow to the already struggling automotive industry. The scheme is one of the casualties of a budget crisis caused by a shock constitutional court ruling in November that upended the government's spending plans. The economy ministry said Saturday that Sunday would be the last day prospective buyers could apply for the scheme, which paid out thousands of euros per customer to partially cover the cost of buying an electric car.

A spokesman for the ministry admitted it was an "unfortunate situation" for consumers who had been hoping to take advantage of the subsidy, but it had no choice "because there is no longer enough money available."

Analyst Ferdinand Dudenhofer from the Center for Automotive Research warned the decision could have dramatic consequences. "The competitiveness of (auto) manufacturers will now be severely damaged," Dudenhofer told the Rheinische Post newspaper.

The Handelsblatt business daily had already warned that scrapping the scheme risked jeopardizing Germany's plans to get 15 million electric cars on the road by 2030. "This goal

was already considered extremely unrealistic. Now it seems completely illusory," it wrote.

A total of around 10 billion euros (\$1.1 billion) has been paid out since 2016 under the scheme for around 2.1 million electric vehicles, according to the economy ministry. Germany's flagship automotive industry has been struggling with the transition to electromobility due to a weak global economy and low levels of demand.

In addition, it is facing a serious challenge from homegrown rivals in China, one of its most important markets. "The Chinese are massively expanding their car industry because they have customers. Our manufacturers no longer have any," Dudenhofer said.

Germany's highest court decided last month that the government had broken a constitutional debt rule when it transferred 60 billion euros earmarked for pandemic support to a climate fund. The bombshell ruling blew a huge hole in spending plans and plunged Chancellor Olaf Scholz's three-way coalition into turmoil. After adopting an emergency budget for 2023, Scholz and his junior coalition partners battled for weeks before finally finding an agreement for 2024 on Wednesday. — AFP



German's flagship automotive industry has been struggling with the transition to electromobility due to a weak global economy and low levels of demand. — AFP



TOKYO: Japan's Nippon Steel has agreed to buy US Steel Corp for \$14.1 billion.

Japan's Nippon Steel to buy US Steel for \$14.1bn

TOKYO: Japan's Nippon Steel has agreed to buy US Steel Corp for \$14.1 billion, the companies announced on Monday, months after the steelmaker rejected an offer from its main US rival. The leading Japanese steelmaker will acquire US Steel in an all-cash deal at \$55 per share, a 40 percent premium above its closing price on December 15, representing an equity value of about \$14.1 billion, the companies said in a statement.

Nippon will also assume the US firm's debt, taking the total deal to \$14.9 billion. US Steel launched a strategic review in August after receiving several unsolicited offers for a partial or total takeover. It rejected an offer from its main US competitor Cleveland-Cliffs, which valued the merger at around \$10 billion.

The steelworkers' union USW had indicated it supported the deal put forward by Cleveland-Cliffs.

The acquisition will significantly expand Nippon's current production in the United States. "As a result of NSC's acquisition of US Steel, its expected total annual crude steel capacity will reach 86 million tons—accelerating progress towards NSC's strategic goal of 100 million tons of global crude steel capacity annually," the statement said. "We are excited that this transaction brings together two companies with world-leading technologies and manufacturing capabilities, demonstrating our mission to serve customers worldwide, as well as our commitment to building a more environmentally friendly society through the decarbonisation of steel," Nippon Steel president Eiji Hashimoto said.

The deal honors all agreements between US Steel and the USW union, the firms said. "Today's announcement also benefits the United States—ensuring a competitive, domestic steel industry, while strengthening our presence globally. Our shared decarbonisation focus is expected to enhance and accelerate our ability to provide customers with innovative steel solutions to meet sustainability goals," US Steel president and CEO David Burritt said.

US Steel's appeal, according to analysts and industry insiders, stems from the fact it is about to complete a costly investment plan, including the installation of electric arc furnaces instead of coal-fired blast furnaces, to reduce its carbon footprint. Both boards of directors have unanimously approved the deal, which is subject to approval by US Steel's shareholders, the firms said. — AFP

Vietnam property developer faces trial over bond fraud

HANOI: The chairwoman of major property developer Van Thinh Phat will go on trial in Vietnam, accused with accomplices of embezzling \$12.5 billion from a bank "for personal purposes", the official government website said. Truong My Lan will be tried at the Ho Chi Minh City People's Court, the website reported Sunday, without specifying

Renewables to exceed half of German electricity use in 2023

BERLIN: More than half the electricity consumed in Germany in 2023 will have been generated from renewables for the first time, the German Association of Energy and Water Industries (BDEW) said on Monday. According to preliminary figures, Germans will consume a total of around 517 billion kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity this year, compared with 540 billion kWh in 2022. Some 52 percent of that will come from renewables, compared to 47 percent in 2022, the agency said.

"The figures show that we are on the right track," said Kerstin Andreae, chair of the BDEW executive board. Germany is aiming to obtain 80 percent of its electricity from wind and solar power by 2030.

But plans to decarbonise energy production in Europe's biggest economy were thrown into disarray by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent cut to sorely needed gas supplies from Russia. The government brought mothballed coal-fired plants back online to take the pressure off gas-based electricity production. The reactivated coal plants will operate until March 2024.

Germany is set to generate 508 billion kWh of electricity in 2023, the BDEW said. Of that, a quarter (26 percent) will come from coal. In 2022, the pollutant fossil fuel accounted for almost a third of

Iliad offers Italy unit merger with Vodafone

PARIS: French telecom group Iliad said Monday it has offered to merge its Italian business with Vodafone, more than a year after the British company rejected a takeover bid for the unit. Under the offer, Vodafone would get a 50 percent share of the combined unit along with a 6.5-billion-euro (\$7.1 billion) cash payment and a two-billion-euro shareholder loan, Iliad said.

Iliad Italia would get the other half along with 500 million euros in cash and a shareholder loan of two billion euros. The merged business would generate revenues of 5.8 billion euros, Iliad said.

"The market context in Italy calls for the creation of the most innovative telecom challenger, with ability to compete and create value in a competitive environment," Iliad chief executive Thomas Reynaud said in a statement. The new company "would be fully committed to accelerating the country's digital transformation and especially fiber adoption and 5G deployment, with more than four billion euros of investment planned over the next five years," he said.

Vodafone rejected an offer from Iliad in February 2022 to buy Vodafone Italia for 11.25 billion euros.

Last month, Iliad reported record earnings in France and Italy, with revenue rising by 9.5 percent to 2.35 billion euros in the third quarter. The French group said earlier this year that it wanted to become one of the top three telecom companies in Europe. Vodafone said in March that it would cut 1,000 jobs in Italy to reduce costs amid strong competition in Italy. — AFP

when the trial would start. She will be prosecuted for embezzlement, bribery, and violating banking regulations. Lan is accused of setting up fake loan applications to withdraw money from Saigon Commercial Bank, where she held more than 90 percent of the bank's shares, according to the government website.

"From February 9, 2018 to October 7, 2022, Truong My Lan gave orders to set up 916 fake loan applications, appropriating more than 304 trillion dong (\$12.5 billion) from SCB," it said. Eighty-five others, including a former official at the State Bank of Vietnam who is accused of accepting \$5.2 million in bribes, will also face trial at the court in Ho Chi Minh City. — AFP



Germans will consume a total of around 517 billion kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity this year, compared with 540 billion kWh in 2022.

electricity production. Germany is sticking by its pledge to exit coal completely by 2030 but doubts persist. Berlin has vowed to cut red tape for installing wind turbines and plans to only approve new gas-fired power plants if they can be converted to run

on "clean" hydrogen. Some observers, however, say the pace is still too slow. Germany also shut down its last remaining nuclear power plants in April this year, a long-planned step which some critics argue could make it harder to hit climate targets. — AFP



Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) during morning trading in New York City. — AFP

Equity markets drop as Fed rate cut rally fades

LONDON: Major stock markets mostly fell Monday following last week's rally, with Federal Reserve officials looking to temper expectations the US central bank will cut interest rates several times next year. Investors are also keeping tabs on the Bank of Japan's meeting this week, though speculation it will shift away from a policy of not hiking rates has faded.

Equity indices are still set to end the year on a high after the Fed suggested it will begin loosening monetary policy as US data shows inflation coming down and the economy on course for a soft landing. The Dow and Nasdaq last week hit record highs on Wall Street as tech firms surged, but the buying frenzy slowed Friday as investors took a step back, which analysts said was to be expected after the advances.

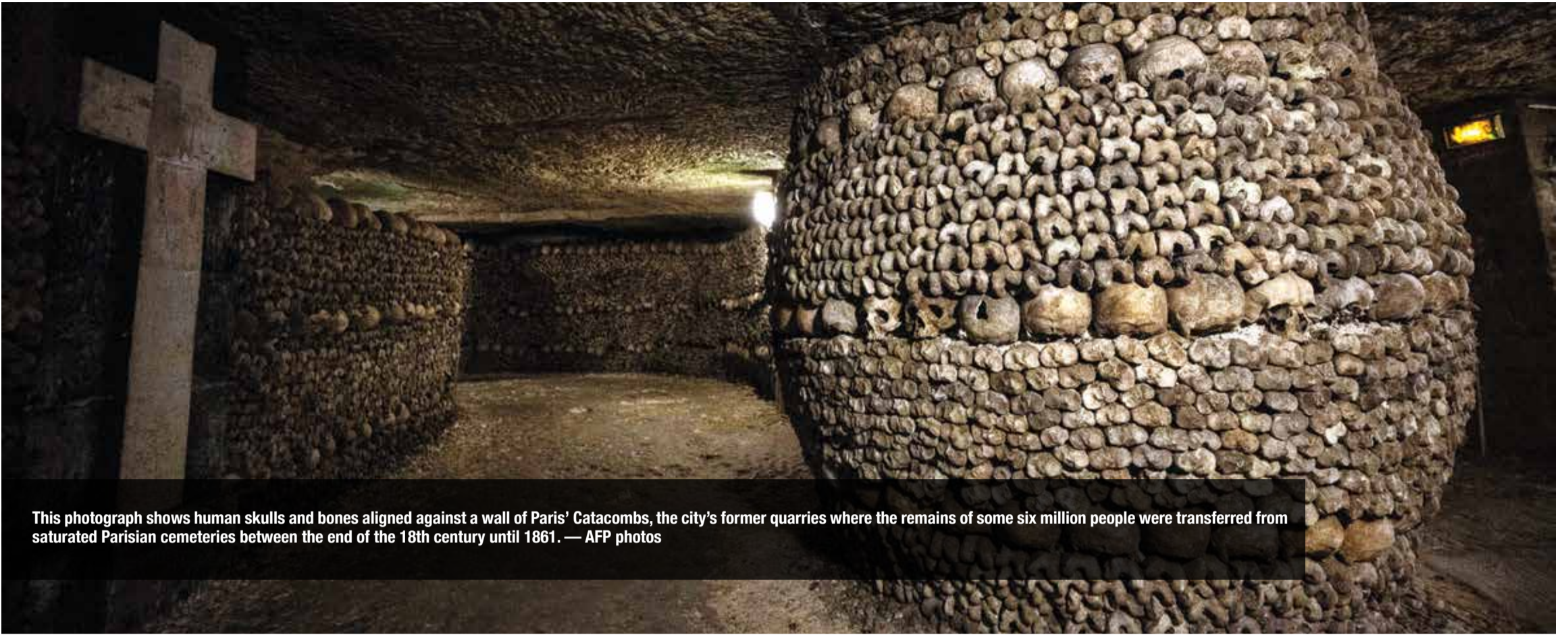
The Paris CAC 40 index also hit an all-time peak last week. "We're into the final furlong and unless there's a big surprise then we're looking at some

very healthy gains for the most part in 2023," noted Neil Wilson, chief market analyst at Finalto trading group. Asia struggled at the start of this week, with Hong Kong down one percent, while Tokyo, Shanghai, Sydney, Singapore, Mumbai, Taipei, Manila and Jakarta were also in the red. In Europe, London rose ahead of UK inflation data Wednesday, while Paris and Frankfurt retreated.

The London FTSE 100 won support from Vodafone. The mobile phone giant's share price was up nearly seven percent in late morning deals after it revealed a proposal with French peer Iliad to merge their Italian operations. A number of Fed officials lined up last week to douse expectations they will slash rates next year. Some observers have predicted as many as six cuts, but the bank's "dot plot" forecast saw three.

The Bank of Japan's own decision is due Tuesday, and while there has been talk that it is about to shift away from years of ultra-loose policy, analysts do not expect it to do so for a few months.

Officials have kept rates in negative territory and stuck to a policy of controlling bond prices in a bid to boost the economy, but with inflation rising and the yen struggling, they are now said to be shifting. "The BoJ has little need to rush into making policy changes," said economists at Societe Generale. — AFP



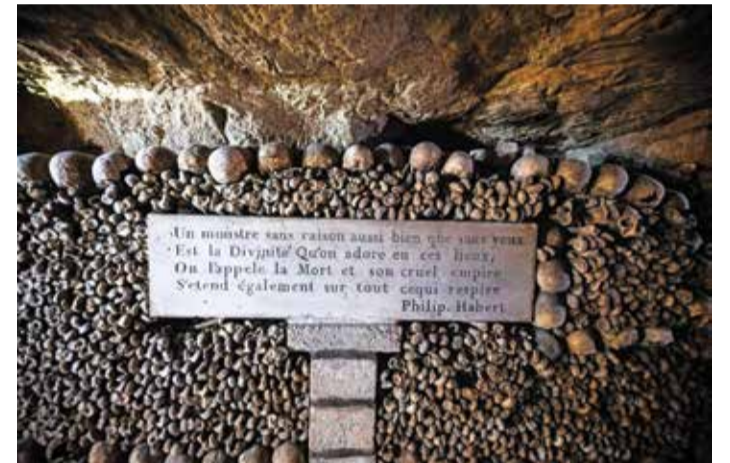
This photograph shows human skulls and bones aligned against a wall of Paris' Catacombs, the city's former quarries where the remains of some six million people were transferred from saturated Parisian cemeteries between the end of the 18th century until 1861. — AFP photos



Workers arrange human skulls and bones against a wall during restoration work of Paris' Catacombs.



This photograph shows human skulls and bones aligned against a wall of Paris' Catacombs.



This photograph shows a stone block with a quote by French poet Philippe Habert next to human skulls and bones aligned against a wall of Paris' Catacombs.



A worker sorts human bones during restoration work of Paris' Catacombs.



This photograph shows a view of Paris' Catacombs.



A worker sorts human bones during restoration work of Paris' Catacombs.

DRY BONE WALLS

Paris rebuilds its Catacombs

In gloomy burial tunnels under Paris, workers carefully stacked the bones and skulls of people killed during the French Revolution into a new, neater wall. The Paris Catacombs, the final resting place for several million Parisians, is starting to rebuild its collapsing walls of human remains. This week visitors to the massive underground ossuary, which attracts some 600,000 tourists a year, could spot experts beaver away in a brightly lit corner to realign one of its around 200 stacks of bones.

The "wall of the September 1792 martyrs" includes the remains of some 1,000 people killed during one of the bloodiest episodes of the French Revolution. Dry stone wall builder Martin Muriot said restacking their bones was a balancing act like building any other wall without mortar. "It's a bit like playing with wooden building blocks," he said, dressed in a blue jumpsuit and face mask. First specialists need to sift through the bones to pick out those in best condition for the new wall's facade.

"All the damaged ones will be used as filling," he said. Nearby two glove-wearing technicians worked together to remove a skull and replace it with another. But as they did, a skull tumbled to the floor. One of the technicians, Hubert Joachim, then painstakingly placed small bits of debris above a row of fragile skulls.

"Without these wedges, the bones (on top) would touch the skulls and could break them," said Joachim, who usually handles works of art. Civil engineer Nathanael Savalle said building a bone wall was a tricky business. Its blocks are "six times lighter than earth", he said. There's a "lot of empty space both between and inside the bones".

'Surprising' work
French authorities began moving human remains from the city's burial grounds to abandoned quarries under



Workers arrange human skulls and bones against a wall during restoration work of Paris' Catacombs.

Paris in the late 18th century, worried that decomposing cadavers were a health hazard. They then moved more when the capital was rebuilt in the 19th century. Catacombs manager Isabelle Knafo said rebuilding this first wall—a stack 2 meters (6.5 feet) long and 1.8 meters high—was a test.

If all went well, others inside the ossuary would be redone next year and the year after. She pointed to a net holding up another wall not far off, its middle bulging out after a part of the quarry ceiling fell on top of it. "Bones can last hundreds of years", but time, erosion and humidity can damage the stacks they have been placed in, she said.

Some 20 meters (65 feet) under the capital's bustling streets, it's an unusual place to be rebuilding a wall. With no bathrooms within easy access, workers have to do three-hour stints.

"It's a bit surprising at first. We're not used to this kind of thing," said Edouard Gomis, another technician. "But once you get into it, you forget you're handling bones." Muriot, the dry stone wall builder, said he found the work "interesting". "But I wouldn't spend my life doing it," he said. He was used to working outdoors in the fresh air, not deep underground. "It's not really where I feel most comfortable," he said.—AFP



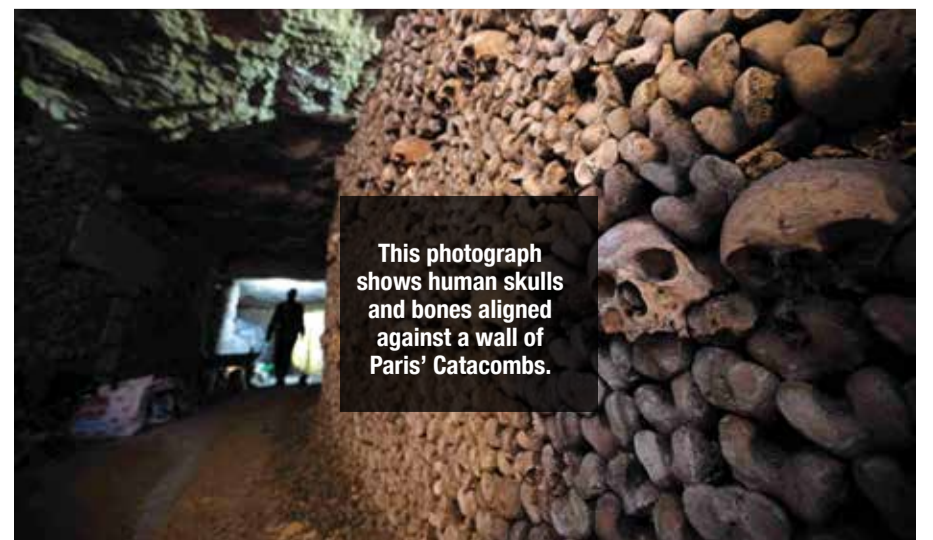
Workers arrange human skulls and bones against a wall during restoration work of Paris' Catacombs.



This photograph shows human skulls and bones aligned against a wall of Paris' Catacombs.



A worker sorts human bones during restoration work of Paris' Catacombs.



This photograph shows human skulls and bones aligned against a wall of Paris' Catacombs.

Lifestyle



US film writers Matt Duffer and Ross Duffer, The Duffer Brothers (left), Netflix Co-CEO Ted Sarandos (third left), British theatre producer Sonia Friedman (center), US actor David Harbour (second right) and US actor Matthew Modine (right) pose on the red carpet upon arrival to attend the West End world premiere of "Stranger Things: The Last Shadow" stage play.



British singer Lily Allen and US actor David Harbour pose on the red carpet upon arrival to attend the West End world premiere of "Stranger Things: The Last Shadow" stage play at the Phoenix Theatre in central London.--AFP photos

Stage version of Netflix hit 'Stranger Things' opens in London



British singer Lily Allen poses on the red carpet upon arrival.



US actor Jennifer Garner poses on the red carpet upon arrival.



US actor Matthew Modine poses on the red carpet upon arrival.



Canadian film director Shawn Levy (left) and Australian actor Hugh Jackman (right) pose on the red carpet.

After proving to be one of Netflix's most popular shows, the makers of "Stranger Things" are hoping for similar success with a stage adaptation of the science-fiction-horror series, which opened in Britain Thursday. "Stranger Things: The First Shadow", which premiered at the Phoenix Theatre in London's West End, is a prequel to the hit television series, which had its fourth season released in May.

Directed by Stephen Daldry, whose lengthy directing credits include "The Crown", the play also takes place in the small US town of Hawkins, Indiana, some two decades before the "Stranger Things" fans worldwide have come to know. The play's creators promise it "brings the world of 'Stranger Things' to life in a completely new way", taking audiences "right back to the beginning of the... story" and teasing that it "may hold the key to the end".

Hollywood stars including Hugh Jackman and James McAvoy were among those to turn out on the red carpet Thursday night in the British capital, alongside Netflix co-CEO Ted

Sarandos. The multi-award-winning series has been one of the streaming giant's most popular series since debuting in 2016, with its fourth season alone amassing more than 140.7 million views globally.

Netflix is one of the producers of the new theatre show. Daldry said it had been "a joy" to work on bringing the stage adaptation to life, crediting a "ferociously talented cast", which includes Welsh actor Shane Attwooll as Chief Hopper.

"They're an extraordinarily gifted group of actors, and we can't wait to share this origin story with audiences," he added of the cast of largely lesser-known names. "Stranger Things" was created by Matt and Ross Duffer, and the brothers are creative producers on the theatre production, while Kate Trefry wrote the stage play after also helping script the TV series. "We couldn't be more thrilled," the Duffer brothers said ahead of the curtain lifting on the London production.--AFP



US actor Daniel Dae Kim poses on the red carpet upon arrival.



British actor James McAvoy and his wife Lisa Liberati pose on the red carpet upon arrival.



Jamaican-British actor Michael Ward poses on the red carpet upon arrival.

'Soul of our ancestors': US to return stolen Cambodian treasures

A prestigious US museum will hand back more than a dozen valuable antiquities to Cambodia, a prosecutor said on Friday, after they were plundered and illegally trafficked into the institution's collection. They were originally stolen by prolific antiquities trafficker Douglas Latchford who in 2019 was charged with operating a major network that stole treasures from Southeast Asia. A priceless 10th century goddess sandstone statue and a larger-than-life Buddha head from the 7th century are among the items being returned.



This image released by the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York shows a 7th century Head of Buddha.--AFP

Prosecutors said 13 Khmer antiquities were being returned, but the Met Museum, where they were displayed, said separately 14 sculptures would be returned to Cambodia, and two to Thailand. "The Met has voluntarily agreed to return the antiquities, and they are in

the process of being turned over," said the office of Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York. Latchford was charged with "orchestrating a multi-year scheme to sell looted Cambodian antiquities on the international art market," the office said. The indictment was later dismissed due to Latchford's death. "Following (Latchford's) indictment, the Met proactively reached out to (prosecutors) and to Cambodian officials, and through this cooperative partnership, the Museum received new information about the sculptures that made it clear that the works should be transferred," the Met said.

"A number of the sculptures—including the bronze masterpiece the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara Seated in Royal Ease (late 10th-early 11th century), and the monumental stone Head of Buddha (7th century) -- will remain on view in the museum's galleries for South Asian art while arrangements are made for their return to their countries of origin."

New York trafficking hub

The Met recently announced it would take steps to better respect cultural property including a review of its inventory. "They are very important items, that's why we are demanding them back. They are all our ancient artifacts. They are dated back to Angkorian era," Cambodian culture ministry spokesperson Hab Touch told AFP ahead of Friday's announcement. "They are very good items, ancient items that are the soul of our ancestors."

The works to be returned were stolen at the end of the 20th century, during the wars in Cambodia in the 1970s and during its 1990s reopening to the outside world. Thousands of statues and sculptures were trafficked internationally over decades from Cambodia to antique dealers in Bangkok, Thailand, before being illegally exported to collectors, businessmen and museums in Asia, Europe and the United States.--AFP

GREEK MUSEUM HANDS OVER REINS TO WOMEN ARTISTS

A Greek art museum this week handed over its halls exclusively to women artists, in a pioneering exhibition titled "What if women ruled the world?" "For 10 months, the entire museum will be in the hands of women artists," Katerina Gregos, artistic director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens (EMST), told AFP. The museum's permanent exhibitions have been reorganized to highlight the work of 25 women artists, with another 15 temporary displays to follow.

Among the painters, sculptors, photographers and others are Syrian-American contemporary artist Diana Al-Hadid, French visual artist Annette Messager, Iranian-American painter Tala Madani, Greek-Belgian contemporary artist Danaï Anesiadou and English visual artist Cornelia Parker. Until now, just 37 percent of artists represented in the museum's permanent exhibition were women, Gregos said.

The selected works address themes

including stereotypes of female beauty, violence against women, inequality, consumerism, and poverty disproportionately affecting women. "Women artists are still under-represented in most aspects of the art world," said Gregos, who took over the post of artistic director in 2021. "We wanted to reverse the trend and see what a museum would look like if, instead of a few token pieces, works by women artists made up the majority," she said.

'Systematically marginalized'

Among the 18 top museums in the United States, 87 percent of works were created by men, according to the Washington-based National Museum of Women in the Arts. Similar statistics are not available for Greece. Several artists in the exhibition will be Greek, with Gregos stressing that women often have difficulty gaining recognition in a traditionally patriarchal country that has long languished outside the international art market mainstream.

"Especially in a country like Greece, where there has never been an organized feminist movement in the visual arts and where women artists have been systematically marginalized for decades, this initiative is an important message and, compensation for a major inequality," she said. At the beginning of the permanent exhibition, a frieze traces the progress of women's rights in Greece.

Women became eligible to vote only in 1953, and marriage dowries were officially abolished only in 1983. "Most wars and destruction are orchestrated mainly by men," Gregos said. "If women were in charge, perhaps there would be less violence, more compromise, more fairness. It wouldn't be a perfect world but it would certainly be different." Housed in a 19th-century brewery complex, the museum's full galleries opened in 2021.--AFP



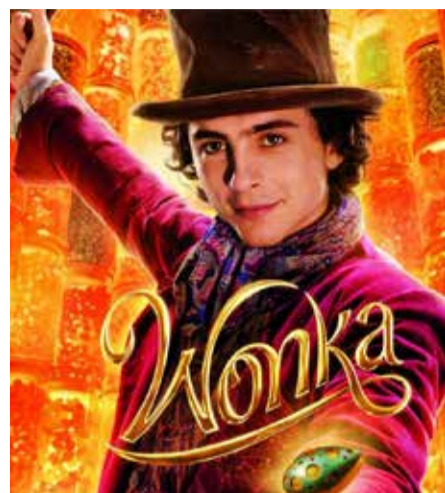
A visitor watches the video of a performance screened in the exhibition titled "What if women ruled the world?" at the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) in Athens.



Katerina Gregos, EMST Athens artistic director, leads a press visit of the exhibition titled "What if women ruled the world?"--AFP photos

Lifestyle

Hot chocolate for the holidays: 'Wonka' tops North America box office



Warner Bros' fantasy musical "Wonka," boosted by the star power of Timothée Chalamet, enjoyed a sweet opening in North American theaters this weekend after an equally strong debut overseas, industry watchers reported Sunday. The film took in an estimated \$39 million in the United States and Canada for the Friday-through-Sunday period, according to Exhibitor Relations. That came on top of \$112 million in tickets sold overseas, where the film opened a week earlier.

"This is an excellent opening," particularly since family-friendly films released in December tend to build through the holidays, said analyst David A. Gross.

"Momentum is very good," he added. The film is a prequel, with Chalamet as a younger version of Roald Dahl's famous chocolatier Willy Wonka, a character first played by Gene Wilder and then Johnny Depp. "Wonka" also stars Olivia Colman, Keegan-Michael Key, Sally Hawkins and, in his first appearance as an Oompa-Loompa, Hugh Grant.

Another prequel, Lionsgate's "Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes," placed second for the weekend at \$5.8 million, showing impressive staying power in its fifth week out. Tom Blyth, Rachel Zegler and Peter Dinklage star in the story about the 10th Hunger Games in the dystopian state

of Panem. In third place was animated fantasy "The Boy and the Heron," from Studio Ghibli, at \$5.2 million. The Japanese film follows 11-year-old Mahito who, during World War II, meets and communes with a talking gray heron after his mother dies in a fire.

The coming-of-age story from celebrated Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki topped the North American box office last weekend, becoming the first original anime production to do so. In fourth was another Japanese production, sci-fi action film "Godzilla Minus One," directed by Takashi Yamazaki and produced by Toho International, at \$4.9 million.

And in fifth was Universal and DreamWorks' "Trolls Band Together" at \$4 million in its fifth week out. The coming week should be a big one for North American theaters, with "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom" opening Friday and the new musical version of "The Color Purple" debuting on Christmas Day. Rounding out the top 10 this weekend were:

- "Wish" (\$3.2 million)
- "Christmas With the Chosen: Holy Night" (\$3 million)
- "Napoleon" (\$2.2 million)
- "Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé" (\$2 million)
- "Poor Things" (\$1.3 million)—AFP

Native oysters return to Belfast after a century's absence

Long gone from Belfast's famed harbor where the Titanic was built, oysters are making a comeback thanks to a nursery installation project aimed at boosting marine life and water quality. Until the early 1900s, the narrow Belfast Lough channel was home to

abundant in European seas, and humans have been harvesting them since the Stone Age. But the group estimates that oyster populations have declined by 95 percent since the 19th century, with native oyster reefs now one of the most threatened habitats in Europe.

searchers tracking their progress. After hoisting the metal oyster homes from the water, the team carefully removed each animal and placed them on the pier for measurement and weighing.

Pairs of oysters already conjoined are the early stages of forming a reef, said Smyth holding two aloft. "Imagine 100,000 of these all stuck together, this is what we are after, from them millions of larvae will settle around the shore and on the seabed," he told AFP with a satisfied smile. Among the ecological benefits of a restored habitat are boosted marine biodiversity and better water quality, according to Ulster Wildlife. "Just as with a coral reef, once these animals start forming their beds then small fish and crustaceans like mussels, barnacles, worms, snails, and algae will come to live and feed there," said Smyth. Oysters are also "supreme water filters" he noted, with just one animal able to filter over 200 liters of seawater a day.

But the resilient nursery animals have "performed impressively" so far with just two mortalities from the 700 oysters installed, with many more planned to be installed in the coming years, he added. Similar projects have got under way recently around Europe but the Belfast nursery aims at replicating a successful effort in New York, begun a decade ago with the goal of restoring millions of oysters to replicate conditions there in the 1800s.



Conservation Manager with Ulster Wildlife David Smyth holds an oyster cage at the City Quays, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.—AFP photos

large oyster reefs but overfishing, disease and pollution gradually decimated the population, according to the Ulster Wildlife group. "We're bringing back a lost habitat," the group's marine conservation manager David Smyth told AFP on a harbor quay in the shadow of a noisy downtown highway and towering commercial buildings.

Extensive native oyster beds were

'Coral reef'
Last month a nursery comprising some 700 of the molluscs—brought from Scotland by van, and measured and screened for disease—were lowered into Belfast Lough in over a dozen cages fitted with shelves. It should eventually create a local "equivalent of a coral reef", said Smyth during a check of the oysters' health with a team of re-

Encouraging signs

With cargo ships and passenger ferries maneuvering in and out of docks not far away, pollutants in the waterway make habitat rehabilitation a challenge. Shipbuilding was one of Belfast's largest industries for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, with the yellow gantry cranes of the shipyard that built the Titanic still defining Belfast's skyline beside a new museum celebrating the doomed liner. A coal yard and tannin works also contributed to long decades of environmental degradation. "It's very difficult for oysters' larvae to settle and become adults if they are exposed to the sort of pollutants present in an industrial shipping lane," said Smyth.



British artist Tracey Emin poses for pictures during a photocall for her latest exhibition entitled "The Last Great Adventure Is You" at the White Cube gallery in London. — AFP

Artist Emin recovering in Thailand after 'intestine nearly exploded'

Renowned British artist Tracey Emin is recovering in Thailand after her small intestine "nearly exploded" due to complications following an operation, she said in a social media post. Emin, one of Britain's best-known living artists, said Sunday on Instagram that she felt she had used "another one of my nine lives". The 60-year-old, a leading figure in the provocative Young British Artists movement of the late 1980s and 1990s, has battled cancer and undergone major surgery in recent years.

In her post she said she had been "very unwell" and thanked a hospital and luxury hotel on the Thai holiday island of Phuket. "Not cancer but horrible complications with my intestines brought on by an infection, scar tissue and made a million times worse by flying," she wrote.

"My small intestine nearly exploded. Luckily for me I was in Thailand on my way back from Australia, so I spent a few days in a very good hospital and now recovering in luxury." Turner Prize nominee Emin was seen as an enfant terrible in the 1990s, making her name with eye-opening, often sexually provocative works, alongside a disarmingly frank public persona. Her installation "My Bed" -- an unmade bed surrounded by intimate debris including empty vodka bottles, cigarette packets and condoms -- caused a sensation in Britain when it was unveiled in 1998.—AFP



Marine Conservation officer with Ulster Wildlife Rachel Millar, holds an oyster at the City Quays, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

"New York's the shining example of how well these animals can do in an industrial area," said Smyth. "There were dolphins swimming around the Statue of Liberty for the first time in years recently, we don't know if we will ever have dolphins swimming in Belfast but you never know," he laughed, before letting a cage drop back below the water.—AFP



Conservation Manager with Ulster Wildlife David Smyth measures the size of an oyster at the City Quays, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.



Conservation Manager with Ulster Wildlife David Smyth (left) and two workers look at oyster cages at the City Quays, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.



Marine Conservation officer with Ulster Wildlife Rachel Millar holds an oyster cage at the City Quays, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.



Otar Iosseliani.

Georgian filmmaker Otar Iosseliani dies at 89

Otar Iosseliani, an award-winning filmmaker, has died in his native Georgia, his French distributor said Sunday. He was 89. His death on Saturday night was confirmed by Regine Vial, from the Les Films du Losange company.

Iosseliani was born in Tbilisi and studied at the VGIK cinema school in Moscow in the 1950's. His early films in Georgia—"Falling Leaves" and "Pastorale"—won him an international following. In the early 1980's he moved to France where he would live much of the rest of his life and where he made "Favorites of the Moon", which won a special jury prize at the Venice Film Festival.

It was the first in a series of wins at Venice for his films. Iosseliani won the Louis-Delluc prize in France in 1999 for "Farewell, Home Sweet Home" and headed one of the Cannes Film Festival's juries in 2000. And in 2002 he picked up two prizes, including Best Director, for "Monday Morning" at the Berlin Film Festival. His films were known for their imagination and ironic aloofness. He once said he wanted his films to be a "gift to someone I don't know but who has the same ideas as I do."—AFP

French museum removes Depardieu wax sculpture

A French museum on Monday removed a wax likeness of film superstar Gerard Depardieu, the management said, in the latest such measure taken against the actor accused of sexual assault. The Grevin Museum took away his statue "following the negative reactions of visitors" passing in front of it, as well as comments "on social media", it said. A life-size representation of Depardieu, 74, had been on display

at the wax museum since 1981.

Depardieu, an icon of French cinema with more than 200 titles to his name, was charged with rape in 2020 and has been accused of sexual harassment and assault by more than a dozen women. A television report released this month which included footage of him making sexist comments, has thrown the allegations back in the limelight and reignited a debate about sexism in French cinema. Depardieu in October rejected all accusations against him, and his family on Sunday denounced an "unprecedented conspiracy" against him.

Despite no court ruling against him, many have rushed to distance themselves from the actor in recent days. On Saturday, a Belgian municipality stripped Depardieu of the title of honorary citizen, several days after the Ca-

nadian province of Quebec revoked its top honour over his "scandalous" comments against women.

Last week, French Culture Minister Rima Abdul Malak said the actor's behaviour shamed France, noting that he might be stripped of the Legion of Honour, the country's top award. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron withdrew the Legion of Honour from Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein after a series of accusations of sexual harassment and rape. Depardieu was one of around 250 French and international personalities represented at the Grevin Museum. Others have included French football icon Zinedine Zidane and French actor Omar Sy, as well as American film star Ryan Gosling and Britain's King Charles III.—AFP



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

Sports

Bills end Dallas win streak but Cowboys reach NFL playoffs, Ravens advance

Baltimore Ravens became the fourth team to qualify for playoffs

WASHINGTON: Buffalo quarterback Josh Allen made NFL history to ignite the Bills' 31-10 rout of Dallas on Sunday to snap a five-game win streak even as the Cowboys clinched a playoff berth. James Cook ran 25 times for 179 yards and a touchdown and Bills defenders dominated the Cowboys in improving Buffalo to 8-6, still out of a playoff spot with three games remaining, while Dallas slid to 10-4.

"That James Cook. What a game from him," Allen said. "He ran the ball so hard. Our offensive line gave him holes to run through. Our guys on the perimeter blocked their tails off... and our defense came out and played so well."

Despite wind and heavy rain, Cook was the first Bill with a rushing and reception touchdown and more than 200 total yards in a game since Thurman Thomas in 1991. "Every opportunity that came my way, just had to make it count," Cook said. "Once you get the ball, you can't hesitate. You have to go."

After marching 75 yards on their first drive to grab the lead on Latavius Murray's 2-yard touchdown run, the Bills got an 18-yard Allen touchdown pass to Cook and a 1-yard Allen touchdown run to seize a 21-3 lead, the largest Dallas

halftime deficit in three years.

That gave Allen an NFL-record 10th game this season with touchdowns rushing and passing. "It wasn't a pretty passing game," Allen said. "We had the rain and wind and when in doubt, give it to our running backs to grind out some yards. We were smart with the ball." The Cowboys, who haven't won the NFL crown since the 1995 season, secured a third consecutive playoff appearance before the start thanks to losses by Atlanta and Green Bay, but lost ground in their quest to overtake San Francisco for the NFC top seed and first-round playoff bye. Playoff-bound San Francisco, powered by Brock Purdy's four touchdown passes, captured the NFC West division crown and improved to 11-3 by beating host Arizona 45-29.

Ravens reach playoffs

The 49ers stretched their win streak to six games and that combined with Atlanta and Green Bay losses secured a playoff berth for the Philadelphia Eagles (10-3), who visit Seattle on Monday. The Baltimore Ravens became the fourth team to qualify for the playoffs with a 23-7 victory at Jacksonville and stayed atop the AFC at 11-3.

The Los Angeles Rams kept Detroit from sealing a playoff spot by defeating Washington 28-20. Two-time NFL Most Valuable Player Patrick Mahomes threw for 305 yards and two touchdowns in defending champion Kansas City's 27-17 victory at New England.

"There's some stuff we've got to clean up, like all season long, but we're going to try and get better and keep it rolling," Mahomes said. "When we're executing well, we're hard to beat." The Miami Dolphins, without top NFL receiver Tyreek Hill due to an ankle injury, blanked the New York Jets 30-0 with Raheem Mostert rushing for two touchdowns and Tua Tagovailoa throwing for 224 yards and a touchdown.

"It's tough not having one of your star guys out there," Tagovailoa said. "We have a lot of other guys we believe in and that's what happened out there—it's just the trust we have in each other." The Dolphins reached 10-4 for the first time in 23 years but remain a game behind Baltimore for the AFC top seed with Kansas City next at 9-5.

Baker Mayfield completed 22-of-28 passes for 381 yards and four touchdowns to lead Tampa Bay's 34-20 victory at Green Bay. New Orleans stayed



Josh Allen

level with Tampa Bay atop the NFC South by beating the New York Giants 24-6 as Derek Carr threw for 218 yards and three touchdowns.

Carolina's Eddy Pineiro kicked his third field goal, a 23-yarder on the last play, to lift the host Panthers over Atlan-

ta 9-7. Dustin Hopkins kicked a 34-yard field goal with 32 seconds to play to give Cleveland a 20-17 home win over Chicago. Houston's Ka'imi Fairbairn kicked his fourth field goal, a 54-yarder on the final play, to give the Texans a 19-16 overtime triumph at Tennessee. — AFP

Special Olympics International, Special Olympics Kuwait mourn the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf

KUWAIT: The Regional Presidency of Special Olympics International for the Middle East and North Africa region mourned the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Engineer Ayman Abdelwahab, the regional president, said that the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, may God have mercy on him, is a great loss not to the Islamic and Arab worlds, but to the entire world, because of the role he played as a leader of the State of Kuwait.

Humanitarian, and people with intellectual disabilities have received many forms of this support since he was crown prince, and the support continued after he took over Kuwait. The regional president extended his sincere condolences and sympathy to the sisterly State of Kuwait, the government and people's leadership, praying to God Almighty to accept him in His heavenly abode. "To God we belong and to Him we shall return."

Meanwhile, with hearts filled with pain, Special Olympics Kuwait mourned its Amir and leader, the caring father Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, may God rest his soul, after a long journey of giving and leading the country's journey with wisdom and ability and tireless efforts to achieve comprehensive renaissance, development and construction, and to achieve the progress and prosperity that his children aspire to.

The National Director of the National Olympics, Rihab Bouresli, on her behalf and on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Special Olympics and all its members, extended sincere condolences to the Kuwaiti people and to the honorable Al-Sabah Family on the passing of the Amir of Pardon, leaving a great legacy of fragrant biography and high humanitarian meanings, through which he embodied a model that we are proud of as a father and leader, in humility. He has patience, toughness, will, responsibility, and love of the country. And reward him well on our behalf, in proportion to the great deeds he performed for the progress



Rihab Bouresli



Ayman Abdelwahab

of his country, and in proportion to the great tasks he shouldered to raise Kuwait, and in proportion to the great challenges he faced and overcame to preserve his gains, and in proportion to the effort he exerted in guiding its direction to the horizons of progress and prosperity.

We remember with all gratitude his caring and support to his children with disabilities and harnessing all capabilities to provide them with a decent life, asking God Almighty to cover him in His vast mercy and generous pardon and to preserve our beloved Kuwait under the leadership of His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, may God protect him.

her's love of India's cricket greats—"Ra" from Rahul Dravid and 'chin' from Sachin Tendulkar.

Ravindra, a left-handed batter and spinner, had his name chanted by Indian fans during the World Cup and can expect the same enthusiasm from franchisees when his name comes up for grabs at a base price of \$60,000.

Harry Brook (England)

Exciting England batsman Brook has plundered runs in all three international formats and has a strike rate of 141.54 in the T20 version. He was snapped up by Sunrisers Hyderabad for \$1.6 million in the previous auction but failed to make much of an impact, barring a century early in this year's IPL. The 24-year-old then managed just 169 runs in six World Cup matches, but recently hit a match-winning 43 in a West Indies ODI and has kept his base price at \$240,000.

Gerald Coetzee (South Africa)

One of the breakout stars of the World Cup, Coetzee finished inside the top five bowlers in the competition with 20 wickets. The South African quick made his debut early this year in a Test against West Indies at Centurion and has since played every format to add to the Proteas' pace riches. Coetzee, 23, is looking to boost his career in the money-spinning IPL and has kept himself in the top bracket with a base price of \$240,000.

Wanindu Hasaranga (Sri Lanka)

Hasaranga has built a reputation of taking wickets at crucial junctures with his leg-spin and has been Sri Lanka's go-to bowler in white-ball formats. The all-rounder earned a \$1.43 million contract at Royal Challengers Bangalore in 2022 but was released by the team ahead of this year's auction.

He has claimed 158 wickets in limited-overs formats and has a T20 strike rate of more than 124 as an attacking middle-order batsman. The 26-year-old missed the World Cup with injury but should expect another lucrative IPL contract with a base price of \$180,000. — AFP

Cummins leads stars up for grabs in big money IPL auction

NEW DELHI: Some of the world's top cricketers will go under the hammer in Dubai on Tuesday in the next auction for the lucrative Indian Premier League. Players can start the bidding for their services at up to \$240,000 but the best will be snapped up for many times that. This time the 10 IPL franchises will have a combined \$31.5 million to spend.

The Twenty20 tournament, the richest in cricket, is expected to begin in March. With the players pocketing most of the fee, AFP looks at five stars who could hit the jackpot:

Pat Cummins (Australia)

Cummins skipped this year's IPL because of a packed calendar but will make a triumphant return after taking Australia to World Cup glory in India. The fast bowler silenced a crowd of 100,000 in the final in Ahmedabad when he bowled out Indian hero Virat Kohli and was widely lauded for his captaincy in leading Australia to the title. Cummins, 30, who previously made an auction record of \$2.17 million when he signed with the Kolkata Knight Riders in 2019, will enter with a top base price of \$240,000. Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Mitchell Starc, Steve Smith and Sean Abbott will be among the other Australian World Cup winners in the hunt for a payday.

Rachin Ravindra (New Zealand)

The up-and-coming batting all-rounder of Indian origin made three centuries in his 578 runs at the World Cup for a strike rate of 106, along with five tournament wickets. The 24-year-old's first name reflects his fa-

Button expects Hamilton to bounce back

PARIS: Former Formula One world champion Jenson Button says his old teammate Lewis Hamilton needs "the right car" to return to the front of the grid next season with Red Bull favourites again to clean up in 2024.

For the second year running, Mercedes driver Hamilton failed to win a grand prix as Max Verstappen won 19 of the 22 races with Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez taking two of the other three. "Red Bull are going to be at the front again next year," Button told AFP.

"They had a strong car this year and they've been able to work on next year's car. "The thing is, if you just look at the results of the race, you go 'Oh Max Verstappen won again' but when you actually watch the races, there have been some amazing races this year. "Max hasn't had it all his own way. He's come out on top in the end but there have been some great fights this season."

"I have enjoyed the year. Would I like more people winning? Yes of course. But it's just not happened." Button, who has just announced a return to full-time racing in 2024 with the World Endurance Championship, knows a thing or two about domination having won six of the first seven races in 2009, a start that launched him to the title with Brawn.

And he has an admiration for the single-mindedness with which Verstappen set about his business. "I think Max has done such an amazing job," said Button. "He's not put a foot wrong. He's obviously driving a good car, you don't win without a good car, but you've just got to compare him to where his teammate was most races. It's a big difference."

"Going into 2024, Red Bull are still the favourites but I think the other teams will be a bit closer. "It's



ABU DHABI: (FILES) McLaren Honda's British driver Jenson Button attends the drivers press conference ahead of the Abu Dhabi Formula One Grand Prix at the Yas Marina circuit. — AFP

not going to be easy to beat Max in a Red Bull if his head is in the right place."

'Definitely good enough'

One of those with realistic expectations of challenging Verstappen is seven-time champion Hamilton who will be 39 by the start of next season. Can he legitimately expect to compete as he did in the thrilling and controversial 2021 title race?

"Lewis wouldn't race if he didn't think he wasn't good enough," says Button who shared a pit with Hamilton when they were both at McLaren. "Lewis is definitely good enough to win races and to win a championship—with the right car."

"Coming up against Max is difficult but if Lewis is in a car that suits him and Max is in a car that suits him... I look forward to that fight. "Hopefully we will see it before Lewis retires, he's definitely got the ability to do that."

Button, 43, will contest the full programme of eight races, including Le Mans, in the World Endurance Championship in the Hypercar category with Hertz Team JOTA driving a Porsche 963. — AFP

Tiger encouraged for comeback after knocking off the rust

MIAMI: Tiger Woods says he has been encouraged by his performance in two December events, the first competitive golf for the 15-time major winner since April ankle surgery. Woods, who turns 48 later this month, had not played since the Masters eight months ago before placing 18th of 20 in the Hero World Challenge two weeks ago.

"A lot of things are aching a lot more than my ankle, which is the way it goes," Woods said. "I'll be able to walk and play. We've been working out hard, been able to recover." On Sunday, he and 14-year-old son Charlie Woods combined to shoot 61 and grab a share of fifth at the PNC Championship in Orlando, Florida.

They finished on 19-under 125 in the parent-child pairs event to stand six strokes adrift of German winner Bernhard Langer and his son Jason. Woods had struggled to walk four rounds after severe leg injuries suffered in a 2021 car crash but has said he plans to compete once a month next year thanks to a strong fitness recovery.

"We've been training every day, which is great," Woods said. "It has been nice to knock off a lot of the rust and some of the doubt I've had because quite frankly I haven't hit a shot that counted in a long time."

"So having to post a score and hit shots on the right number, hit shots with consequence, it has been nice," Woods says his surgically repaired right ankle, which once had him limping through rounds at majors, is no longer such an issue.

"The ankle was fine because it's now fused but other parts were definitely aching," Woods said. "The fact we were able to train right away and get after it, and start hitting balls, it was encouraging." Woods is not exempt for next year's US Open, but the three-time US Open champion would likely receive an exemption.

"As of right now, no, I'm not in," Woods said.



Tiger Woods

Sports

Liverpool frustrated as Man Utd show spirit in defiant draw

Liverpool kicked off in third place after wins for Arsenal, Aston Villa

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool missed a chance to return to the top of the Premier League as troubled Manchester United finally showed some fighting spirit in a gritty 0-0 draw on Sunday. United had Diogo Dalot sent off for dissent in the final seconds of stoppage time at Anfield, but Liverpool had long since run out of ideas in the face of the visitors' defiant display.

Having started the weekend in top spot, Liverpool kicked off in third place after wins for Arsenal and Aston Villa earlier on Sunday. Jurgen Klopp's side dominated a dull clash against their hated rivals, but lacked the cutting edge required to extend their winning run in the league to four matches.

Liverpool sit in second place, one point behind leaders Arsenal ahead of their summit meeting with the Gunners at Anfield on Saturday.

"I saw a lot of good things, the one thing I don't like is the result. We should have scored," Klopp said. "I can't remember such a dominant performance against Man Utd, but they defended with a lot of passion." While Liverpool were left frustrated after failing to win at home for the first time in 12 games in all competitions, for United the result was a step in the right direction after another dismal week.

Ravaged by injuries and missing suspended captain Bruno Fernandes, United showed the kind of tenacity absent for much of a turbulent campaign. Last weekend's home humbling by Bournemouth was followed by a 1-0 defeat against Bayern Munich on Tuesday that condemned United to a meek Champions League group stage exit.

Erik ten Hag's team were back at Anfield for the first time since being hammered there 7-0 in March, an abject surrender that ranked among the most hu-

milating defeats in the club's history. They remain without a win at Anfield since 2016, but after so many chastening visits over the last seven years, the under-fire Ten Hag left grateful for small mercies as United avoided more embarrassment.

"The game-plan went well, the players were brilliant how they stuck together and were in the fight," Ten Hag said. In keeping with the toxic nature of English football's most bitter rivalry, Liverpool were forced to "utterly condemn" the fans who bombarded United's team bus with missiles before the game, leading to a window being smashed by a glass bottle. That ugly scene was followed by a scrappy game equally short on appealing qualities.

Defiant United

Without a goal in his last nine games, Darwin Nunez couldn't convert Salah's lobbed cross as he stretched in vain at the far post. Salah has enjoyed tormenting United in the past and he nearly bagged another goal at their expense when his close-range effort was deflected wide after Andre Onana failed to hold Nunez's header.

Liverpool's territorial dominance produced eight corners in the first 30 minutes, with Virgil van Dijk almost turning one into the opening goal as his header was pushed over by Onana. Ibrahima Konate headed wastefully over from yet another Liverpool corner, but despite the Reds' sustained pressure, United were organised enough to keep Klopp's men at bay.

A frustrating half for Liverpool ended fittingly when Salah's strike from a good position inside the area was comfortably saved by Onana. It was a similar pattern after the interval as Liverpool controlled possession and United stubbornly refused to crack.



LIVERPOOL: Manchester United's English defender #23 Luke Shaw (R) defends from the path of Liverpool's Egyptian striker #11 Mohamed Salah during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Manchester United at Anfield in Liverpool. — AFP

Klopp moved Trent Alexander-Arnold into midfield in the second half and the right-back went close with a first-time shot that flashed inches wide from the edge of the area. United striker Rasmus Hojlund was anonymous for long periods and when he finally did get a sight of goal, the Dane shot straight at Alisson Becker after Scott McTominay's pass gave him a

glorious opportunity to break the deadlock.

Onana made a good stop to deny Salah after the Egyptian advanced menacingly, while Luis Diaz's effort was turned away by Dalot. Dalot's positive contribution was followed by a needless one when he was shown a second yellow card for berating referee Michael Oliver while disputing a throw-in. — AFP

Martinez, Thuram fire Inter Milan four points clear

MILAN: Lautaro Martinez and Marcus Thuram shot Inter Milan four points clear at the top of Serie A with a goal each in Sunday's 2-0 win at Lazio which continued their thrilling strike partnership. Inter's dynamic attacking duo made sure their team took full advantage of closest rivals Juventus only drawing at Genoa on Friday to put daylight between Simone Inzaghi's side and the rest of the chasing pack.

The pair have scored 22 of Inter's 39 Serie A goals this term as they gun to beat local rivals AC Milan—nine points back in third after beating Monza 3-0 -- to 20 league titles. Argentina striker Martinez dedicated his goal to his hometown of Bahia Blanca, where a powerful storm caused the death of at least 13 people when the roof of a sports club collapsed.

"My city and family have been affected by the storm, I wanted to send a message," said Martinez. Inzaghi has never won the Scudetto as a coach but his team have been by far Italy's best over the 16 matches played so far and continued their charge against a team where the coach spent most of his playing career.

His attentions now turn to Monday's draw for the Champions League last 16, where he predicted a rematch of last season's final with Manchester City. Martinez sent Inter on their way five minutes before the break by netting his 17th goal of a remarkable season to date, pouncing on a dreadful Adam Marusic backpass before skipping around Lazio goalkeeper Ivan Provedel and prodding home.

And France forward Thuram doubled the away side's lead in the 66th minute when after being set up by Nicolo Barella he rolled home his eighth club goal of the season. That strike ended Lazio's resistance and left Maurizio Sarri's side 11th following a first home defeat since August, with Manuel Lazzari's late red card for dissent the icing on a bitter cake.

Reijnders delivers

Milan strolled to victory at the San Siro in large part thanks to a stellar display from Tijjani Reijnders who opened the scoring with a brilliant third-minute



ROME: Inter Milan's French forward #09 Marcus Thuram tries to score against Lazio's Italian goalkeeper #94 Ivan Provedel and Lazio's Spanish defender #34 Mario Gila Fuentes during the Italian Serie A football match Lazio vs Inter Milan at the Olympic stadium in Rome. — AFP

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.

"You always have to believe, we are not finished yet," said Reijnders of Milan's title hopes. 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. Simic, 18, doubled the hosts' lead three minutes before half-time, ramming home Rafael Leao's low cross before bathing in adulation from supporters as his parents wept with joy in the stands. "It's a dream for any kid to make your debut for a club like AC Milan and scoring on your debut is incredible," said Simic to Sky.

Bologna in top four

Bologna have been the revelation of the season

the resulting short corner as his driven cross was well cleared by Leny Yoro in the six-yard box with the goal gaping before him.

The game kept its rhythm into the second half, but PSG were offered a golden opportunity to break the deadlock just after the hour mark when Bafode Diakite lunged into the back of Lucas Hernandez inside the Lille box. Chevalier guessed right, but France captain Mbappe's shot had too much pace and precision for the stopper to get a hand to it and prevent the Parisians taking the lead in the 66th minute.

A good chance fell Yusuf Yazici's way but as he shot in plenty of space following Zhegrov's cut-back, Marquinhos got quickly out to him and deflected a goal-bound effort out for a corner. One minute from time, a free-kick near the area gave Lille a chance but Angel Gomes could only find the wall, before seeing his follow-up effort charged down.

Hopes of a leveller then seemed all but dead until Adam Ounas' shot was deflected on its way through to Amau Tenas, who made a fine save with his legs, but was left helpless on the floor as David gleefully headed home in what was nearly the last action of the match.

Marseille continue fine form

Two goals in the first half from Amir Murillo and Amine Harit secured a 2-1 win for resurgent Marseille earlier on Sunday, as the south coast side continue to climb the table. Gennaro Gattuso's men seemed to have the points sewn up against bottom-side Clermont, until a Jim Allevinah goal halved the deficit but with over 40 minutes remaining they held out for their fourth successive league win.

"I'm very happy today. We played a great game

so far and will finish the weekend fourth after an impressive 2-0 win against top-four rivals Roma. Nikola Moro's 37th-minute strike and a Rasmus Kristensen own goal shortly after the break were enough for Bologna to claim their third win in four games and jump a point above champions Napoli and Fiorentina, who beat Verona 1-0 earlier in the day.

Motta has done a sensational job at Bologna after replacing Sinisa Mihajlovic in September last year, just over three months before his Serbian predecessor succumbed to leukaemia. "I'm sure that Sinisa was watching over us, and giving us a hand," said Motta.

Mourinho, whose team missed key attackers Paulo Dybala and Romelu Lukaku, drop down to seventh, three points from Bologna. "Without Paulo, there's no class, and without Romelu there's no physical presence," said Mourinho, who confirmed that he intends to stay at Roma next season. Udinese are one point above the relegation zone after throwing away a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 with Sassuolo. — AFP



VILLENEUVE-D'ASCQ: Lille's Swedish defender #05 Gabriel Gudmundsson (R) and Paris Saint-Germain's Portuguese midfielder #15 Danilo Pereira fight for the ball during the French L1 football match between Lille LOSC and Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) at Stade Pierre-Mauroy in Villeneuve-d'Ascq, northern France. — AFP

in the first half, both tactically and technically," said the Italian coach. "In the second half we suffered," he added, explaining that his charges' less-impressive performance after half-time was due to Thursday's away defeat to Brighton in the Europa League.

"We went to bed at 5:30 am (after the tie)... when you lose that much energy, especially after a hard blow like the one we suffered at Brighton, things like that can happen." Four minutes before the half-hour mark, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang found Murillo in the box and the defender controlled and rifled home a fine right-footed half-volley. — AFP

Pogacar to make Giro d'Italia debut in 2024

ROME: Tadej Pogacar will race the Giro d'Italia for the first time in his career in 2024, the double Tour de France champion announced on Sunday. In a video published on social media by the organisers of the Italian Grand Tour, Pogacar is shown landing at Milan's Linate airport and saying "let's go" after stepping into a taxi.

UAE rider Pogacar, 25, will complete his collection of Grand Tours after also competing in the 2019 Vuelta a Espana, where he finished third. Slovene Pogacar is a popular rider in Italy where he has already racked up a series of big wins.

He is one of three men to win Il Lombardia three years in a row, claimed Strade Bianche last year and the Tirreno-Adriatico stage race in both 2021 and 2022. The Giro will start on May 4 around Turin, and after three stages in the north-western Piedmont region which borders France, the three-week race will descend to Naples before crossing to the Adriatic to head north to the Alps.

It will finish in Rome for the second straight year, on May 26. Pogacar's countryman Primož Roglic won this year's edition in the Italian capital. The Tour de France starts in Florence just over a month later—the first of four stages in Italy—before the Olympic Games commence in Paris on July 26. No one has won the Tour and Giro in the same season since Marco Pantani in 1998. — AFP

Rangers beat Aberdeen to lift Scottish Cup

GLASGOW: James Tavernier scored the only goal as Rangers picked up their first trophy of the Philippe Clement era with a 1-0 win over Aberdeen in Sunday's League Cup final. The prolific skipper rifled in the winner in the 76th minute of a hard-fought encounter at Hampden Park to hand his Belgian boss his first trophy after just two months at Ibrox.

The victory completed a clean sweep of domestic trophy wins for the full-back and it also meant Clement remains unbeaten in 14 games since taking over from Michael Beale in October. It was the 28th time the Ibrox club have won the trophy—the first since 2011 -- and they still have interest in the Premiership title and Europa League this season.

Both sides were below par in the first half. Rangers winger Ross McCausland had the ball in the Aberdeen net in the 39th minute but referee Don Robertson had blown for an infringement inside the Dons' box. Aberdeen goalkeeper Kelle Roos made crucial saves in the second half from a Cyriel Dessers strike and free-kicks from Tavernier and left-back Borna Barisic.

Rangers took the lead when Barisic made it to the byline and his deep cross from the left found Tavernier, who took a touch and fired home to send the blue section of Hampden into raptures. Aberdeen tried to hit back and there were some nervy moments in the Rangers defence, but they held on to win.

"Aberdeen gave us a tough game, but we knew if we remained tight at the back and limited them our chance would come," goalscorer Tavernier told Viaplay. He said the first trophy under Clement was the "start of something really special for this team." "This is a great first step," he added. "We've got to keep pushing and building on this momentum." — AFP

Madrid thrash Villarreal to go top

Defender David Alaba suffers serious knee injury



MADRID: Real Madrid's Brazilian forward #11 Rodrygo (L) falls down during the Spanish league football match between Real Madrid CF and Villarreal CF at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid. — AFP

BARCELONA: Real Madrid cruised to a 4-1 win over Villarreal on Sunday to move top of La Liga but their night was tarnished when defender David Alaba suffered a serious knee injury. Carlo Ancelotti's side are a point ahead of Catalan minnows Girona, who host Alaves on Monday and will be looking to reclaim pole position.

Spain's top scorer Jude Bellingham broke the deadlock for Madrid with his 13th league goal of the season before Rodrygo Goes doubled their lead. Villarreal pulled one back through Jose Luis Morales, but Brahim Diaz scored a superb solo goal to restore Madrid's advantage.

Luka Modric drove home the fourth as Madrid fans celebrated a sizeable victory in their final home match of the year. Madrid's joy was tempered by Alaba's injury, confirmed by the club in a statement, say-

ing the defender needs surgery.

The Austrian joins a long list of players out, including Thibaut Courtois, Eder Militao and Eduardo Camavinga, all with knee injuries, and winger Vinicius Junior among others. Ancelotti said Alaba's injury was "very sad" but praised his team's performance. "We think we are doing very well, it was one of our best games," said the coach. The highlight of the night was Diaz's fine individual strike. "It's the kind of move I usually try, today it went in, so I'm very happy," Diaz told Real Madrid TV. "I'm happy for the team's work, we did a great job today and I'm happy for the goal and for the win."

Former Manchester City midfielder Diaz is striking up a fruitful relationship with Bellingham and Rodrygo in attack. "We understand each other well, we

all get along because it's an incredible group, we are very united and you see that on the pitch," he added.

Ancelotti put his faith in England international Bellingham to take an attacking role this season for Madrid and it is paying off in virtually every match. The 20-year-old netted his 17th goal across all competitions in his 20th match this season to get the party started after Madrid saw rivals Barcelona, third, held at Valencia on Saturday.

Comfortable triumph

Madrid, playing at the renovated Santiago Bernabeu with the new roof closed for just the second time, made the early running against Villarreal. They got their reward midway through the first half when Bellingham leaped high to nod

home Modric's delicious clipped cross.

After Alaba's injury, sustained while trying to challenge Gerard Moreno, Rodrygo doubled the lead from close range. It was the Brazilian's eighth goal in his last eight games for Real Madrid, continuing his own superb goalscoring form of late after a slow start to the campaign.

Early in the second half, Villarreal pulled one back, with Morales finishing past Andriy Lunin, selected over Kepa Arrizabalaga. But Diaz whisked the visitors' hope away when he turned brilliantly away from Aissa Mandi in midfield, drove forward, swerved Jorge Cuenca and finished with ease.

After Modric added the fourth, Madrid fans brought out the 'ole' chants as their team passed the ball around an increasingly frustrated Villarreal. Madrid

now have 38 goals in La Liga, equalling Girona's total as the top scorers to date.

Midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni made his return from injury as a substitute in the final stages for Los Blancos, who open up a seven-point lead on third-place Barcelona. "It's always good to build an advantage on Barca but there's a long way to go in the league and we have to continue with this mentality," said Rodrygo.

Marcelino's Villarreal languish 14th, three points above the relegation zone. Earlier Real Sociedad and Real Betis shared the spoils in an intense 0-0 draw on Sunday in La Liga. Both teams lost ground on Athletic Bilbao, fifth, who beat fourth-placed Atletico Madrid on Saturday. La Real, sixth, trail their Basque rivals by two points, while Betis, seventh, are five points behind Athletic. — AFP

Man City to play Copenhagen in Champions League

PARIS: Holders Manchester City were handed a tie against FC Copenhagen in Monday's draw for the Champions League last 16, from which the meeting of last season's runners-up Inter Milan and Atletico Madrid appears the standout tie. Pep Guardiola's City, who are looking to retain the title they won in Istanbul last June, will be expected to comfortably get the better of the Danish side, who qualified from their group at the expense of Manchester United after beating the Red Devils 4-3 at home.

The clubs met in the group stage of last season's Champions League, with City winning 5-0 at home before being held to a 0-0 draw away at the Parken Stadium. Inter, the Serie A leaders, were one of the teams to avoid after finishing second in their group and their meeting with Atletico will see Diego Simeone, the coach of the Spanish club, come up against a team with whom he spent two years as a player in the late 1990s.

French champions Paris Saint-Germain, who have gone out in the last 16 in each of the last two seasons and in five of the last seven campaigns, were also braced for a tough draw having come second in their group behind Borussia Dortmund. They will therefore be relieved at being handed a tie against Real Sociedad, who topped their section above Inter but are appearing in the Champions League



NYON: The results are displayed on a screen next to the UEFA Champions League cup at the end of the 2023-2024 UEFA Champions League football tournament round of 16 draw at the House of European Football in Nyon, on December 18, 2023. — AFP

last 16 for the first time since 2003/04, when they were knocked out by Lyon.

Barcelona's meeting with Italian champions Napoli is another standout tie, while Premier League leaders Arsenal will be expected to get the better of Porto and reach the quarter-finals for the first time since 2010. "We want to try and go as far as possible, but we are very much concentrating on playing well, performing well and playing the best football we can, and then we'll see how far we go," Arsenal's sporting director, Edu, told the club's website. Sergio Conceicao's Porto finished level on points with Barcelona in their group but were ranked in second place after losing both meetings with the Catalans.

Real Madrid will be heavily fancied against RB Leipzig, and Bayern Munich will be strong favourites against Lazio, a team they beat 6-2 on aggregate at the same stage of the competition in 2020/21. "We've had positive experiences with Lazio before," said Bayern captain Manuel Neuer. "We'll go into the games as favourite but we won't allow ourselves to underestimate them." The other tie sees Dortmund come up against PSV Eindhoven, who are coached by former Borussia manager Peter Bosz and are through to the last 16 for the first time in eight years. The first legs will take place in mid-February with the return matches in March. This season's Champions League final will be staged at Wembley in London on June 1. — AFP

Celtics drop Magic to stay perfect at home

LOS ANGELES: Boston improved their perfect NBA home record to 14-0 on Sunday as Jaylen Brown keyed a fourth-quarter surge that saw the Celtics pull away for a 114-97 victory over the Orlando Magic. Brown scored 17 of his 31 points in the final period to help the Celtics, who led by nine through three quarters, push their lead to as many as 23.

Jayson Tatum scored 23 points, and Kristaps Porzingis added 15 points and 10 rebounds in his return from a one-game absence. The Celtics withstood a 36-point, 10-rebound performance from Orlando's Paolo Banchero to beat the Magic for the second time in three days.

Stung by that defeat on Friday, the Magic raced to an early 10-point lead, but the Celtics turned the tide in the second quarter and never trailed after the break. Brown, who added five rebounds, six assists, one steal and one block, said his fourth-quarter burst was just a matter of falling into a rhythm.

"I'm a do whatever our team needs kind of guy," he said. "First quarter, fourth quarter, it don't matter, I just take advantage of the opportunities I get." The Milwaukee Bucks stayed a game and a half behind the East-lead-

ing Celtics with a 128-119 victory over the Houston Rockets.

Damian Lillard scored 39 points and Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 26 points and pulled down 17 rebounds—passing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to become the Bucks' all-time rebounding leader. Antetokounmpo, already the Bucks' all-time leader in points and assists, claimed the franchise rebounding mark with his 14th of the night midway through the fourth quarter that took his career tally to 17,162.

The bruising encounter in Milwaukee saw Antetokounmpo leave the court to have a bleeding cut on his arm taken care of and Milwaukee's Pat Connaughton take an elbow to the jaw from Houston's Dillon Brooks. Brooks and Rockets coach Ime Udoka were both ejected in the final minute.

The Rockets were down by nine when Brooks and Udoka were tossed and Lillard made three of the four technical free-throws to put it out of reach. VanVleet led the Rockets with 22 points and center Alperen Sengun added 20. But Houston, who had cut the deficit to three midway through the fourth, couldn't come up with an answer when Milwaukee's Khris Middleton scored 14 of his 20 points in the final period to help the Bucks pull away. — AFP