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Sheikh Mishal takes oath as Amir

Amir pays tribute to Sheikh Nawaf, rebukes Assembly and Cabinet, accepts govt resignation

By B Izzak & Agencies



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah gestures as he takes oath at the National Assembly on Dec 20, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah took the constitutional oath at a special National Assembly session on Wednesday, becoming the 17th Amir of the State of Kuwait. HH Sheikh Mishal read: "I swear by Almighty Allah to respect the constitution and the laws of the state, to defend the liberties, interests and properties of the people and to safeguard the independence and territorial integrity of the country," as stated in article 60 of the constitution.

In a speech after the constitutional ceremony in the Assembly, Sheikh Mishal paid tribute to late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and strongly criticized the government and the Assembly for taking "unanimous decisions that harm national interests".

The first decision HH Sheikh Mishal took after assuming his constitutional powers was accepting the resignation of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah, who submitted his government's resignation to HH the Amir at Seif Palace. The Amir then

asked HH Sheikh Ahmad to remain as a caretaker premier until a prime minister is appointed.

HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal pledged to be a "loyal citizen" for his nation and people and underlined that executive and legislative authorities should cooperate to serve the best interests of Kuwait. "Today I have become head of the state and I pledge to the Kuwaiti people through you to be a loyal citizen for his nation and people, keen on the interest of the nation, keen on national unity," as well as development, progress and prosperity, HH the Amir said in the speech before the parliament after taking the oath. "The task is heavy and the oath is great," he noted.

HH the Amir said he is keen on compliance with the constitution and application of the law on all and fighting corruption. He also asserted "our commitment to our Gulf and international" obligations. HH the Amir said executive and legislative authorities have obligations to meet for the nation and citizens, and not take decisions that would be harmful to the nation, citing unfair appointments, naturalizations that "change Kuwait's identity", the amnesty file "and its consequences" and the rehabilitation file that were "harmful to our nation, and an evidence of the harm to the interests of the nation".

"What is sadder is the silence of the two authorities over this systematic harm which legitimizes them (files), and the matter becomes like a deal of mutual interest and benefits for the two authorities at the expense of the nation," HH the Amir underlined. "Therefore, we issued a decision to stop the appointments and transfer (of people) between jobs, and the rest of the files will be addressed to

serve interest of the nation," he said. "We have warned in the past of threats against our nation, and we need to stick to our national unity and security," and work on improving the economy and living conditions of people.

HH the Amir urged them to consult and work together and to spread optimism with the objective of preserving national identity for the sake of the nation. HH the Amir said the political leadership would be close to all parties and follow domestic development closely, urging objective questioning by parliament members within the framework of the constitution and law.

HH the Amir paid tribute to the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf, who contributed to the development and prosperity of Kuwait. The late Amir, he said, was an example of humility and forgiveness. HH the Amir thanked citizens, expatriates, leaders of friendly countries and even those who could not come to Kuwait for expressing their condolences. "To all of them I say: Thank you for your sentiments for sharing our grief," he said.

As Crown Prince, HH Sheikh Mishal had been delegated extensive constitutional powers of the Amir due to Sheikh Nawaf's illness. He used those powers only last week to prevent the government from appointing civil servants for three months, citing irregularities and violations in the appointments. Under the law, the Amir can reappoint the prime minister to form a new government or can appoint a new prime minister. The National Assembly sessions will be suspended until the new government is appointed. Accordingly, amendments to the residency law will also be delayed.



May Allah enlighten your path

His Highness the Amir of the State of Kuwait
Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

Security Council observes minute of silence in honor of late Amir

UN officials in New York offer condolences

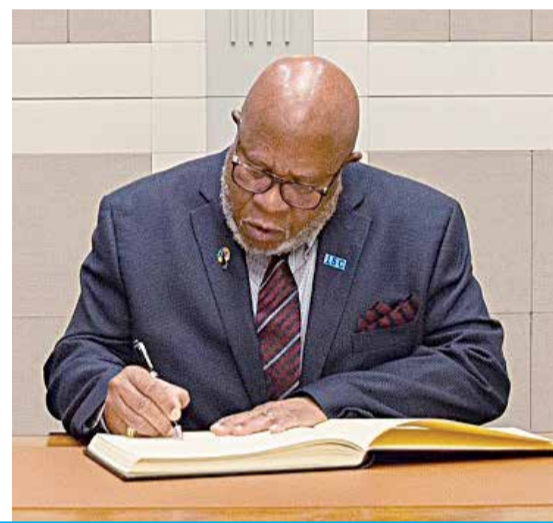
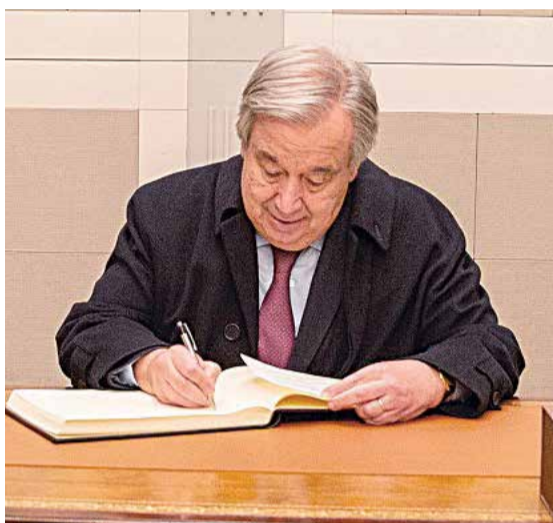


NEW YORK: Ambassadors to the UN observe a minute of silence for Kuwait's late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. — Photos by AFP and KUNA

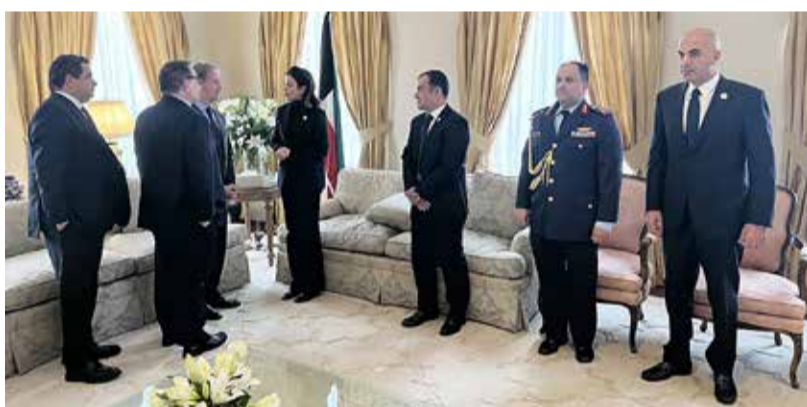
NEW YORK: Members of the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday observed a minute of silence to mourn and honor Kuwait's late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The UN lowered its flag to half-mast at its New York headquarters in honor of the late Amir on Monday. The UN paid tribute to the late Amir, describing him as a distinguished statesman who contributed to the growth of understanding and cooperation in the Gulf and beyond and pursued strengthened relations in support of peace and stability in the region and around the world.

UN officials in NY

Meanwhile, the Permanent Mission of Kuwait to the United Nations in New York received, on Tuesday, UN officials offering condolences on the passing of the late Amir. UN Security General Antonio Guterres, his deputy Amina Mohammed, and the President of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Dennis Francis of Trinidad and Tobago, attended the function, which lasted three days. The UN officials expressed condolences to Kuwait's leaders and people and opened a condolence book for mourners of the late Amir. — KUNA



NEW YORK: (From left) UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, UN General Assembly (UNGA) President Dennis Francis and UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed offer condolences on the passing of the late Amir. — KUNA photos



WASHINGTON: Kuwaiti Ambassador to US Sheikha Al-Zain Al-Sabah receives condolences on the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA photos

Kuwaiti Ambassador to US Sheikha Al-Zain Al-Sabah

Embassy in Washington lowers flag to half-mast

WASHINGTON: Flying its flag at half-mast, the Kuwaiti Embassy in Washington organized a three-day reception to receive mourners offering condolences over the passing of the late Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Among the key mourners were the Kuwaiti Ambassador in Washington, Sheikha Al-Zain Al-Sabah, Arab and foreign ambassadors, and senior US officials, who voiced heart-

felt solace and sorrow over the demise of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Speaking to KUNA, the Kuwaiti ambassador said she offered heartfelt condolences to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the government and people of Kuwait over the late Amir. Paying tribute to the late Amir, she said his qualities of giving, moderation, balance, and tolerance would remain etched in everyone's memories, praying to Almighty Allah to bestow mercy upon his soul and to rest him in the best place of paradise.

For his part, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf, also speaking to KUNA, said he, on his behalf and on behalf of the US Department of State, extended condolences to the State of Kuwait over the late Amir. He added that the US stands side by side with the government and

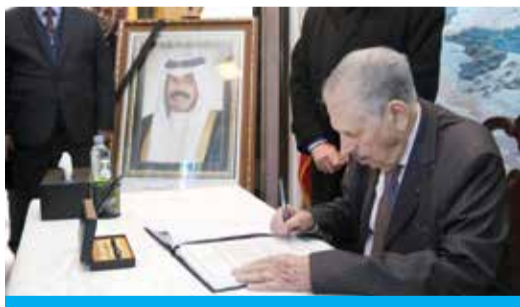
people of Kuwait at this sad moment. US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking, after offering condolences at the embassy, told KUNA that he had stayed in Kuwait for a couple of years, when he met with the late Amir on several occasions in the context of strong friendly relations between Kuwait and the US.

Former US Ambassador in Kuwait Edward Ghoneim said it was a very sad moment to hear the news of the demise of Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, noting that he had had a strong relationship with the late Amir for many years. He extended sincere solace and commiserations to the government and people of Kuwait over the passing of the late Amir. The Tunisian Ambassador to the US, Hanene Tajouri, lamented that the late Amir's demise was a loss not only to Kuwait but to the entire Arab world as well, noting

that his great heritage would be engraved in the memories of generations to come.

The French Embassy's Counselor, Dora Cattuti, expressed her country's heartfelt condolences to the Al-Sabah family and the people of Kuwait over the passing of the late Amir. Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Embassy in Brazil, over the last three days, received mourners who had offered heartfelt condolences over the demise of the late Amir of Kuwait. The embassy said in a release that many Brazilian officials, deputies, and representatives of foreign diplomatic missions in Brazil, as well as civil society organizations, signed the embassy's condolence book. Furthermore, the Brazilian parliament observed a minute of silence as a sign of mourning following the passing of the late Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA

Kuwaiti Embassies receive mourners



President of the Council of the Nation Salah Goudjil offers his condolences at the Kuwaiti embassy in Algeria. — KUNA photos



Kuwait Embassy in Italy receives condolences on the demise of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.



Senior Minister of State for National Development and Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sim Ann signs the condolence register.



Foreign Minister Luminita Odobescu offers his condolences at the Kuwaiti Embassy in Romania.

CAPITALS: Kuwait Embassies in Algeria, Italy, Romania, Serbia, and Singapore, and the consulate in the Kurdistan region of north Iraq, continued on Tuesday, receiving mourners for the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Soon after the Kuwaiti government announced on Saturday, a 40-day mourning for the late Amir, the diplomatic missions abroad opened their condolence books for three days, from Sunday, December 17, until Tuesday, December 19.

In Algiers, President of the Council of the Nation Salah Goudjil visited the Kuwait embassy to offer condolences to the ruling family, the government, and the people of Kuwait on behalf of President of the Republic Abdelmajid Tebboune. Goudjil expressed profound grief for the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf, saying his passing is "a big loss for Kuwait and the Arab and Muslim nations." He recalled the solidarity and patriotic stances of the late Amir towards the fair issues of the Arab and Muslim nations, notably the legiti-

mate struggle of the Palestinian people.

In Rome, Ambassador to Italy Nasser Al-Qatani and the diplomatic staff of the embassy received representatives of the government, civil society, and heads of diplomatic missions based in Italy. On behalf of the Italian people and government, the head of the Diplomatic Ceremonial of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed sincere condolences, saying that the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf was "an exceptional leader of Kuwait and friend of Italy."

Ambassadors of Oman and Palestine in Rome offered, on behalf of their respective governments, offered condolences to Kuwait, expressing their best wishes for the new Amir, His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In Bucharest, Romanian Foreign Minister Luminita Odobescu offered condolences to Kuwait Ambassador Talal Mansour Al-Hajeri. On behalf of her government, Odobescu offered a bouquet of bereavement flowers and registered her name in the condolence book of the Embassy.

In Belgrade, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Goran Aleksic led the Serbian mourners in offering condolences to the embassy, the government, and the people of Kuwait. In Singapore, Senior Minister of State for National Development and Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sim Ann offered condolences on behalf of President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Kuwait Ambassador Ahmad Al-Shuraim, head of the Singapore Office of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation Qais Al-Bassam, and the embassy's staff received mourners; among them were heads of diplomatic missions based in Singapore. In Irbil, President of Kurdistan Regional Government Nechirvan Barzani visited the Kuwait Consulate General on Tuesday to offer condolences to the leadership and people of Kuwait. Over the past two days, dozens of public figures and politicians in the northern Iraq region visited the consulate to mourn the passing of the late Amir.

Kuwait's Embassy in Beirut received Leba-

non's top officials on Tuesday, offering condolences over the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. President of the Free Patriotic Movement, Gebran Bassil, offered condolences and expressed to KUNA his deep sorrow and sincere solace to the Amir and the people of Kuwait, praising Kuwait's continuous support for Lebanon. In a similar statement to KUNA, Lebanese Minister of Information Ziad Makary offered his sincere condolences and praised the deep relationship that ties the two countries. Lebanese Druze religious leader Sheikh Sami Abi Al-Muna, Deputy Head of the Higher Islamic Shia Council, Sheikh Ali Al-Khatib, Lebanese Forces, Battalions, Amal, and Future Movements all offered their condolences at Kuwait's Embassy in Beirut. The Embassy also received diplomats from various embassies and other top international officials.

The Embassy of Kuwait in Cyprus issued a statement as it mourned the great loss of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sa-



Lebanese Minister of Information Ziad Makary offered his sincere condolences.

hab and opened a condolence book. Kuwait's Ambassador to Cyprus, Abdullah Al-Kharafi, said they have received the President of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides, where he offered sincere condolences and sentiments on behalf of the government and people of Cyprus. The embassy noted that it has received mourners for a three-day period. — KUNA

Amir receives congratulatory messages from top officials

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Wednesday several cables from top Kuwaiti officials, congratulating him on taking the constitutional oath and becoming the 17th Amir of Kuwait. In his cable, Speaker of the National Assembly Ahmad Al-Saadoun congratulated His Highness the Amir on taking the oath, saying that the parliament and people of Kuwait appreciated the leading role played by His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad in the previous period.

He commended His Highness Sheikh Mishal for his strong support of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who, on his part, fulfilled his duty in serving the Kuwaiti people and protecting the country's interests. He asserted that His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was up to the task of leading the State of Kuwait into a much more prosperous and promising future.

In a similar cable addressed to His Highness the Amir, His Highness Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah—Chief of the Kuwait National Guard (KNG)—congratulated Sheikh Mishal on taking the constitutional oath, expressing support and wishes of success and welfare to His Highness. Meanwhile, His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, in his cable, congratulated His Highness

the Amir on assuming the post, commending His Highness for all the efforts and sacrifices he made to serve Kuwait and its people.

He expressed wishes of welfare and good health to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal, hoping that he would continue to succeed in his position as leader of the country and the Kuwaiti people. On his part, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, congratulating him on taking the oath during the special session of parliament earlier today.

He wished His Highness the Amir all the success in leading the Kuwaiti people and the country into future prosperity and development. In his reply cables to the top officials, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah thanked them for their sincere wishes and hopes, affirming that he would continue efforts to better serve Kuwait and meet the expectations of the Kuwaiti people.

First Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Wednesday congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on assuming office. In a statement, the Ministry's relations and media department said that Sheikh Talal



KUWAIT: Kuwait's new Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah salutes as he swears in before lawmakers at the National Assembly, on December 20, 2023 in Kuwait City. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

conveyed the greetings and congratulations on behalf of himself and all Interior Ministry personnel.

Sheikh Talal spoke of His Highness the Amir's prosperous journey calling it a source of pride for all, as he also

prayed Allah to support HH the Amir in his endeavors towards further progress, prosperity and growth. — KUNA



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives the government's resignation from HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah at Seif Palace. — KUNA



Kuwaiti lawmakers watch the swearing in ceremony.



Foreign diplomats watch as the new Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah swears in as the country's 17th Amir.



Members of Kuwait's security forces watch as the new Amir swears in before lawmakers as the country's 17th Amir.

Speaker: Late Amir left legacy, imprints on development

KUWAIT: Parliament Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun said the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah left an immortal legacy and notable imprints in development and political reform, saying His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah will complete the process of building the state in accordance with constitutional values.



Ahmad Al-Saadoun

"The heart grieves and the eyes shed tears; everyone is saddened by the parting of the late Amir, May Allah the Almighty have mercy on him and bless him," Al-Saadoun said in a speech in a special session of the National Assembly.

"The loss is painful, and the sorrow is deep in all hearts, to whom he was known as a wise leader and a person who gave without limits," he pointed out. The late Amir was a guide who was patient with generous pardons, a ruler who believed in the value of tolerance, responding to the needs of people, he mentioned. The late Amir undertook national duties, leaving an immortal legacy through his well-known words rooted in the conscience, taking the responsibility of work in the areas of development, achievement, and political reform, he said.

The people of Kuwait have followed with great pride what His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad has done in managing the government in all that is in the interest of the country and its people since the issuance of the Amiri decree on November 15, 2021, he explained. Al-Saadoun pledges to His Highness the Amir today, with loyalty and sincerity, to be as trustworthy as His Highness the Amir and to cooperate with the executive authority to shape the new era, he indicated. — KUNA



129,500 students start 1st semester final exams

KUWAIT: The final exams for the 2023–24 first semester started on Wednesday for some 129,500 students in both intermediate schools as well as the tenth and 11th grades of high school. The Ministry of Education fulfilled all necessary requirements in preparation for students' eagerness to perform their best to succeed in their studies and cultivate a bright future for Kuwait.

Meanwhile, Kuwait Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Dr Adel Al-Manea congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on taking the constitutional oath, becoming the 17th Amir of Kuwait. Dr Al-Manea expressed his wishes for good health and welfare for the Amir and hoped for continuous prosperity and developments for the country and a brighter future for the people of Kuwait. — KUNA



Students arrive for the first semester exams. — KUNA photos



Canada Ambassador
Aliya Mawani

On behalf of Canada and Canadians, it is my honor and pleasure to offer heartfelt congratulations to His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on his ascension as Amir of Kuwait. I also take this opportunity to extend my warmest congratulations to the government and people of Kuwait on this historic occasion. Canada and Kuwait are friends and partners, bound together by shared values, a spirit of collaboration, and deep people-to-people ties. We look forward to deepening this cooperation and taking this relationship from strength to strength under the wise leadership and guidance of His Highness the Amir.

Iran Ambassador
Mohammad Toutounchi

On the momentous occasion of HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah taking the constitutional oath as the 17th Amir of Kuwait, warm congratulations are extended to him and the brotherly Kuwaiti people. Expressing heartfelt wishes for a prosperous and righteous reign, this message underscores the hope that His Highness will lead the country towards goodness and development. The commitment to longstanding bilateral relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran is emphasized, with a sincere desire for increased prosperity and development in the years to come, fostering a brighter and elevated future for both neighboring Muslim countries. His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah to be the best successor to the best predecessor, encapsulating the hope for continuity in the legacy of leadership and dedication to the well-being of the people. This message stands as a testament to the mutual respect and goodwill shared between the two countries, fostering a vision of collaboration, progress, and enduring friendship between Kuwait and Iran.

France Ambassador
Claire Le Flecher

On behalf of the French Embassy in Kuwait, I would like to extend my warmest congratulations to Amir HH Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, wishing His Highness success in supporting Kuwait's march towards progress and prosperity. Kuwait is a distinguished partner of France, and since the establishment of friendly relations between our two countries, French-Kuwaiti relations have developed on the basis of trust and a shared vision in all key areas. France reaffirms, on this occasion, its commitment to the security and stability of Kuwait and the region. We look forward to strengthening our bilateral relations and achieving a new horizon for these relations in the future, including political, defense, developmental, economic, cultural, Francophonie, scientific, and technical, in a way that serves the interests of our two countries.

Ambassadors congratulate new Amir

US Ambassador
Karen H Sasahara

Congratulations to the Amir, HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on his accession. The United States and Kuwait have stood together for more than six decades, and we have been privileged to work with HH Sheikh Mishal for the last three years during his time as Crown Prince. The American and Kuwaiti partnership is deep and enduring, based on our shared commitment to a more stable, secure, democratic, and prosperous Middle East. We are proud that our relationship has grown in recent years to include defense, commercial, educational, and cultural ties that benefit both Kuwaiti and American citizens. Five generations of Kuwaitis have studied in American universities, as a result, American and Kuwaiti businesspeople work closely together in many fields. On behalf of the United States government and Americans around the world, I wish HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah long life and success in leading the country and his people. The best successor to the best predecessor.

Australia Ambassador
Melissa Kelly

I congratulate His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on his accession as Amir. His Highness' experience and leadership has made an important contribution to Kuwait's security and stability over many years. His strong relationships with leaders across the region and the world will no doubt see Kuwait's important role as a promoter of peace continue. His Highness Sheikh Mishal has been a steadfast advocate for Australia's warm and longstanding relations with Kuwait - founded on food security trade, consolidated with Australia's participation in the coalition that liberated Kuwait in 1991, and now flourishing across trade, investment, education and ties between our people. We wish His Highness and the people of Kuwait the very best and look forward to continuing our warm friendship into the future.

Cyprus Ambassador
Michael Mavros

On behalf of the government and the people of the Republic of Cyprus, I wish to convey our most heartfelt congratulations on the accession of His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to the throne of Kuwait and express our best wishes for every success in fulfilling his noble mission. We are confident that under his wise leadership, the long-standing relations and friendship between our countries, based on common principles of mutual respect, understanding, and respect for international law, will continue to flourish in the years to come, for the benefit of our peoples and countries, as well as the wider region. Let us assure you of the willingness and determination of the Cyprus side to continue working with dedication to further enhance our bilateral and multilateral relations.

Sierra Leone
Ambassador Haja
Ishata Thomas

On behalf of the government of Sierra Leone and the Embassy, I convey my warmest greetings and congratulations to the Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Sierra Leoneans wish His Highness good health and success. The Embassy remains confident that the bonds of friendship and constructive cooperation between Kuwait and Sierra Leone will be further strengthened in the years ahead.

Spain Ambassador
Miguel Moro Aguilar

Our warm congratulations to the Amir, HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on his proclamation as the new Kuwait Amir at the National Assembly. We genuinely wish him success in his mandate during the new period, both for Kuwait and for the relations between our friendly nations.

Switzerland
Ambassador
Tiziano Balmelli

I have the honor to extend to the Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah my best wishes for much success, good and long health, peace, and prosperity for the entire country and its people. The President of Switzerland, Alain Berset, has just come to Kuwait to offer his condolences on the passing of the late Amir and was able to personally experience the deep friendship between our two countries. Our president was impressed and moved by His Highness's personal ties with Switzerland, a country that His Highness knows very well. This beautiful reality gives our diplomatic relations a deep human dimension, which is invaluable.

China Ambassador
Zhang Jianwei

As His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah takes office, on behalf of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, I would like to extend my warm congratulations to His Highness the Amir. The leaders of China and Kuwait have maintained lasting friendly relations. In December 2022 and September 2023, President Xi Jinping had two meetings with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal. He sent a congratulatory message at the earliest possible time to Sheikh Mishal on his assuming office as the Amir of Kuwait. I am confident that under the brilliant leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal, Kuwait will move forward on the journey toward development and rejuvenation and meet the expectations.

Palestine Ambassador
Rami Tahboub

I have the honor, on behalf of the Palestinian community in Kuwait to extend my warmest congratulations and blessings to the Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. May God protect him on the occasion of his assumption to power. I pray to God Almighty to grant His Highness good health.

Senegal Ambassador
Ibrahim Al Khalil Seck

On behalf of the Senegalese government and the Embassy in Kuwait, I congratulate the new Kuwait Amir, HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as he becomes the 17th Amir of Kuwait. We wish His Highness all the best. I also use this opportunity to extend my warmest congratulations to the government and people of Kuwait on this historic occasion.

Belgium Ambassador
Christian Domes

We convey our warmest greetings and heartfelt congratulations to His Highness, the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on the occasion of his accession to power. We wish His Highness lasting well-being and success in leading Kuwait. The Embassy of Belgium in Kuwait remains confident that the bonds of brotherhood, friendship, and constructive cooperation between Belgium and Kuwait will be further strengthened in the years ahead.

Greece Ambassador
Ioannis Plotas

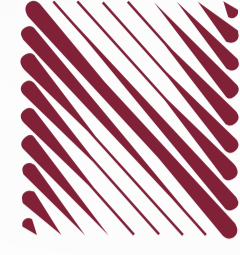
On behalf of the President of Greece, the government, and the people of Greece, I would like to convey heartfelt congratulations to Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on the occasion of his assumption of his duties as the 17th Amir of Kuwait. I wish His Highness all success and the friendly Kuwaiti people welfare and prosperity.

Germany Ambassador
Hans-Christian
Freiherr von Reibnitz

Today, Kuwaiti Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was sworn in as the new Amir to succeed the late Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah as the 17th ruler of Kuwait. On behalf of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to His Highness the Amir, and I am adding my best wishes for his good health and a successful hand in guiding the government and people of Kuwait through challenging times into the future. May his wise leadership and guidance continue to be a source of pride and inspiration for Kuwait and a beacon of international respect and close friendship among our nations.

Austria Ambassador
Marian Wrba

On the occasion of your installation as the 17th Amir of Kuwait, I would like to convey the most heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the Austrian Federal President, the government of Austria, and myself. We wish His Highness all the best in continuing the proven path that has guided Kuwait to defend the freedoms, interests, and wealth of the people of Kuwait in the face of all the challenges that the region and the world are currently confronted with. The Republic of Austria and Kuwait established diplomatic relations 58 years ago. We look forward to continuing this fruitful cooperation and further deepening the cordial bilateral relationships between our two countries.



شركة الاستثمارات الوطنية
NATIONAL INVESTMENTS COMPANY

خير خلف لخير سلف

The Chairman, Members of the Board of Directors,
the Executive Management and all employees of the

National Investments Company

Would like to congratulate His Highness the Amir of the
State of Kuwait,

Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

May God protect him

For assuming the reins of power in the country.
We implore God Almighty to grant His Highness prosperity
and success in all domains for our country and our
honorable people.



Colorado top court blocks Trump from presidential primary ballot

Polls open in DR Congo amid 'chaos', conflict

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RAFAH: A fireball erupts after a Zionist strike over Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 20, 2023. — AFP photos

New Gaza truce in the works

Deal could see release of 40 Zionist hostages, one-week ceasefire: Source

GAZA: Hopes rose Wednesday that the Zionist entity and Hamas may be inching toward another truce and hostage release deal in the Gaza war, following secret talks and as the head of the Palestinian militant group visited Egypt.

Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late Tuesday told relatives of some of the remaining 129 captives held in Gaza since the Oct 7 attack that his spy chief was working on efforts to "free our hostages". "I have just sent the head of Mossad to Europe twice to promote a process to free our hostages," the premier told them. "I will spare no effort on the subject, and our duty is to bring them all back."

Mossad director David Barnea held a "positive meeting" in Warsaw this week with CIA chief Bill Burns and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, a source familiar with the talks told AFP, asking not to be named. Talks were ongoing "with the aim of reaching an agreement around the release of the remaining hostages in Gaza in exchange for a truce and the potential release of Palestinians held in (Zionist) prisons," said the source.

The Qatar-based chief of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, on Wednesday travelled to Egypt, traditionally a key mediator between the Zionist entity and the Palestinians, for talks with intelligence chief Abbas Kamel. A source

close to Hamas, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said the talks would focus on stopping the war and "to prepare an agreement for the release of prisoners (and) the end of the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip".

President Isaac Herzog also said the Zionist entity was "ready for another humanitarian pause and additional humanitarian aid in order to enable the release of hostages". Another Palestinian militant group, Islamic Jihad, meanwhile, released video footage it claimed showed two hostages, ramping up pressure on the Zionist entity.

The Zionist entity launched a nearly three-month military campaign on Gaza which killed 19,667 people, mostly women and children, while also cutting off most water, food and power supplies. The deadly offensive is in response to an attack carried out by Hamas and allies in Gaza targeting southern communities and military bases in the Zionist entity. Around 1,140 people died in the attack and as a result of Zionist attempts to regain control following the attack, according to Zionist figures and media.

Qatar last month helped broker a first week-long truce in which 80 Zionist hostages were freed in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners. The source close to Hamas said the Egypt talks would focus on proposals including a week-long truce that would see

the release of 40 Zionist hostages, including women, children and male non-combatants. Haniyeh, before leaving Qatar, met Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, but no details of their meeting were released.

UN vote expected

Fighting raged unabated Wednesday in Gaza, where the Zionist army reported close quarter combat and more than 300 strikes over the past day, while the death toll among its own forces rose to 134 inside Gaza. It said "ground, aerial and naval operations were carried out on dozens of terrorists and terrorist infrastructure" including rocket launch sites and military command and control centers in Khan Yunis.

At least 11 people were killed overnight in Zionist strikes. In Khan Yunis, residents searched by hand through the rubble of a building completely flattened by bombardment. The house was "full of people, why did they bomb it? What's the reason?" said one distraught young resident. Amr Sheikh-Deeb. "We managed to remove some bodies, but where are the rest of them? What did these people do?"

Three corpses lay on the floor of the Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, where wounded people were treated, including children. One man, Abed

Abu Aisha, came in carrying his crying child, both covered in blood and dust. "A missile hit our house, without any prior notice," he said. "We pulled out some from under the rubble, but more people are still buried. I don't know the exact number of casualties, but a whole family was wounded."

The UN Security Council was set to vote later Wednesday on a resolution calling for a pause in the conflict, diplomatic sources told AFP, after two previous votes were delayed as members wrangled over wording. The latest version of the text calls for the "suspension" of hostilities, the sources said. The US vetoed a previous ceasefire resolution, sparking condemnation by aid groups which urged more action to help civilians caught in the conflict.

'On the brink'

The UN estimates 1.9 million of Gaza's 2.4 million residents have been forced to flee their homes, many sheltering in tents amid dire shortages and the biting winter cold. "Amid displacement at an unimaginable scale and active hostilities, the humanitarian response system is on the brink," said Tor Wennesland, the UN's special coordinator for the Middle East peace process.

The Zionist entity, which declared a total siege on Gaza at the start of the war, has since allowed in aid trucks through the Rafah bor-

der crossing with Egypt, and as of this week, its own Kerem Shalom crossing. Aid organizations have said the supplies are a fraction of the magnitude needed. The UN's World Food Program said Wednesday it had delivered food through the crossing in a first direct aid convoy from Jordan.

A Zionist military agency, COGAT, said it had also started laying a pipeline from Egypt to deliver drinking water from a mobile desalination plant in a project led by the United Arab Emirates. But aid groups have warned the humanitarian goods fall far short of the dire need, and the UN children's agency said that "child deaths due to disease could surpass those killed in bombardments".

The Gaza war has sparked fears of regional escalation and seen Zionist trade deadly cross-border fire with Iran-backed Hezbollah militants in Lebanon, where the Zionist entity said its aircraft hit more targets Wednesday.

Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels, meanwhile, have repeatedly fired missiles and drones at vessels passing through the Red Sea that they say are linked to the Zionist entity, in a show of support for Palestinians. The United States this week started to build a multinational naval task force to protect the waterway leading to the Suez Canal, through which more than 10 percent of global trade transits. — AFP

Hamas revenues set to withstand war with Zionists

PARIS: Hamas has been the focus of a relentless Zionist onslaught in Gaza but with resilient and diverse finances, it is expected to have a significant war chest at its disposal as the conflict drags on. Over the past two months, more than 19,400 people — mostly women and children — have been killed by Zionist bombardments in the Gaza Strip.

But as the Zionist entity pursues its military objective, undermining Hamas' revenue streams will also prove a formidable task. "Hamas is financially solid," Jessica Davis, president of the Canadian group Insight Threat Intelligence, told AFP. "In the last decade, if not longer, they have been creating a resilient finance network," she said, explaining the group had set up investments and sources of income in many countries without being disrupted.

These sources include "small businesses and real estate" in countries such as Turkey, Sudan and Algeria, she added. Hamas also relies on an informal network of donations. It has become "very good at developing and operating a very complex system of money changers", said Yitzhak Gal, a Zionist expert on the Palestinian economy, explaining the exchanges run through Turkey, the UAE, Europe and the United States.

The number of donors has not necessarily decreased since Oct 7. "Hamas seems to have gained support amongst certain population segments internationally as a perceived resistance vanguard," Lucas Webber, co-founder of the specialist website Militant Wire, explained. For

years, the group's major backer has been Tehran.

Estimates put Iran's annual contribution at between \$70 million and \$100 million, through a diverse range of sources that includes payments in cryptocurrency, suitcases of cash and transfers via foreign banks and the informal "hawala" system. According to Gal, Iranian aid in the form of military equipment was smuggled in years past from Egypt via tunnels dug between Gaza and the Sinai desert, which are now blocked.

Following Hamas' 2006 election victory, and its seizure of power the following year after clashes with rivals, the distinction between money intended for the territory's now 2.4 million inhabitants and the group's own finances has blurred. Of the Gaza Strip's \$2.5 billion budget, \$1.1 billion comes from the Palestinian Authority, with the Zionist entity's agreement, said Gal, who is a specialist at the Mityvim think tank.

The international community funds UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. Qatar pays the salaries of civil servants, such as doctors and teachers, and gives \$100 per month to the territory's 100,000 poorest families — totaling \$1.49 billion in payments between 2012 and 2021, according to Doha.

In 2021, the gas-rich emirate, which hosts the Hamas political bureau in its capital with the blessing of the United States, pledged \$360 million in annual funding to the coastal Palestinian territory. Doha has denied providing financial aid to Hamas. "Without exception, all of Qatar's aid is fully coordinated with (the Zionist entity), the US government and the United Nations," a Qatari official told AFP. "All goods such as food, medicine and fuel pass directly through (the Zionist entity) before entering Gaza," they added.

Last week, Qatar's lead hostage negotiator and diplomat, Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, indicated that the



DOHA: Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (left) welcomes Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (center), on Dec 20, 2023 in this handout picture by the Iranian foreign ministry. — AFP

Gulf state's funding for Gaza would continue. In October, Washington imposed sanctions on 10 "key members of Hamas", and the West is considering coercive measures. But cutting off Hamas completely will likely be impossible. "The prospect of a long-term complete destruction of Hamas finances is not realistic," Davis said.

"You can disrupt it, you can take out key players, you can minimize sources of funds, but the network, the infrastructure will always be there and if the group still has supporters, they can leverage to help them," she added. Gal explained Hamas' future finances would be linked to how the future of Gaza, a tiny territory wedged between Egypt, the Zionist entity and the Mediterranean is resolved.

"When the war stops and normal life resumes, the question will be: will this whole financing system resume or change?" he said. "Gaza is now one big refugee camp. Who will be in charge of providing food, water and shelters to these refugees, Hamas or another organization, another mechanism?" — AFP

Malaysia bans ships with Zionist flags

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia banned on Wednesday Zionist-flagged cargo ships from docking at its ports in response to the Zionist entity's actions in Gaza, which it said ignores "basic humanitarian principles". Ships on their way to the Zionist entity will also be barred from loading cargo at any port in the largely Muslim Southeast Asian nation with immediate effect, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said in a statement.

Anwar singled out the Zionist entity's biggest shipping firm ZIM. Malaysia's cabinet authorized ZIM to dock its vessels at Malaysian ports in 2002 but Wednesday's statement said that authorization had been rescinded. "The Malaysian government decided to block and disallow the Zionist-based shipping company ZIM from docking at any Malaysian port," Anwar said.

"These sanctions are a response to (the Zionist entity's) actions that ignore basic humanitarian principles and violate international law through the ongoing massacre and brutality against Palestinians," Malaysia "also decided to no longer accept ships using the Zionist flag to dock in the country" and ban "any ship on its way to (the Zionist entity) from loading cargo in Malaysian ports". Anwar said Malaysia was confident its trade would not be affected by the decision. Malaysia does not have diplomatic ties with the Zionist entity. International pressure is mounting for a new truce that could ramp up aid to the besieged Palestinian territory, with the United Nations due to vote Wednesday on calling for a ceasefire. — AFP



خير خلف لخير سلف

نبايعك على السمع والطاعة

يتقدم السيد / محمد رميح الدجيني
(رئيس مجلس ادارة شركة آد زون العالمية للدعاية والاعلان)

بأسمي آيات التهاني

لمقام حضرة صاحب السمو

الشيخ مشعل الأحمد الجابر الصباح أمير البلاد
حفظه الله ورعاه

بمناسبة تولي سموه مسند الإمارة ومقاليد الحكم في البلاد
وندعو الله تعالى أن يعين سموه ويكون خير خلف لخير سلف



International

Polls open in DR Congo amid 'chaos', conflict

Locals say logistical challenges could keep elections going for several days



KINSHASA: Congolese police officers block a door after voters forced their way into a voting station on Dec 20, 2023. — AFP photos



A voter gets ready to cast her ballot.

KINSHASA, DR Congo: People in the Democratic Republic of Congo voted Wednesday in a high-stakes election pitting the incumbent President Felix Tshisekedi against a fragmented opposition, whose leaders denounced "chaos" and "irregularities". The first polling stations in the east of the vast central African nation, which straddles two time zones, opened almost on time, shortly after 6:00 am (04:00 GMT).

At around midday, however, voting was still not under way in some polling booths in various regions of the country, which is the size of continental western Europe. Centers "have problems with machines, batteries," the archbishop of Kinshasa, Fridolin Ambongo, told reporters after voting. "Solutions need to be found quickly, otherwise the elections are going to go on for several days."

AFP reporters in the capital Kinshasa and the cities of Goma, Beni, Lubumbashi and Tshikapa witnessed delays and other problems. "There's terrible disorder in the

organization," teacher Jean Claude Nzine Cokola grumbled, having still not cast his ballot after waiting four hours in South Kivu province.

Leading opposition candidates Moise Katumbi, Martin Fayulu and Denis Mukwege all blasted what they described as chaos during the vote. "It's total chaos, there's no organization," said Fayulu, a 67-year-old former oil executive, who claims to have won the 2018 election.

Mukwege, 68, the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner for his work helping rape victims, and 58-year-old business magnate Katumbi, both complained of irregularities. "If we find that these irregularities are huge, we are not going to accept that the population is placed in a position" of not being able to elect its leaders, Mukwege said, also at a Kinshasa polling station.

The DRC is Africa's top copper producer and the world's largest producer of cobalt — a key component of batteries used

in electronics and electric vehicles. But it remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with little wealth trickling down.

Logistical challenge

People still waiting in line at 5:00 pm when polls are scheduled to close will be given tokens and polling booths will stay open until they cast their votes, an official at the electoral commission told AFP. The government declared a bank holiday for Wednesday, and as in previous elections, has closed the borders and suspended domestic flights.

Around 44 million Congolese — in a nation of 100 million — are registered to choose their president as well as lawmakers in national and provincial assemblies, and local councilors. More than 100,000 candidates are running for various positions. Several observer missions including a union of Catholic and Protestant churches will be watching the voting process. Results are not expected for several days.

'Foreign candidates'

Tshisekedi, 60, who took office in 2019 and is running for a second five-year term, faces 18 challengers. He is considered the front-runner in the single-round presidential vote, although his record, as he himself has acknowledged, is mixed. He has presided over years of economic growth but little job creation and soaring inflation. He is asking for another term to "consolidate his gains".

Throughout the campaign, he also poured scorn on what he termed "foreign candidates" — suggesting that his opponents have dual loyalties and lack the will to stand up to Rwanda, which the DRC accuses of funding rebel groups on its soil. Katumbi, who is a former governor of mineral-rich Katanga province and chairman of the country's leading football club, Tout Puissant Mazembe, is the main target of such attacks.

Violence-wracked east

Armed conflict in eastern DRC overshadowed much of the electoral campaign. Militias have plagued the troubled region for decades, a legacy of regional wars that flared in the 1990s and 2000s. Tensions have resumed since the M23 group, which is allegedly backed by Rwanda, began capturing swathes of territory in late 2021. Clashes with M23 fighters have subsided in recent weeks but the rebels continue to hold sway over large parts of North Kivu province. Citizens living in those areas will not be able to vote. In conflict-torn Ituri province, in the east, a group of protesters stormed a polling booth. "They ransacked everything," said a local electoral commission official. "There's the war, there's a lack of jobs, young people are really being neglected, forgotten," Desire Abedi Mubwana, 28, from the eastern city of Goma, said. "But we're here to vote in the right leaders who will still think about young people and who will also think about the security of our region." — AFP

India court weighs future of mosque in Hindu holy city

NEW DELHI: An Indian court has weighed into one of the country's most bitter religious disagreements by greenlighting cases on whether a mosque in the holy city of Varanasi should be opened to Hindu worshippers. The Gyanvapi mosque was built in the 17th century by the Muslim Mughal empire then ruling over much of India in a city where Hindu faithful from across the country cremate their loved ones by the Ganges river.

It is among several Islamic places of worship that Hindu activists, backed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, have sought for decades to reclaim for their faith in disputes that have previously sparked deadly religious riots. The Allahabad High Court on Tuesday directed a lower bench to evaluate petitions on the future of the mosque, which historians say was built over the demolished ruins of a temple to the Hindu deity Shiva.

The decision would permit several civil suits to proceed from Hindus demanding the right to worship at the Gyanvapi site and the restoration of a temple on its grounds. Presiding justice Rohit Ranjan Agarwal ordered a lower court to rule on the site's future within six months, describing the dispute as a matter of "national importance". "It is not a suit between two individual parties. It affects two major communities of the country," he said, according to local media reports published Wednesday.

Emboldened right-wing Hindu groups have laid claim to several Muslim sites of worship they say were built atop ancient temples during Mughal rule. Hindu zealots in 1992 demolished the centuries-old Babri Masjid in the nearby city of Ayodhya, sparking sectarian riots that killed more than 1,000 people nationwide.

A decades-long court battle over the future of the ruined mosque's site ended in 2019 when the Supreme Court permitted the construction of a temple to the deity Ram, who according to scripture was born in the city. Prime Minister Modi, whose party has campaigned for the temple for decades, will inaugurate the structure next month ahead of national elections in which he is widely expected to win a third term.

Modi's party has come to be the dominant force in Indian politics thanks to its muscular appeals to the country's Hindu majority, emboldening the faith's hardliners. Calls for India to enshrine Hindu supremacy in law have rapidly grown louder since he took office in 2014, making its 210-million-odd Muslims increasingly anxious about their future. — AFP

UN sounds alarm over fighting near Sudan aid hub

UNITED NATIONS: The United Nations raised the alarm on Tuesday over fighting raging near the former safe haven of Wad Madani in Sudan where the population had swelled to more than 700,000. The paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on Sunday set up a base near Wad Madani, where their offensive has sent thousands fleeing Sudan's second city and former aid hub, many of them already displaced. The paramilitaries have continued to press deeper into the city, witnesses say.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres "is deeply concerned about reports of fighting between the Sudanese armed forces and the Rapid Support Forces in the vicinity of Wad Madani in Al-Jazira state," said his spokesman Stephane Dujarric. "The city has served as a hub for humanitarian operations since the start of the conflict and had not been directly impacted by the conflict until this recent round of fighting."

Since fighting broke out on April 15 between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, the city of Wad Madani, 180 kilometers (110 miles) south of Khartoum, became a haven for thousands of dis-

Behind the 'revolution' led by Myanmar's ethnic minority fighters

NAMHSAN, Myanmar: Pickup trucks carrying ethnic minority fighters rolled into a town in Myanmar's northeastern Shan state recently cleared of junta troops — another victory redrawing the frontlines of the country's civil war. The convoy passed the golden spire of a Buddhist pagoda in Namhsan but most eyes were scanning the skies for the attack jets the junta is using to support its embattled ground troops.

The men jumped down from the vehicles and fanned out on foot past locked wooden houses and down deserted streets silenced by days of fighting. A burst of gunfire revealed a pocket of junta troops on the edge of the town and sent the fighters scuttling for cover behind walls.

Nestled in the hills of northern Shan state, Namhsan is the latest town to fall to Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) fighters since they launched a surprise offensive against Myanmar's junta in October. The TNLA announced it had captured Namhsan on Saturday. Footage obtained by AFP shows the fighters in the last stages of their operation to secure the town last week.

On the road to Namhsan hours before the TNLA moved in, its spokesman Tar Aik Kyaw said his fighters were "walking the revolutionary path." "The main objective is to take down the military dictatorship, which is what Myanmar people always want." Near-



GEDAREF: Displaced people fleeing from Wad Madani in Sudan's Jazira state arrive in Gedaref in the country's east on Dec 17, 2023. — AFP

placed people during the conflict.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement that the city's population had reached 700,000, after more than half a million people took shelter there, among them 270,000 who need humanitarian assistance.

"The continued escalation of violence in Sudan is devastating the country, as well as the region," Dujarric told a media briefing. "We reiterate our call

to the Sudanese armed forces as well as the Rapid Support Forces to immediately cease fighting. If the fighting continues, aid distribution to two million people — that's about a third of the state's population — will be compromised."

The US embassy in Khartoum warned on Sunday in a statement that "the continued advance of the Rapid Support Forces threatens massive civilian casualties and significant disruption to humanitarian assistance efforts." — AFP



NAMHSAN: Members of ethnic minority armed group Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) prepare to launch a drone during their attack on Myanmar's military camp in Namhsan Township. — AFP photos

by, a squad of fighters in camouflage fatigues and peaked caps with badges showing the TNLA emblem set against a blue sky, unloaded crates of mortars for a final check before heading into battle.

Desperate civilians

For almost three years, civilian "People's Defense Forces" have been battling around the country to oust the junta which seized power in a 2021 coup. But the offensive launched by the TNLA and its allies — the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) — in October has galvanized the anti-junta movement and presented the generals with their stiffest military challenge in decades, with groups attacking on multiple fronts.

Evidence of fierce fighting was everywhere in Namhsan. One of the pagoda's spires had been



A man digs a bomb shelter near his house amid clashes between the ethnic minority armed group TNLA and Myanmar's military.

knocked down, an unexploded rocket lay on the ground and a building was riddled with bullet holes. Inside, a dark pool of blood stained the floor next to blankets and food wrappers, while in the next room more blood was smeared on the walls. Residents who have not already fled live in fear.

"We don't have anywhere to go. There are caves to hide in but they are a long way from our house," said Ohmar, 50, who asked to use a pseudonym for security reasons. "My neighbors left this morning to hide in the caves but on the way artillery shells started landing all around them and so they came back here," she said. One man dug a hole into the side of a hill to make a rudimentary shelter — an action familiar to many across Myanmar after three years of conflict. "I already sent my family members to other places," resident Zaw Oo said. — AFP

International

Colorado top court blocks Trump from presidential primary ballot

Court finds Trump 'disqualified' from becoming president

LOS ANGELES: Donald Trump is ineligible for the US presidency because of his involvement in the January 2021 assault on the Capitol, Colorado's supreme court ruled Tuesday, setting off a political earthquake that could upend next year's election. The stunning legal decision — which Trump's campaign said it would appeal — drew immediate condemnation from Republicans across the spectrum and looked set to light a fire under the former reality TV star's claim to political persecution.

The ruling, which only applies to the Colorado primary ballot, is the first of a number of legal actions across the country to successfully invoke the US Constitution's 14th Amendment, which bars from office anyone formerly sworn to protect the country who later engages in insurrection.

"A majority of the court holds that President Trump is disqualified from holding the office of President under Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution," the Colorado high court wrote. "Because he is disqualified, it would be a wrongful act under the Election Code for the Colorado Secretary of State to list him as a candidate on the presidential primary ballot."

"We do not reach these conclusions lightly," the 4-3 majority wrote. "We are mindful of the magnitude and weight of the questions now before us. We are likewise mindful of our solemn duty to apply the law, without fear or favor, and without being swayed by public reaction to the decisions that the law mandates we reach."

An earlier ruling by a lower court found that while Trump had clearly given succor to the Jan 6 riot, the office of president was not included in

the list of federal elected positions affected by the 14th Amendment.

Noah Bookbinder of campaign group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, which brought the original case, took to social media to hail Tuesday's ruling, calling it "a huge moment for democracy." "It is not only historic and justified, but is necessary to protect the future of democracy in our country. "Our Constitution clearly states that those who violate their oath by attacking our democracy are barred from serving in government."

Supreme Court

The court placed its ruling on hold until Jan 4, anticipating an appeal to the US Supreme Court, which Trump's campaign immediately said it would seek. "We will swiftly file an appeal to the United States Supreme Court and a concurrent request for a stay of this deeply undemocratic decision," campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said in a statement.

Cheung said the "all-Democrat appointed" panel in Colorado was doing the bidding of a "(George) Soros-funded, left-wing group's scheme to interfere in an election on behalf of Crooked Joe Biden. Democrat Party leaders are in a state of paranoia over the growing, dominant lead President Trump has amassed in the polls. They have lost faith in the failed Biden presidency and are now doing everything they can to stop the American voters from throwing them out of office next November."

The judgment brought swift rebukes from senior Republicans, including Trump's one-time rival for the 2016 nomination, Senator Marco Rubio. "The



WATERLOO: Former US President and 2024 presidential hopeful Donald Trump applauds at the end of a campaign event in Waterloo, Iowa, on Dec 19, 2023. — AFP

US has put sanctions on other countries for doing exactly what the Colorado Supreme Court has done today," he wrote on social media.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis — who is running against Trump for the 2024 Republican nomination but has closely aligned himself with many of the former president's political positions — said the US Supreme Court "should reverse" the Colorado ruling. "The Left invokes 'democracy' to justify its use of power, even if it means abusing judicial power to remove a candidate from the ballot based on spurious legal ground," he wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

Even as swathes of the traditional Republican Party are becoming increasingly exasperated with



Trump and his brand of grievance-filled isolationism, a vocal grassroots movement continues to support him enthusiastically. Failure to stand behind the presumed frontrunner against what he paints as a "witch hunt" can have dire consequences for even senior party figures.

Trump's historic indictments for allegedly leading a criminal conspiracy to steal the 2020 election — one at the federal level and another in Georgia — have opened a frenzied legal debate over his eligibility for future office. The Colorado action is one of multiple 14th Amendment lawsuits against Trump proceeding nationwide. Minnesota's top court threw out a similar move last month. — AFP

'No one knows' when Ukraine war will end: Zelensky

KYIV: President Volodymyr Zelensky said Tuesday that there was no end in sight to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as fatigue builds among Kyiv's allies nearly two years into the war and the Kremlin voices growing confidence of victory. Zelensky said he had turned down a request from the military — for now — to mobilize as many as 500,000 Ukrainians for the army, an unpopular proposal that could hit his worsening poll ratings among Ukrainians.

His meeting with local and foreign journalists wraps a difficult year in Ukraine, with Kyiv's forces under pressure on the front and allies wavering on military and financial backing. "No one knows the answer," Zelensky told reporters in response to a question of whether the war with Russia could end next year. "Even respected people, our commanders and our Western partners, who say that this is a war for many years, they do not know," he said.

The question of how long Western countries will provide essential support for Kyiv has grown increasingly urgent. Zelensky last week embarked on a tour of Western countries to make the case for more military and political support as Russia's invasion grinds closer to its two-year-anniversary in February. But he failed to convince the US Congress to immediately approve \$60 billion in support, while in Brussels, Hungarian leader Viktor Orban blocked an aid package of around 50 billion euros (\$55 billion).

Washington will 'not betray us'

Zelensky said Tuesday that he wanted to organize talks with Orban to "find solutions" to their differences, and voiced confidence that Washington would follow through on aid. "I am confident that the United States will not betray us," he said. But hours later, the Democratic and Republican leaders of the US Senate, said that Washington would not be able to approve new aid for Ukraine before year's end as the two sides continued to seek a compromise.

With elections looming in the United States next year, Zelensky acknowledged that the result of the



DONETSK: A woman walks past a multi-storey residential building hit by recent shelling in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine. — AFP photos



KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky gestures as he delivers an end-of-year press conference on Dec 19, 2023.

November poll could have a "very strong impact" on the course of the war, saying Republican favorite Donald Trump would "surely have a different policy" from Joe Biden. Those setbacks on the diplomatic front come in the wake of a disappointing counteroffensive that Kyiv launched in June using

Western-supplied tanks and weapons stockpiled over months.

Responding to growing weariness over the war, UN human rights chief Volker Turk said Tuesday that the world had become "jaded" by the Ukraine conflict, where war crimes continue to be committed "primarily by the forces of the Russian Federation".

In contrast, Russian President Vladimir Putin has vowed victory and said during a Tuesday meeting with defense officials that society had rallied behind the war effort. Putin, who has announced he will run for re-election in March, lashed out at the West and claimed it was seeking Moscow's destruction. "Well, we are not going to give up the goals of the special military operation, either," he said, using the Kremlin's term for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Zelensky was facing growing discontent at home before becoming the global face of Ukrainian resistance after Russia's invasion, but he is once again feeling political pressure. Recent polling shows that the number of Ukrainians who trust Zelensky has dropped to 62 percent compared to 84 percent one year ago, when Kyiv's forces were celebrating gains in the east and south. — AFP

Survivors of China's deadliest quake brave freezing cold

JISHISHAN, China: Survivors of China's deadliest earthquake in years huddled in makeshift aid tents despite freezing temperatures on Wednesday, too scared to return to homes made dangerous by the disaster. State broadcaster CCTV said at least 134 people were killed in northwestern Gansu province and neighboring Qinghai after a shallow tremor on Monday night damaged thousands of buildings.

Almost 1,000 were injured across the two provinces, according to state news agency Xinhua, while CCTV said 13 were still missing in Qinghai as of 4:00 pm (0800 GMT) Wednesday. The quake was China's deadliest since 2014, when more than 600 people were killed in southwestern Yunnan province.

AFP reporters saw families sheltering in makeshift tents built from wooden poles and tarpaulins outside the Majiahe mosque near the epicenter in Gansu's Jishishan county, with outdoor stoves and blankets salvaged from homes their only sources of warmth.

A woman taking refuge in one of the tents outside the mosque told AFP her family was afraid to return home. "We can't get inside anymore, it's too dangerous," she said, declining to give her name. "All the bricks and tiles inside could fall down at any time." Residents crowded around stoves in large tents set up on a basketball court by the local government in a nearby township.

One resident told AFP some tents had as many as 35 people huddled inside them. "We have eight



JISHISHAN: People are seen at a temporary shelter in the main square in Dahejia in Jishishan County in northwest China's Gansu province on Dec 20, 2023. — AFP

people in our family but (emergency response staff) only gave us three servings of instant noodles last night," local student Ma told AFP. "There is nothing we can do. We can't go back to our house now," she said.

Children lay under blankets, playing on their phones, while adults attempted to prepare meals from the limited food rations. AFP saw rescue teams unloading large bundles of supplies, including more tents. In another nearby town, people were seen queuing up for food and supplies beneath a large mosque, its roof panels almost entirely knocked down by the tremor. Next to the damaged mosque were more than 150 blue emergency tents, each allo-

ated to one family, an official at the scene told AFP.

Nearly a thousand people who were injured have been sent to hospitals, with 87,000 people moved to "temporary shelters" in Gansu alone, CCTV said. China's western hinterland carries the scars of frequent seismic activity. A huge quake in Sichuan province in 2008 left more than 87,000 people dead or missing, including 5,335 schoolchildren.

"Search and rescue work basically ended by 3:00 pm yesterday and the main work now is to treat the injured and resettle the affected population," an unidentified official from Gansu's Emergency Management Department told a news conference on Wednesday. — AFP

EU agrees 'historic' overhaul of asylum laws, sparking outcry

BRUSSELS: The EU on Wednesday agreed to an overhaul of its asylum system that includes more border detention centers and speedier deportations, prompting migrant charities to slam the changes as "dangerous".

But EU governments, officials and MEPs hailed the preliminary accord on the bloc's new pact on asylum and migration as "historic", saying it updated procedures to handle growing irregular arrivals while maintaining respect of human rights. The legislative reform, reached after lengthy negotiations between EU member countries and bloc lawmakers, has yet to be formally adopted by the European Council and European Parliament. That is expected to be done before June 2024, when EU elections will decide the next parliament. Nationalist, anti-immigrant parties are forecast to win more seats in the parliament, reflecting a harder stance among EU voters struggling with a high cost of living.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen welcomed the "historic" agreement on "a fair and pragmatic approach to managing migration". Many EU countries, including France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands also hailed the accord. Italy's interior minister, Matteo Piantedosi, called the agreed reform a "great success", saying front-line countries like his own "no longer feel alone". But Hungary — which objects to having to take in irregular migrants or pay countries that do — rejected the deal in the "strongest possible terms," its foreign minister Peter Szijjarto said.

Faster screening

The EU reform includes faster vetting of irregular arrivals, creating border detention centers, accelerated deportation for rejected asylum applicants and a solidarity mechanism to take pressure off southern countries experiencing big inflows.

The overhaul, based on a commission proposal put forward three years ago, keeps the existing principle under which the first EU country an asylum-seeker enters is responsible for their case. But to help countries experiencing a high number of arrivals — as is the case with Mediterranean countries Italy, Greece and Malta — a compulsory solidarity mechanism would be set up.

That would mean a certain number of migrant relocations to other EU countries, or countries that refuse to take in migrants would provide a financial or material contribution to those that do — something Budapest is fiercely against. The reform also accelerates the vetting of asylum-seekers so those deemed ineligible can be quickly sent back to their home country or country of transit. That procedure — which requires border detention centers being set up — would apply to irregular migrants coming from countries whose nationals' asylum requests are rejected in more than 80 percent of cases.

Families with young children would have adequate conditions, human rights monitoring would take place and free legal advice provided, MEPs said. Another point is a proposed "surge response" under which protections for asylum-seekers could be curtailed in times of significant inflows, as happened in 2015-2016 when more than two million asylum-seekers arrived in the EU, many from war-torn Syria.

Dozens of charities that help migrants criticised the changes. The deal "will cost more lives at sea," the Sea-Watch ship rescue charity said, arguing that it was "a bow to the right-wing parties of Europe". Oxfam said the new package is "in many ways ... far worse" than the existing system, with one of its migration experts, Stephanie Pope, calling it "a dangerous dismantling of the key principles of human rights and refugee law". Amnesty International said the "likely outcome is a surge in suffering on every step of a person's journey to seek asylum in the EU", while the Danish Refugee Council complained that "the EU should protect refugees — not make it harder for them". — AFP

Waning influence of OPEC+ in spotlight as prices flag

Group faces pressure on multiple fronts amid transition debate

LONDON: Despite slashing oil production for months on end and announcing new cuts in late November, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its ten allies have struggled to boost flagging prices. Moreover, the OPEC+ group faces pressure on multiple fronts, as rising US crude production, a looming transition away from fossil fuels, and reports of discord among members have added to the challenges.

Prices are sitting at their lowest level in nearly six months despite the cartel's announcement in November to further cut output. They have jumped in recent days as cargo shippers and oil firms say they will avoid using the Red Sea and Suez Canal because of drone and missile attacks by Houthi rebels. But they still remain below \$80 a barrel.

Nevertheless, crude prices remain above the average of the past five years. In an effort to prop up prices, the OPEC+ alliance has implemented supply cuts of more than five million barrels per day (bpd) since the end of 2022. After nearly striking \$100 in September, the alliance's strategy has since fallen short of reversing a slide. While Riyadh blamed speculators for the drop, rather than weak demand, analysts say the cartel's lack of

unity has fuelled skepticism about their latest announced cuts.

"If the supply cuts went broadly unheard it is because the latest discussions showed frictions at the heart of the group," Swissquote analyst Ipek Ozkardeskaya told AFP. Angola and Nigeria expressed dissatisfaction with their production quotas at the November ministerial meeting, which had to be postponed for several days because of disagreements.

Furthermore, the OPEC+ alliance was unable to agree on a group-wide production cut that all 23 members would have supported. Instead, heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Russia only managed to garner support from six other members in a bid to voluntarily reduce output.

Yet, "unity is what's needed to give a stronger legitimacy to the group" and its decisions, said Ozkardeskaya. Founded in 1960, the 13-member OPEC cartel in 2016 partnered with 10 other producers to form OPEC+ to gain more clout.

But the group's enlargement has proven to be "a double-edged sword", noted Ozkardeskaya, with decision-making becoming more difficult. The Vienna-based group drew international attention in 1973, when it imposed an oil embargo against the Zionist entity's allies in the



midst of the Yom Kippur War, triggering the first oil shock. Within just a few months, prices quadrupled, highlighting the cartel's dominance. Faced with rising competitors in the 1980s, it introduced its famous quota system that enabled it to exert more control over the market.

This strategy meant the group fared relatively well during the 2008 financial crisis and the price shock in the wake of the COVID pandemic, despite increased

internal tensions. As a result of the supply cuts and amid various political crises in Libya and Venezuela, the OPEC+ share of the oil market has fallen to 51 percent—the lowest since its creation—the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in its latest report. Meanwhile, crude production in the United States, the world's leading producer, has risen above 20 million bpd, while Brazilian and Guyanese output has also soared. "The shift

in global oil supply from key producers in the Middle East to the United States and other Atlantic Basin countries... (is) profoundly impacting global oil trade," the IEA said. In recent years, OPEC+ has been confronted with its own demise as an increasing number of states have called for a transition away from fossil fuels owing to climate change.

"The green transition is a major drag on OPEC's business," said Ozkardeskaya, stressing that the group has an "interest (in) delaying the green transition as much as possible". At the COP28 summit in Dubai, OPEC Secretary-General Haitham Al-Ghais urged OPEC+ members in a heavily criticized letter to "proactively reject" any language that "targets" fossil fuels rather than emissions. According to analysts, it is imperative for Riyadh to sustain the inflow of government revenues derived from oil.

They are "essential to finance Saudi Arabia's extensive and multi-year economic diversification program, including ambitious giga projects", said Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management. Riyadh has been working on developing other sources of revenue, but "the transition doesn't happen overnight", UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo added. — AFP

IMF approves \$100m under ECF for Somalia

WASHINGTON: The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a new three-year arrangement under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) for Somalia in an amount of SDR 75 million (about 45.9 percent of quota, about \$100 million). Approval of the ECF arrangement enables immediate disbursement of SDR 30 million for budget support (about \$40 million). This follows the successful completion of a previous ECF arrangement approved in 2020 and that expired on Dec 15, 2023 and reaching the completion point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative on Dec 13, 2023.

The Executive Board's decision to approve the new program was taken on a lapse of time basis, following Board discussion of the authorities' program request on Dec 13, 2023. Achievement of the HIPC Completion Point and completion of the 2020 ECF is a testament to the Somali authorities' sustained track record of reform implementation over the past years, despite numerous challenges. Though these efforts, Somalia has made considerable progress in strengthening key economic and financial institutions, as well as improving governance.

However, despite the progress achieved, Somalia faces significant challenges, including those stemming from economic, social, security, and climate risks. In 2022, an estimated 54 percent of the population was living on less than \$2 per day. Growth is currently insufficient to reduce widespread poverty, address large social needs, and create sufficient jobs for the youth. Somalia is highly vulnerable to climate shocks that hurt growth and hinder poverty reduction efforts. Faced with these challenges, the authorities are embarking on a new 3-year IMF-supported program.

The program will support the authorities' post-HIPC reform strategy to further strengthen key economic institutions and promote macroeconomic stability and growth, in line with Somalia's national development plan and the government's long-term vision. Reform implementation will be accompanied by extensive IMF capacity development assistance, supported by the Somalia Country Fund. Fiscal policy will be guided by a prudent framework that balances the need for higher development expenditure with protecting fiscal sustainability and taking into account capacity constraints. External financing is expected to be based solely on grants and concessional loans to preserve debt sustainability. Increasing domestic revenues is a key pillar of the reform strategy, including implementation of a new income tax law. Efforts to improve public financial management include further progress on payroll integration, expenditure controls, and fiscal transparency, as well as strengthening debt management capacity and public investment management capacity. Continued improvements in the institutional capacity of the Central Bank of Somalia, including in the context of the currency reform, will foster financial deepening and financial inclusion. It will also be important to continue to advance reforms to improve AML/CFT and governance to promote private investment.



UK inflation hits lowest level in more than 2 years

LONDON: British inflation has slowed sharply to the lowest level in more than two years on falling petrol prices, official data showed Wednesday, easing a cost-of-living crisis after aggressive interest-rate hikes.

The Consumer Prices Index hit 3.9 percent in November from 4.6 percent in the previous month, attaining the weakest rate since September 2021, the Office of National Statistics said. The news handed a further boost to embattled Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak after inflation had already achieved his goal of falling below five percent in October. Finance minister Jeremy Hunt welcomed the news but conceded that Britons were still struggling with elevated consumer prices.

"With inflation more than halved we are starting to remove inflationary pressures from the economy," said Hunt. "We are back on the path to healthy, sustainable growth. But many families are still struggling with high prices so we will continue to prioritize measures that help with cost of living pressures." Sunak is currently seen as unlikely to win next year's general election, as his governing Conservatives trail Keir Starmer's main opposition Labour party.

November marked a sharper slowdown than expectations of 4.3 percent, but the rate is nevertheless almost double the Bank of England's official target of 2.0 percent. "Inflation eased again to its lowest annual rate for over two years, but prices remain substantially above what they were before the invasion of Ukraine," said ONS chief economist Grant Fitzner. "The biggest driver for this month's fall was a decrease in fuel prices after an increase at the same time last year. Food prices also pulled down inflation, as



LONDON: British inflation has slowed sharply to the lowest level in more than two years on falling petrol prices.

they rose much more slowly than this time last year."

The news comes one week after the BoE froze its key interest rate at a 15-year peak of 5.25 percent—but warned that it will remain elevated to tackle stubbornly high consumer prices. Inflation had surged to a 41-year peak at 11.1 percent in October 2022, stoked by spiking energy prices after the invasion of Ukraine by major oil and gas producer Russia and sparking a cost-of-living squeeze in Britain.

Wednesday's data sparked speculation the BoE could now decide to start cutting borrowing costs next year. However, core inflation—which strips out food and energy costs—eased only slightly to stand at 5.2 percent in November from 5.6 percent in October. "The sharper-than-expected fall in inflation

in November is good news, pointing to a continued easing in price pressures," noted Deloitte senior economist Debapratim De. "Those hoping that this allows the Bank of England to soften its relatively hawkish stance on interest rates might be disappointed though."

"Measures of underlying pricing strength, such as core and services inflation, have eased further but still remain at elevated levels." The BoE had stated last week that monetary policy would need to be "restrictive for an extended period of time" in order to return inflation to its target level. And its governor, Andrew Bailey, cautioned that there was "still some way to go" in policymakers' efforts to dampen inflationary pressures. — AFP

Bab Al-Mandeb strait: Key shipping route under attack

PARIS: Following a surge in attacks claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels targeting cargo vessels in the Red Sea, major shipping companies have halted traffic through the crucial Bab Al-Mandeb strait. As the United States works to form a multinational naval task force to safeguard the lane, AFP looks at the importance of the route, referred to as the "Gate of Tears" in Arabic.

The Strait of Bab Al-Mandeb is a narrow waterway at the southern tip of the Red Sea, connecting with the Gulf of Aden in the Indian Ocean. It separates Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula from Djibouti and Eritrea on the Horn of Africa. About 100 kilometers (62 miles) long and 30 kilometers (18 miles) wide, it stretches from Ras Menheli on the coast of Yemen and Ras Siyyan in Djibouti, each representing the end-point between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. At this juncture the island of Perim divides the strait into two shipping lanes.

With the Red Sea acting as a key link between Europe and Asia, the strait is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. Oil tankers and cargo ships arriving from the Indian Ocean pass through the wa-



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

terway to reach the Red Sea and then the Suez Canal, where they enter the Mediterranean, and vice versa. Around 20,000 ships transit every year through the Suez Canal, carrying millions of barrels of oil every day, and goods made in Asia.

According to the London-based International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) 12 percent of world shipborne trade passes through the Red Sea. The Pentagon puts the figure at between 10 and 15 percent. Deliveries of oil via the strait accounted for around 12

percent of oil carried by ship in the first half of 2023, while shipments of liquefied natural gas along the route over the same period came to around eight percent of the commodity's trade, according to S&P Commodity Insights. The Gulf, where the Suez Canal and the Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandeb straits are situated, is one of the most highly militarized zones in the world. The United States has set up its only permanent base in Africa there with 4,000 troops. China in 2017 opened its first overseas military base there. — AFP

German consumer mood brightens

FRANKFURT: German consumer confidence rose again heading into January thanks to expectations of higher salaries, although it still remained weak, a key survey showed Wednesday.

Pollster GfK said its forward-looking survey of around 2,000 people rose to minus 25.1 points, an increase of 2.5 points compared to December. The institute said there could finally be some "light at

the end of the tunnel" for consumers in Europe's top economy, which has been battling through a weak period. Inflation fell to 3.2 percent in November, way down on highs seen last year, relieving pressure on struggling households and businesses.

In particular, consumers' expectations when it comes to salaries have stopped declining, due to expected wage increases aimed at coping with higher prices, GfK said. But Rolf Buehler from GfK said that it "remains to be seen whether the current rise is the beginning of a sustained recovery," adding the overall reading of the survey was still low.

"Geopolitical crises and wars, sharply rising food

prices and the discussions surrounding the national budget for 2024 continue to cause uncertainty," Germany's top court ruled last month the governing coalition had broken rules on taking on debt, leaving their spending plans in disarray and prompting a scramble to hammer out a new budget for next year. A deal was clinched between the three parties in the coalition last week. But savings will have to be made, and observers have warned the crisis is likely to weigh on German growth next year. Last week, the German central bank slashed its growth forecast for next year to 0.4 percent, from a prediction of 1.2 percent in June. — AFP

Business

Ghana's cocoa industry faces threats from illegal mining and smuggling

Ghana took \$3bn credit from IMF to shore up its finances

ACCRA, Ghana: Ghana, the world's second biggest cocoa producer, faces a growing risk to its harvest—and blow to its crisis-hit economy—from illegal mining and smugglers, industry officials, farmers and activists warn. Top producer Ivory Coast and Ghana, together with other West African neighbors, produce two thirds of the world's supply of cocoa, the main ingredient in chocolate.

Along with gold and oil, the cocoa industry is a mainstay of Ghana's economy and foreign currency earnings. Any losses in revenue hit hard, as the country struggles to weather its worst economic crisis in decades. But cocoa production is falling victim to illegal mining, mostly for gold and known locally as "galamsey".

It is a major problem in Ghana despite government efforts to crack down and arrest those involved who have included Chinese nationals. "For the past five years, we've been experiencing serious destruction on cocoa farms as a result of activities of illegal miners," Michael Kwarteng, director in charge of anti-illegal mining activities at Ghana Cocoa Board (COCOBOD), told AFP. "It has reached an alarming proportion."

Despite an incentive package to help producers increase the price of a bag of cocoa, farmers accept lucrative deals to sell off land for unlawful mining. Rita Abena Koranteng, a 45-year-old cocoa farmer in Suhum in the Eastern Region, said the tough economic times had prompted her to give out two old pieces of land for mining. "Every month he pays me \$500 and I am happy with that because I am not going to make such an amount of money in my cocoa business," she said.

"I know some of my colleague cocoa farms in the Western Region and other places have switched to

rubber plantation now." The harvest has fallen in recent years, impacted by illegal mining, experts say. Around one million tons of cocoa were produced in Ghana in 2020-2021, according to COCOBOD. It dipped to 750,000 tons for the 2022-2023 crop, while the forecast for the coming season is between 750,000 and 800,000 tons.

The government announced a 63-percent-increase this year in cocoa prices—a bag currently sells for \$114 and a ton costs \$1,822. "Farmers are giving out their lands to these illegal miners in return for huge sums of money," Kwarteng said. "So far, the land lost to illegal mining now accounts for two percent of the total cocoa cultivation area in Ghana."

Sometimes cocoa farmers are even tricked into handing over land to illegal miners who claim to have a government permit to operate on it, Kwarteng said. Once seen as an economic star and beacon of political stability in the region, Ghana has been forced to take a \$3-billion credit deal with the International Monetary Fund to shore up its finances. Inflation stands at more than 26 percent, while public debt has increased sharply. Its economic woes weigh on President Nana Akufo-Addo's ruling NPP party as it gears up for elections at the end of next year.

Cocoa crops generate about \$2 billion in foreign exchange annually in a major contributor to government revenue and growth. In 2021, the contribution of cocoa to GDP in real terms was about \$533 million, according to the 2022 Cocoa Sector Report by GCB Strategy and Research Department.

But illegal mining is not the only problem—smugglers also target the crop. COCOBOD has begun to offer cash rewards to whistleblowers who report illegal mining on cocoa land but also smuggling of beans,



Along with gold and oil, the cocoa industry is a mainstay of Ghana's economy and foreign currency earnings.

Benjamin Tei Larweh, the board's deputy communications director, said.

"In 2022, Ghana lost about 150,000 metric tons of cocoa beans through smuggling to our neighbors and that was a colossal \$600-million revenue gone down the drain," he said. Six main regions in Ghana cultivate cocoa but due to fluctuating rainfall and decreasing soil fertility, production has moved westward. The Western Region is now Ghana's main cocoa produc-

er, accounting for 43 percent of the total. But illegal mining has also grown at the same time in the region.

Obed Owusu-Addai, of EcoCare Ghana which advocates for farmers' wellbeing, said the government had to do more to help improve prices and living standards. "We are sitting on a time bomb as a country," said Owusu-Addai. "If this issue is not resolved immediately, we will end up losing most of our lands to illegal mining." — AFP

Countdown begins for Burgan Bank's Kanz account draw

KUWAIT: As Burgan Bank gets closer to announcing the winner of Kanz account's biggest cash prize, it continues to encourage existing and potential customers to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of winning the Kanz annual cash prize



of KD 1,500,000. Accordingly, the bank announced that Dec 31 marks the last chance for customers to make a deposit and increase their balance or open aKanz account to qualify for the annual draw.

Commenting on the upcoming Kanz annual draw, Naser Al-Qaisi, General Manager - Retail Banking at Burgan Bank, said: "As a trusted financial partner, we are constantly looking for creative ways to inspire our customers to make the best financial decisions for themselves and their families. We continue to encourage all our community members to adopt a balanced financial plan that includes regular and planned savings. To this end, we decided to promote the savings culture by adding an attractive incentive to it with the Kanz draw account. Our goal is to always offer our customers the most rewarding, smart financial tools and solutions."

On her part, Lolwa Al-Khatrash, Executive Manager - Products and Segments at Burgan Bank, said: "We are very proud of the Kanz account and the success it has achieved so far. With every new product, our team spares no effort to introduce a simple solution that customers can seamlessly integrate into their lives. What we are witnessing today with Kanz testifies to the power of forward-looking banking products and their ability to make a lasting positive impact on our customers' lives."

London firms turn to cargo bikes

LONDON: On a busy north London street, plumber Ben Hume-Wright zipped through the heavy rush-hour traffic to his next job by bike. Trades such as his used to rely on vans but many are now choosing to do more business using two or sometimes three wheels.

Since switching his Ford diesel pickup truck for an electric cargo bike two years ago, Hume-Wright said he has been busier than ever. "I used to take on a maximum of five or six appointments" a day, he told AFP as the traffic ground forward behind him.

"I'll now book in six, seven and possibly even eight, because I know that I'm not going to get stuck in traffic," Hume-Wright set up in 2010 and was reliant on his van for 11 years. But now describes it as a "glorified shed" handy for storing parts and tools. When faced with a big installation job, he gets a supplier to deliver bulkier items directly to the client's address. He then shows up on his bike with just the tools needed for the job. "It's cheaper, I don't have any of the fuel costs and I just enjoy it. It's a lot more fun," he said.

Transport for London (TfL), the local government body responsible for most of the British capital's transport network, launched its first "Cargo Bike Action Plan" earlier this year. It wants to "promote and enable" their growth, given a rise in polluting van deliveries from online shopping since the pandemic. The use of cargo bikes, which can cost several thousand pounds (dollars), also increased during lockdown and encouraging their use chimes with Mayor Sadiq Khan's aim of a carbon net-zero city by 2030.

TfL estimates that the move towards cargo bikes



LONDON: Co-founder of green logistics company Zhero, Joe Sharpe, rides a cargo bike near Sadie Coles HQ gallery, one of Zhero's clients, in London. — AFP

could save up to 30,000 tons of CO2 emissions a year across Greater London by that time. Cargo bikes were popular across northern Europe until the mid-20th century but fell out of favor as motorized vehicles gained ground.

Their revival began in the early 2000s in cycling-crazy Denmark and the Netherlands, which unlike London are blessed with flat terrain and good cycling infrastructure. The number of cargo bikes on the streets of Copenhagen increased from 20,000 in 2020 to more than 40,000 in 2022, the city said.

In Germany—Europe's largest market for E-cargo bikes -- 165,000 units were sold in 2022. Ben Jaconelli, chief executive of leading E-bike and E-cargo bike firm Fully Charged, said UK growth has been

of a total \$500 million package "considering the continued satisfactory progress made by the government with the reform program". Sri Lanka has doubled taxes, removed subsidies on fuel and electricity and introduced anti-graft legislation in line with a \$2.9 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

The IMF released the second tranche of \$337 million of its four-year bailout last week, after the country secured a debt restructuring deal with its main bilateral lender China. The economy grew in the September quarter, marking the first expansion since the foreign exchange crisis. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka said the economy had grown by a modest 1.6 percent in the quarter ending September, up from a contraction of 11.5 percent a year earlier. Despite the positive data, overall figures from the first nine months of the year showed a contraction of 4.9 percent. The IMF has forecast Sri Lanka's full-year GDP growth in 2023 at negative 3.6 percent. — AFP

This year, Burgan Bank completely revamped its Kanz account to include more exclusive benefits and bigger prizes for its participants, including 20 winners who walk away with KD 2,000 every month, a semi-annual draw winner who is awarded with a KD 500,000 prize and a lucky annual draw winner who is set to receive the astounding KD 1,500,000 cash prize.

In order to qualify for any of the Kanz account draws, customers must have at least KD 200 in their Kanz accounts, or the equivalent of this amount in USD, GBP or EURO. Each KD 25 is equivalent to one chance in the draw, meaning that the greater the savings, the higher the chances of winning.

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced the most recent issues of CBK bonds and related Tawarruq at a total value of KD 240 million for three months with a rate of return at 4.375 percent.

Commodities market Report

Crude and gas pop on Red Sea disruption risk

By Ole Hansen

Crude oil and European gas prices received a boost after several companies, including BP and Equinor, joined a growing list of shippers who have paused Red Sea shipping amid almost daily attacks from Houthi rebels. While this event will line the pockets of shippers given the prospect for longer journeys and higher rates, the impact on crude oil and gas seems temporary unless the Iran link receives some fresh attention, thereby raising fresh concerns about supply from key producers in the Middle East Crude oil and European gas prices received a boost on Monday after several companies, including BP and Equinor, joined a growing list of shippers who have paused Red Sea shipping amid almost daily attacks from Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

Developments that led London's marine insurance market to widen the area in the Red Sea as it considers high risk, further reducing the passage of ships on the shortest route to Europe from the Middle East and Asia via the Suez Canal. This being the latest disruption related to the Zionist entity war with the Houthi attacks being carried out in support of Hamas, and while it may raise short-term supply risks as ships have to sail around Africa, which will add thousands of miles to their voyages, thereby delaying cargo deliveries, the risk of a lasting impact seems limited at this stage. Also considering the US defense Secretary Austin has announced plans to set up a new maritime task force intended to protect commercial vessels from attacks. An announcement that helped arrest Monday's rally with some weakness seen today, especially in gas.

Wrong-footed funds

Brent and WTI both in steep declines since late September received a boost from the news BP and Equinor as well as other shippers of crude and fuel products would halt shipments through the Red Sea. Thereby supporting a bounce that started last week when the Fed's pivot towards lower rates supported a general recovery in risk appetite. Just like gas we expect the disruption to this major trading route to be short term and as long production is not affected the price impact is likely to be short lived.

However, given the involvement of Iran-backed Houthi rebels the risk of escalating tensions cannot be ruled out and together with very weak positioning by funds ahead of 2024 these two developments may signal a fresh low has been set up. In Brent within an area around \$72 that has given support on several occasions since March, raising speculation it could be an invisible line in the sand that OPEC+ producers may try to defend.

As we highlighted in our latest Commitment of Traders update, speculators such as hedge funds and CTAs (commodity trading advisors) cut their net long in WTI and Brent to a 12-year low in the week leading up to last week's FOMC supported bounce. The selling that took place during the week to December 12 was carried out at volume-weighted average prices (VWAP) below current levels in both WTI and Brent and it highlights the involvement of short covering, potentially telling us the bounce was mostly driven by a technical, more than a fundamental change. The slump to 171k contracts (171 million barrels) from a September peak at 560k contracts, shows what a combination of weakening fundamentals and negative momentum can do to prices and positioning among speculators.

Note: Ole Hansen is head of Commodity Strategy at Saxo Bank

World Bank releases \$250m to boost Sri Lanka reforms

COLOMBO: The World Bank said Wednesday it had released \$250 million to support bankrupt Sri Lanka's tough economic reforms following last year's financial crisis. Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$46 billion external debt in April 2022 after running out of foreign exchange to finance essential imports of food, fuel and medicines, with civil unrest ousting then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

His successor has been pressing tough austerity measures to help restore essential supplies. The World Bank said it had released the second and final tranche



COLOMBO: A vendor holds Sri Lankan bank notes while working at a market in Colombo. — AFP

Lifestyle



Ruaa Hassuna plays music for Palestinian children on her Oud (Ud, or oriental lute) as Palestinian children participate in an activity aimed to support their mental health, amid continuing war on Gaza.— AFP photos

Music gives Gaza children respite from horrors of war

It takes a while but slowly the children gathered around volunteer entertainer Ruaa Hassuna in a Gaza camp start clapping along as her music offers some respite from the horrors around them. Smiles light up the faces of the children, huddled amid the tents outside the south Gaza town of Rafah which shelter hundreds of thousands of Palestinians driven from their homes by more than two months of relentless Zionist bombardment.

Hassuna is part of a troupe of more than a dozen volunteer entertainers who travel from camp to makeshift camp on a mission to provide children with some escape, however brief, from the death and destruction they have witnessed. The 23-year-old plays the oud, a lute-like stringed in-

strument popular across the Middle East. Other volunteers entertain the children with slapstick, acrobatics, story-telling or dance.

"We use whatever means we can to remove the children from the war," says the 23-year-old. "The aim of getting them to sing is to alleviate their stress." Hassuna says that when her young audiences hear her oud, they "no longer hear the hum of the drones" deployed by the Zionist army, instead immersing themselves in the music.

The United Nations says children make up half of the 1.9 million Palestinians displaced since the onset of the war on Gaza. They have been forced to abandon their daily routines and live under the Zionist bombardment.

'I want my childhood back'

Hassuna's troupe travels to a different camp every day, putting on a three-hour performance in each. "It's an important project because, from what we've observed, the psychological state of the children is very bad," said returning expatriate Awni Farhat, the person behind the initiative.

This space "allows them to unburden themselves of the psychological problems created by this war", said Farhat, who lives in the Netherlands but returned to Gaza during a week-long humanitarian truce in late November. The UN children's agency, UNICEF, has described the Gaza Strip as "the most dangerous place in the world" for a child.

Speaking after a two-week visit to the be-

sieged coastal enclave, UNICEF spokesman James Elder said he had witnessed children hospitalized for amputations who were then "killed in those hospitals" by the Zionist bombardments. The health ministry says more than 19,667 people have been killed in Gaza during the war, most of them women or children.

Many of the children in the troupe's audiences are hardened beyond their years, their innocence shattered by fear and bereavement. "I want to forget my worries and forget the people I've lost," said 15-year-old Nizar Shaheen, adding that he felt "suffocated" by life in the camps. "I want to live my childhood like we did before," he said, adding: "We don't know where to go. Today, there's no food, no water, there's nothing."—AFP



A Ukrainian Cultural Forces musician performs for sick soldiers at a recovery centre in an undisclosed area in the Donetsk region amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.— AFP photos



Ukrainian singer Danielle Zayushkina from Vivienne Mort band performs for sick soldiers at a recovery centre in an undisclosed area in the Donetsk region amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Live music offers respite from Ukraine's trench life

With bawdy songs and violin solos, a live concert near Ukraine's front line gave troops a chance to unwind and clear their heads of warfare. Performed by fellow soldiers, the intimate show was staged at a recovery centre for Ukraine's 23rd mechanized brigade in the eastern Donetsk region. The unit is deployed around the war-battered industrial hub of Avdiivka, which the Kremlin has been trying to capture for nearly two months.

"While listening, I wasn't thinking about the trenches," said Oleksandr, a soldier recovering from a sinus infection likely due to hypothermia. "There are songs or rhythms that remind you of something, of good memories," the 31-year-old, who declined to give his last name citing security concerns, told

AFP. A handful of musicians worked their magic on the piano, violin, guitar and bandura—a traditional Ukrainian string instrument—for an audience of a couple dozen.

The performers were from Cultural Forces, an association that has put on more than 2,500 concerts for troops since the beginning of the war in February 2022. "We offer the guys a chance to take their minds off things through music, song, jokes," said Roman Rameniev, the guitarist that day. "They forget where they are for a bit... and unwind," said the 43-year-old, who fought in a brigade before joining the association in June. Founded by singer Mikolai Sierga, the association has a roster of 60 military and civilian artists who perform at the front-line medical facilities.

Shell shock'

At first, the soldiers at the recovery centre listened indifferently, with vacant gazes and tired faces. When the violinist called out for requests, the servicemen struggled to come up with songs. "I've forgotten everything my parents sang when I was kid," said one. "We don't remember anything, we've had shell shock," added another.

It took a bawdy number about their higher-ups for the men to crack a smile and loosen up. But the war was back soon enough. During a smoke break outside, the conversation turned to life on the front line. "You never leave the trenches because of the goddamn drones," said one soldier to another.

"You fire at them, shoot one down but shit, it gets worse: the enemy spots and shells you," he added. "There's nowhere to hide". Later, a unit deputy commander handed out medals and a priest delivered a sermon—formalities not normally part of the association's concerts.

"(We usually) show up at their houses—there's like 10 people and we get to know everyone," said Rameniev, the guitarist. "We talk about the quiet life, civilian jobs, what they used to do, what they do now, their dreams. It's less a concert than a conversation," he added.

Special guest

Oleksandr, the soldier, gave the show a thumbs up. "I enjoyed it. It's been a long time since I heard music or had contact with civilization," he said. He said the men spent all their time in trenches or village houses used as military bases. "I used to listen to music all the time. Sometimes I'd fall asleep with earphones in. But I've stopped listening. Don't feel like it anymore," he said. The show concluded with a special guest.

Daniela Zayushkina, lead vocalist of Ukrainian rock band Vivienne Mort, showed off her soulful voice in a solo performance. "The main goal is to entertain. Even if for five minutes, if it works, then I'm happy," she told AFP. It was her third show for the association. She also has a foundation of her own that raises funds to buy drones for the war effort. "My priority right now is to help the troops," she said. "Once we win, there'll be time for other things."—AFP



Ukrainian Cultural Forces musicians perform for sick soldiers at a recovery centre in an undisclosed area in the Donetsk region.

DR Congo rapper pardoned after jail for insulting president

A Congolese rapper arrested in 2021 for insulting the country's leader Felix Tshisekedi has been freed from prison after receiving a presidential pardon, the musician told AFP on Tuesday. Delphin Katembo, who goes by the stage name Idengo, was arrested in October 2021 on charges of insulting the head of state and for calling for the killing of members of the security forces.

He received a ten-year sentence for a rap song in which he said: "They're sacrificing us because of money... We are tired of their promises." A video also showed him with a weapon in his hand, pretending to cut off heads.

"Finally, I've been released," Idengo, 27, told AFP by telephone after he left prison in the eastern city of Goma. Tshisekedi had announced on December 11 that he was planning to release the rapper while speaking at an election rally in the musician's hometown of Beni, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

"I will continue to express through my songs everything I have to say," Idengo said. The DRC, an impoverished but mineral-rich central African nation, is holding presidential and parliamentary elections on Wednesday. Tshisekedi, 60, is running for a second term.—AFP



President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and leader of the Union of Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) party, Felix Tshisekedi (right), speaks to supporters during a campaign rally at Sainte Therese in the Ndjili district of Kinshasa.— AFP

ONCE THE ENEMY, MAJESTIC CONDOR WINS HEARTS OF COLOMBIAN FARMERS



Goats are seen at the "Paramo el Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



People take picture of goats during a sighting of Andean condors at the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



Women walk past a mural depicting an Andean condor in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



This undated handout picture taken with a camera trap and released by the Fundacion Jaime Duque shows Andean condors at the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.

A group of condors rip into the carcass of a calf at the top of a Colombian mountain which rises 4,200 meters above sea level. Their meal is a peace offering from local ranchers working to improve their relationship with the world's largest bird of prey, dubbed the King of the Andes. "It's a bird that, when you see it flying, is so beautiful," said Diana Bautista, of the white-collared creature with a wingspan that can reach up to three meters, tipped by fingerlike feathers.

In the mountainous northeastern municipality of Cerrito where she lives, the condor has not always been looked upon fondly. Up until a few years ago, villagers would leave out poisoned carrion or shoot at them to scare off the scavenger seen as a threat to their livestock. A group of 19 families living high up in the moorlands of the Andes, a unique mountain ecosystem, in 2019 formed the ACAMCO association to protect and boost appreciation of the bird.

Now, residents have learned to build pens to protect their most vulnerable livestock, and platforms in the mountains where they leave carrion for the winged giants. The community initiative is aimed at "protecting and learning about" the bird, which "attracts a lot of people" and could also have an economic benefit for the region, said Andrea Florez, from ACAMCO. "We must not believe all the bad things that are said about the condor," said Bautista. "Not everyone is lucky enough to have this bird in their country (...) we must love it."

'A great loss'

Acamco is supported by the Jaime Duque Foundation, a Colombian non-profit organization, which buys weak or sick animals from breeders to give to the condor, in order to study its eating habits using

camera traps. Condors used to feed on small animals, but human activity has chased away their usual prey and they have become dependent on livestock, said Francisco Ciri, a biologist and director of the Neotropical conservation foundation.

The Andean Condor is considered vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which lists its population of mature individuals at just over 6,700 and decreasing. There are only 60 left in Colombia, according to a 2021 national census by the Neotropical Foundation. Their main threat is deliberate poisonings by humans, says the IUCN.

The death of a single condor is "a great loss" for the species because it reproduces so slowly, said Carlos Grimaldos, an expert with the Jaime Duque Foundation. The condor reaches sexual maturity at the age of 10 and only gives birth to one chick every two or three years.

Protecting it is essential as the scavenger "cleans" the moorlands by eating dead animals and prevents contamination of water sources, said Grimaldos. With binoculars in hand, Grimaldos teaches visitors at a reserve run by the foundation to distinguish the condor from other raptors.

The condor finds itself "in an increasingly critical situation" throughout the Andes, said Guillermo Wiemeyer, an Argentine researcher attending a meeting of the South American Condor Network in the province of Santander. Experts from Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela created the network a decade ago to try and protect the condor, already considered extinct in Venezuela. Alexcevit Acosta, director of Santander's environmental authority, said it is urgent to hold a census throughout Latin America as "condors know no borders." —AFP



Women walk past a mosaic of the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



People walk during a sighting of Andean condors at the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



View of frailejon flowers at the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



An Andean condor flies at the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



General Manager of the Regional Autonomous Corporation of Santander (CAS), Alexcevit Acosta, speaks during a sighting of Andean condors at the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia.



View of a frailejon flower at the "Paramo del Almorzadero" in the municipality of Cerrito, Santander department, Colombia. — AFP photos

Top Italian influencer fined one million euros over cake deal

Italy's competition watchdog on Friday fined two companies owned by the fashion entrepreneur and Instagram star Chiara Ferragni one million euros (\$1.1 million) for "unfair commercial practices" over her endorsement of a cake marketed as raising money for charity. The pandoro cake "designed" by Ferragni for the food group Balocco went on sale in November 2022, purportedly to raise funds for the treatment of children with bone cancer in a hospital in Turin.

In fact, Balocco had made a fixed-sum donation of 50,000 euros to the Regina Margherita Hospital months earlier, the competition authority said in a statement. The firms that manage Ferragni's activities, Fenice and TBS Crew, made more than one million euros in the deal "without paying anything" to the hospital, it said. Fenice was fined 400,000 euros and TBS Crew was fined 675,000 euros. Balocco, based near Turin in northwest Italy, was fined 420,000 euros.

The authority accused the three companies "of having implemented an unfair commercial practice by publicizing the 'Pandoro Pink Christmas', designed by Chiara Ferragni, implying to consumers that in buying it, they would contribute to a donation" to the hospital. The pandoro cost around 2.5 times a non-branded version, a markup that "contributed to misleading customers, reinforcing their perception of



Italian blogger Chiara Ferragni poses prior to the Fendi catwalk show for the Women Fall/Winter 2022/2023 collection on the second day of the Milan Fashion Week in Milan. — AFP

being able to contribute to the donation".

Ferragni, who has almost 30 million followers on Instagram, came to prominence with a fashion blog before launching her own shoe collection. She went on to collaborate with several fashion brands, including Dior and Chanel, and is part of one of Italy's most famous celebrity couples with her husband Fedez, a rapper and music producer. — AFP

Malaysia OKs 'Merry Christmas' on halal cakes

Halal-certified bakeries in largely Muslim Malaysia can now put Christmas greetings on cakes for their customers, religious authorities said, reversing a three-year-old ban following public uproar. The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, known as Jakim, said Monday that the new directive replaces a previous order which barred the businesses from writing Merry Christmas on their products.

The new ruling came after an internal memo from popular bakery chain Berry's telling staff not to write Christmas greetings on their cakes was shared widely online since last weekend. "To be informed for this coming Christmas Festival Celebration we are strictly not allowed to write the words of Merry Christmas or X'Mas on any cakes even (if) requested by the customer," according to the memo, which cited halal regulations from Jakim.

Staff were advised to use a "Season's greetings" topper instead. "Will having the word Merry Christmas on the cake make all the cakes in the



shop non-halal? So please respect all cultures!", one Facebook user commented about the policy. Jakim, the country's Islamic affairs agency, said in a statement that "it is clear that there are no obstacles for business premises that have Malaysia halal certification to write any festive greetings on cake orders or similar". The agency said its "previous statements in 2020 are not applicable" anymore, and released an image of the Berry's memo with its statement. Jakim also said it will "review and re-evaluate" matters

related to the Malaysian halal certification procedure.

A Berry's representative told AFP on Tuesday that the internal memo "was meant for internal use". "Now we follow Jakim guidelines and customers can write the Christmas wishes," said the representative, who declined to give her full name. "We hope this issue can come to an end." Muslims account for about two-thirds of Malaysia's 34 million people, with large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities. Christians comprise about 10 percent of the population.

The Southeast Asian country regularly hosts international trade fairs on halal products and is positioning itself as a world leader in halal certification to meet the demands of Muslim consumers worldwide. Halal certification for products is increasingly sought after by manufacturers in a bid to tap into a lucrative Muslim consumer market which Malaysian officials estimate will be worth five trillion dollars globally by 2030 from three trillion dollars currently. —AFP

Sports

Salt smashes ton as England set up decider with West Indies

England now have the chance to secure series back at the same venue

TAROUBA: Phil Salt smashed a superb 119 from just 57 balls as England beat West Indies by 75 runs to level their Twenty20 international series 2-2 and set up a decider on Thursday. Led by Salt's aggressive stroke play and swift half-centuries from skipper Jos Buttler and Liam Livingstone, England made a team record of 267 for three in their 20 overs at the Brian Lara Academy.

England's tally was second-highest innings score in a match between full member nations and although West Indies made a fast-scoring start they rapidly lost wickets and ended up bowled out for 192 in 15.3 overs. Having trailed 2-0 in this series and having lost the ODI series in the Caribbean, England were facing a demoralising end to their tour but now have the chance to secure the series back at the same venue.

Salt had hit an unbeaten ton in England's victory in Grenada on Saturday and carried on where he left off, taking the attack to the hosts from the outset in emphatic fashion after England were put in. Salt and skipper Jos Buttler put on 117 in the opening partnership before the captain was removed for 55 when he was caught in the deep by West Indies captain Rovman Powell off Jason Holder.

Will Jacks helped maintain the momentum with 24 from nine balls as part of a rapid 56-run partnership and Liam Livingstone ensured the run-rate never faded with 54 from 21 balls. Salt was finally bowled by Andre Russell in the penultimate over after striking ten sixes and seven fours in his entertaining innings—the highest score by an Englishman in T20 internationals.

The West Indies reply started badly with Brandon

King removed with the first ball of the innings, edging to Reece Topley at short third man off Moeen Ali. But Nicholas Pooran came in and hammered 20 off the rest of Ali's opening over as the home side showed they were ready for the daunting chase.

The runs were flowing but Kyle Mayers was caught by Chris Woakes, at the second attempt, after looping a mis-timed drive off Topley high to mid-on. Shai Hope went for 16 after he top-edged Woakes to the grateful Salt behind the stumps leaving West Indies at 78-4 in just the sixth over. Andre Russell offered a reminder of his power with five sixes in his 51 off 25 balls but England wrapped up the win when Russell was caught by Harry Brook off Topley.

Tweaks satisfy Salt

Salt's incredible form bodes well for England's hopes in June's T20 World Cup, which will be hosted in the Caribbean and the United States, and he said he was relishing playing in the region. "I'm definitely enjoying it. It's a cool place to tour," he said. "The boys have produced the goods in the last couple of games and now we've got a decider to look forward to." Salt credited his surge in form to a changed approach to the game.

"It's very satisfying. The tweaks that I've made to my game in the last six months from a mental approach point of view... it's good that I'm seeing the rewards now," he added. Skipper Buttler was beaming after what was a feat of big-hitting with 33 sixes in the day. "A fantastic win," he said. "You don't play in too many of those games. It was like being at the Hong Kong Sixes. Really proud of the



TAROUBA: Phil Salt of England celebrates his century during the 4th T20I between the West Indies and England at Brian Lara Cricket Academy Stadium in Tarouba, Trinidad and Tobago. — AFP

group, to play with the bravery, the courage and the skill level that we have."

For his counterpart Powell, there was little to do other than get his team ready for one more clash. "Credit where credit is due," he said. "Phil Salt and Jos batted really well up front. These things happen. It's a very thin line. We're playing against world-

class players. Once you don't execute properly, they're going to put you under pressure. "The boys like a final it seems. We'll come into Thursday with brand new ideas and plans... The guys will just relax. Sometimes you just need to give them some space. It's a thinking game, and once guys are clear in their mind, they generally can execute." — AFP

N Zealand down Bangladesh in second ODI

NELSON: Henry Nicholls fell agonisingly short of a century on Wednesday as New Zealand eased to a seven-wicket win and sealed victory in their one-day international series against Bangladesh. A superb 169 off 151 balls from opener Soumya Sarkar was not enough to end Bangladesh's miserable ODI streak in New Zealand, where they have now lost all of their 18 previous 50-over matches against the Black Caps.

"The way the openers set the innings up was outstanding," said New Zealand captain Tom Latham. "We also had two good partnerships to put us in a good position. It was very clinical," he added. In a strong batting display by the hosts, Nicholls and Will Young hammered 128 for the second wicket. Latham and Nicholls then teamed up to grab 56 more for the third as New Zealand's batters dominated.

The win in Nelson gives New Zealand an unassailable 2-0 lead in the series after their 44-run win in the first game on Sunday. The third and final ODI will be played in Napier on Saturday. Sarkar's boundary-heavy innings took the visitors to a respectable 291 all out. But Nicholls led a strong Black Caps reply with 95 off 99 balls, steering the hosts to a comfortable victory.

Sarkar misses record

It was a superb innings by Sarkar who bounced back from a duck last Sunday to smash 22 fours and two sixes. He was just short of the Bangladesh ODI batting record of 176 scored by Litton Das against Zimbabwe in March 2020.

Sarkar hit out during a 91-run fifth-wicket partnership with veteran batter Mushfiqur Rahim. He finally departed in the 49th over when seamer William O'Rourke had him caught behind, the first of

Zimbabwe coach Houghton quits after WCup failure

HARARE: Zimbabwe coach Dave Houghton has resigned after the country's failure to reach next year's T20 World Cup, the national board said Wednesday. "The Zimbabwe Cricket Board has accepted Dave Houghton's resignation from his position as head coach of the Zimbabwe senior men's national team with immediate effect," the board said in a statement.

"Houghton said he had 'lost the change room' after 18 months in charge and felt that a 'new voice' was needed to take the team forward," the statement added. His resignation letter was sent just ahead of a board meeting Wednesday to look into the World Cup campaign. Zimbabwe lost to Namibia and Uganda at a recent qualifying tournament.

Surfing body proposes Olympic events without judge tower

PARIS: The International Surfing Association (ISA) said it proposed next year's Olympic competitions be judged remotely after plans to build a new tower at a famous Tahiti beach sparked fierce local resistance.

A proposal made to Paris 2024 organisers and the Polynesian government suggested the use of "live images shot from land, water and drones" to judge events at Teahupo'o on the French Pacific island.

The proposition, revealed by the ISA in a statement on Tuesday, came after a construction barge



NELSON: Bangladesh's Shoriful Islam (R) fields the ball as New Zealand's Will Young (L) looks on during the second one-day international cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh at Saxton Oval in Nelson. — AFP

three wickets the New Zealand bowler took in the final six balls.

In response, New Zealand's openers raced to 76-1 after ten overs before Bangladesh debutant Rishad Hossain pulled off a great catch at deep mid-wicket to dismiss Rachin Ravindra for 45 off 33 balls. The wicket came at the end of an expensive over for Bangladesh's bowlers as Ravindra smashed a six and Will Young hit consecutive fours.

New Zealand's batters all impressed as the Bangladesh bowlers struggled to exert any authority. Young, who scored 105 in the first ODI, was steaming towards another century when his misfired shot was caught and bowled by Hasan Mahmud.

Zimbabwe have also just been beaten in a limited overs series against Ireland. Houghton, 66, replaced Lalchand Rajput as Zimbabwe coach in June last year after six one-day and Twenty20 losses at home to Afghanistan. The board said he would be assigned to a "new role within the organisation".

"Dave will always be a legend of our game and it is with regret that he felt the change room needed a new voice," said board chairman Tavengwa Mukuhani. "While the past few months have been disappointing as we failed to qualify for both the 50-over World Cup and the T20 World Cup, they should not obscure all the work he has done over the past year to rebuild the foundations for long-term success."

Houghton, who captained the team in their first four Test matches and 17 one-day internationals, commented: "I have always had Zimbabwe cricket at heart and, though my coaching of the national team comes to an end, I would love to be involved in other areas."

"The talent base in Zimbabwe is enormous. How we move players from talented to performing well on the international stage is a great project to be in-

used to install a new judges' tower in the sea broke through part of a colourful coral reef during testing.

"Faced with this change of position, Paris 2024 will contact the key stakeholders... to understand how the ISA envisages the organisation of events without access to a judges' tower," the Paris Olympics organising committee responded.

It added that surfing's governing body had been "fully included in discussions since 2021 over the need to build a new tower for the proper organisation of broadcasting and refereeing operations".

The issue has had environmentalists up in arms and an online petition against the project has attracted more than 227,000 signatures.

The ISA said it put forth its proposal for remote judging on December 9, a day before Polynesian leader Moetai Brotherson announced that the surfing contest would stay at its planned venue.

Young finished on 89 with New Zealand in command at 204 for two. His second-wicket partnership of 129 runs off 131 balls with Nicholls was the most lucrative of the match. After Nicholls was caught with New Zealand on 260 for three after 40 overs, Black Caps captain Tom Latham kept the hosts' tally ticking over with 34 runs off 32 balls alongside wicketkeeper Tom Blundell.

Blundell sealed the win with a huge six in the 46th over to finish on 24 off 20 balls. "It's really disappointing," said Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto. "We lost a couple of early wickets, that's what cost us today. "We had a good tally, but our bowlers didn't bowl well." — AFP



Dave Houghton

involved in." The board said an interim management team would be named for a tour to Sri Lanka in January. It has also appointed a committee that has been given three weeks to look into the World Cup failures and the national structure. — AFP

Brotherson presented a plan in stages for construction of the new aluminium tower, which is to be completed by May 13, in time for a World Surf League (WSL) event seen as a dress rehearsal for the Olympics.

During the talks with concerned parties, he had won "unanimous backing from mayors, the (Tahiti) surfing federation and even the associations, except one," Brotherson said.

France's Sports Minister Amelie Oudea-Castera criticised the testing which damaged the beach's fragile corals for being "not well prepared" but ruled out any relocation of the surfing events.

The ISA earlier this month welcomed the decision by authorities to suspend work on the 14-metre (46 feet) tower due to replace an existing wooden structure that is no longer up to required standards. — AFP



GQEBERHA: South Africa's Tony de Zorzi poses with the player of the match trophy after the second one-day international (ODI) cricket match between South Africa and India at St George's Park in Gqeberha. — AFP

Burger, De Zorzi take SA to ODI victory over India

GQEBERHA: Left-arm fast bowler Nandre Burger and opening batsman Tony de Zorzi took South Africa to a series-levelling eight-wicket win in the second one-day international against India at St George's Park on Tuesday.

Burger, in his second one-day international, took three for 30 as India were bowled out for 211 despite half-centuries by Sai Sudharsan (62) and captain KL Rahul (56). Dreadlocked left-handed De Zorzi, in his fourth appearance, made 119 not out — his maiden international century — as South Africa achieved victory with 7.3 overs to spare.

The result set up a series decider in Paarl on Thursday after India won the first match by eight wickets in Johannesburg on Sunday. The strongly-built Burger, 28, took advantage of an unusually well-grassed St George's Park pitch after South African captain Aiden Markram won the toss and sent India in to bat.

"It was a tough wicket to bat on," said Rahul. "But a couple of us got set. If one of us could have gone on to make a big hundred and control the innings we could have got 60 runs extra." Burger generated consistent pace and occasional steep bounce. His fastest delivery was timed at 147km/h.

Opening batsman Sudharsan and Rahul batted sensibly in a third-wicket stand of 68 before Sudharsan was caught behind off a sharply-lifting ball from Lizaad Williams with the total on 114.

No other batsman could reach 20. Mukesh Kumar and Arshdeep Singh posed problems with the new ball when Reeza Hendricks and De Zorzi started South Africa's innings. Hendricks was dropped at second slip by Ruturaj Gaikwad off Kumar when he was on seven.

Hendricks went on to score 52 in an opening stand of 130 with De Zorzi which took the hosts a long way towards victory. "It was a much better all-round performance," said Markram. "It was still quite a tough wicket when the openers walked out. To put on a hundred partnership to set the game up was great."

Man of the match De Zorzi hit some powerful strokes in making his runs off 122 balls with nine fours and six sixes. — AFP

Sports

Griezmann ties Aragones goals record in Atletico draw

Surprise leaders Girona go to Real Betis

BARCELONA: Antoine Griezmann became Atletico Madrid's joint all-time leading scorer alongside Luis Aragones with 173 goals on Tuesday as he struck twice only for Getafe to snatch a stoppage-time equaliser in a 3-3 draw.

Atletico had to play much of the game with 10 men after Stefan Savic was sent off for two first-half bookings, but Griezmann gave the hosts the lead just before the break when he turned in Rodrigo Riquelme's cross. Borja Mayoral equalised early in the second half before Alvaro Morata headed Atletico back in front.

Griezmann scored a penalty to make it 3-1 and move level with Aragones, who also won La Liga as Atletico coach in 1976-77 and guided Spain to victory at Euro 2008. But Getafe pulled a goal back through Oscar Rodriguez and Mayoral tucked away a spot-kick in the third minute of added time to deny Atletico, whose 17-match home winning run in the league came to an end.

Former Real Madrid forward Mayoral is on 12 goals for the season, just one behind leading scorer Jude Bellingham. The point for Atletico was still enough to bump Diego Simeone's side up to third above Barcelona.

Sevilla won the first time in 11 outings with Adria Pedrosa, Lucas Ocampos and Sergio Ramos on target in a 3-0 victory away to Granada as new boss Quique Sanchez Flores made a strong start after taking over Monday. Valencia won 1-0 at Rayo Vallecano courtesy of Sergi Canos' goal in the second half.

Surprise leaders Girona go to Real Betis on Thursday while Real Madrid, two points behind in second, round out the year with a trip to Alaves. — AFP



MADRID: Atletico Madrid's French forward #07 Antoine Griezmann runs with the ball during the Spanish league football match between Club Atletico de Madrid and Getafe. — AFP

No repeat of Cameroon tragedy at Africa Cup of Nations

ABIDJAN: All is on track for African football's biennial showpiece, the Africa Cup of Nations, according to organisers in the Ivory Coast who are confident their security measures will prevent a repeat of the tragedy that overshadowed the 2021 edition in Cameroon.

Ivory Coast may be one of the heavyweights in African football but this will be only the second time they host the finals, after 1984 when the tournament featured just eight teams instead of the 24 this time round.

The competition runs from January 13 to February 11 with Senegal defending the title they won for the first time after beating Egypt on penalties. It retains its 2023 moniker despite the decision by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) in July last year to postpone it from the original dates in the northern hemisphere summer owing to fears over staging matches during the rainy season.

Around \$1.5 billion has been invested which includes funding improved roads—principally a complete overhaul of the 350-kilometre coastal road which links Abidjan—the economic capital—to the port city of San Pedro, cutting in half

the travel time between the two.

Aside from the external security risk posed by jihadists based in neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, Ivorian authorities have moved to quell fears over crowd control which has been the source of most anxiety due to what happened in Yaounde two years ago.

The last-16 clash between hosts Cameroon and the Comoros resulted in eight dying and dozens injured due to a crush as home fans piled in to watch. Youssef Kouyate, director-general of the Ivory Coast police, told AFP they had measures in place for all six stadia to avoid a similar tragedy—with organisers expecting 1.5 million fans from outside the country.

"We are going to open the gates to the stadia very early, we will ensure the spectators form an orderly queue so they can enter the stadium without any trouble," he said. "We are going to demand spectators come early." There will be some 17,000 soldiers and police deployed for the tournament and 2,500 stadium staff.

"It is after all not the first big sporting event Ivory Coast has had to organise," said Kouyate. "We hosted the Francophone Games (in 2017). We are calm."

'Fit for purpose'

It was not so calm a few months ago when to the embarrassment of the organisers torrential rain flooded the pitch at the 60,000-capacity Eimpe Olympic Stadium which had been specially constructed at enormous cost for the tournament.

sports, while also continuing to compete in their existing national championships.

UEFA optimistic

It means the European court's ruling will be crucial, and in October last year the promoters of the Super League launched A22 Sports Management, a company whose aim is to contest UEFA's so-called "monopoly" over the sport on the continent, in the interest of "supporters, clubs and of football".

Technically, the court (CJEU) will rule on several questions put to it in 2021 by a judge in Madrid, most crucially that of whether UEFA is "abusing its dominant position" in submitting all tournaments in Europe to its authority, and threatening punishments against clubs and players who go against that.

UEFA has cause for optimism, given that CJEU Advocate General Athanasios Rantos advised in December last year that rules laid out by European football's governing body, as well as by FIFA, were "compatible" with European Union com-

The stadium is due to host 10 matches including the opening game between Ivory Coast and Guinea-Bissau on January 13, and the final on February 11. The authorities put it down to a freak downpour but all the same it resulted in Patrick Achi and Paulin Danho being removed from their posts as prime minister and sports minister respectively.

Achi's successor Robert Beugre Mambe—who also assumed the role of sports minister—has been charged with "organising the most beautiful Africa Cup of Nations in history". Three months on from the shame of the flooding it appears under Mambe's stewardship the pitch is now resistant to a similar catastrophe.

"We were all disturbed by what we saw," said Idriss Diallo, president of the Ivorian football federation, at the beginning of December whilst sitting in a stand at the stadium with rain tipping down. "But the authorities took the matter in hand and the pitch has been completely relaid."

"It is fit for purpose," he added. There have been concerns that the main stadium plus the five others to be used in Abidjan, Yamoussoukro, Bouake, San Pedro and Korhogo will become white elephants.

Organisers hope that the First Division teams—the majority of whom play in Abidjan—will attract larger crowds due to the proximity of the stadia. Diallo thinks there will also be a knock-on effect globally.

"Thanks to our stadia we will become a hub for teams in the region who do not have such facilities," he said. "Before they all went to play in Morocco, now they will come here." — AFP

Nottingham Forest appoint Nuno as new manager

LONDON: Nuno Espirito Santo has been appointed as the new manager of Nottingham Forest, the Premier League club announced Wednesday. "Nottingham Forest can today confirm the appointment of Nuno Espirito Santo as first team head coach," said a club statement.

"Nuno joins the club on a two-and-a-half-year contract and will take charge of his first match on Saturday when Forest face Bournemouth at The City Ground." The 49-year-old Portuguese coach succeeds Steve Cooper, sacked by Forest on Tuesday after a dismal run of one win in 13 Premier League games left the club just one place, and five points, above the relegation zone.

Nuno has been out of work since leaving Saudi Pro League club Al-Ittihad in November. But he has now returned to English football following a two-year absence since his departure after an ill-fated four-month spell at Tottenham Hotspur which featured a mere 10 Premier League games.

Nuno also had four years in charge of Wolves, guiding the club to promotion from the Championship in his first season in charge. Wolves enjoyed consecutive seventh-place finishes in the Premier League and a run to the Europa League quarter-finals under Nuno's leadership.

Cooper's exit from the City Ground came with Forest having lost five of their past six games. The 44-year-old Welshman led Forest to promotion to the Premier League in 2022, ending a 23-year absence from the top flight for a club twice crowned champions of Europe under celebrated manager Brian Clough in 1979 and 1980.

Cooper had retained the support of Forest fans after taking them from the bottom of the Championship to Premier League survival last season. But with Cooper's summer of heavy investment in new signings failing to deliver the required results, Forest's Greek owner Evangelos Marinakis finally lost patience with the former Swansea boss. — AFP



Nuno Espirito Santo

Court to deliver crucial Super League verdict

LAUSANNE: The European Court of Justice will deliver a ruling on the breakaway Super League on Thursday in a case that has potentially massive consequences for the future of football on the continent. Depending on what the judges decide, it could be a key victory for European football's governing body UEFA or it could send shockwaves through the sport in the same way the Bosman ruling did in the 1990s.

The case goes back to April 2021, when 12 of Europe's biggest clubs announced they had signed up to the planned Super League, just before UEFA were set to reveal vast reforms to the Champions League. The Super League was seen as a direct competitor to UEFA's flagship

competition. It quickly crumbled in the face of a strong backlash from supporters and football's governing bodies, and UEFA, as well as world governing body FIFA, threatened to take disciplinary action against the clubs involved.

Nine of the 12 clubs involved—including six from the English Premier League—threw in the towel almost immediately, leading to the collapse of the Super League within 48 hours of its launch. Two years on, only Spanish giants Real Madrid and Barcelona have not stood down from the project, with Juventus withdrawing in July. Juve's president, Andrea Agnelli, had been a key pro-Super League voice but he resigned late last year and was then barred from Italian football for two years after his club were found guilty of using transfers to artificially boost their balance sheet.

Yet the threat of a breakaway by Europe's most powerful clubs continues to hang over football, as they dream of introducing a highly lucrative closed league like those in North American

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010

Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733

Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764

Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

Change of Name

I, SHAHINFAR, holder of Indian Passport No. M0404462 having permanent address Vpo Khodan, Teh Garhi, Banswara, Rajasthan, 327022, India residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under Given Name: SHAHEEN And Surname: KHAN.
(#4574) 21-12-2023

Man City ease into Club World Cup final but must cope without Haaland

Happy to get to the final against Fluminense: Pep Guardiola



JEDDAH: Manchester City's Dutch defender #06 Nathan Ake and Urawa's Japanese midfielder #21 Tomoaki Okubo fight for the ball during the FIFA Club World Cup football semi-final match between England's Manchester City and Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds at King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah. — AFP

JEDDAH: Manchester City will have to cope without Erling Haaland as they aim to lift the Club World Cup for the first time in Friday's final against Fluminense. The European champions shrugged off their sluggish Premier League form to cruise past Urawa Reds 3-0 in Tuesday's semi-final in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Haaland watched on from the stands as Mateo Kovacic and Bernardo Silva struck after Marius Hoibraten's own goal opened the scoring. The Norwegian still provoked the biggest cheer of the night from a barely half-full King Abdullah Sports City Stadium when he offered the crowd a wave as he appeared on the big screens during the first half.

But City boss Pep Guardiola confirmed his top scorer will miss the final and does not know when Haaland will be fit to feature again. The 23-year-old has already missed four matches due to a foot problem. City have won only one of their last six

Premier League matches to fall behind Arsenal and Liverpool in the title race.

And they face in-form Everton away on their return to England on December 27. "Erling still cannot train," said Guardiola after Haaland was left out the City squad. Tournament rules state that the 23 players selected in the semi-final are the only players allowed to feature in the final.

Kevin De Bruyne will also miss the final despite making his return to training on Monday from a four-month layoff due to a hamstring injury. Despite missing their biggest goal threat and creative hub, City were never troubled as an unblemished record for European sides against Asian teams at the Club World Cup was extended to 14 games. "Happy to get to the final against Fluminense. It's the last step to win the title, the only title the club doesn't have, so we go for it," added Guardiola.

City lacked penetration and punch for the first 45 minutes despite enjoying over 80 percent of

possession against the Asian champions. Urawa had lost six of their previous 10 games but largely kept their opponents at bay before a self-inflicted blow opened the game up for City on the stroke of half-time. Matheus Nunes fired a low cross into the box that Hoibraten turned into his own net under little pressure.

Kovacic bags first goal

As Urawa tired from chasing the ball in the sweltering Saudi heat, City were then able to cut loose in the second half. Kovacic drilled in his first City goal after racing onto Kyle Walker's pass that cut the Japanese defence wide open.

Both Kovacic and Nunes have struggled to make a meaningful impact since arriving at the treble winners in the summer transfer window.

Nunes should have followed the Croatian's lead by netting his first goal for the club when he headed a glorious chance wide from Jack Grealish's

cross. A third goal for City did not take long to arrive as Hoibraten's bad luck continued when Silva's shot deflected in off the Norwegian defender.

Silva warned of the heightened risk of injury put upon players by a "crazy" schedule after FIFA confirmed that the Club World Cup will expand to 32 teams and a month-long competition in 2025. A hugely one-sided contest did little to whet the appetite for many more matches between Europe's elite clubs and the rest of the world as the financial gulf between the two continues to grow.

"A lot of our players now know what is the gap between a Premier League team and our team," said Urawa coach Maciej Skorza. "We expected possession of the ball will be huge for Manchester City, but we had our plan to counter-attack. Maybe this match showed also quite a big difference in physical aspect between these two teams." European teams are now unbeaten in 21 Club World Cup matches stretching back to 2012. — AFP

Chelsea back from brink to reach League Cup semis

LONDON: Chelsea came back from the brink to reach the League Cup semi-finals with a dramatic penalty shoot-out victory against Newcastle after Mykhailo Mudryk's last-gasp equaliser on Tuesday.

Mauricio Pochettino's side were joined in the semi-finals by Fulham, who beat Everton on penalties, and second-tier Middlesbrough, 3-0 winners against Port Vale. Beaten three times in their previous five games, a wretched run that started with their 4-1 loss at Newcastle, Chelsea showed some much needed fighting spirit to win the quarter-final 4-2 on penalties after a 1-1 draw at Stamford Bridge.

Languishing in 10th place in the Premier League, Chelsea were two minutes from being knocked out before Ukraine winger Mudryk came to the rescue with the leveller that set the stage for the Blues' shoot-out success. Pochettino's only silverware as a manager is a French league title and domestic cup with Paris Saint-Germain.

Chelsea's progress keeps the Argentine in contention for his first trophy in England after he lost the 2015 League Cup final during his time at Tottenham. "We are so happy. The fans and the club deserve this sort of feeling. It's a big motivation," Pochettino said.

"We are so young. We are creating a very good bond. This type of result will help us." The defeat was a painful blow for Newcastle, who failed in their attempt to avenge last season's League Cup final loss to Manchester United at Wembley.

After crashing out of the Champions League group stage, Newcastle's exit was another setback for the Saudi-backed club in their bid to land a first major trophy since 1969. "It hurts a lot. We defended really well but didn't get over the line," Newcastle manager Eddie Howe said.

"It's a very painful moment for us. We'll just have to accept it and digest it." Newcastle had been gifted the lead by Chelsea's shambolic defending in the 16th minute. Callum Wilson seized possession inside his own half and accelerated away from Thiago Silva as his lung-bursting run carried him into the Chelsea area.

Benoit Badiashile should have snuffed out the danger, but the defender's woefully miscued attempt to clear allowed Wilson to fire home with ease. With 20 minutes left, France forward Christopher Nkunku came on for his Chelsea debut after a prolonged injury absence since his close-season move from RB Leipzig. Two minutes into stoppage time, Chelsea forced a shoot-out as Newcastle defender Kieran Trippier made a hash of dealing with a cross, misdirecting his header to Mudryk, who drilled into the bottom corner.

Trippier woe

Trippier's misery was compounded when he smashed Newcastle's second penalty wide in the shoot-out. Nkunku converted Chelsea's third penalty in his first significant contribution for the club. Djordje Petrovic sealed Chelsea's victory as he dived to his left to make a brilliant save from Matt Ritchie's kick.

Fulham moved into the semi-finals for the first time after a 7-6 shoot-out win against Everton following a 1-1 draw at Goodison Park. Cottagers boss Marco Silva enjoyed a measure of revenge on the club that sacked him in 2019 by leading Fulham into their first domestic semi-final since the 2002 FA Cup.

Tosin Adarabioyo scored the decisive spot-kick after Everton's Idrissa Gueye hit the post. Amadou Onana had missed a chance to win the tie for Everton earlier in the shoot-out when his kick was saved by Bernd Leno.

Fulham went ahead in the 41st minute through Michael Keane's own goal before Everton substitute Beto equalised with eight minutes left. "It's incredible what the players have been doing," Silva said. "We wanted to make history in the football club." — AFP



LONDON: Chelsea's team players celebrate after Chelsea's Serbian goalkeeper #28 Djordje Petrovic saved a penalty kick during the penalty shoot out to win the English League Cup quarter-final football match between Chelsea and Newcastle United at Stamford Bridge in London. — AFP

Grizzlies' Morant dazzles in return

LOS ANGELES: Ja Morant made a scintillating return from a 25-game suspension Tuesday, driving for a game-winning layup as time expired to lift the Memphis Grizzlies to a 115-113 NBA victory over the New Orleans Pelicans. The basket capped a 34-point, eight-assist, six-rebound performance from Morant, who was suspended by the league for the first 25 games of the season after a pair of social media posts in which he displayed guns.

He looked a little rusty to start, and a little weary at the finish, but ultimately Morant delivered everything the Grizzlies could have hoped for and more. "I ain't played a game in eight months," he told broadcaster TNT. "Had a lot of time... a lot of hard days where I

went through it. "But you know, basketball is my life, what I love, therapeutic for me and I'm just excited to be back." The Pelicans, led by 34 points from Brandon Ingram, were up 60-41 at halftime, but the Grizzlies hit back in the third quarter, cutting the lead to 10 entering the final period.

With 1:20 left to play, Morant connected with a floater that put them up 111-109 -- Memphis' first lead since the first quarter. It was tied at 113-113 when Morant grabbed the rebound of a CJ McCollum miss and after a timeout took the ball up the court and sliced into the lane for the game-winner.

"I felt like it was the perfect ending, perfect day, being able to come back and play and also deliver a game winner for us," he said. Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said before the game that Morant was "fired up," adding that his message to the 24-year-old was "go out there, have fun, build chemistry with your teammates and just enjoy this opportunity to be back on the floor." — AFP