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UN pays tribute to late Amir

General Assembly observes minute of silence • Guterres extends best wishes to Sheikh Mishal



NEW YORK: The UN General Assembly observes a minute of silence to mourn and honor the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Dec 20, 2023. — KUNA

NEW YORK: The UN General Assembly on Wednesday held a special session to pay tribute to the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait. At the advent of the session, attendees observed a minute of silence to mourn and honor the late Amir, who passed away on Dec 16. In his speech, President of the UN General Assembly Dennis Francis said the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf's reign was marked by public service and a commitment to the principles of unity, dignity and solidarity.

Sheikh Nawaf was known for his diplomatic prowess nationally and abroad and was revered as a unifier. Francis went on to point out that the late Amir guided Kuwait towards progress and maintained its tradition of multilateralism. He noted Kuwait's election to the Human Rights Council is emblematic of the late Amir's vision for a more peaceful world. That vision will be instrumental in finding a lasting solution to the crisis in Gaza. Voicing condolences to the Al-Sabah Family, he called on the UN General Assembly to honor the Amir's legacy, stating: "May his great soul rest in peace."

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres described the late Amir as the "Amir of wisdom, forgiveness and peace". "Today, we are united in sor-

row by the passing of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait. I want to extend my sincere condolences to His Highness' family and the government and people of Kuwait. We stand with all of you today in mourning and memory," he said.

Guterres pointed out that Sheikh Nawaf dedicated his life to the people of Kuwait. For nearly six decades, on the domestic and global stages, he served at the highest levels of government, across a diverse range of ministerial positions. "Far beyond Kuwait's borders, His Highness was a respected statesman. He was a determined champion of preventive diplomacy - an approach that helped define Kuwait's role across the Gulf region and around the world. He was a steadfast voice of regional and global stability, peace and multilateralism - the very values and goals that give life to this chamber," he said.

"He was a generous humanitarian, helping to ease human suffering and mobilize support for millions of people in need around the region and the world. And his personal commitment to collective solutions to forge peace remains an inspiration," the UN chief added.

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JN.1 COVID variant not found in Kuwait

KUWAIT: The ministry of health said Thursday that the JN.1 COVID variant has not been detected yet throughout the country, even as cases have been confirmed regionally and globally. A ministry statement indicated that the surfacing of such variants is "expected" but "not alarming". The JN.1 variant shares similarities with previous Omicron strains in terms of high transmissibility and mild symptoms.

Meanwhile, a groundbreaking study conducted by the College of Public Health at the Health Sciences Center at Kuwait University, with the support of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, revealed the average cost of caring for patients infected with COVID-19. The study, which spanned two and a half years, indicated the cost of caring for a patient with a non-acute infection is KD 1,544, while caring for an acute case is significantly higher at KD 4,626, equivalent to three times the cost of a non-acute case for cases registered in hospitals.

The research, which spanned two and a half years, highlighted that Kuwait is among the countries significantly impacted by COVID-19 within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Officially recorded infections in Kuwait reached 658,520, with 2,563 recorded deaths by the end of Sept 2021.

The primary objective of the study was to determine the total cost of caring for COVID-19 patients in Kuwaiti hospitals. The impact of the coronavirus on the local

Continued on Page 6

Zionists summarily killing Palestinian civilians, inmates

JERUSALEM: The United Nations human rights office said it had received reports that Zionist troops "summarily killed" at least 11 unarmed Palestinians in a possible war crime in Gaza. The OHCHR office in the West Bank city of Ramallah said the killings were alleged to have been carried out in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City this week.

It said on Wednesday it had received "disturbing information alleging that (the Zionist army) summarily killed at least 11 unarmed Palestinian men". The incident "raises alarm about the possible commission of a war crime", it said, adding the men were killed in front of their family members. The report said troops

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More than 15 killed in Prague univ shooting

PRAGUE: A gunman killed more than 15 people and wounded dozens more at a Prague university on Thursday in the Czech Republic's worst shooting in decades, before authorities said the attacker was "eliminated". The violence in the city's historic center sparked frantic evacuations, a massive response by heavily armed police and warnings for people to stay indoors. The shooting erupted at the Charles University's Faculty of Arts, which sits near major tourist sites like the 14th-century Charles Bridge.

"More than 15 people have lost their lives and at least 24 have been wounded", police chief Martin Vondrasek told reporters following the shooting. "There is no indication that this crime has any link to international terrorism", Interior Minister Vit Rakusan told reporters of the shooting at the Charles University's building. "The building is currently being evacuated and there are several dead and dozens of wounded people on the scene," police said on X, formerly Twitter.

Emergency services preliminarily reported nine serious injuries, at least five mid-serious and up to 10 light injuries. Thursday's shooting was the



GAZA: A man injured during Zionist bombardment looks on outside the Kuwait Hospital in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 20, 2023. — AFP



PRAGUE: A police officer gestures as he secures the area near the Charles University on Dec 21, 2023. — AFP

worst since the Czech Republic emerged as an independent state in 1993. Czech President Petr Pavel said he was "shocked" by the violence and expressed "deep regret and sincere condolences to the families and relatives of the victims". European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said she was "shocked by the senseless violence of the shooting that claimed several lives today". Prague's emergency service said on X that "a large number of ambulance units" were deployed at the faculty, adding the injuries ranged from light to very serious. — AFP

Angola quits OPEC

LUANDA: Angola said on Thursday it would leave OPEC over a disagreement on production quotas following the oil cartel's decision last month to further slash output next year. Mineral Resources and Petroleum minister Diamantino Azevedo said that the decision was not taken lightly, but OPEC membership no longer served the African country's interests. "We feel that at this moment Angola gains nothing by remaining in the organization and, in defense of its interests, it decided to leave," the presidency quoted Azevedo as saying in a statement.

The presidency said the decision was taken at a cabinet meeting chaired by President Joao Lourenco in the capital, Luanda. After the meeting, Lourenco signed a decree to officialize the matter, it said. Azevedo told state broadcaster TPA that Angola is unhappy with OPEC's decision last month to further slash production next year in an effort to prop up volatile prices.

"We think the time has come for our country to be more focused on our goals," he told state broadcaster TPA. "If we remained in OPEC... Angola would be forced to cut production and this goes against our policy of avoiding decline and respecting contracts." — AFP



Local

Kuwaitis in the eyes of non-Kuwaitis: Wealthy or supported by the govt?

Culture of generosity may create the impression of affluence



Aerial view of famous Kuwait Tower at night with Kuwait City at the background.



Aerial view of an oil refinery.

By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: Many Kuwaitis usually face the assumption of being wealthy by non-Kuwaitis, whether inside or outside Kuwait. To uncover the mystery behind these superficial assumptions, Kuwait Times spoke to two Kuwaitis and two non-Kuwaitis, one an expat residing in Kuwait and the other living in Lebanon. Sara Al-Hendi, a Kuwaiti businesswoman, spoke about the Kuwaiti lifestyle that captures the attention of non-Kuwaiti people, highlighting that this façade is not solely a result of being born into wealth, but is a result of being supported by a welfare state that is tirelessly determined to uplift its citizens.

"Many believe that anyone from GCC countries, including Kuwait, is wealthy. This misconception arises from the perception of high living standards rather than actual wealth. For example, we don't pay taxes, and even in GCC countries where taxes are imposed, they are relatively low and manageable based on the average income of the citizen," Hendi said.

"Our cultural traditions that emphasize on gener-

osity is another reason for this assumption, because even if an Arab has a small amount of money, they are likely to spend it on others as an act of kindness and generosity. Another main thing is that Kuwait has experienced considerable development since the introduction of the constitution, which grants Kuwaitis various rights and benefits, such as food, housing, marriage allowance, land, job opportunities, free education, healthcare, etc.," she added.

Thus, according to Hendi, these extensive benefits coupled with the culture of generosity may create the impression of affluence. "However, it is important to note that many Kuwaitis actually face financial challenges, often resulting in debt. Despite various benefits, some people struggle to maintain a luxurious lifestyle and pile up debt to afford luxury items or travel for fun. If you wish to buy multiple expensive items that you cannot afford, stores in Kuwait will simply ask you for a salary certificate to pay for what you bought in instalments. Hence, you have all these fancy things that make others assume you are rich. The government takes good care of citizens' needs, so they can enjoy spending their salaries on

buying such things," she explained.

Lama, a Kuwaiti college student, said: "One of my professors, who was new to Kuwait, expressed his astonishment at how students could afford expensive accessories and cars without jobs. He was speaking to one of my peers at that day and told her that in his country, the watch she is wearing would put her at serious risk of harm if she wore it in public."

She further elaborated that she frequently encounters reactions from people during her travel that imply Kuwaitis are affluent. These reactions range from comments to instances where prices are increased simply because the individual is Kuwaiti or seems to be from a GCC country. Lama also experienced this issue inside Kuwait, where some vendors openly admitted they are raising prices for her based on her nationality, claiming that such a small price hike would not affect her budget.

According to an expat who did not wish to reveal her name, there are cultural differences in spending and highlighted that Kuwaitis seem to spend on items that expats would not prioritize, even if they had the means to do so. "As an expat with a decent

income in Kuwait, I believe that I am more cautious and selective with my spending, even when I can afford to buy certain relatively high-priced stuff. I do not have the inclination like my Kuwaiti friends. For example, for gatherings, my Kuwaiti friends tend to buy sweets from bakeries and sweetshops, while I prefer to bake at home. It's not that I can't buy it or that they can't bake, but it stems from what we are used to," she pointed out.

Rabea Ali, a young man living in Lebanon, told Kuwait Times that Kuwaiti people are perceived as rich even if they do not fit the traditional definition of wealth. "Kuwaiti people have high living standards, even if we do not consider them as rich. I am not only speaking about cars, houses or travels; even about the small things such as buying a cup of coffee from famous coffeeshops is something I see them do very often. It can be daily and sometimes twice a day; however, this behavior is extremely rare to find among people like Lebanese or other nationalities. Therefore, we tend to assume that they are more comfortable with spending than others," he remarked.

Arab ministers affirm support for Palestinians

CAIRO: The Arab Ministers of Social Affairs affirmed their continued support for the people of Gaza as a result of the continuation of brutal Zionist attacks until the situation stabilizes and the process of redressing the difficult social and humanitarian impacts in the Gaza Strip. This came in a statement by the Assistant Secretary-General and Head of the Social Affairs Sector of the League of Arab States, Ambassador Haifa Abu Ghazala, at the conclusion of the 43rd session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs.

Abu Ghazala praised the keenness of many Arab countries to provide relief, social, humanitarian, and health support to the Gaza Strip and their keenness to follow up. Abu Ghazala thanked the Egyptian Minister of Social Solidarity, Nevin Al-Kabbaj, for her efforts in her capacity as Vice President of the Red Crescent to deliver aid to the Arab Council of Ministers of Social Affairs and Health, as well as aid to Arab countries and friendly countries, and her diligent follow-up of all relevant details.

Abu Ghazala explained that the Arab ministers approved a number of important decisions within the framework of the Council's jurisdiction, especially with regard to preparing for the upcoming Arab Summit in its (33rd) session in Bahrain, as well as the Fifth Arab Development Summit: Economic and Social in Mauritania.

The Council also approved a number of strategies, plans, and programs related to eliminating multidimensional poverty and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities, including topics related to the elderly, family, and childhood, in addition to providing support to a number of social projects in member states. Earlier, Kuwait reiterated its staunch support for the Palestinian people in the face of crimes committed by the Zionist occupation against civilians, schools, hospitals, and houses in the Gaza Strip, the Gulf state's permanent representative to the Arab League said.

The 43rd session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs kicked off on Wednesday in Cairo. The Egyptian Minister of Social Solidarity, Nevin Al-Kabbaj, said in her opening speech that this



KUWAIT: A handout photo shows humanitarian relief aid bound for the Gaza Strip through Egypt being loaded into a military aircraft at the Kuwait International Airport. — AFP

session was held in a delicate phase that witnessed unprecedented struggles and challenges because of the ongoing aggression on Palestinians.

Al-Kabbaj noted that since the first day of the aggression, Egypt has sent 4000 shipments of humanitarian aid through Rafah crossing by the Egyptian Red Crescent Society and continues sending aid for the people of Gaza until the situation calms down. She added that this meeting is considered an opportunity for exchanging visions and expertise to support the sustainable development plan of 2030 that would benefit Arab citizens.

On her part, Abu Ghazala started her speech by expressing her condolences to Kuwait over the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and wishing His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah success and prosperity. She also said that the world is witnessing a human tragedy that will be printed in history and people's memories due to the vicious crimes of the Zionist occupation against Palestinians.

Abu Ghazala suggested forming an emergen-

cy committee in the Council of Ministers of Social Affairs that would make immediate and necessary decisions in the social and humanitarian fields, and that the council remain ongoing until the situation in Gaza stabilizes. She expressed confidence that these difficult times will not stop the Council from continuing its work to promote joint Arab social development work in various social fields.

Furthermore, she explained that the agenda includes many topics that represent a priority for Arab people and contribute to strengthening Arab efforts aimed at implementing the Sustainable Development Plan of 2030 by focusing on vulnerable groups in society. She also stressed the importance of preparations for the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit in its fifth session in Mauritania, in light of the results of the extraordinary session of the council last October in Tunisia, as well as preparing for the upcoming Arab Summit in Bahrain and other important related topics. The Kuwaiti delegation was headed by Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the Arab League, Ambassador Talal Al-Mutairi. — KUNA

went to Ahmadi Governorate with 137 deals representing about 34.9 percent of the total number of real estate deals. Hawally Governorate came second with 73 deals and representing 18.6 percent of total deals. The lowest share went to Jahra Governorate with 24 deals, representing 6.1 percent of the total. The value of private housing activity reached KD 117.4 million, declining by -21.8 percent compared with KD 150 million in October. Its share of total real estate activity dropped to 40.6 percent versus 48.1 percent in October. The 12-monthly average of private housing activity stood at KD 122.8 million. This means that November's trading value is -4.4 percent lower than the average. The number of deals for this activity decreased to 274 deals versus 345 deals in October.

Accordingly, the value of private residential deals averaged KD 428 thousand versus KD 435 thousand in October, indicating a -1.5 percent decrease. The total value of investment housing activity scored KD 72.3 million, declining by -4.2 percent when compared to

KD 75.4 million in October. Its contribution to overall real estate trading activity rose to 25.0 percent versus 24.2 percent in October. The trailing-12-months trading average of investment activity scored KD 73.7 million, indicating that the average trading value during November was -1.9 percent lower than the 12 months' average. In addition, the number of its deals decreased to 104 compared with 123 deals in October.

Therefore, the average value per deal for the investment activity reached KD 695 thousand versus KD 613 thousand in October, a rise by 13.3 percent. Commercial activity trading value increased to KD 97.2 million or by 16.2 percent, compared with KD 83.6 million in October. Its share out of total real estate trading value rose to 33.7 percent compared with 26.8 percent in October. The average value of commercial activity trading in the past 12 months scored KD 45.4 million. This means that trading value in November was higher by 114.2 percent than the 12 months' average.

Its deals totaled 13 compared to 8 deals for Oc-

Kuwait '2nd largest stakeholder' in OIC

KUWAIT: Acting Assistant Undersecretary of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Finance for Economic Affairs Talal Al-Nimsh confirmed on Thursday that Kuwait is the second largest stakeholder in the organization of Islamic Cooperation after Saudi Arabia, explaining that the percentage of Kuwait's contribution to the organization is 9 percent.

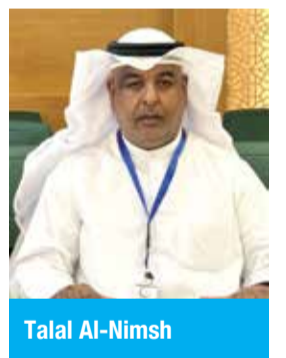
This was stated in a statement made by agent Talal Al-Nimsh to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) at the end of his chairmanship of the Kuwait delegation participating in the meeting of the extraordinary session of the permanent finance committee at the OIC General Secretariat, which was held at the OIC headquarters in Jeddah.

He expressed the commitment of Kuwait to pay its mandatory contributions to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and its subsidiary organs in order to assist it in carrying out its tasks. He pointed out that the meeting approved the budgets of the General Secretariat and its subsidiary bodies for the fiscal year 2024, in addition to referring administrative issues to the next meeting of the Standing Finance Committee at its regular session.

On a related note, the OIC permanent financial committee approved at its meeting a draft resolution approving the budget of the General Secretariat and its subsidiary bodies for the fiscal year 2024 in accordance with the financial rules and regulations of the organization and requesting that the General Secretariat and its subsidiary bodies rationalize their expenses and urge efficiency and cost-effectiveness in their financial and administrative operations. The meeting was launched at the headquarters of the organization of Islamic Cooperation and concluded its work on Thursday.

The average value per deal for November reached KD 7.5 million versus a KD 10.5 million average for October, a -28.5 percent drop. Moreover, the warehousing activity had a single deal in November at KD 1.96 million versus KD 2.70 million, showing a decline by -27.6 percent. When comparing November 2023 trading with November 2022, we note that liquidity in the real estate market decreased from KD 343.5 million to KD 288.8 million, i.e. a -15.9 percent decline as mentioned previously.

The decline was driven by drop in the private residential activity by -45.9 percent and the investment residential activity by -34.8 percent, while the commercial activity rose by 579.8 percent and the warehousing activity by 33.3 percent. The quarterly statistical bulletin of the Central Bank of Kuwait (July to September 2023) published on its web page mentions some economic and monetary indicators whose developments deserve follow up and documentation. — AL-SHALL



Talal Al-Nimsh

A decrease real estate activity

KUWAIT: The latest data released by the Ministry of Justice – Real Estate Registration & Authentications Department – indicates a decreased real estate market activity during November 2023 versus October 2023 (after excluding the crafts activity and the coastal strip system). Total value of traded contracts and power of attorneys (POAs) was at KD 288.8 million in November, a -7.4 percent decline versus KD 311.8 million in October 2023, and lower by -15.9 percent versus KD 343.5 million in November 2022.

Trading during November 2023 was distributed between KD 283.3 million in contracts and KD 5.5 million in POAs. Number of real estate deals during November reached 392, of which 381 are contracts and 11 are POAs. The highest share in real estate deals

Local

Amir receives congratulatory messages

KUWAIT: Head of the Prime Minister's Office Abdulaziz Al-Dakhil on Thursday extended his sincere congratulations to Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on assuming office. He praised His Highness's great achievements and wished him further success in leading Kuwait and strengthening its status in the world. Meanwhile, several Kuwaiti authorities on Thursday congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on assuming office. Assistant Undersecretary at the Amiri Diwan and the Martyr's Bureau Director General Salah Al-Oufan wished His Highness success and further prosperity for Kuwait under his leadership.

On his part, Director General of the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), Dr. Hassan Al-Fajjam, pledged loyalty to His Highness, praising his achievements and wishing him success. Director of the Gulf Arab States Educational Research Center (GAS-ERC), Dr. Mohammad Al-Sharika, extended congratulations to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, expressing aspiration for His Highness's vision for Kuwait and wishing him further success and prosperity.

Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) praised His Highness's inaugural speech, which emphasized serious accountability within the framework of the Constitution and law, as well as addressing the work of the legislative and executive authorities, commending His Highness for continuing the path of his predecessors.

UAE leaders

His Highness on Thursday, received a cable of congratulations from the President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, on his inauguration, wishing him good health and all success in his reign. His Highness the Amir sent a cable in response to the UAE President, expressing sincere appreciation for his kind sentiments and wishing him good health and wellbeing and further progress and prosperity for his country under his wise leadership. Also, HH the Amir received a congratulatory cable from Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, the UAE Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai. In the cable, Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid expressed his sincere congratulations to His Highness Sheikh Mishal on ascending to office, as well as his sincere wishes for His Highness' success and good health.



KUWAIT: Kuwait's new Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah greets lawmakers at the National Assembly. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Indian leaders

HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Thursday cables of congratulations from Indian President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on assuming office. In the messages, the Indian president and premier wished His Highness the Amir success in continuing progress and prosperity in Kuwait, and well-being. His Highness the Amir sent replies to both Murmu and Modi, thank-

ing them for their good sentiments and wishing them good health.

The King of Norway

His Highness the Amir received a cable of congratulations from King Harald V of Norway on His Highness's inauguration, wishing His Highness success and good health. His Highness the Amir sent a reply enclosed with sincere appreciation for the kind sentiments, wishing for even further bilateral relations

and for the King's good health and wellbeing.

The King of Sweden

His Highness the Amir received a cable of congratulations from King Carl XVI Gustaf on His Highness's inauguration, wishing His Highness success and good health. His Highness the Amir sent a reply enclosed with sincere appreciation for the kind sentiments, wishing for even further bilateral relations and for the King's good health and wellbeing.

Palestine president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber A-Sabah received a congratulatory cable from the Palestinian President and Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Mahmoud Abbas. In the cable, the Palestinian president expressed his sincere congratulations to His Highness on ascending to office and wished him success, good health, and further progress for Kuwait.

Ambassadors congratulate Amir

South Korea Ambassador Chung Byung-ha



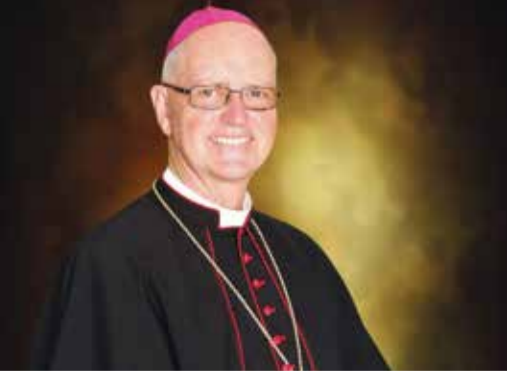
On behalf of the government and people of the Republic of Korea, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on his assumption of office as the Amir of Kuwait. Korea and Kuwait have been enjoying excellent bilateral relations and cooperation since the establishment of their diplomatic ties in 1979 in many fields, including health, smart cities, food security, education, and others. I am confident that under HH the Amir's guidance and visionary leadership, our two friendly countries will be able to strengthen their existing ties and further upgrade their relations in all areas in the decades to come. I wish HH the Amir continued good health and success in his new responsibilities.

Bangladesh Ambassador Major General MD Ashikuzzaman



On behalf of the people of Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Community in Kuwait, I extend my heartfelt gratitude and felicitations to Kuwait Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Heartiest congratulations, His Highness. We hope that the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Kuwait will be further strengthened and will get extra momentum under the dynamic and visionary leadership of His Highness the Amir. Bangladesh will remain extremely committed to working shoulder-to-shoulder with Kuwait to maintain and strengthen our relations in the coming days. We pray to Almighty Allah for the peace, prosperity, and good health of His Highness the Amir.

Apostolic Nuncio Eugene Martin Nugent



On behalf of the Apostolic Nunciature, the Vatican Embassy in Kuwait, and the Holy See, I have the pleasure to express my sincerest congratulations to His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on becoming the 17th Amir of Kuwait. I ask for all the blessings from God almighty that HH the Amir could be guided with wisdom and endowed with continued good health in the exercise of his new mandate as Amir of this beautiful country. May God richly bless his family and the Kuwaiti people. I am sure that, under the guidance of the Amir, happiness and prosperity will continue in the country. At a time when war is ravaging the region, may His Highness also continue to work for peace and harmony. All the members of the Catholic Church in Kuwait assure His Highness of their devotion and respect.

Russia Ambassador Vladimir Zheltov



On behalf of the Russian Embassy, I extend sincere felicitations to His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Amir of Kuwait, expressing deep commitment to advancing bilateral relations and commemorating the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Russia and Kuwait this year. We are confident in the enduring friendship between our countries. We believe that Kuwait, under the wise guidance of His Highness, will experience further progress, development, and prosperity. We wish HH the Amir good health and success.



NEW YORK: The UN General Assembly on Wednesday held a special session to pay tribute to the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. At the advent of the session, attendees observed a minute of silence to mourn and honor the late Amir, who passed away on Dec 16. — KUNA photos

Turkey Ambassador Tuba Nur Sonmez

On behalf of the Embassy and the Turkish community in Kuwait, I am pleased to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Amir of Kuwait, HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. I wish His Highness the Amir good health, happiness, and prosperity. I believe the wise, sincere, and firm leadership of His Highness the Amir will continue to lead Kuwait toward a more developed future. His experience will be key to the aspirations of the faithful people of Kuwait. His contribution to the brotherly bonds between our nations will continue to play a central role in fostering exemplary relations between Turkey and Kuwait.



Philippines Embassy

The Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines congratulates Kuwait Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on his assumption as Amir of Kuwait. May God protect and preserve him as he leads Kuwait and its people to greater prosperity and success.



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

Founder and Publisher

YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief

ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432

ADVERTISING : 24833199 Extn. 301

CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 220

ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125

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Trade surplus with Japan down 18.2%

TOKYO: Kuwait's trade surplus with Japan in November narrowed 18.2 percent from a year earlier to JPY 82.5 billion (\$574 million), down for the second month due to slow exports, government data showed. However, Kuwait stayed in black ink with Japan for 15 years as exports still outpaced imports in value, the Finance Ministry said in a preliminary report. Overall exports from Kuwait to Japan shrank 10.3 percent year-on-year to JPY 109.7 billion (\$763 million) for the second straight month of decline.

Imports from Japan jumped 26.8 percent to JPY 27.2 billion (\$189 million), up for the 19th month in a row. The Middle East's trade surplus with Japan also narrowed by 20.5 percent to JPY 882.3 billion (\$6.1 billion) last month, with Japan-bound exports from the region sliding 10.9 percent from a year earlier. Crude oil, refined products, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and other natural resources, which accounted for 95.4 percent of the region's total exports to Japan, went down 11.4 percent.

The region's imports from Japan soared 25.6 percent on robust demand for automobiles, machinery, and manufactured goods. The third-largest economy in the world recorded a worldwide trade deficit in November for the second month, amounting to JPY 776.9 billion (\$5.4 billion), but it shrank in size by 62.2 percent from the previous year.

Exports edged down 0.2 percent from the year before, due to sluggish shipments of steel, semiconductor production, and vessels. Imports dropped 11.9 percent on lower energy prices. LNG and crude oil, China remained Japan's biggest trade partner, followed by the US. The trade data are measured on a customs-cleared basis before adjustment for seasonal factors. — KUNA

US dollar stable

Meanwhile, the exchange rate of the US dollar against the Kuwaiti dinar was stable at KD 0.307 on Thursday, while the euro went down to 0.19 percent to reach KD 0.336, compared to Wednesday's rates. The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said in its daily bulletin that the exchange rate of the sterling pound went down 0.67 percent to reach KD 0.388 while the Swiss franc was stable at KD 0.356 as well as the Japanese yen at KD 0.002. The exchange rates announced by the Central Bank of Kuwait are for the average currency rates for the day and do not reflect the actual buying and selling rates. — KUNA

Creatives 'should not fear AI, they should embrace it'

Is AI putting my job at risk?

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: Fear is a very powerful emotion that occurs as a natural response to the unknown, especially when facing new and revolutionary technology that one can barely predict its consequences, such as artificial intelligence. While the feeling of uncertainty should help one grow and thrive, the fear of getting replaced by AI is leaving many people emotionally paralyzed and resentful to accept it as an integral part of their work life.

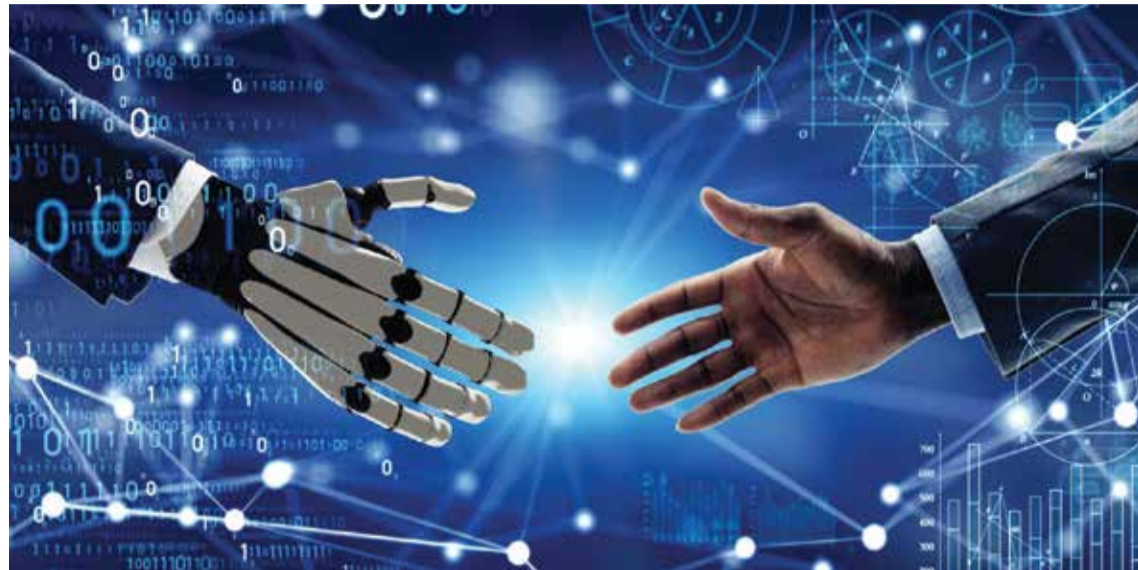
One area of particular concern is the creative industry, where AI is already being used in different areas, as it can now greatly help in creating mesmerizing art pieces, writing high-quality content, generating professional videos or even composing music pieces from scratch. All of which is provoking a never-ending question for all creatives out there: Is AI putting my job at risk?

Ronny Engen, an AI and strategy expert who's been working in the tech industry in Kuwait for almost 20 years, answered this question in a conversation with Kuwait Times. Engen explained in simple words that when it comes to creative pieces, AI is merely focused on deriving logical conclusions and final output, based on analysis of hundreds of thousands of data per second.

He believes that while logic can be extremely powerful, sometimes it is never enough to produce creative pieces that emotionally connect with people. "Many of the things that we fall in love with have nothing to do with logic. You might like a song or a piece of poem that everyone else probably hates, just because it happened; it just clicked. AI cannot do this because it can never replace the human soul," he stressed.

Engen pointed out that it is extremely beneficial for the creative industry to recognize AI as only a tool rather than a threat. "The more we use it, the more the manual and routine aspects of work can be automated, driving artists to focus on the essence of their work, which is the creative aspect," he said.

If someone has a vision or an idea, AI will just help them implement this vision by brainstorming their idea incredibly fast. Yet, despite its efficiency,



Ronny Engen

its abilities are still largely limited to a great extent. AI will always rely on humans' input and oversight to perform appropriately and make accurate decisions, he noted. Engen added that by combining or merging previously existing large number of ideas, AI can produce much stronger ones, however still repetitive in nature.

"Although it might look creative and novel, it really isn't. AI is not yet trained to come up with something completely different and revolutionary that the world has never seen before. It cannot create an entirely new artistic style or genre," Engen said, referring to the 1960s when rock and roll music evolved as a powerful force for social and cultural change, in a time that the world was ready for a new sound. How can AI ever come up with something at the right time that can be so relevant to so-

ciety's values and needs, he questioned.

For this reason, Engen noted there's a huge risk that if people overly rely on AI to finish all the work for them, human creativity as a whole will not move forward as fast as it is now. He believes that the human brain has this distinctive feature that can never be replicated, which is the ability to create a sudden connection between two completely unrelated ideas or observations, bringing one to notice a completely unique and cohesive pattern out of them.

While highlighting the limitations for AI is crucial, one shouldn't miss out on how AI can make one's life much easier in multiple ways. Engen noted that people should realize that AI technology by itself cannot take anyone's job, but it's someone using AI who is coming for their jobs. So, it's time for everyone to overcome their fears and learn to cope with global advancements in technologies and embrace them by incorporating them in their daily tasks. It is also important to educate oneself about it properly and understand the ethical concerns of using it. Because AI, if not used properly, can produce poor quality creative pieces that lack emotional depth, personal expression and human intent.

Exploring concept of 'situationships'

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: The landscape of relationships has evolved over time. In the past, relationships were primarily centered around commitments and long-term connections. However, the contemporary approach of the new generation to dating has notably shifted away from the traditional view, embracing the concept of "situationships". This reflects a departure from rigid structures,

introducing a more flexible and open-ended dynamic to modern romantic involvement.

Hatan Fatafta, 17, explained to Kuwait Times the "situationships" that her Generation Z believes in. "It is a term used among my generation to not give any label to a relationship," she said. "Relationships should not be labeled. Situationship describes how people must decide by time the right term for their relationship," she added, noting that it is a mix of everything with no restrictions.

Aliya Hammadi, 29, opposed Hatan's idea of the new term, explaining situationship is a term invented for players. "In an era dominated by the Internet and social networking sites, the ease of acquiring various needs has expanded to include the pursuit of love. While platforms facilitate the buying and selling of cars, cosmetics and clothes, the notion of acquiring love through these channels remains a subject of controversy. In societies with conservative views on relationships, the idea of seeking love should be more respectful," she explained.

She expressed concern that the new generation lacks a profound understanding of the deeper meaning inherent in various types of relationships. The emergence of new terms and concepts and the adoption of unfamiliar habits have introduced ideas that diverge from the established norms of Islamic and traditional culture in our society.

"This shift reflects a broader cultural evolution, as the younger generation navigates uncharted territory, incorporating elements that may challenge or redefine the values engrained in Islamic and traditional practices. The clash between these new ideas and the established cultural norms raises questions about the evolving nature of relationships and the potential impact on the fabric of our society. It signals a complex interplay between tradition and modernity, sparking conversations about how societal values adapt to the changing dynamics brought about by contemporary perspectives," Aliya noted.

On the other hand, Issam Hamzawi, 37, offers a distinct perspective on Gen Z. According to him, this generation, epitomized by traits like honesty, loudness and pride, encapsulates a steadfast dedication to authenticity. In Hamzawi's view, the characterization of Gen Z reflects a commitment to being genuine and unapologetically true to one.

"In stark contrast to earlier generations, where relationships often served as a primary source of companionship, the newest generation places a premium on cultivating independent self-confidence and self-worth. This significant shift in mindset underscores a purposeful move away



from seeking validation through external relationships and towards a more internalized pursuit of self-discovery. It reflects a conscious effort to sidestep potentially toxic entanglements, and more importantly, a readiness to assertively decline opportunities that don't align with their evolving sense of self," he said.

In the realm of modern dating, the new generation has crafted an entirely new vocabulary, forming a comprehensive dictionary that often leaves the older generation grappling with unfamiliar terms and concepts. Sama Nabeel, 16, revealed that her generation created new terms to give some bad behaviors in relationships a name to recognize.

She said that one of the terms is "benching", coming from sports, which entails putting someone on hold in the dating realm to explore connections with others. The concept of a "pink flag" introduces the idea of peculiar traits in a partner that don't reach the severity of a red flag but warrant attention. "Zombieing" describes the re-appearance of an ex in one's life, typically after a period of ghosting. "Love bombing" denotes showering someone with affection early in a relationship only to suddenly withdraw. "Roaching" uncovers the clandestine act of a person secretly dating multiple partners while in a seemingly exclusive relationship.

In addition, "textationship" is when partners exclusively communicate through text messages, never meeting face-to-face. "Love haze", a term expressing deep infatuation, underscores the potential blindness to a partner's flaws during this intense romantic state. The concept of "rizz" emphasizes one's ability to charm a love interest.

Technical team to explore 'Gulf visa'

KUWAIT: The government will form a technical team whose task is to discuss the Kuwaiti mechanisms and procedures and crystallize them with executive recommendations to be submitted to the Council of Ministers in preparation for the work of the unified Gulf tourist visa approved by the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in their last meeting in Qatar.

According to the new rules, holders of visit and residence visas in one of the six GCC countries will be able to enter the rest of the countries with the

same visa, just like the Schengen visa rules that link the European Union countries. "The new visa regulations will facilitate the movement of tourists and incoming visitors between the GCC countries, thus enhancing the role of tourism, which is an engine of economic growth. It will also open new opportunities for investment in the tourism sector in each of the member states, and Kuwait is keen on close cooperation with the GCC countries to ensure implementation and coordination," the sources said.

The sources reported that the Kuwaiti technical team will coordinate with other Gulf interior ministers on the implementations, explaining that the new residence law, which is expected to be approved in the National Assembly during the current session.



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'Dying every 2 hours': Afghan women risk life to give birth

'Serious' shrinking of Caspian Sea worries secretive Turkmenistan

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Sudan's displaced relive nightmare

More than 250,000 people flee Wad Madani after RSF captures safe city

WAD MADANI: Mohamed Ibrahim had barely settled into life in Sudan's main agricultural center after fleeing fighting in the capital Khartoum, only to discover the war had again arrived on his doorstep. "Seven months ago, when the battles intensified in Khartoum, I was displaced with my family to Wad Madani" 180 kilometers (110 miles) south, the 53-year-old said.

Thousands of families made the same move, and Wad Madani, the capital of Al-Jazirah state, quickly became a safe haven and a crucial hub for aid operations. Now with the regular army under attack in the city by paramilitaries of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Ibrahim and his family are on the move again.

More than half a million people had found shelter in Al-Jazirah, Sudan's pre-war breadbasket, before the fighting engulfed the state capital. By Wednesday, more than 250,000 people had fled the state, "many in panic and with no other option than fleeing on foot," according to the International Organization for Migration.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which pulled out its staff last week as fighting reached the city, appealed for "lifesaving access to all areas affected by fighting as humanitarian needs soar". "We fear that Wad Madani, once considered a safe haven for people fleeing extreme violence in Khartoum, is turning into another death trap," said the head of the ICRC's Sudan delegation, Pierre Dorbes.

"We saw desperate people running away in panic to the sound of explosions amid traffic jams and chaos. Each time this happens, family members get separated, and vulnerable people, like the elderly and people with disabilities, are left behind," he said.

In Sennar, 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Wad Madani, Ibrahim's family can't find housing. "It's the

same thing we went through in our first days in Wad Madani," he said. Others, like 44-year-old Abdel Rahim Mohamed Imam, headed east to Al-Faw, 120 kilometers (75 miles) away, where his family "is now staying at a friend's house," he told AFP.

Fleeing on foot

By early December, the war between the army and the RSF had killed 12,190 people, according to a conservative estimate by the Armed Conflict Locations and Event Data project. It has displaced 5.4 million people inside the country, while 1.4 million more have fled abroad, according to UN figures.

In a bitter reminder of the first days of war in Khartoum, those who had tried to make a home in Wad Madani saw the city overrun by the same violence they hoped they had left behind. As the rival security forces battled for the city's strongpoints, shopkeepers boarded up their stores to ward off looters while women disappeared from the streets for fear of sexual violence.

With the paramilitary fighters pressing deeper into the city, transport quickly became near impossible to find. Omar Hussein, 65, said he and his family walked for 10 kilometers (six miles) before they found a driver willing to take them to safety. "We're just trying to get to Gedaref," 240 kilometers (150 miles) east, Hussein told AFP. "We have family there we can stay with."

But in both Gedaref and Sennar, "the humanitarian situation is dire," the UN refugee agency's spokesman William Spindler said Tuesday. Gedaref is already facing multiple disease outbreaks, including cholera and dengue fever. On Tuesday, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo put out a statement hailing the



People displaced by the conflict in Sudan gather outside a passport office in the city of Gedaref as they attempt to get passports and exit visas after fleeing Wad Madani. — AFP

"liberation" of Wad Madani "from the remnants of the old regime". Despite persistent reports from Sudan's main battlegrounds of widespread abuses against ci-

vilians by combatants on both sides, the RSF chief "invited citizens who have been displaced to return to their homes". — AFP

No functional hospitals left in northern Gaza

GENEVA: There are no longer any functional hospitals in the north of the Gaza Strip, the World Health Organization said Thursday, describing "unbearable" scenes

of largely abandoned patients begging for food and water. The UN health agency said it had led missions to two badly damaged hospitals, Al-Shifa and Al-Ahli, in the north of the Palestinian territory on Wednesday.

"Our staff are running out of words to describe the beyond catastrophic situation facing remaining patients and health workers," said Richard Peeperkorn, the WHO representative for the occupied Palestinian territory. His comment came amid increasingly frantic diplomatic efforts to secure a pause in the war that

Gaza health authorities says has already claimed 20,000 lives in Gaza, 70 percent of them women and children.

WHO has already described Al-Shifa, the largest hospital in Gaza which last month was the focus of an extended Zionist army operation and has been devastated by Zionist bombardments, as "a blood bath". The smaller Al-Ahli hospital had since become the only place where surgeries were possible in the north, but its director said it had stopped operating on Tuesday after being stormed by the Zionist army.

Dying 'slowly and painfully'

The WHO-led mission revealed that Al Ahli, which just two days ago was "overwhelmed with patients needing emergency care", was now "a shell of a hospital". Peeperkorn told reporters in Geneva via video link from Jerusalem. "There are no operating theatres anymore due to the lack of fuel, power, medical supplies and health workers, including surgeons and other specialists," he added. "It has completely stopped functioning."

Of Gaza's original 36 hospitals, only nine are now partially functional, all of them in

the south. "There are no functional hospitals left in the north." Hospitals, protected under international humanitarian law, have repeatedly been hit by Zionist strikes in Gaza since the war erupted. The Zionist military accuses Hamas of having tunnels under hospitals and using the medical facilities as command centers, a charge denied by the group. Asked about the charge, Peeperkorn said "we on our missions have not seen anything of this on the ground", adding that WHO was "not in a position to assert how any hospital is being used". — AFP



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International

'Serious' shrinking of Caspian Sea worries secretive Turkmenistan

Receding water levels hit heart of former Soviet republic's struggling economy

TURKMENBASHI: On the Caspian Sea coast in Turkmenistan — one of the world's most secretive states — Batyr Yusupov can no longer ferry his passengers between two ports. There is not enough water. "I used to go between Turkmenbashi and Hazar," the 36-year-old ferry worker said of the ports separated by a small gulf on Turkmenistan's coast. "But we haven't been able to go there for a year due to the serious shrinking of the Caspian," he said.

In at least one seaside city, local bathers have noted the waters receding by hundreds of meters. But it is not just about ferry routes or having to walk further for a proper swim: the changes hit the heart of Turkmenistan's struggling economy. And year after year, the water levels are falling.

It is still not entirely clear why that is happening, but scientists say it is down to naturally occurring processes exacerbated by climate change. One 2021 study projected that by 2100, water levels in the Caspian Sea could drop by another 8 to 30 meters (26 to 98 feet).

The Caspian Sea, an inland body of water, is flanked by the Caucasus region to the west and Central Asia to the east. Turkmenistan, a former Soviet republic, is one of five countries on the Caspian Sea together with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran and Russia. And they are all, to some extent or another, affected by the changes.

Receding shoreline

South of Turkmenbashi, in the seaside town of Hazar, satellite images show the shore has receded around 800 meters (half a mile) on both sides. That has turned the town,

which sits at the end of a peninsula, into an island. Instead of sailing between Hazar and the main port of Turkmenbashi, Yusupov now takes passengers to Gyzylsuw — between the two — which is more accessible by boat. But even there, the situation is not much better. "A new pier is being built because the old one is no longer deep enough," said one local resident, 40-year-old Aisha.

Dozens of rusty boats line the shore in Gyzylsuw. Aisha's house has stilts protecting it from the sea, which now seem superfluous. "Even during storms, the water doesn't reach the house," she said. In Turkmenbashi itself, Turkmenistan's largest coastal city, the changing shoreline is evident to swimmers. "Last summer, the water was up to my shoulders, then around my waist," said one regular, 35-year-old Lyudmila Yesenova. "This year, it's below my knees."

Sounding the alarm

The receding waters threaten the maritime infrastructure of Turkmenbashi, a major Central Asia port crucial for trade between Europe and Asia. And on the opposite coast of the Caspian lies Baku, the capital of oil-rich Azerbaijan.

Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov sounded the alarm in a recent speech. "At present, the sea level is close to the minimum values for the entire time of instrumental observations," he said in August. "In the last 25 years, it has decreased by almost two meters," which meant that the retreat of the sea had become particularly noticeable in recent years, he added. "The sea has moved hundreds of meters away from its former shores,"



AVAZA, Turkmenistan: Low water levels are seen in Turkmenistan's Caspian Sea resort of Avaza on Sept 13, 2023. — AFP

he said. "In the north of the Caspian these figures are even higher." Neighboring Kazakhstan, Central Asia's largest country, has echoed some of Turkmenistan's concerns. But after years of disputes over the control of huge hydrocarbon reserves in the region, the collaboration Meredov has called for is only in its earliest stages.

'Tectonic movements'

Turkmen scientist Nazar Muradov at-

tributes the changing sea levels to "tectonic movements and seismic phenomena, which change the seabed". He said the sea level had previously fallen in the 1930s and the 1980s before rising again. But the changing climate also had to be factored into this latest phenomenon, he added. "The sea level also depends on the flow of rivers — whose levels are diminishing — as well as low levels of precipitation and intense evaporation."

Kazakhstan also depends on the sea for its oil and gas industry. The drop in water levels, coupled with a rise in temperatures, has also hit marine life in the Caspian, including seals. In a sign he is taking the situation seriously, Kazakh leader Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has announced he had taken the decline in the seal population under his "personal control". He also said Kazakhstan would create a research institute for the study of the Caspian. — AFP

US and Venezuela swap prisoners in Qatar-brokered deal

SAN ANTONIO: The United States released an ally of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in exchange for 10 American detainees and a fugitive dubbed "Fat Leonard" in a sweeping prisoner swap deal Wednesday between the rival governments.

US President Joe Biden made the "extremely difficult decision" to free Alex Saab, the onetime confidant of socialist leader Maduro, who is accused by the United States of money laundering for Caracas. US officials said, Venezuela in return handed over a fugitive named Leonard Francis, who was at the center of the US Navy's worst-ever corruption scandal, freed 20 Venezuelan political prisoners and released the 10 US citizens.

The Americans deplaned at a US military base in San Antonio, Texas late Wednesday, with White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan tweeting a photograph of the returnees and saying: "Welcome home." Washington has been easing the pressure on the leftist Caracas government while it pushes for progress on democracy, agreeing in October to scale back oil and gas sanctions.

Biden -- who faced criticism for a prisoner swap with Iran earlier this year -- defended the Venezuela deal and denied it could encourage other governments to detain US citizens. "We're freeing Americans, people who are held illegally, and we made a deal with Venezuela that they'll hold free elections," he told reporters at the White House. "So far, they've maintained their requirements and that's it."

The deal was brokered by the Gulf state of Qatar,

US officials added. Venezuela's Maduro hailed Saab's release as "a triumph of truth," and the ex-prisoner's arrival home was broadcast live on local television. Saab, who spoke at the Miraflores presidential palace in Caracas with Maduro at his side, thanked the Venezuelan leader and said that "today the miracle of freedom, the miracle of justice, has become a reality."

'Extremely difficult'

Saab, a Colombian national whom Maduro gave Venezuelan nationality and an ambassadorial title, was arrested in June 2020 on a stopover in Cape Verde and then extradited to the United States. Saab and his business partner Alvaro Pulido are charged in the United States with running a network that exploited food aid destined for Venezuela, where millions have fled an economy that has been devastated, despite the nation's oil wealth. The pair are alleged to have moved \$350 million out of Venezuela.

Maduro reacted furiously to Saab's extradition, suspending talks with the US-backed opposition on ending the country's political and economic crisis. A senior US official said Biden "had to make the extremely difficult decision to offer something that the Venezuelan counterparts actively sought, and he made the decision to grant clemency to Alex Saab."

The White House named four of the freed Americans as Joseph Cristella, Eyvin Hernandez, Jerrel Kenemore and Savoi Wright. Former US soldiers Luke Alexander Denman and Airan Berry, who were serving 20-year sentences for a botched armed invasion into Venezuela in 2020, were also among those freed, a Venezuelan rights group said.

'Suckling pig'

Francis, the fugitive arrested and returned by Venezuela, was a military contractor known as "Fat Leonard" who escaped house arrest in California in September 2022 by cutting off his GPS tag. The Malaysian nation-



SAN ANTONIO: (From left) Freed US citizens Joseph Ryan Cristella, Eyvin Hernandez, Edgar Jose Marval Moreno, Jason Saad, Savoi Wright Jerrel Kenemore and National Security Council Director for Counter Terrorism David Cotter pose for pictures upon their arrival in Texas. — AFP

al pleaded guilty in 2015 to offering some \$500,000 in bribes to naval officers to steer official work to his shipyards, then overcharging the US Navy to the tune of \$35 million.

Francis bribed "scores" of US Navy officials with gifts including "cash, prostitutes and luxury travel, and things like Cuban cigars, Kobe beef and Spanish suckling pig," a US official said. Biden said Francis would now "face justice" for "brazen bribery and corruption."

A prisoner exchange has long been in discussions as the United States switches strategy to engaging Maduro. The United States, under Donald Trump, in 2019 declared Maduro to be illegitimate following allegations of election irregularities and launched a campaign through sanctions and pressure to remove him. But Maduro withstood the pressure, holding on with the help of a loyal political support base and the military as well as from Cuba, Russia and China. —AFP

UN pays tribute to late Amir...

Continued from Page 1

He urged all to follow his example by "collaborating and compromising" for peace. Stressing that those qualities are "in tragically short supply," he urged those present to also remember their own obligations to be wise in decision and action, to be forgiving of one another and to be willing to collaborate and compromise to forge peace. "This is our solemn responsibility," he underscored.

Guterres also extended his best wishes to HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. "The United Nations will continue its strong partnership and friendship with the State of Kuwait, as we work to build a better, more peaceful and tolerant world for all people," he concluded.

Qatar's representative mourned the late Amir, saying "the Gulf family has lost one of its pillars". Noting that the late Amir contributed to regional unity and to Kuwait's renaissance, she said his personality was characterized by wisdom and justice, as well as concern for the well-being, stability and advancement of his people.

Also voicing condolences was Egypt's representative, speaking for the Arab Group, who noted that everyone - nationally and internationally - knew the late Amir as a noble gentleman who defended just causes - particularly that of Palestinians. "No one can ignore his nobility and his wisdom," he said, recalling that, under the late Amir's reign, Kuwait's commitment to multilateralism to achieve the goals of the UN Charter - even amid unprecedented challenges - was evident.

Other speakers also noted the late Amir's legacy, spotlighting his contributions both at home and abroad and expressing condolences to his successor, family, country and people. These included the representatives of Turk-

menistan, speaking for Asia and Pacific States; Zambia, speaking for African states; Sweden, for Western European and other states; and the United States. Thanking the speakers for their sincere words and condolences, Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Tareq Al-Bannai said history books will "faithfully pay tribute to the memory of a just leader whose name and reign have been testimony to everything that is noble".

Sheikh Nawaf loved his people - and was loved by them - and when asked what his weakness was, answered that he was weak when he saw an old person asking for help or a sick child suffering. History honors those who spend their lives serving people, Bannai said, paying tribute to the late Amir's memory and congratulating his successor. "Kuwait will remain as you know it," he added - an active member of the United Nations and a defender of its noble mission of peace, tolerance and justice. — KUNA

JN.1 COVID variant not found in...

Continued from Page 1

economy, particularly in the healthcare sector, remains uncertain, but the study shed light on this aspect, emphasizing "the cost of intensive care is the lowest in the Gulf for COVID-19 patients".

According to the study, the average hospital stay for the sampled patients ranged between 9 and 10 days. The costs associated with doctors and nurses constituted the largest percentage of the overall cost at 42.1 percent, followed by intensive care costs at 20.6 percent and laboratory costs at 10.2 percent. The remaining costs, estimated at 27.1 percent, is distributed among other items such as management, treatment and miscellaneous expenses. — Agencies

Zionists summarily killing Palestinian...

Continued from Page 1

also ordered women and children into a room "and either shot at them or threw a grenade into the room, reportedly seriously injuring some of them, including an infant and a child". A Zionist official rejected the claims as "nothing but blood libel". The Zionist army did not immediately comment. Zionist troops have previously been accused of deliberately targeting and killing civilians, according to the office.

Meanwhile, Zionist police have questioned 19 prison guards as part of an investigation into the death of a Palestinian inmate, authorities said Thursday, following allegations of torture. Thaar Abu Assab, 38, from Qalqilya in the occupied West Bank, died last month after being beaten by prison guards in the Zionist entity, according to the official Palestinian news agency Wafa.

"This week, 19 prison guards were interrogated," a police spokeswoman said. "At the end of their interrogation, (they) were released under restrictive conditions. The investigation continues." The spokeswoman said the interrogations were part of an investigation into a "suspected violent incident that happened about a month ago in a prison in the south of the country". A spokeswoman for prison services did not respond to AFP's request for comment.

Assab, a member of the Fatah movement of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas who was serving a 25-year sentence was found dead in his cell, according to Zionist media. A Zionist newspaper reported that a post-mortem examination failed to determine whether the alleged abuse by his jailers was the cause of his death.

But the Public Committee against Torture in (the Zionist entity) said the death "raises serious suspicion that (the Zionist Prison Service) is being transformed from a profes-

sional incarceration body to a vindictive and punitive force". "Six prisoners have already died in prison," the committee said in a statement, adding that it had collected testimonies from Zionist prisons of beatings and sexual violence. "All the instances of abuse and death must be investigated immediately," it added.

Far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, said prison officers must be presumed innocent until an investigation proves them guilty. He told the newspaper that the guards were dealing with "human scum, murderers who represent a security risk".

Since war broke out on Oct 7 between the Zionist entity and the Palestinian group Hamas, Zionist prison authorities have imposed new restrictions on Palestinian detainees. Authorities have said that for inmates there would be no more leaving their cells — and therefore no more visits — no more buying food from the canteen, no more power in their electrical outlets and more frequent surprise searches. As of early December, Zionist prisons housed some 7,800 Palestinian detainees, according to the Palestinian Prisoners' Club, an advocacy group that keeps a tally of detainees from annexed east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank.

In Gaza, the Zionist army said Thursday it bombed scores of targets as diplomats pressed on with efforts to halt the fighting that has killed 20,000 people in the Palestinian territory. United Nations relief chief Martin Griffiths called the surging death toll a "tragic and shameful milestone" as the UN Security Council was to again discuss a draft resolution calling for a pause in the bloodiest ever Gaza war.

Incoming rocket fire set off air raid sirens in the Zionist entity and Tel Aviv, where police reported falling shrapnel but no casualties so far after the projectiles were intercepted by air defenses. Hamas' military wing announced it had launched the Tel Aviv-bound "missile barrage in response to the (Zionist) massacres against civilians". Hopes that the Zionist entity and Hamas could be inching towards another truce and hostage release deal have risen this week. However, their stated positions remain far apart. — AFP

International

'Dying every 2 hours': Afghan women risk life to give birth

Gynecologist 'brain drain', failing healthcare system restrict access to birth support

KHOST, Afghanistan: Zubaida travelled from the rural outskirts of Khost in eastern Afghanistan to give birth at a maternity hospital specializing in complicated cases, fearing a fate all too common among pregnant Afghan women — her death or her child's.

She lay dazed, surrounded by the unfamiliar bustle of the Doctors Without Borders (MSF)-run hospital, exhausted from delivery the day before, but relieved. Her still-weak newborn slept nearby in an iron crib with peeling paint, the child's eyes lined with khol to ward off evil. "If I had given birth at home, there could have been complications for the baby and for me," said the woman, who doesn't know her age.

Not all of the women who make it to the hospital are so lucky. "Sometimes we receive patients who come too late to save their lives" after delivering at home, said Therese Tuyisabingere, the head of midwifery at MSF in Khost, capital of Khost province.

The facility delivers 20,000 babies a year, nearly half those born in the province, and it only takes on high-risk and complicated pregnancies, many involving mothers who haven't had any check-ups. "This is a big challenge for us to save lives," said Tuyisabingere. She and the some 100 midwives at the clinic are on the front lines of a battle to reduce the maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan, where having many children is a source of pride, but where every birth carries heavy risks — with odds against women mounting.

Afghanistan is among the worst countries in the world for deaths in childbirth, "with one woman dying every two hours", UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said earlier this month. The Afghan health ministry did not respond to repeated requests for comment on this story.

According to the latest World Health Organization figures, from 2017, 638 women die in Afghanistan for every 100,000 viable births, compared with 19 in the United States. That figure, moreover, conceals the huge disparities between rural and urban areas.

Terje Watterdal, country director for the non-profit Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), said

they saw 5,000 maternal deaths per 100,000 births in remote parts of Afghanistan. "Men carry the women over their shoulders, and the women die over the mountain trying to reach a hospital," he said.

'Brain drain'

Before the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021 and the end of their insurgency, women would sometimes have to brave the frontlines to reach help, but now there are new challenges — including a "brain drain" of expertise. "A lot of gynecologists have left the country," Watterdal said.

Moreover, Taliban authorities want to get rid of the mobile medical teams visiting women because "they cannot control the health messages they were giving", he said. Under the Taliban government, women have been squeezed from public life and had access to education restricted, threatening the future of the female medical field in a country where many families avoid sending women to male doctors. "Access to antenatal and postnatal care for a woman was (always) extremely complicated. It's even more complicated today," said Filipe Ribeiro, MSF director in Afghanistan.

This is due to measures taken by authorities as well as the failings of the healthcare system — including structural support from foreign donors. "What little there was has been put under even greater pressure," Ribeiro said. The financial strain on families amid the country's economic crisis increases the risks, said Noor Khanum Ahmadzai, health coordinator for non-governmental organization Terre des Hommes in Kabul. In a public hospital where the midwives are overworked and poorly paid, women have to bring their own medicine.

A delivery costs around 2,000 Afghanis (\$29) — a significant sum for many families. Despite the risks, "women who used to go to the public sector now prefer to deliver at home, because they don't have money", said Ahmadzai. An estimated 40 percent of Afghan women give birth at home, but that shoots up to 80 percent in remote areas — often with the



KHOST, Afghanistan: In this photograph taken on Dec 8, 2023, Afghan women sit beside their newborns at the Doctors Without Borders (MSF)-run maternity hospital in Khost. — AFP

help of their mother-in-law or a local matriarch, but sometimes alone.

'Mother died in childbirth'

Islam Bibi, pregnant with triplets, went to the MSF facility in Khost in pain, and empty-handed. "I was sick, my husband didn't have any money. I was told, 'Go to this hospital, they do everything for free,'" said the 38-year-old, one of hundreds of thousands of Afghans who fled Pakistan in recent months, fearing deportation.

Multiple births like Islam Bibi's are common, said

Tania Allekotte, an MSF gynecologist from Argentina. "It is valued here to have many children and many women take a treatment to stimulate their fecundity. We often have twins here," she told AFP.

The average woman has six children in Afghanistan, but multiple pregnancies, repeated caesarean sections or miscarriages increase the risk of death. There are some rays of hope. Women in neighboring Paktia province may have fewer risks now, thanks to a first-of-its-kind maternity center opened recently by NAC in the small provincial capital Gardez — a clinic run by women for women. — AFP

Top court dismisses #MeToo initiator's case in South Korea

SEOUL: South Korea's highest court dismissed claims for compensation from the initiator of the country's #MeToo movement on Thursday, after she had filed suit against a boss over alleged sexual abuse. Seo Ji-hyun said she was groped by her superior Ahn Tae-geun at a funeral in 2010, and that he had transferred her from Seoul to a provincial position after she filed an internal complaint, blighting her career as a state prosecutor.

She suffered in silence for years until she went public in a 2018 television interview, a rare move which triggered a flood of similar accusations against powerful men in fields ranging from literature to politics that grew into a South Korean #MeToo movement.

In 2018, Seo filed a 100 million won (\$77,000) compensation suit against Ahn for physical and mental damages, as

well as unspecified "state compensation" from the government. Her claims were dismissed by two lower courts, which had ruled that the statute of limitations for the damages claim had expired. The courts also said it was difficult to conclude Ahn's decision to transfer Seo was a "harmful" or "illegal" act. On Thursday, the top court upheld the lower courts' decisions, dismissing Seo's appeal. "There were no errors in the judgment" in the previous rulings, the Supreme Court said in a statement. Following the ruling, Seo said the court made a "shameful decision". "It is disheartening that in 2023, only this much of a ruling can be made," she said in a public Facebook post.

Seo's former boss, Ahn, was sentenced to two years in prison for abuse of power in 2019. He was separately fired for corruption in 2017. Ahn was not charged with sex abuse



Seo Ji-hyun

because the one-year statute of limitations had expired before Seo brought her complaint.

He walked free in 2020 after his conviction was quashed by the Supreme Court, which ordered a retrial. His acquittal was finalized by the lower court that year, and local media have reported that he has since joined Kim & Chang, one of the biggest law firms in the country.

Seo said on Thursday she was effectively forced to leave her job as a state prosecutor, endured malicious rumors and experienced emotional distress since her 2018 television interview. Activists say her story exemplifies the plight of many South Korean women — well-educated and hard-working yet discriminated against and mistreated by their employers — as well as their frustration at the slow pace of social change. "Although my journey ends here, I believe that the women who come after me, the next generations, will take another step forward," Seo said in her post. — AFP

Bangladesh garment workers sacked after wage protests

DHAKA: For a decade, the nimble fingers of Bangladeshi garment worker Naim Pramanik sewed shirts and trousers for top Western brands, to be worn by the wealthy across the world. Now the 28-year-old is unemployed, sacked after daring to take part in protests demanding a fair wage. "Some clothes we make are sold at \$100 a piece in shops in America and Europe," he said, showing the labels of American fashion giant Tommy Hilffiger and British brand George. "We don't get more than \$100 a month."

The South Asian country — the world's eighth most populous, with about 170 million citizens — was last month rocked by its worst labor unrest in a decade. Tens of thousands of workers clashed with police for a 23,000-taka (\$208) minimum monthly wage, up from the 8,300 taka set by the government five years ago. At least five people were killed.

Pramanik joined protests last month because his \$75 monthly salary was "killing us". The garment industry has been the key driver of impressive economic growth in Bangladesh as it has overtaken

neighboring India in GDP per capita and made it a darling for Western brands such as H&M, Levi's, Uniqlo and Zara. But experts say the industry has failed to lift its four million workers out of poverty.

'Beg or borrow'

"We took to the streets for our legitimate demands and that's why my factory fired me," said Pramanik, who gained attention after his comments to a news website during protests were shared widely on social media.

Mahmudul Hasan, a spokesman for his former employer Wear Mag, said he was sacked because "he was absent in duties for days". Sitting on the bed in his cell-like, 4.5-square-metre (48-square-foot) home in the Pallabi suburb of the capital Dhaka, which he shares with his wife and baby, Pramanik pulled out a nearly empty pot of rice. "These are the last few rice grains I have got. Once this finishes, I won't have anything to eat," he said. "I'll have to either beg or borrow to provide food."

He received a 67,000-taka (\$610) severance package, but debts swallowed much of that, and he does not know how he will pay his next rent demand. Pramanik sent much of his pay to his family in a village in the northern rural district of Sirajganj, which many have left after farming jobs dried up with the mechanization of agriculture. In Dhaka, he shares a kitchen and toilet with eight other families. "After paying my house rent and debts, nothing remains," he said,

worried about supporting his baby. "Just look at my house, it has nothing. I sleep on a broken bed."

'Bare minimum'

Last month a state-appointed panel raised the minimum monthly wage by 56 percent to 12,500 taka, but the unions rejected the wage, saying it did not match soaring prices for food, rent and health-care. Global rights group Clean Clothes Campaign said it was "not a living wage but the bare minimum that is needed for workers to make ends meet".

Unions have since stopped protests in the wake of a major police crackdown but warn they will resume if demands are not met by early January when Bangladesh will also hold general elections. Garment factory owners are among the wealthiest people in the country, and several are also lawmakers.

Pramanik is not the only one to have been sacked. Unions said hundreds of workers have lost their jobs for joining the demonstrations. Prodig Ray, 38, a union leader who led protests in the capital's Mirpur district, said there was a "culture" of sacking workers "just because they took part in a protest".

Those now jobless include Akter, 28, a single mother, who asked to not be fully identified for fear of retaliation. "I don't know how I will pass this month," she said, adding that she had less than four dollars in savings. "I don't know how I'll take care of my son ... the time to pay the house rent is knocking." — AFP



DHAKA: Naim Pramanik (second right), a garment worker who lost his job, with union leader Prodig Ray (center) sits along a street. — AFP photos



Naim Pramanik (left) sits with his family on the bed in his cell-like, 4.45-square-metre (48-square-foot) home in Pallabi, in the northern suburb of Dhaka.

India's criminal code gets major overhaul, alarming advocates

NEW DELHI: India's parliament on Thursday rushed through the country's biggest criminal justice overhaul since the British colonial era, alarming rights campaigners who say the new laws give authorities too much power.

Sweeping changes to the colonial-era Penal Code and two other laws remove archaic references to the British monarchy, redefine the scope of "terrorism" offences, and introduce new punishments for mob lynchings and crimes against women. Home Minister Amit Shah said when unveiling the three proposed laws in August that the old statutes had been designed to "strengthen colonial rule" and had outlived their purpose. "The motive of the three bills is not to give punishment but to give justice," he told lawmakers on Thursday.

The new laws quickly passed through both houses of parliament over two days with minimal debate, after nearly 150 opposition lawmakers were suspended over the past week for protesting an unrelated issue. New provisions in the laws would impose the death penalty on perpetrators of mob lynchings and the rape of a minor, as well as a 20-year minimum sentence in cases of gang rape.

They introduce community service provisions for petty crimes to ease the chronic backlog in Indian courts, which have millions of pending cases. The laws also heighten police powers over the detention of suspects and expand terrorism offences to include acts that could threaten India's sovereignty or "economic security".

Amnesty International said the new criminal justice framework would intensify a "targeted crackdown on freedom of expression in the country". The laws "dangerously broaden the definition of 'terrorism', reintroduce sedition, retain the death penalty, and extend police custody", the rights watchdog said.

India's Penal Code and other statutes governing the police and courts were introduced in the 19th century, while the country was governed by the British crown. The legal overhaul is the latest effort by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist government in its campaign to remove lingering symbols of colonial rule from India's history books, urban landscape and political institutions.

Modi's government has passed a number of laws through parliament this week while more than half of the legislature's opposition lawmakers were barred from attending. They had been protesting a security breach last week that saw a member of the public enter the floor of the lower house and set off a smoke canister.

Parliament also passed a telecoms bill that allows the government to temporarily take control of and suspend telecom services in the interest of national security. The new telecoms law's expanded powers have been criticised by campaigners who say India already regularly uses internet shutdowns to manage unrest. Lawyer and digital rights advocate Apar Gupta told AFP that the law would uphold the government's power to shut down the internet "without any statutory safeguards". — AFP

Business

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2023

Zionist-Hamas war pushing Lebanon back into recession

Conflict, spillovers reverse the tepid growth projected



SIDON: Workers repair shoes as customers wait in Ahmed Al-Bizri's shoe-repair store in the coastal city of Sidon. Among meandering alleyways in the historic market of Lebanon's southern city of Sidon, cobblers and menders are doing brisk business, as an economic crisis revives demand for once fading trades. — AFP photos

BEIRUT: The impacts of the Zionist-Hamas war are set to push crisis-hit Lebanon's economy back into recession, the World Bank said Thursday, blaming mainly a "shock to tourism spending". Lebanon's southern border has seen regular exchanges of fire, mainly between the Zionist army and Hamas ally Hezbollah, since the Gaza conflict erupted on October 7.

The impact of the conflict had reversed a slight recovery for Lebanon, which has battled a deep economic crisis for years, the Washington-based bank said in a report. "Prior to October 2023, economic growth was projected—for the first time since 2018 - to slightly expand in 2023,"

by 0.2 percent, the World Bank said.

It attributed the positive pre-war expectations mainly to summer tourism and remittances from the large Lebanese diaspora. But, it added, "the current conflict and its spillovers into Lebanon are expected to quickly reverse the tepid growth projected for 2023, as the economy returns to a recession". The economy will contract "primarily due to the shock to tourism spending", the report said. More than half of travel reservations to Lebanon have been cancelled for winter holidays, the World Bank said, warning that "tourism cannot, on its own, serve as the basis for an economic recovery".

Real gross domestic product is expected to decline "to between minus 0.6 percent to minus 0.9 percent depending on the extent of the tourism shock," it added. Lebanon's economy collapsed in late 2019, plunging most of the population into poverty, according to the United Nations. Bickering politicians, widely accused of corruption, have been unable to agree on measures to save the economy, or even on selecting a new head of state. Lebanon has been governed by a caretaker government with limited powers and without a president for more than a year as lawmakers have repeatedly failed to elect a new leader. — AFP



BEIRUT: Two girls walk past a stationary shop in Beirut.



HUALIEN: A farmer checks his buckwheat fields in Yuli township in Hualien, eastern Taiwan. — AFP

Taiwan accuses China of 'economic coercion' over tariffs move

TAIPEI: Taiwan accused China on Thursday of election interference and deploying "classic economic coercion" after Beijing slapped fresh tariffs on certain products from the island in a retaliatory trade measure. Taiwan will hold a presidential election next month in a contest dominated by the self-ruled island's relations with Chinese leadership.

Beijing's decision to add tariffs comes after its Commerce Ministry announced last week that an investigation launched in April had concluded Taiwan's restriction on over 2,000 products from the mainland constituted a trade "barrier". Twelve products from Taiwan - including chemicals used in the plastics industry - will see their tariff concessions suspended from January 1, 2024, said China's Customs Tariff Commission of the State Council on Thursday. "Taiwan has unilaterally adopted discriminatory

restrictions and other measures on the export of mainland products," violating the Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, it said in a statement. "We hope Taiwan will take effective measures to lift trade restrictions on the mainland," the commission said, without elaborating.

Taipei and Beijing signed the milestone cross-strait deal in 2010, a sweeping agreement to ease tariff restrictions and boost trade. An official at Taiwan's international trade administration said Thursday that most of the 12 products would see tariffs raised to one or two percent, from zero, under a WTO member country rate. Taiwan's Office of Trade Negotiations described the tariffs - as well as the Chinese Commerce Ministry investigation - as "classic economic coercion".

The office said Beijing's move was "not in line with international norms" but estimated the damage to Taiwan should be "controllable". "All authorities have been instructed to continue to make full preparations for the risks and damages in this case... and to assist the industry not to over-rely on a single market," it said in a statement. The office also said the Chinese investigation on trade barriers was "unfair, non-open and non-transparent". — AFP

Turkey's central bank announces rate hike

ISTANBUL: Turkey's central bank announced a smaller interest rate hike than in previous months on Thursday, signaling it is nearing the end of its monetary tightening as it battles double-digit inflation. The bank lifted its policy rate by 2.5-percentage-points to 42.5 percent. This compares to five-point hikes in previous months. The bank said it reduced the pace of rate hikes and "anticipates to complete the tightening cycle as soon as possible".

"Assessing that monetary tightness is significantly close to the level required to establish the disinflation course, the (Monetary Policy) Committee reduced the pace of monetary tightening," the bank said in a statement. "The monetary tightness will be maintained as long as needed to ensure sustained price stability," it added. Turkey's interest rates are now the highest of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's two decades in power. A self-declared enemy of high interest rates, Erdogan made a U-turn after securing election victory in May. He appointed a new team of market-friendly economists, including Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek and central bank governor Hafize Gaye Erkan, who has Wall Street experience.

'Terribly expensive'

Erdogan has allowed the lira currency to weaken while promising that the new team would tackle years of economic crisis. Year-on-year inflation stood at 61.98 percent in November after touching 85 percent in October 2022. And the central bank expects consumer prices to peak in May of next year at between 70 and 75 percent. Erdogan said early this month that inflation would remain elevated until June. Erkan made headlines when she told a Turkish daily on Saturday that she has been priced out of Istanbul's property market by rampant inflation, leaving no choice for the former finance executive but to move back in with her parents.

"We haven't found a home in Istanbul. It's terribly expensive. We've moved in with my parents," said the 44-year-old, a former top executive at US finan-

cial firms who took up her post in June. Nicholas Farr, emerging Europe economist at the London-based Capital Economics, said the big picture was that policymakers' work in tackling Turkey's inflation problem was "far from over". "We think that interest rates will need to be kept high for a prolonged period of time, if there is any chance of Turkey achieving single digit inflation this decade," Farr said in a statement.

'Much still to be done'

Economists said a five-point hike on the same scale as the last three months would have been welcomed by markets, but that was more hope than expectation. Thursday's 2.5-point hike was in line with forecasts. "This will almost certainly not be the last rate rise in this cycle," said Cagri Kutman, Turkish market specialist at KNG Securities, a London-based investment bank, in a note to investors. "There is much still to be done in taming inflation but the bond market is optimistic that Turkey is on the right track," Kutman added.

He noted that Turkish bonds have been amongst the strongest performing out of major economies over the past month. Turkish media reported that Simsek and Erkan would travel to New York in January to meet with investors. Bartosz Sawicki, market analyst at Conotoxia fintech, suggested that the central bank is set to halt the tightening cycle before the local elections in March. "The following year will put the central bank's independence and determination to stick to a more orthodox stance to the test," Sawicki commented. — AFP



ANKARA: A woman walks past a shop with a rental sign hanging in Cankaya district in Ankara. — AFP

Electric scooter company Bird files for bankruptcy

Process aims at 'better positioning the company for long-term'

NEW YORK: US electric scooter rental company Bird announced Wednesday that it filed for bankruptcy protection as the once-hot startup reorganizes itself. The reorganization, which affects US operations but not Bird's holdings in Europe and Canada, will entail the sale of assets, according to a press release describing a "comprehensive restructuring." The process aims at "better positioning the company for long-term, sustainable growth," Bird said.

The company, which grew quickly on enthusiasm about emission-free transport in urban settings, has reached an agreement with Bird's existing lenders pertaining to a sale of assets. The plan effectively sets a "floor" on the value of the assets as Bird pursues other buyers in a process expected to take 90-120 days, Miami-based Bird said in the press release.

Bird did not immediately respond to an AFP query seeking further details on the plan. Bird has obtained \$25 million in financing from a division of Apollo Global Management to complete the reorganization. Bird was part of a generation of scooter companies that grew fast in the late 2010s. But the business began to lose its luster as scooters frequently made their way outside designated areas and became ensnared in numerous accidents.

Paris, Montreal, Las Vegas and New Orleans eventually banned the vehicles, joining big cities such as Barcelona, Toronto and New York, which had never authorized the vehicles. Other cities instituted draconian restrictions on the vehicles, further hitting revenues. Bird in October 2022 re-



AUSTIN: 'Bird' scooters are parked on a sidewalk in Austin, Texas. The electric vehicle company Bird Global has filed for bankruptcy after its challenges with litigation expenses and the company's decline in demand after significant investments were made during the COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

treated from several markets, including Germany and Norway. It also left San Francisco earlier this year. The company still maintains operations in 350 cities. First introduced on public markets in

November 2021, Bird reached a peak valuation of \$2.3 billion. But the company was delisted from the New York Stock Exchange in September as its financial problems worsened. — AFP

Argentina's Milei orders deregulation of economy

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina's new leader Javier Milei unveiled Wednesday a series of measures to deregulate the country's struggling economy, eliminating or changing more than 300 rules via presidential decree, including on rent and labor practices. "The goal is to start along the path to rebuilding the country... and start to undo the huge number of regulations that have held back and prevented economic growth," Milei said in a televised speech from the presidential palace, flanked by his cabinet.

Latin America's third-biggest economy is on its knees after decades of debt and financial mismanagement,

with inflation surpassing 160 percent year-on-year and 40 percent of Argentines living in poverty. Milei, who was elected last month and took office 10 days ago, has pledged to curb inflation, but warned that economic "shock" treatment is the only solution and that the situation will get worse before it improves.

Among the changes announced Wednesday are the elimination of a law regulating rent, as well as rules preventing the privatization of state enterprises. Milei also announced a "modernization of labor law to facilitate the process of creating real jobs" and a series of other deregulatory measures affecting tourism, satellite internet services, pharmaceuticals, wine production and foreign trade.

Following the speech, thousands of people converged on the streets near the Congress to voice their discontent. Protesters banged pots and pans, climbed gates and waved the national flag. "I am here because I am

terrified by the decree," Nicolas Waiselbaum, a 48-year-old teacher, told AFP. Leopoldo Maldonado, a 25-year-old student, said "the measures are very negative." "I'm especially worried about the rent law and the labor reform. It is already very complicated for young people to get a stable job," he said.

The decree, published in the government gazette at midnight, must be assessed by a joint committee of lawmakers from both chambers of the legislature within 10 days. Constitutional law expert Emiliano Vitaliani told AFP that the decree could only be overturned if rejected by both the lower House and the Senate. Milei's far-right Libertad Avanza party only has 40 seats in the 257-member lower house and seven senators out of 72. But Milei's margin improves if the members of the center-right Together for Change coalition are taken into account. — AFP

AfDB pulls expats from Ethiopia after assaults


ABIDJAN: The African Development Bank (AfDB) said Wednesday it was withdrawing international staff from Ethiopia after the arrest and assault of two staffers "by Ethiopian security forces" in October. It said two of its Addis Ababa-based staff had been "unlawfully arrested, physically assaulted, and detained for hours without charge or any official explanation" at the end of October. "This was a gross violation of their personal diplomatic immunities, rights, and privileges," the Abidjan-based bank said in a statement.

The AfDB office in the Ethiopian capital will remain open with local staff, it added. The bank did not identify the two victims. But two diplomatic sources in Addis Ababa have previously confirmed reports that the bank's Ethiopia director Abdul Kamara was one of them and that he had since left the country. "The situation is still not yet resolved in a satisfactory manner," AfDB president Akinwumi Adesina was quoted as saying in the statement.

"The African Development Bank remains particularly concerned that the Ethiopian government has, to date, not shared with the Bank any report, or details of investigations into the incident," Adesina added. The Bank was created in 1964 to finance development efforts in Africa. Apart from countries of the African Union, its membership includes about 20 non-African nations. Its investments in Ethiopia as of the end of September came to \$1.2 billion across 22 projects. — AFP



BUENOS AIRES: People buy cleaning products at a supermarket in Buenos Aires. — AFP



شركة الصفاة للاستثمار
AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 21 DECEMBER 2023

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No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance											Valuation Multiples *			
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	905	919	920	911	9	9,556,591	12	1.32%	-10.49%	916	926	13.4	1.74	3.7%	1.02
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	273	280	281	274	7	17,908,314	6	2.19%	-5.78%	270	281	13.5	1.28	3.4%	1.32
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	151	151	153	150	3	9,354,006	1	0.67%	-15.71%	150	156	15.7	0.57	2.4%	1.11
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	180	175	180	174	6	9,728,561	-3	-1.69%	-16.10%	170	176	18.2	0.66	4.3%	1.36
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	723	726	732	718	14	23,752,070	10	1.40%	-2.96%	715	725	17.9	1.86	2.3%	1.18
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	598	599	604	597	7	4,015,154	2	0.34%	-20.43%	593	616	37.0	2.41	0.9%	1.20
201	Kuwait Investment	Financial Services	130	128	131	127	4	815,416	-1	-0.78%	-15.79%	125	129	7.5	0.59	3.9%	1.82
204	National Investments	Financial Services	242	243	245	238	7	3,530,774	3	1.25%	2.53%	237	244	78.6	1.12	11.6%	2.05
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	119	108	114	106	8	12,287,313	-5	-4.42%	-3.57%	101	110	27.1	0.62	0.0%	1.02
212	Arzan Financial Group	Financial Services	206	196	203	194	9	11,854,425	-4	-2.00%	73.84%	195	202	29.0	1.36	2.0%	1.17
222	Aayan Leasing and Investment	Financial Services	168	170	173	169	4	41,492,816	0	0.00%	27.82%	168	171	8.7	1.17	4.4%	1.64
252	Al Intiaz Investment	Financial Services	59.1	56.1	59.8	56	3.8	1,321,798	-1.8	-3.11%	-25.10%	55.5	57.1	NM	0.36	15.7%	1.36
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	201	192	199	192	7	12,236,367	-4	-2.04%	83.11%	187	193	15.5	1.29	1.5%	1.08
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	824	819	821	809	12	1,304,251	7	0.86%	2.38E-02	811	838	17.0	1.77	1.6%	1.03
418	The Commercial Real Estate	Real Estate	104	102	105	102	3	9,755,107	0.0	0.00%	6.23%	102	105	20.4	0.62	2.8%	0.62
501	National Industries	Financial Services	198	198	204	198	6	11,754,343	1	0.51%	-4.19%	194	199	18.1	0.94	2.4%	1.62
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	1,340	1,300	1,337	1,299	38	934,107	-38	-2.84%	7.00%	1,290	1,319	13.6	1.20	4.5%	1.04
506	HEISCO	Industrials	859	815	858	815	43	2,187,887	-35	-4.12%	32.95%	815	832	22.8	2.07	2.4%	0.92
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	599	580	603	571	32	2,733,599	-20	-3.33%	-27.50%	571	604	12.5	1.21	10.3%	0.95
603	Agility	Industrials	521	518	524	515	9	4,043,386	-1	-0.19%	-28.06%	500	520	15.7	0.74	0.0%	1.52
605	Zain	Telecommunications	496	495	499	492	7	6,711,578	4	0.81%	-12.08%	487	495	9.9	1.72	7.1%	0.63
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,087	3,100	3,105	3,050	55	1,434,417	1	0.03%	-7.53%	3,065	3,100	9.2	3.43	12.4%	0.64
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	176	179	181	178	3	488,029	1	0.56%	-11.82%	178	184	NM	0.78	0.0%	1.17
654	JAZEERA	Consumer Discretionary	1,390	1,375	1,377	1,333	44	411,392	15	1.10%	-27.63%	1,300	1,405	24.0	9.05	5.7%	1.45
813	GFH Financial Group	Financial Services	76.2	75.9	76.7	75.8	0.9	5,520,157	-0.5	-0.65%	-0.13%	74.7	76.6	8.2	0.86	6.5%	1.36
821	Warba Bank	Banking	184	184	188	183	5	5,468,666	0	0.00%	-19.35%	169	188	25.4	0.99	1.6%	1.14
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	512	564	564	510	54	1,649,586	37	7.02%	43.51%	541	565	13.8	1.64	2.3%	0.45
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	501	520	520	502	18	1,009,456	24	4.84%	40.54%	505	520	36.5	2.12	2.9%	0.68
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	176	174	176	174	2	702,281	0	0.00%	-7.45%	174	176	13.5	1.45	6.9%	0.23
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	1,725	1,718	1,747	1,716	31	445,615	2	0.12%	-16.28%	1,700	1,770	22.2	5.65	4.9%	0.90
830	AL GHANIM	Consumer Discretionary	1,023	1,040	1,045	1,031	14	775,399	8	0.78%	29.19%	1,033	1,069	11.0	3.78	6.7%	0.63

* As of end of week closing

Business

Markets splutter: Early Santa rally loses steam

Asian indices strike a mixed note

LONDON: Stock markets faltered Thursday following an early pre-Christmas rally that was fuelled by expectations the US Federal Reserve will slash interest rates next year as inflation cools in the world's biggest economy. Asian indices struck a mixed note although Tokyo tumbled on troubling news from Japanese carmaker Toyota, whose share price tanked. European equities slid, as London hit reverse one day after jumping on news of a sharper-than-expected slowdown in UK inflation, and with many traders away for the yuletide break. Eyes are now on Friday's upcoming release of the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index, the Fed's preferred gauge of inflation, which could be key for its next meeting in January.

'Santa Rally?'

"Investors abruptly slammed the brakes on the year-end Santa rally," said SPI Asset Management analyst Stephen Innes. New York's three main indices lost more than one percent apiece on Wednesday, with the Dow coming off five straight records. US equities had driven higher since late October, following a nearly unbroken path as inflation moderated and the Federal Reserve flagged plans for 2024 interest rate cuts. A stream of US data in recent weeks has shown inflation continues to slow and the jobs market is softening, while other economic indicators suggest the US central bank is on course to bring prices under control while averting a recession.

The latest figures on Wednesday showed US consumer confidence bouncing back more than forecast, while home sales came off a 13-year low. The most recent Fed gathering ended with officials indicating they would cut about three times in 2024, sparking a buying frenzy in markets and forcing some policymakers to try to temper expectations. Traders are now eagerly awaiting fresh US data on Friday, which is the last trading day before Christmas.

'Walking a tightrope'

"A higher-than-expected core US inflation reading tomorrow could tip us back into fretting about rates being higher for longer," said AJ Bell investment director Russ Mould. He added that any downgrade to the third-quarter US gross domestic product could also raise concerns about the health of the economy. "A downturn would be unwelcome news for corporate earnings even if central banks move on rates as the market hopes. For now, stocks are walking a tightrope to a hoped-for soft landing for the economy," he said, using a term for avoiding recession.

Back in Tokyo, shares slumped after Toyota announced a recall of a million vehicles, and its subsidiary Daihatsu decided to suspend shipments of all models over rigged safety tests. The news got worse for the world's biggest carmaker later in the day when it said it was recalling around a million Toyota and Lexus vehicles in the United States, citing concerns about their airbag systems. — AFP



FRANKFURT: Traders work in front of a chart of Germany's share index DAX that is displayed (in background) at the stock exchange in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. — AFP

Platinum miners end underground protest

JOHANNESBURG: More than 2,000 platinum workers returned to the surface at a South African mine on Wednesday after ending a three day underground protest over conditions, the owners said. All 2,205 workers who started the protest in two shafts about 500 meters below ground over bonuses and conditions were "now safely on the surface", Impala Platinum Holdings said in a statement.

More than 160 had returned to the surface during the protest because of the difficult conditions, the company, also known as Implats, said. All operations at the Bafokeng mine north of Johannesburg had been halted in the fourth major underground protest in South Africa in two months. The company, which also operates in Zimbabwe and Canada, did not say if it had made any agreement with the workers who it declared had staged an "illegal protest". It did indicate that "disciplinary" action could be taken, however.

Implats said it would be "instituting required disciplinary processes and securing the sustainability of the operation amid the low metal price environ-



RUSTENBURG: A general view of the 11 shaft at Impala Platinum mine near Rustenburg. — AFP

ment." Implats said the protest went ahead without union "support" and "against a background of increasing incidents of a similar nature at other mining companies." It had previously said the protest put jobs at risk "given prevailing low platinum group metal prices".

The government has also expressed concern over labor unrest in the crucial mining industry which employs hundreds of thousands of people.

South Africa is the biggest exporter of platinum and a major exporter of gold, diamonds, coal and other raw materials. More than 100 gold miners spent nearly three days underground in Springs near Johannesburg in October as rival unions battled for control. Another 440 staged a protest in another gold mine this month while 250 platinum workers demanding better wages occupied a shaft for three days at the same time. — AFP

EU strikes budget reform deal after two-year wrangle

BRUSSELS: The EU agreed reforms Wednesday that will loosen budget rules with the goal of encouraging investments while keeping debt and spending under control, after France and Germany bridged their differences. Finance ministers from the 27 members met by video link to hammer out the agreement - after their French and German colleagues had got together in Paris on Tuesday to clear the way for a compromise. France's finance minister Bruno Le Maire took to social media to hail the deal. "Historic accord! After two years of intense negotiations we have new European budget rules," he said.

Dutch minister Sigrid Kaag said: "This agreement provides for fiscal rules that encourage reforms, with room for investments and tailored to the specific situation of the member state in question. "They work counter-cyclically so that potential economic growth is not cut short. In addition, rules must also be better adhered to, which too often has been an issue in the past." The fiscal straitjacket imposed on EU members - limiting countries' debt to 60 percent of GDP and public deficits to 3 percent - was loosened during the COVID pandemic to allow greater state spending.

This was meant to be a temporary reprieve, but launched a two-year debate between countries led by Germany that wanted a return to rigorous controls and others led by France that wanted more flexibility to allow spending to finance, for example, the transition to green energy or arms deliveries to Ukraine. The compromise deal reconfirms the three percent deficit target. But it softens the rules for how quickly and a severely a country has to cut spending to get back within the parameters.

"It was a hard road. It was a difficult path to tread. And now we have finally reached safe harbour at a historic moment," Spanish finance minister Nadia Calvino, whose country holds the EU presidency, said after the video conference. "The rules are more realistic. They respond to the post-pandemic reality and they incorporate also the lessons learned from the great financial crisis." Time had been running out for a deal. If there was no new plan the original stability pact would have come back into force on January 1.

Route back to stability

Failure to agree new rules would have also damaged the EU's credibility in the eyes of the financial markets. Now that there is political agreement, the EU member states will seek endorsement from the European parliament to pass binding legislation before elections in June.

The draft text provides for rules more adapted to the particular situation of each country, allowing big spenders a slower route back to frugality. Brussels is proposing that member states present their own adjustment trajectory over a period of at least four years in order to ensure the sustainability of their debt. Reform and investment efforts would be rewarded by the possibility of extending this budgetary adjustment period to seven years so that it is less brutal.

The targets would be linked to evolution of expenditure, an indicator considered by some more relevant than deficits, which can fluctuate according to the level of growth. In order to satisfy Germany, however, countries with excessive deficits will be forced to make a minimum effort to reduce their deficit, which could be 0.5 percentage points per year. Paris, however, won from Berlin a pause of this effort in 2025 to 2027. Over this period the increase in the cost of debt linked to high interest rates will be taken into account.

Berlin also wants a public deficit target of 1.5 percent of GDP to be assigned to the most indebted countries, in order to preserve a margin of safety in relation to the three-percent ceiling. To achieve that, an adjustment of at least 0.4 points of GDP per year will be required, which can be reduced to 0.25 points in the event of reforms and investments. The debt will have to fall by one percentage point per year on average over four or to seven years. Compared to the old rules, a French official argued "the deficit target is less restrictive, the pace of reaching it is more progressive and rewards investment". — AFP

E-commerce talks at the WTO make strong headway

GENEVA: Negotiations at the World Trade Organization towards drawing up global e-commerce rules have concluded on a range of regulations, and should wrap up fully next year, the countries organizing the talks said Wednesday. Around 90 countries, representing 90 percent of the WTO membership and including heavy-hitters like the United States, the European Union and China, have been participating in the talks first launched in 2019.

Australia, Japan and Singapore, which have been co-convening the talks, announced Wednesday "the substantial conclusion of negotiations on a number of global digital trade rules that will facilitate electronic transactions, promote digital trade facilitation, and foster an open and trusted digital economy". "This marks a significant milestone," they said in a statement. Countries have largely concluded negotiations in three broad areas: digital trade facilitation, open digital environment and business and consumer trust, they said.

Within those areas, issues like e-authentication and e-signatures, e-contracts and paperless trading, online consumer protection, personal data protection and cybersecurity had been worked out. Countries were meanwhile still discussing how to regulate



HANGZHOU: This aerial photo taken shows a general view of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba's headquarters in Hangzhou in China's eastern Zhejiang province. — AFP

telecommunication services and e-payments, as well as provisions of information and communications technology (ICT) products that use cryptography, the statement said, adding that the aim was "to conclude negotiations in a timely manner in 2024".

Participants hailed the progress. "Agreement on a broad range of digital trade rules at the WTO will facilitate digital trade for consumers and businesses, particularly MSMEs (micro, small and medium

dataset for many institutional investors.

Through our annual integrated report, and the ever-strengthening processes and initiatives that underpin it, we aim to provide a holistic and extensive view of our performance across the most material sustainability issues for our business." PMI scored 85 out of 100 in the 2023 S&P Global CSA2 reflecting a significant increase of 21 points since it first began engaging with the ranking in 2018. This is the first year PMI has recorded the highest CSA score out of 13 companies assessed in the tobacco industry by S&P.

The recognition of PMI's best-in-class sustainability performance has not only been recognized by S&P—earlier this month, ISS ESG Corporate Rating qualified PMI as "Prime" status according to their rating methodology. Prime status is awarded to companies with an ESG performance above a sector-specific threshold, which means that they fulfill ambitious absolute performance requirements. According to ISS, the Prime rating classification qualifies companies for responsible investment. To date, PMI is the only company in the tobacco industry to ever receive Prime status qualification.

"A reflection of hard work, perseverance, deep commitment to sustainability, impactful performance, and best-in-class reporting allows PMI to be rec-

ognized externally for its leadership in sustainability performance and transparency. We are the only company in our sector included in the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index, leading the tobacco industry in this rating for the first time," said Jennifer Motles, chief sustainability officer, PMI.

"Our north star is to create a net positive impact that benefits our company, shareholders, consumers, and society. This recognition signals we are on the right track. Our approach to sustainability is deeply embedded in our corporate strategy and is a true opportunity for innovation, growth, and purpose-led, impact-driven, long-term value creation. I look forward to the journey ahead as we remain committed to transform for good." Further to the recognition by S&P and ISS ESG, PMI's performance in various sustainability ratings to date demonstrate the company's leadership on sustainability performance and transparency.

Some of these include PMI's Triple A score on CDP for the third consecutive year, 5 PMI's inclusion in the Bloomberg Gender Equality Index for the second consecutive year, and recognition as a top performer by WBCSD Reporting Matters for its transparent and robust reporting practices for the third consecutive year.

PMI included in Dow Jones Sustainability World Index

DUBAI: Philip Morris International Inc. (PMI) (NYSE: PM) has been included in the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index for the first time, and for the fourth consecutive year in the Dow Jones Sustainability North America Composite Index. The Dow Jones Sustainability World Index is one of the most reputable benchmarks for measuring the sustainability performance of companies worldwide, as identified by S&P Global through the annual Corporate Sustainability Assessment (CSA).

The World Index includes the top 10% of the largest 2,500 companies in the S&P Global Broad Market Index based on long-term economic, environmental, and social criteria. "Investors and other financial stakeholders place increasing value on reliable, robust, and timely measures of sustainability performance," said Emmanuel Babeau, chief financial officer, PMI. "ESG ratings are one part of the input

Fading colors: Bangladesh's threatened rickshaw art



This photograph shows a bicycle rickshaw adorned with colourful artwork in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw drivers transporting passengers in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw driver Mohammad Babu posing for a portrait with his vehicle on a street in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw driver Mohammad Chan Mia posing for a portrait with his vehicle in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw driver Mohammad Shamim posing for a portrait with his vehicle on a street in Dhaka.



This photograph shows a bicycle rickshaw driver resting in his vehicle by a street curb in Dhaka. — AFP photos

Vibrant greens and swirling yellows, film stars, birds and architecture: Bangladesh's bicycle rickshaw drivers have for decades used their transport as a unique moving canvas of urban folk art. But many fear that despite being added by the United Nations cultural agency this month to its list of intangible cultural heritage, the colorful craft is fading in the face of faster, modern motorized rickshaws.

Rickshaw mechanic Mohammad Sabuj, 40, says he is mourning the decline in the "beautiful" paintings, which adorn the vehicles' carriage covers, seats and footrests. "It has become rare nowadays," he said. "When I was younger, rickshaws were full of colorful art and designs—but nowadays the trend has fallen." Rickshaw driver Shahid Ullah, 72, has been pedaling his bike for half a century through the congested and narrow streets of Dhaka, a city of around 20 million people. But as people switch to cars and buses for transport—or motorized Chinese-made rickshaws without the same space on the frame to carry the art—his trade is disappearing.

Dying art

Ullah welcomed the UNESCO decision this month to recognise the art, which it called a "key part of the city's cultural tradition and a dynamic form of urban folk art, providing inhabitants with a sense of shared identity". The rickshaw art was one of



This photograph shows rickshaw artist Hanif Pappu working on a painting at his shop in Dhaka.

dozens of practices that made UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list on December 6, alongside Italian opera singing, Peru's ceviche seafood dish, Thailand's Songkran New Year festival and Ivory Coast's traditional loincloth weaving. "It's a good thing for us," Ullah said. "We

feel proud." UNESCO South Asia chief Tim Curtis said that rickshaw painting was "under threat", and that the listing would help boost the craft by "finding innovative and sustainable ways of keeping this living heritage alive". Increasing costs of fuel and other basic goods have hit the craft hard,

said mechanic Sabuj.

"Drivers need to pay more to the rickshaw owners than before and the design also requires more money now," he said. Depending on the complexity of the design, painting costs between \$45-\$90 — as much as a third of the cost of a new bicycle rickshaw, which costs around \$230-\$270. Painting costs are usually borne by the owner, who rents bikes out to drivers.

A new motorized rickshaw is more expensive—between \$750-\$900 — but they are seen as earning a quicker return. Abdul Motalab, another rickshaw driver, said people admired the art but still used modern transport including the packed metro system.

"People prefer faster vehicles," Motalab said. Rickshaw artist Hanif Pappu, 62, said the number of youngsters coming to learn the trade had slumped. "Now no one sends their children to learn this art," he said. "They see that the trainers themselves are starving." For Pappu, the UNESCO listing will not halt the decline. "It came too late," he said. "Rickshaw painting is dying in the country."

'Raw creation'

With the rickshaws weaving through the chaotic roads of Dhaka, Pappu said the paintings were a roving art exhibition carrying the creator's message to a mobile audience. "Look at this, it's a message of peace," he said, pointing to a painting of a



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw driver Abdul Mojid posing for a portrait with his vehicle in Dhaka.

tranquil rural scene with birds and a house that he said was a reminder in the busy city of the countryside many had left behind to find jobs.

"It's a message of a happy family," he added. "We try to give such messages in our work." He is proud of the colorful creations, which he has been painting since he was a boy, recalling how movie posters were once popular designs. "It is a heritage of Bangladesh," he said. "It is our own raw creation." But Pappu worries for the future.

"I could have left this work for the sufferings I faced, but I didn't because I feel it is now mixed with my blood. Will anyone stay in this profession for 55 years like I did?" he said. "If this trend continues, this industry will vanish. It won't survive." — AFP



This photograph shows a bicycle rickshaw driver posing for a portrait with his vehicle on a street in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw drivers transporting passengers in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw driver Mohammad Mosleuddin posing for a portrait with his vehicle on a street in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw drivers transporting passengers in Dhaka.



This photograph shows a bicycle rickshaw adorned with colorful artwork depicting film actors, in Dhaka.



This photograph shows the palette of rickshaw artist Hanif Pappu as he prepares to work on a painting at his shop in Dhaka.



This photograph shows bicycle rickshaw driver Mohammad Mojin posing for a portrait with his vehicle on a street in Dhaka.

Lifestyle



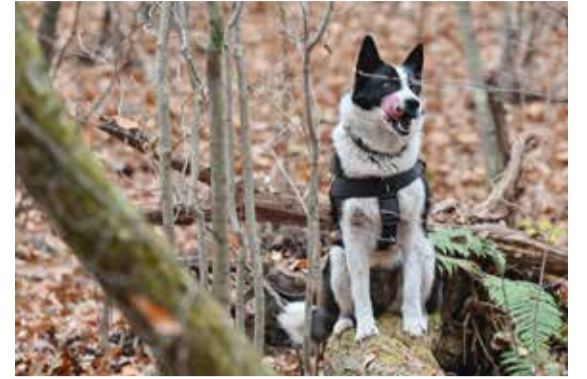
This handout photo shows a captured Asian black bear being inspected near the resort town of Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture.



This photo shows Junpei Tanaka walking with the Karelian bear dog "Rela" after they searched for the location of a bear who was fitted with a tracking device in an area near the resort town of Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture.



This photo shows Junpei Tanaka, a wildlife expert for the nonprofit organization Picchio Wildlife Research Center, displaying a collar which used to track a bear, at his office near the resort town of Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture.



This photo shows the Karelian bear dog "Rela", taking a rest after looking for bears in an area near the resort town of Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture.

DOGS, ANTENNAS AND HONEY FOR JAPAN'S BIG BEAR PROBLEM

Thousands of bears are being shot in Japan each year as they become more and more of a problem. Junpei Tanaka and his dog Rela, straining at her leash in the woods, have a kinder, smarter way. People moving from rural areas and Japan's ageing society—plus climate change affecting bears' food and hibernation time—are prompting ever more of the hungry animals to approach towns.

Reliable data is hard to find but bear numbers also appear to have rocketed, with one newspaper estimating they had roughly tripled in 11 years in some places. Sightings have almost doubled this year. The increasing frequency of these powerful animals—which in the case of brown bears can weigh half a ton (1,100 pounds) and outrun a human—coming into contact with people has created alarming headlines.

This year is on track to be the deadliest for humans since the government started collating data in 2006, with six people killed by bears, including one elderly woman in her garden in October. The severed head of a fisherman was found by a lake in May. A bear was reportedly spotted with his waders dangling from its mouth. Another 212 people, also a record, have been injured in attacks. One bear attacked six people in a single day in October, including an 83-year-old woman and a schoolgirl waiting for a bus in the northern town of Kitaakita.

Animal-lovers

It's been far worse for the bears. On average over the past five years, 4,895 have been killed each year, according to figures from the Environment Ministry. As of November 30, 6,287 have died in this fiscal year (to March), around 2,000 of them in November alone. Usually, they are shot. "This year, it's expected to go as high as 8,000," said Tanaka, 50, a bear expert who works for the Picchio Wildlife Research Center.

This is prompting unease in a country—

three-quarters of it mountainous—that thinks of itself as living in harmony with nature. "For a long time, Japanese people co-existed with wild animals... They believed in the presence of gods in every kind of living thing and avoided unnecessary killing," Tanaka said.

"But now, it has become difficult to segregate the wild and human areas due to the change in environment, change in social structures and change in people's lifestyles," he said.

Reliable

Tanaka says his project in Karuizawa, a town surrounded by woods in the shadow of a volcano 90 minutes from Tokyo by bullet train, is a "fore-runner" of what can be done without resorting to killing the bears. In the dead of night—when the bears are most active—Tanaka demonstrates the methods used by his organization, which he says keeps both humans and bears safe.

He and his team set barrel traps, with honey inside, to capture any bears that start to lose their fear of humans. They are fitted with a radio collar and released, far away. The town has also installed bear-proof rubbish collection points—the slot for the door handle is too small for a paw—and appealed to locals to be more aware.

But the key component in the non-lethal efforts is Tanaka's amber-eyed, keen-nosed canine Rela and the rest of the team of specially trained Karelian Bear Dogs, a sturdy and fearless breed originally from Finland. "They are very reliable staff of the team. They are our colleagues," Tanaka tells AFP.

Picchio acquired Rela's mother from the Wind River Bear Institute in the United States, whose bear biologist founder Carrie Hunt has pioneered the use of dogs in bear control. Heading out in his small van in the pre-dawn mist, Tanaka first waggles around a metre-long (three-foot) antenna to triangulate the location of any nearby bears fitted with a radio collar.



This photo shows Junpei Tanaka, a wildlife expert for the nonprofit organization Picchio Wildlife Research Center, and his Karelian bear dog "Rela" as they walk past a sign warning people about bears in the area, near the resort town of Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture. — AFP photos

"You got the bear scent? Okay, let's go!" Tanaka says in English—like all his commands—to the dog. He and Rela then head fearlessly out over the hill and once they find a bear—unseen by AFP staying safely at a distance—the dog emits a fierce bark and scares it away.

'Bear shepherding'

This "bear shepherding" method is unique in Japan, although other places are interested, said city official Masashi Tsuchiya. "Bears are dangerous animals, so it is true that we did receive some voices from local residents that bears should be killed," Tsuchiya told AFP. "But thanks to the Picchio program, we have learned that we can control and monitor bears' behavioral patterns by identifying each individual animal, attaching a radio collar and pushing them away from the town," he said.

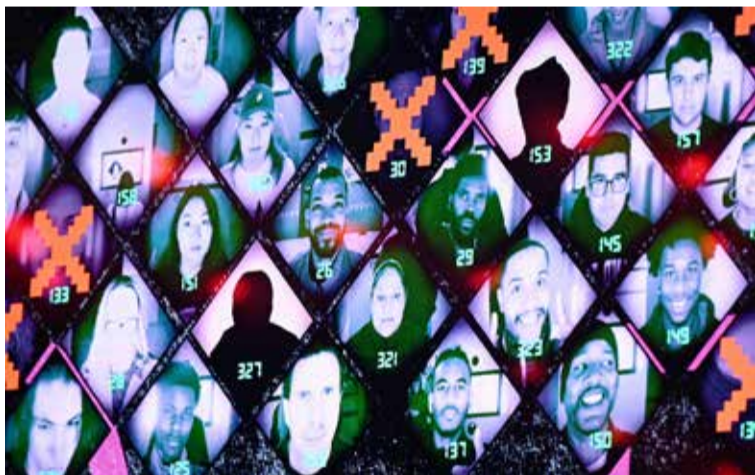
Japan has two types of bears. Around Karuizawa they are all Asian black bears—also known as moon bears—and the bigger brown bears live on the northern island of Hokkaido.

Moon bears always live in forests and don't like being seen but brown bears, which are



This photo shows Junpei Tanaka speaking to AFP about his work to rescue bears, at his office near the resort town of Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture.

bigger, come out in the open. And while brown bears "bluff" attacks, moon bears do not. "Most of the time they run away from humans. But once they get in trouble with a human and get into a panic, they attack," Tanaka said. "And they don't retreat." — AFP



Images of participants are seen on the display in "Squid Game: The Trials," an in-person interactive competition experience based on the Netflix show "Squid Games," in Los Angeles, California.--AFP photos



The entrance to "Squid Game: The Trials."



Visitors participate in "Squid Game: The Trials."

INTERACTIVE 'SQUID GAME' CHALLENGE TESTS FANS IN LA

Jabbar Lewis and Nic Ashe watched every episode of "Squid Game"—and were convinced they would be able to handle the deadly schoolyard contests. They never imagined they might actually get a chance to try. At "Squid Game: The Trials" in Los Angeles, fans of all ages can relive the most emotional moments of Netflix's South Korean hit show—but there is a lot less blood and no one wins any prize money. "It's so funny that even without the \$4.56 million cash prize, you really feel the stakes in the game. I found myself sweating and shaking and I would do it again," said Ashe, 27.

"It's like the show kind of came to life. It came out of my TV and I got to step into the world." In a series of rooms,

organizers of the immersive LA attraction have set up harmless versions of the brutal games depicted in the series, in which misfits and criminals took an all-or-nothing gamble: win the prize or die. Netflix says it hopes visitors will be transported into the universe of the show—and its reality competition spinoff—from the get-go.

Players are greeted by the Front Man, the overseer of the game, flanked by his minions in their distinctive fuchsia jumpsuits and black masks with symbols. Classic "Squid Game" challenges like the glass bridge and the dalgona candy game are recreated, as is the runaway favorite: "Red Light, Green Light," complete with the giant, menacing, motion-sensing doll.



Young-hee doll keychains and other merchandise are seen for sale in the "Night Market" at the start of "Squid Game: The Trials."

"It was real!" said Melanie Galano. Fellow visitor Andrew Lin chimed in: "It just felt like you're kind of in the show." Participants wear wristbands that buzz when they "die" in a challenge, but some joked that they hoped

for more reality. "I expected real dying," joked Choi Hyumbom. "I realized it's not the same as (the show), but I'm still having fun."

Lewis, who won his round, said for him, "'Squid Game' just represents

determination to win, the will to win. And it does require a lot of strategy." When asked how he plotted his win, Lewis replied: "Be low-key in the background and then come up like a shark and destroy everybody." — AFP



Visitors get instructions for the "Red Light, Green Light" game in "Squid Game: The Trials."



Visitors participate in "Squid Game: The Trials."



Participant Jabbar Lewis, 26, wins the final challenge during his visit to "Squid Game: The Trials."



A guard follows participants down a hallway in "Squid Game: The Trials."



Visitors participate in "Squid Game: The Trials."

Lifestyle



A person buys Christmas lottery tickets from a street vendor outside the popular lottery outlet 'Dona Manolita' in central Madrid. — AFP photos

A person buys Christmas lottery tickets from a street vendor outside the popular lottery outlet 'Dona Manolita'.

Spain braces for annual 'Fat One' Christmas lottery

Spain kicks off its festive period on Friday with the world's richest lottery, splashing prize money and festive cheer across the country. Large queues formed outside of kiosks ahead of the nationally televised draw for the Christmas lottery, which features children from the San Ildefonso school—a former home for orphans—singing out the winning numbers and matching prizes. "I have bought lottery tickets for the whole family, everyone knows I'm coming and they're taking advantage of it," said Jose Moreno, who queued for over two hours to buy tickets at Dona Manolita, a tiny shop in central Madrid considered by many to be the luckiest in Spain.

"I bought the same number, so if it is picked we will all win," the 52-year-old

building superintendent, who was visiting from Barcelona and sported a thick black coat and Real Madrid cap to guard against the cold, told AFP. Purchasing and sharing 20-euro tickets, called "decimos", is a major tradition among families, friends, co-workers and in bars, and in sports and social clubs. The popular state-run lottery will dish out a total of 2.59 billion euros (\$2.83 billion), much of it in hundreds of smaller prizes.

Prizes range from 20 euros—in other words you get your money back—to the 400,000 euro top prize, known as "El Gordo" or "The Fat One", which goes to thousands of holders of "decimos" bearing the same winning number. Other lotteries around the world have bigger individual top prizes but Spain's Christmas lottery, held each

year on December 22, has the most total prize money involved.

Glued to TV

The draw, which gets underway at Madrid's Teatro Real on Friday at 9 am (0800 GMT), lasts around four hours, bringing Spain to a virtual standstill with people glued to TV sets, radios and computers, waiting to see if they got lucky. "I buy two 'decimos' a year, one for my parents and one for me. We watch the draw at home on TV... and if we win something, we hug each other," said Karin Arizaca, a 25-year-old Peruvian who studies and works as a shop assistant in Madrid.

Wearing a pink winter coat, Arizaca also waited for over two hours to buy her tickets at Dona Manolita because it "usually has more luck". Scores of re-

sellers set up temporary stands where they sell tickets originally purchased at Dona Manolita at a small markup. "The queue is very long, so I decided to pay two euros more for each 'decimo'," said Daniel Gomez, a 70-year-old pensioner from the southern city of Granada after he bought tickets from one such vendor.

Celebrations

Throughout the day of the draw, television stations broadcast live images of winners across the country celebrating with cheers, hugs and sparkling wine. The lottery often produces heart-warming stories, such as in 2017 when 22 workers at a retirement home in a struggling town each had at least one "decimo" bearing the winning number for the top prize of 400,000 euros. —AFP

Belief and hope in the pub of one of Ireland's last faith healers

Joe Gallagher is one of Ireland's last traditional faith healers, whose pub is visited by believers from across the country hoping for a cure for aches and pains, warts and rashes. The 77-year-old former monk has even performed an exorcism. Gallagher, who also runs The Pull Inn in the tiny village of Pollagh in central Ireland, sees himself as part of "a dying breed". He is also a seventh son, which in Irish folklore traditionally meant someone likely to have supernatural or healing powers.

"Where do you have seven of a family now, nev-

er mind seven sons?" he said, with once common large families now a rarity in Ireland. "There's nobody can afford to have seven children, and then it's just by luck if you have seven sons," he told AFP.

Belief in faith healers, curing charms and folk medicine is still a way of life for many in Roman Catholic-majority Ireland, if a fading one. Every Sunday morning Gallagher's family offer cups of milky tea and biscuits to dozens of visitors who wait nervously in the bar.

"I'm praying for a miracle now, I'm 28 weeks' pregnant with my first child, but my baby's heart is in trouble," said Maryrose, 35, who said she travelled from distant Waterford. Her 62-year-old mother said it was her "first time visiting a seventh son". "I take medicine for high blood pressure, sometimes it works but more times it doesn't, so please God Joe might have a cure for me too," she said.

'The cure'

The bespectacled Gallagher joined a Franciscan monastery in the 1960s but left when he was 25 as he was unable to work as a missionary abroad. "Being a monk helped me with my faith," he said. "I have a strong belief in God and in prayer, there's nothing better than prayer," he said. In 1971 he bought the pub, whose walls are adorned with photos of regulars and Gaelic football and hurling teams, and the entrance is topped by lucky horseshoes.

A blurry black and white photo shows a row of



Traditional faith healer Joe Gallagher poses for a photograph at his pub, The Pull Inn, in Pollagh, central Ireland. — AFP photos

six brothers with a smiling Gallagher the youngest -- and last surviving -- in the line. Another brother, Oliver, died in infancy. "When I was born the parish priest called to see my mother and said to her, 'This lad must have the cure, sure, isn't he the seventh son?'" he said. To prove whether the infant Joe had "the cure", a worm was placed in his hand, and promptly died.

"From then on I've been doing the cures, long before I ever knew what I was doing, but as I grew up I realized I had this gift, and had to do it," he said. Gallagher doesn't charge for his services but visitors can donate to a children's hospital if they wish. Told never to refuse anybody, he was once asked to "do an exorcism" for a Polish man. "That was frightening, it's not something I'd be happy to do too often," he said. —AFP



Traditional faith healer Joe Gallagher holds a book as he poses for a photograph at his pub, The Pull Inn, in Pollagh, central Ireland.

PlayStation 5 sales cross 50 million units

Sales of Sony's PlayStation 5 have crossed 50 million units, the Japanese electronics giant said, pointing to "strong momentum" this year for its flagship gaming console. The PS5 was launched in November 2020, with the world in the grip of the COVID pandemic, and its sales initially suffered because of widespread supply chain problems and a global chip shortage.

Still, the PS5 reached the 50-million-unit milestone in almost the same period as its predecessor, the PS4, with Sony saying its flagship console enjoyed "strong momentum" in 2023. "We're thrilled that this is the first holiday season since launch that we have a full supply of PS5 consoles—so anyone who wants to get one can get one," Jim Ryan, president and CEO of Sony Interactive Entertainment, said in a statement Wednesday.

Since releasing the first PlayStation in 1994, Sony has grown into a titan of console gaming, a market whose revenues this year have been estimated at more than \$53 billion by industry consultancy Newzoo. The PS2 remains Sony's bestselling console with more than 155 million units sold, while the PS4 exceeded 117 million, according to the company.

"This is an eye-popping number, given the PS5 hasn't even been properly available at retail for half of its life cycle," Serkan Toto, CEO of Tokyo-based consultancy Kantan Games, said of the 50 million units sold. "In the end, Sony might actually be able to top the astonishing PS4 lifetime sales." The PS5 milestone caps a strong year in gaming for Sony. In October, "Marvel's Spider-Man 2", developed by Sony-owned Insomniac Games, became the fastest-selling PlayStation Studios game in the first 24 hours after release.

Sony said the PS5 also enjoyed a boost in 2023 from the success of games including "Baldur's Gate 3" and "Alan Wake 2". Since 2001, Microsoft's Xbox consoles have emerged as the PlayStation's main challengers. While the PS5 is outselling the latest Xbox consoles, according to estimates by industry analysts, Microsoft has made a strong push in recent years to boost its position in the market.

That has included mega acquisitions of developers including the \$69 billion takeover of Activision Blizzard, the maker of the blockbuster "Call of Duty" games. Sony had previously tried to block the Activision deal, but agreed with Microsoft in July to keep releasing "Call of Duty" on the PlayStation. —AFP



In this picture a Sony Playstation 5 video game console is displayed at the company's headquarters in Tokyo. —AFP



A snowboarder is practicing in Schladming, Austria.—AFP photos



A worker is pictured at the Atomic Austria GmbH factory in Altenmarkt im Pongau, Austria.



Skiers flock to the slopes in Schladming, Austria.

Ski prices rise but skiers keep coming, for now

In the heart of the Austrian Alps, workers at the world's leading ski maker churn out pair after pair for international clients who are undeterred by the sport's snowballing costs. Atomic—which raised prices by five percent compared to last year—made record sales of 277 million euros (\$303 million) in 2022 and is on course to surpass that figure this year. Austrian ski lift operators have also hiked prices this year, in line with other resorts throughout the Alps. But skiers keep coming, for now.

"Now they want to have the best products, they want to have the best skis, the best boots, everything best," Atomic CEO Wolfgang Mayrhofer told AFP in an interview. Atomic—a subsidiary of Finnish firm Amer Sports, which was bought by a Chinese consortium—employs some 1,000 people and produces 550,000 pairs of skis per year. It produces skis in a factory in the small town of Altenmarkt, near Salzburg, and another one in southern Bulgaria.

A pair of Atomic skis costs anywhere between several hundred to several thousand euros. The company has profited from an "outdoor sports boom" in recent years, as well as growth in the sale of helmets and other protective gear, Mayrhofer

said. Atomic's clientele includes people with second homes in the Alps who drive around in "huge SUVs", as well as tourists flying in from abroad and renting skis, he said.

Pricier passes

It's not just skis that have become more expensive. On the mountains around Altenmarkt, downhill skiers are paying up to 8.5 percent more for their lift passes this season, said Christoph Eisinger, managing director of Ski Amade, as resorts pass on high energy and other costs. A record 58,000 season passes have already been sold for the area, up from 54,000 last year. A season pass costs 770 euros per adult in pre-sales. On the slopes, skiers told AFP they were feeling the pinch but wanted to keep enjoying their hobby. "I would rather save elsewhere because skiing is really our sport," German holiday-maker Andrea Mentges, 42, said as she put on her skis outside the cable car station on the 1,906-metre (6,253-foot) Planai mountain.

'Last chance tourism'

Costs are expected to rise further as climate

change means greater reliance on expensive man-made snow while low-lying ski areas get squeezed out, said Oliver Fritz, senior economist at the Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO). Fritz said "last chance tourism" may be fuelling demand. "Maybe not consciously, but unconsciously, people are already aware that skiing is extremely endangered by climate change and that they should take advantage of the opportunity now," he told AFP.

A study conducted by market researcher Manova, which interviewed some 3,000 respondents online in Austria, Germany and Switzerland in September, found that financial reasons and a lack of snow were the top two reasons people skied less or not at all last year. Half of the world's ski resorts are in Europe, where they generate about \$30 billion per year in revenue and play a key role in sustaining local economies.

At current rates of greenhouse gas emissions, 90 percent of Europe's ski resorts will eventually face critical shortages of natural snow, researchers reported in the journal Nature Climate Change in August. One of Europe's largest ski areas, Ski Amade's 25 resorts in western Austria can cover 90 percent of slopes with artificial snow as long as temperatures are near freezing levels, helping it survive ever warmer winters due to climate change. "We are constantly improving our snowmaking systems," Eisinger told AFP, adding he was "very confident to be able to ensure very good ski operations" in the next 20 to 30 years. —AFP



A worker uses a snowblower at Planai mountain in Schladming, Austria.



Skiers flock to the slopes in Schladming, Austria.

Sports

Surfing tower will be built, says Paris 2024 Games chief

Paris to be the most expensive Games both for int'l federations, fans: Coe

PARIS: The controversial building of a tower to judge the surfing event at the Paris Olympics will go ahead despite the sport's federation saying it is not required, chief organiser Tony Estanguet said on Wednesday. A proposal made by the International Surf Association (ISA) 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 of Tahiti.

However, Estanguet—president of the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympics Organising Committee (Cojo) -- dismissed their offer as had Polynesian leader Moetai Brotherson. "We respect the almost unanimous decision taken locally to continue with the launch of the construction work," he said at his end-of-year press conference at Cojo headquarters.

Estanguet, 45, explained the option offered by the ISA had been studied and found wanting. "It was judged to be not feasible on several fronts," said the three-time canoeing Olympic champion. "On the technical front in terms of filming the images but also surrounding security it poses a lot of questions."

Etienne Thobois, director general of Paris 2024, said it was a matter of urgency to get the work underway. Brotherson has programmed that the work should be finished on the new aluminium tower by May 13, in time for a World Surf League (WSL) event seen as a dress rehearsal for the Olympics. "Five months before the test events, eight months out from the

Games themselves it is imperative we take a step forward," he said.

'Most expensive Games'

Questions over the tower have been posed since a construction barge used to install a new judges' tower in the sea broke through part of a colourful coral reef during technical testing in December. Work was subsequently suspended by the Polynesian government with French Sports Minister Amelie Oudea-Castera claiming the test had been "badly prepared".

The issue has had environmentalists up in arms and an online petition against the project has attracted more than 228,000 signatures. Estanguet also took issue with World Athletics president and chief organiser of the 2012 London Games Sebastian Coe's claim on Monday the tickets for the Games—which run from July 26 to August 11 -- are expensive.

Coe's concerns echoed that of many, not just the general public but also those involved in the sporting world, who have criticised the pricing. "We have to accept for all sorts of reasons that Paris will be the most expensive Games both for the international federations but also for the fans," said Coe.

Estanguet, though, hit back claiming they were within the same price range as London and Tokyo in 2021, though, barely any spectators were able to watch events due to COVID-19 restrictions. "Whether it was London or Tokyo more recently, tickets were £20 (\$25), which taking into consideration inflation is 27 euros (\$30), and the highest price they were £725 so a bit more than 1000 euros in today's prices," said Estanguet.



PARIS: French President of the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympics Organising Committee (Cojo) Tony Estanguet (R) speaks next to the Committee's Director General Etienne Thobois during a press conference on the 2023 review and 2024 outlook at the headquarters of the Paris 2024 Olympics. — AFP

More than 7.6 million tickets have already gone on sale for the Paris Games. The cheapest are 24 euros, but others, notably for athletics can cost as

much as 990 euros. The largest amount still available are for the football, which takes place in stadiums throughout France. — AFP

US Soccer blocks MLS from entering reserve teams

MIAMI: Major League Soccer's controversial plan to have their reserve team clubs enter the US Open Cup instead of the first teams has been blocked by the US Soccer Federation, the two bodies said on Wednesday.

MLS announced on Friday that their teams would not compete in the 2024 US Open Cup, the league instead sending second-tier development clubs, from the MLS Next Pro league, to the nation's oldest football tournament.

The knockout competition, which dates to 1914, is open to all US clubs and MLS's move was heavily criticised by many fan groups and lower division clubs. It remains unclear whether MLS clubs will now take part at all in the 2024 edition although a source with knowledge of discussions said the expectation was that they likely would.

MLS Next Pro is mainly made up of MLS reserve teams with some independent clubs also involved. MLS said in a statement on Wednesday that the US Soccer Federation had blocked the move but made no mention of whether first teams would take part.

"US Soccer has...notified MLS that the Federation is not prepared to grant the necessary waiver for MLS NEXT Pro clubs owned by MLS owners to participate in the Open Cup. Independently owned MLS NEXT Pro clubs such as Chattanooga FC and Carolina Core remain eligible for the 2024 Open Cup."

"MLS is committed to finding a viable solution for the 2024 tournament and is working to find a pathway that addresses its goals and concerns," said the league. US Soccer confirmed the decision in their own statement.

"After thoughtful consideration, we have informed MLS that the US Soccer staff recommendation, which was adopted by the Pro League Taskforce, is



FORT LAUDERDALE: (FILES) Hector Herrera #16 of the Houston Dynamo raises the Lamar Hunt Cup after winning the 2023 US Open Cup Final against the Inter Miami. Major League Soccer's plan to have their reserve team clubs enter the US Open Cup instead of the first teams has been blocked by the US Soccer Federation, the league and federation said. — AFP

that the request be denied." "As we move forward, we will continue our review of the Open Cup to ensure it aligns with the US Soccer strategic pillars. We remain committed to addressing the needs and concerns of all of our members, including MLS, and other stakeholders to enhance and improve the US Open Cup," they said.

MLS had said that withdrawing its teams from the Cup, which tends to draw small crowds until the latter stages, would have freed up six mid-week match dates. The league had also suggested that allowing clubs to field their development teams would have increased opportunities for young players.

MLS Next Pro, which now has 27 teams, was launched in 2022 mainly for reserve and development players with MLS clubs. However, next season some non-MLS clubs—Carolina Core and Chattanooga FC—will join the league with a club in Jacksonville earmarked to start in 2025 and Cleveland joining in 2026.

The source said MLS clubs are now likely to look into how they might be able to field players they have with MLS Next Pro teams for their parent clubs in the Cup. The only non-MLS club to win the Cup since the league launched was the Rochester Rhinos in 1999. — AFP

ECB hires hockey's Ed Barney as performance chief

LONDON: The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said on Wednesday it had appointed Ed Barney as its new performance director following his work in a similar role in field hockey. Barney will replace Mo Bobat, who has left the ECB to become director of cricket with Royal Challengers Bangalore in the Indian Premier League, in March.

The 41-year-old previously worked in talent identification at the ECB from 2010-13 and he has spent the last seven years with England and Great Britain Hockey. ECB director of men's cricket Rob Key, who worked with Bobat on scouting and selection, said: "The men's performance director is a vital role as we look to continually increase the depth of talent and prepare players for the rigours of international cricket."

"What is clear with Ed is that he has been able to do that at England and Great Britain Hockey, building world-class programmes that has left them in a better place than when he started, while his experience with the ECB makes him ready-made to build on the significant work we have already been doing," the former England batsman explained.

Barney added: "The opportunity to return to the ECB and take on the role of performance director was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. "It's been a real honour to lead the performance team at England and Great Britain Hockey. It has been very special to see many of the junior teams break through, whilst the senior programmes have excelled on the world stage with European, Commonwealth Games and Olympic medals." — AFP

Second round of Equestrian league starts today

KUWAIT: The second round of the third edition of Kuwait Show Jumping League starts today (Friday) at Kuwait Riding Center with riders from local clubs "under the sponsorship of Zain". Today's competitions will be at the heights of 70, 90, 105, 115, 125 and 135 cm. The round will continue tomorrow with four heats at the heights of 110, 120, 130 and 140 cm.

Head of Kuwait Equestrian Federation Masoud Hayat said "we will continue organizing the league championship for the third season due to the government support through Public Authority for Sport and its Director Yousuf Al-Baidan and Kuwait Olympic Committee and its President Sheikh Fahad Al-Nasser, and appreciate the support of Zain and KGL, and asked fans to attend equestrian activities in support of the riders."

Hayat said the league championships is made of 8 rounds and will conclude in May 4th 2024, that in addition to organizing international championships of the two and three stars championships.



Masoud Hayat



Arab Tennis Masters tournament begins on Sunday in Qatar

KUWAIT: The third Arab Tennis Masters tournament will start in Doha, Qatar Sunday with (16) players from (8) Arab countries. The organizing committee will hold a press conference on Friday to give details about the event followed by the draw.

The Arab Tennis Federation said matches will be held at Khalifa International Tennis Complex, adding that participating players are those with ATP ranking. The Federation thanked Chairman and members of the Qatar Federation's board members for hosting the tournament in Doha.

Players started arriving in Doha on Thursday, as Lebanon's Hani Habib said he is ready for the tournament, and looks forward for a new achievement after winning the first edition in 2021. He thanked the Arab Tennis Federation for organizing the tournament for the third consecutive year.



NEW DELHI: (FILES) Indian wrestler Vinesh Phogat is detained by the police while attempting to march to India's new parliament. — AFP

Scandal-hit India wrestling chief replaced by ally

NEW DELHI: A close aide of India's scandal-hit former wrestling federation chief was on Thursday elected as the new president, beating a Commonwealth Games gold medal-winning woman candidate.

Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, also a lawmaker from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party, was charged this year with sexually harassing and stalking women wrestlers under his charge. Many of India's top wrestlers had led a noisy sit-in protest campaign demanding his ouster after the allegations came to light in January.

Singh and his family were prohibited from contesting the election, held months behind schedule, to determine his successor as Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president. The vote was won by his ally Sanjay Singh, a mainstay of the WFI who had held senior federation positions under the former president.

"It's a very big victory of truth over lies," Sanjay told

reporters after winning 40 out of the 47 votes cast by the federation's member institutions. He promised to ensure there is "no injustice against any woman wrestler" under his leadership.

The new president defeated Anita Sheoran, who won a gold medal at the 2010 Commonwealth Games and supported the campaign by athletes against his predecessor. Wrestling is hugely popular in rural northern India, and star athletes saw a wellspring of public support when they were detained in May while attempting to march on parliament to demand the arrest of the WFI's then-chief.

"The future of wrestling is now dark," world champion wrestler Vinesh Phogat, one of the leaders of the protest campaign against the former president, said after the election. "I am disappointed that we failed in our fight to clean the system," she added. The accused 66-year-old Singh has denied all charges and claimed he is the victim of a conspiracy to force him out of parliament.

A criminal case against him is ongoing and could see him sentenced to five years in prison if found guilty. Sheoran, the losing candidate in Thursday's election, is a witness in the case. The ballot opens the way to ending the federation's suspension by United World Wrestling, the international governing body. The WFI was suspended in August over its failure to hold the long-delayed elections to replace Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh in time. — AFP

Sports

Fluminense's 'anti-Guardiola' approach faces acid test in Club World Cup final

He brings out the best in each player: Marcelo

JEDDAH: Fluminense coach Fernando Diniz's free-flowing style that he has labelled the antithesis to Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola's football faces the ultimate test when the two men face off in Friday's Club World Cup final.

Diniz, 49, has shot to fame in his homeland, even combining his role with the South American champions as interim Brazil coach, on the back of an innovative set-up that seeks to bring the skills honed as kids in street football into the professional arena.

"The way Pep likes having possession is the opposite of mine. His style is positional, mine is anti-positional," Diniz once said when asked about comparisons between him and Guardiola. The idea is to group players together in small pockets, trying to create overloads in tight spaces.

When it works it has reminded Brazilians of the "Jogo bonito" times of a glorious past for the five-time world champions. After a nomadic coaching career that has included 13 different clubs, Diniz's methods have struck gold at Fluminense, who he led to their first ever Copa Libertadores triumph last month.

However, his idea comes with the risk of leaving plenty of open space for opponents to exploit, particularly for his ageing side. Al Ahly could easily have halted the Brazilians' dreams of winning a first Club World Cup at the semi-final stage on Monday.

Two late goals eventually saw Fluminense through 2-0 in Jeddah, but only thanks to the heroics of 43-year-old goalkeeper Fabio after the Egyptians had 18 efforts on goal. Felipe Melo, who became the

oldest outfield player in the competition's history at 40, and former Real Madrid captain Marcelo, 35, also had big parts to play in the semi-final victory. But even a City side missing the prolific Erling Haaland, due to injury, will not be so forgiving, if given the same amount of space and chances in the final.

Marcelo feels 'desire' again

Diniz has already found the step up to international level tough. Handed the reins on a temporary basis, as they hold out in hope of luring Madrid boss Carlo Ancelotti, he has lost three of Brazil's first six World Cup qualifiers - including a first ever qualifying defeat on home soil to Argentina last month.

The lack of time needed for players to adjust to his demands at international level has been offered as an excuse. However, Diniz, who has a degree in psychology, has complete buy-in from those under his command at Fluminense.

"He brings out the best in each player," said Marcelo, who won five Champions Leagues among 20 major honours at Madrid. "I've never played as freely as here. After I left Real Madrid, I thought I had already had a great career, but Diniz made me feel that desire again."

Diniz, though, is realistic over the scale of the task facing Fluminense against City. European teams are unbeaten in 21 Club World Cup matches, stretching back to 2012. Guardiola also stands to make history as the first coach to win the competition with three different clubs, having lifted the Club World Cup three times already during his



JEDDAH: (FILES) Manchester City's Spanish coach Josep Guardiola (L) greets Urawa Reds' Polish manager Maciej Skorza after 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

spells at Barcelona and Bayern Munich. "The fact that South American teams have not won since 2012 is mainly due to the economic power of the European clubs," said Diniz. "They take the play-

ers that shine in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay at an even younger age... and the best coaches too. "When this happens over the course of a long time, it ends up creating an imbalance." — AFP

Mbappe scores birthday brace as PSG end year on top of Ligue 1

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe marked his 25th birthday with a brace as Paris Saint-Germain beat Metz 3-1 in Ligue 1 on Wednesday to reach the halfway stage of the season five points clear at the top of the table. PSG, who had been held 1-1 at Lille at the weekend, laboured in the first half before Vitinha opened the scoring early in the second half by turning in a cross from Lee Kang-in.

Mbappe then took centre stage by making it 2-0 with a superb strike in off the underside of the crossbar from the edge of the area. Matthieu Udol pulled one back for the struggling visitors but Mbappe pounced on a short backpass to round the goalkeeper and make it 3-1 towards the end for his 18th league goal of the campaign.

His birthday was made even more memorable when his 16-year-old brother Ethan came on for his senior debut in stoppage time. PSG end the year with a comfortable five-point cushion over nearest challengers Nice, who defeated Lens 2-0 on Wednesday thanks to two late goals from Nigerian striker Terem Moffi.

Monaco are seven points behind the leaders in third place after coming from behind to win 2-1 at Toulouse, with Wissam Ben Yedder scoring both of their goals. The principality side held on to take all three points despite having Aleksandr Golovin sent off early in the second half.

Malian international Kamory Doumbia produced the individual performance of the evening by scoring four goals, all in the first half, as Brest beat Britany rivals Lorient 4-0. That result lifted Brest up into fourth, a Champions League qualifying berth, above a Lille side who were beaten 2-1 away at Patrick Vieira's Strasbourg.

NBA MVP Embiid hits 51 to power 76ers over Timberwolves

WASHINGTON: Joel Embiid scored a season-high 51 points and grabbed 12 rebounds Wednesday to accomplish feats unseen for more than a half-century as the Philadelphia 76ers beat NBA-best Minnesota 127-113. The reigning NBA Most Valuable Player struck the Sixers (19-8) to their seventh victory in eight games and snapped the four-game win streak of the Western Conference-leading Timberwolves, who slipped to 20-6.

Embiid became the first NBA player with 12 consecutive games of 30 or more points and 10 or more rebounds since Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in 1972. He also became the first 76er since Wilt Chamberlain in 1967 with three consecutive games of 40 or more



PARIS: Metz's Moroccan defender #22 Sofiane Alakouch fights for the ball with Paris Saint-Germain's French forward #07 Kylian Mbappe during the French L1 football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and FC Metz at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. — AFP

Fireworks

Marseille are sixth after coming from behind to draw 1-1 at Montpellier, with Jordan Veretout scoring their goal in a game that was held up for five minutes in the second half after fireworks were set off at one end of the stadium. Montpellier had a point deducted following an incident in their home match against Clermont earlier this season, when the away side's goalkeeper was hit by a firecracker thrown from the same stand.

"These guys are idiots, it's incredible," complained Montpellier coach Michel Der Zakarian on Wednes-

days. "I don't understand it. You are supposed to come to the stadium to support your team, not to set off fireworks." Japanese international Keito Nakamura got the only goal as Will Still's Reims defeated Le Havre 1-0, while Rennes struck twice late on to claim a 3-1 victory at bottom club Clermont. Meanwhile, Lyon climbed out of the bottom three as they beat Nantes 1-0 thanks to an Alexandre Lacazette goal.

It was a third consecutive victory for a team who had previously won just once all season, and the result lifted them two points above Toulouse, who now occupy the relegation play-off position. — AFP

two steals and a blocked shot in humbling the NBA's top defensive team and its big men, Rudy Gobert and Karl-Anthony Towns.

Maxe added 35 points for the 76ers, forming a deadly duo with Embiid and taking up the scoring slack when the MVP was resting. "All-Star starter," Embiid said of Maxey. "He has been doing that all season. Just give him the ball and he has been carrying us every single fourth quarter. You see what happens when he's impressive."

"He believes in me," Maxey said. "I go out there and try to put in the work and help him as much as I possibly can." Anthony Edwards led Minnesota with 27 points while Towns had 23 points and 13 rebounds. The Boston Celtics took over the NBA's best record, improving to 21-6 with a 144-119 victory at Sacramento to snap the Kings' four-game win streak. The Celtics, without top scorer and rebounder Jayson Tatum due to a left ankle sprain, were led by 28 points each by Jaylen Brown and Derrick White while De'Aaron Fox led Sacramento with 29. — AFP

Leverkusen beat Bochum as Kane scores in Bayern win

WOLFSBURG: Patrik Schick scored a first-half hat-trick as Bayer Leverkusen thumped Bochum 4-0 at home to stay four points clear of Bayern Munich, who won 2-1 at Wolfsburg on Wednesday. Harry Kane's 21st league goal was the difference in Bayern's victory but Leverkusen continued their stellar record to claim the three points and keep the German champions at bay.

With January's Africa Cup of Nations in mind, Leverkusen manager Xabi Alonso rested several first teamers, including Nigeria striker Victor Boniface. Schick, handed his first league start in 14 months, repaid his manager's faith, winning and converting a penalty after half an hour.

The Czech forward doubled up two minutes later, slamming in a Jeremie Frimpong cross to make it 2-0. He scored again, this time heading in a corner, just before the break. Alonso took Schick off to a standing ovation midway through the second-half for Boniface, who scored two minutes after coming on.

"We're happy about that, but it's even more important that we keep doing it into the new year" Leverkusen sporting director Simon Rolfes told Sky. An undermanned Bayern were made to work to keep pace with Leverkusen, Kane and Jamal Musiala scoring first-half goals to victory at Wolfsburg.

"We were in the red zone" coach Thomas Tuchel said. "Compliments to the players. That was a real tour de force in the second-half." Playing a second straight time without the flu-hit midfield duo of Leon Goretzka and Joshua Kimmich, Bayern rushed out to a 2-0 lead but were pegged back before half-time by a Max Arnold stunner.

The German champions dug in throughout the second-half against a dogged Wolfsburg side coached by former Bayern mentor Niko Kovac, but held on to claim a valuable three points in what is emerging as a true two-horse title race.

"They're a great team, they've got a great coach" Kane said of Leverkusen after the game, but told reporters "we can't control their game, all we can do is keep pushing them." "We're not even half-way through the season yet, so we can't focus on them too much."

Elsewhere, Stuttgart rebounded from Sunday's 3-0 loss at Bayern, beating Augsburg at home by the same scoreline to leapfrog RB Leipzig into third spot. Stuttgart's star striker Serhou Guirassy scored again, his 17th of the campaign, while Denis Undav and Chris Fuehrich also got on the score-sheet for the home side.

Promoted Heidenheim continued their impressive debut Bundesliga season, coming from behind twice to win 3-2 at home with Freiburg. Eintracht Frankfurt scored two goals in injury time to come from behind and win 2-1 at home against Borussia Moenchengladbach. — AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804

Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadisiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300

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

I, MOHAMMAD, holder of passport no. T8766760 do hereby change my name to RAJENDRA REDDY (as given name) MARRIPATI (as surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name MARRIPATI RAJENDRA REDDY and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (#4575) 22-12-2023

UEFA court defeat revives battle with breakaway Super League

'We have won the right to compete, UEFA monopoly is over and football is free'

LAUSANNE: The promoters of a Super League announced plans for a new breakaway competition on Thursday after the EU's top court ruled that UEFA had used illegal tactics to stifle a previous project. The European Court of Justice ruling did not constitute an endorsement of the Super League idea, which still faces furious opposition from many football fans and from Europe's existing national leagues.

But it marks a serious legal setback for UEFA and for soccer's world governing body FIFA, finding that their tactic of threatening to ban future Super League clubs and players from taking part in their competitions broke EU law. And it was seized upon by the promoters of the Super League project, A22 Sports Management, to promote their vision of a new 64-team tournament that would feature promotion and relegation and would be broadcast live for free "on a new streaming platform".

"The FIFA and UEFA rules making any new inter-club football project subject to their prior approval, such as the Super League, and prohibiting clubs and players from playing in those competitions, are unlawful," the ECJ ruled.

Because UEFA operates as a monopoly in setting the rules, while also organising tournaments of its own such as the Champions League, its criteria for authorising rival competitions should be "transparent, objective, non discriminatory and proportionate". "However, the powers of FIFA and UEFA are not subject to any such criteria. FIFA and UEFA are, therefore, abusing a dominant position," the court ruled.

The planned Super League project has been moth-balled since it collapsed in early 2021 amid fan fury at the threat it posed to national league competitions, but after the ruling the promoters claimed victory and

promised rapid announcements.

"We have won the right to compete. The UEFA monopoly is over. Football is free," the firm's CEO Bernd Reichart declared in a social media post from the A22 account. "Clubs are now free from the threat of sanction and free to determine their own futures."

But UEFA chose to emphasise a different part of the ECJ judgment, stressing that the ruling "does not signify an endorsement or validation of" the breakaway competition. UEFA went on: "It rather underscores a pre-existing shortfall within UEFA's pre-authorisation framework, a technical aspect that has already been acknowledged and addressed in June 2022. "UEFA is confident in the robustness of its new rules, and specifically that they comply with all relevant European laws and regulations."

Fans will 'fight it'

Many football fans fear that a closed, US-style league with no promotion or relegation of clubs will destroy the hopes of glory for smaller teams and the prestige of beloved national competitions. Football Supporters Europe (FSE), an umbrella lobby group also spoke out, saying "since 2021, FSE and fans across Europe have stood firm against a breakaway



super league time and time again, and repeatedly called for the greater protection of our game.

"Whatever comes next, the super league remains an ill-conceived project that endangers the future of European football. FSE, our members, and fans across Europe will continue to fight it." The case goes back to April 2021, when 12 of Europe's biggest clubs announced they had signed up to the planned Super League, a direct competitor to UEFA's flagship competition the Champions League, which features the most successful clubs from Europe's various national leagues.

The upstart league quickly fell apart in the face of a strong backlash from supporters and both

UEFA and the world body FIFA threatened to take disciplinary action against the clubs involved. English fans in particular remained loyal to their traditional domestic league model and nine of the 12 rebel clubs—including six from the English Premier League—threw in the towel within 48 hours.

Two years on, only Spanish giants Real Madrid and Barcelona have stood by the dormant project, with Italian giant Juventus withdrawing in July. Real Madrid's chairman Florentino Perez hailed Thursday's court decision, declaring that: "European club football will no longer be a monopoly." But the club's current parent league, La Liga, denounced the Super League idea as "a selfish and elitist model." — AFP



LIVERPOOL: West Ham United's Greek defender #15 Konstantinos Mavropanos heads the ball during the English League Cup quarter-final football match between Liverpool and West Ham United at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England. — AFP

Liverpool dominate West Ham to reach League Cup semis

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool destroyed West Ham 5-1 on Wednesday to set up a League Cup semi-final against Fulham, easing the frustration of their week-end Premier League stalemate against Manchester United. Curtis Jones scored twice and Dominik Szoboszlai, Cody Gakpo and Mohamed Salah were also on the scoresheet for Jurgen Klopp's dominant team, who were trophyless last season.

No team have won more League Cups than Liverpool, who lifted the trophy for the ninth time in the 2021/22 season. The Reds had 34 shots against United in Sunday's Premier League match without finding the net, failing to win at home for the first time this season to their intense frustration.

Manager Jurgen Klopp said he was delighted with his team's "joyful football" as they once again clicked in front of goal against West Ham. "We were brave in our positioning, our second ball game was exceptional," he said. "It was a really, really good performance from start to finish."

"It is really tough for all of us, there's a lot of games and the boys played a lot of football already." The much-changed home side, with Salah and Trent Alexander-Arnold on the bench and Alisson Becker rested completely, launched wave after wave of attacks, with West Ham struggling to lay a glove on their opponents.

Harvey Elliott blasted over the bar in the 14th minute and Szoboszlai fired wide but the Hungarian midfielder gave Liverpool the lead they deserved shortly before the half-hour mark. It came after Said Benrahma lost the ball carelessly in midfield, squandering a chance for a rare West Ham break.

Dominant Liverpool

Jarell Quansah fed Szoboszlai on the right of the Liverpool attack and he let fly with powerful shot from outside the area that flew into the far corner, giving goalkeeper Alphonse Areola no chance. The game continued in the same pattern, with West Ham forced to feed off scraps—a familiar feeling for a team who have won just once at Anfield since 1963.

The home side could have doubled their lead in the final moments of the opening period but Gakpo headed narrowly wide following a fine cross from Elliott. Liverpool had 11 shots in the first 45 minutes to West Ham's zero. The London side also had a clutch of star names on the substitutes' bench, with the impressive Lucas Paqueta and James Ward-Prowse omitted from the starting line-up.

The second half unfolded in a similar way to the first, with Liverpool probing and David Moyes' men looking toothless. Darwin Nunez, who started the game without a goal in his past 10 games for Liverpool, got a shot away after wriggling clear in the box but Areola was equal to the task.

However, Jones gave Liverpool a buffer in the 56th minute, firing the ball through Areola's legs at the near post. Moyes threw on Paqueta but Klopp countered by bringing on Salah, Alexander-Arnold and Ibrahima Konate.

Liverpool made it 3-0 when Gakpo fired low inside Areola's right-hand post from the edge of the area following Konate's charge forward. Jarrod Bowen pulled one back, cutting inside Quansah and producing a fine curling finish around Caoimhin Kelleher but worse was to come for the hapless visitors.

Salah netted a breakaway goal from Alexander-Arnold's pass and Jones capped a fine night with his second after dancing through the Hammers defence. Liverpool, who host Premier League leaders Arsenal on Saturday with a chance to leapfrog the London side, will face Fulham in the first leg of the two-legged League Cup semi-final in the week beginning January 8. Middlesbrough will take on Chelsea in the other last-four tie. — AFP

Sergi Roberto fires struggling Barca to victory over Almeria

BARCELONA: Barcelona ground out an unconvincing 3-2 home win against basement club Almeria on Wednesday thanks to a late Sergi Roberto goal, moving them up to third in La Liga. Xavi Hernandez's side ended 2023 with a win thanks to Sergi Roberto's double and a first-half goal from Raphinha.

Twice the 20th-placed visitors pegged back the Catalan giants courtesy of goals from Leo Baptistao and Edgar Gonzalez but it was eventually the home team who held out to claim the spoils. The opening 45 minutes threw up several good chances for both sides as Barcelona set about methodically trying to break down the visitors.

It was nearly an early set-piece that did the trick for the Catalans when captain Sergi Roberto was left all alone in the centre of the box but 'keeper Luis Maximiano did exceptionally well to keep out his headed effort.

The hosts then got a warning shot at the other end after Ronald Araujo missed a cross and Joao Cancelo desperately had to intervene to block Largie Ramazani's effort in the 13th minute. Raphinha opened the scoring on 33 minutes when weak Almeria defending, again from a corner, allowed Araujo to get a header goalwards, Maximiano made another fine stop but was unable to do anything about Raphinha's lashed rebound.

Now in the lead, Xavi's charges took their foot off the pedal, yet they almost got a second when Robert Lewandowski was gifted the ball in the box by a defender and only another excellent Maximiano save denied him. This drop in intensity did then prove to be their undoing as just eight minutes later,

Leo Baptistao shocked them with an equaliser.

A defensive error by Araujo let Sergio Arribas slip the Brazilian striker through and his dinked finish over Inaki Pena quickly resulted in the assistant's flag being raised. Initially off-side earlier in the move, VAR replays showed he had got back inside by the time Arribas played him the ball. Xavi rang the changes at half-time and sent on Ferran Torres and Jules Kounde in place of Joao Felix and Andreas Christensen.

Torres had an instant impact, working the Portuguese stopper with a firm strike three minutes after half-time. Despite this injection of pace, the home side still looked sluggish.

Poor set-piece defending gave Barca the chance they needed to get back in front on the hour mark, Sergi Roberto meeting a corner at the near post and lofting a header over the goalkeeper's dive into the far corner.

The second goal appeared to have knocked the stuffing out of the 20th-placed side but a gift from Pena got them back in it, when he dropped a lofted free-kick at Edgar's feet and the defender gleefully rolled the ball into the unguarded net.

Barca had a golden chance to win the game with just over 10 minutes remaining, but first Lewandowski then Ilkay Gundogan were unable to make sufficient contact with their headers when the goal was gaping before them.

But it was Sergi Roberto, in just his fifth appearance of the season, that provided the winning goal for the Spanish champions when he burst onto Lewandowski's lofted pass in the 83rd minute and slotted past Maximiano.

Five minutes later, Pena atoned for his earlier error by making a great reflex save from an Idris Baba header as his side stumbled over the line in a topsy-turvy encounter. Later, Athletic Bilbao went level on points with fourth-place Atletico Madrid after beating Las Palmas 1-0 and near the foot of the table, Rafael Benitez's Celta Vigo lost 3-2 at Villarreal. — AFP



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Spanish midfielder #20 Sergi Roberto celebrates after scoring his team's third goal during the Spanish league football match between FC Barcelona and UD Almeria at the Estadi Olimpic Lluis Companys stadium in Barcelona. — AFP