



Amir meets speaker, PM, top judge

MPs want special debate on Amir's remarks • Panel doubles cost-of-living allowance



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives (from left) National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah and Head of the Supreme Judicial Council and Court of Cassation Justice Dr Adel Bouresli at Seif Palace on Dec 24, 2023. — KUNA photos

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Sunday separately received National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah and Head of the Supreme Judicial Council and Court of Cassation Justice Dr Adel Bouresli at Seif Palace.

HH Sheikh Ahmad resigned last week and HH the Amir accepted the resignation, asking the Cabinet to continue as a caretaker government. The Amir is expected to start constitutional consultations soon

to name a prime minister to form the new Cabinet. He could reappoint HH Sheikh Ahmad or name a new figure. In his consultations, HH the Amir will receive current and former speakers and prime ministers.

A number of lawmakers on Sunday submitted a motion calling on the National Assembly to hold a special session to debate critical remarks made by HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal after taking the oath in the Assembly. After swearing in to assume his constitutional powers as the new Amir, HH Sheikh Mishal strongly criticized MPs and the government for unanimously taking decisions harmful to national interests.

Only a few lawmakers signed the motion, but others are expected to sign. Over the weekend, about 32 MPs out of the 50-seat Assembly issued a statement in which they congratulated HH the Amir on his appointment, adding all decisions the Assembly had taken were for the service of the country and the people.

Meanwhile, the Assembly's financial and economic affairs committee voted to approve proposals calling to raise the cost-of-living allowance by KD 130 to reach KD 250 per month for all Kuwaiti employees in the public and private sectors, and also for retirees. The committee also agreed to

raise interest-free loans for retired citizens from seven times their pension to 15 times. Repayment has also been made easier.

Five lawmakers submitted a proposal calling to set up a special authority for artificial intelligence. MP Abdullah Fahhad on Sunday submitted a proposal calling to provide thousands of stateless people, known as bedoons, civil rights until their problem is resolved. Under the proposal, bedoons will be given permanent residency, free medical care, education and other services. They will also get birth, death and marriage certificates, in addition to driving licenses.

War rages in Gaza on Christmas Eve

GAZA: The Zionist entity on Sunday pressed on with its war on Hamas in Gaza on Christmas Eve, shifting focus to the besieged territory's south as the death toll spirals. US President Joe Biden stressed the "critical need" to protect civilians, in a call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who vowed the Zionist entity would "continue the war until all of its goals have been achieved", according to official statements.

As heavy fighting raged on, the Zionist army said it had struck another 200 targets in the past 24 hours in the narrow Palestinian territory, where it is seeking to defeat Hamas and free captives. The army said 153 troops had died in Gaza since it launched its ground invasion on Oct 27. Ten soldiers were killed in battles on Saturday, one of the deadliest days for the Zionist side.

"This is a difficult morning, after a very difficult day of fighting in Gaza," said Netanyahu on Sunday. "The war is exacting a very heavy price... but we have no choice but to keep fighting." Hamas rejected Zionist claims, saying they are meant "to justify their massacring of innocent civilians and their destructive aggression".

The Zionist entity's withering military campaign, including massive aerial bombardment, has killed 20,424 people, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's health ministry. Vast areas of Gaza lie in ruins and its 2.4 million people have endured dire shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine due to a Zionist siege, alleviated only by the limited arrival of aid trucks.

Eighty percent of Gazans have been displaced, according to the UN, many fleeing south and now shielding against the winter cold in makeshift tents. Near the far southern Gaza city of Rafah, Umm Amir Abu al-Awf, 27, suffered wounds to her hand and legs in a strike on

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Low-key Christmas in Kuwait over Gaza war, Amir's demise

By Passant Hisham & Chidi Emmanuel

KUWAIT: Christmas in Kuwait feels different this year amid the Gaza conflict and the mourning period for the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. People are spending this special occasion keeping a low profile, with festivities quieter than previous years. On Christmas Eve, the Catholic Church and National Evangelical Church were illuminated with decorative lights as worshippers attended mass and other activities.

Vector Almeida, an Indian expat attending a service Salmiya Catholic Church, explained that unlike previous years, the church is not holding any musical events or competitions at the church to respect the current situation of the country and the entire world. "It doesn't really feel right to celebrate while people are suffering out there," he noted, referring to the Gaza war. (See Page 4)

Gaza war casts pall of gloom over Bethlehem

BETHLEHEM: A pall of gloom descended over Bethlehem on Christmas Eve as the Gaza war weighed heavily on the biblical city in the occupied West Bank and the usual crowds of pilgrims stayed away. The traditional giant Christmas tree, marching bands and flamboyant nativity scene were all absent in the city celebrated as the birthplace of Jesus Christ (PBUH).

While there were few festive lights, a huge Palestinian flag was unfolded in the center of town and a banner declared that "The bells of Bethlehem ring for a ceasefire in Gaza". Bethlehem usually throngs with pilgrims and tourists at this time of year. But many residents have fled and few visitors

have come since the start of the Zionist-Hamas war on Oct 7.

Palestinian Christians have showed little appetite for celebration, with official events largely cancelled by the municipality. Many in the community were unable to come to terms with the death and displacement of hundreds of thousands of their fellow Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. "A lot of people are dying for this land," said Nicole Najjar, an 18-year-old student. "It's really hard to celebrate while our people are dying."

Usually a huge Christmas tree is put up at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, believed by Christians to be built on the spot where Christ (PBUH) was born. This year there is an art installation expressing solidarity with Gazans: Grey statues placed in a pile of rubble. On the building next door hung a large banner that read: "Stop the genocide, stop the displacement, lift the blockade" on Gaza.

"This year is different," said Mervat Murra, 50, a fashion designer in Bethle-



KUWAIT: Worshippers attend a Christmas Eve service at the Catholic Co-Cathedral of the Holy Family in Kuwait City on Dec 24, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



BETHLEHEM: Palestinian scouts hold up banners condemning and calling for an end to the conflict in Gaza during a procession welcoming the arrival of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem for Christmas Eve celebrations on Dec 24, 2023. — AFP

hem. "It is marked by sadness, sorrow, destruction, deprivation and loss." A marching band, which usually comes with loud bagpipes and tambourines, was absent this year. "Our message every year for Christmas is a message of

peace and love but this year it is message of sadness, grief and anger — a message as a response to what is happening in the Gaza Strip," said Bethlehem's Mayor Hanna Hanania.

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Walking: Popular sport in Kuwait amid vision for a healthy lifestyle

Exploring the health benefits



KUWAIT: Residents take a walk in the neighborhood. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: Walking is not just a means of transportation or a healthy physical activity - it has become a widely practiced sport in Kuwait. With the state's dedication to promoting a healthy lifestyle, walking areas have been developed across the country. Kuwait Times explores why walking has gained such popularity in Kuwait and how the state's encouragement through the provision of dedicated

walking areas has further enhanced this thriving sport.

Ala' Falah, a physical exercise coach shared with Kuwait Times her appreciation for Kuwait's installation of walking areas almost everywhere, including in shopping malls. Falah said it is obvious that Kuwait has recognized the potential of walking and its many health benefits for people. In Kuwait, the accessibility of walking areas has made it easier for people to remain keen on incorporating this healthy and easy exercise into their lives.

Parks, shopping malls, corniches and dedicated pedestrian paths can be found in almost every single area in Kuwait, facilitating people's accessibility to walking areas, ensuring they feel safe and fostering an environment to pursue their walking routine, regardless of their location. "Aside from going to the gym, I tend to walk every day around the neighborhood that I live in. This activity has connected me with my neighbors and people who live in the same area, which makes me quite familiar and friendly with every-

one around. The whole neighborhood feels like home to me, as I feel safe and accustomed to most of the people residing in this area. I also walk in shopping malls and highly admire the fact that there are floors with an actual walking track in shopping malls in Kuwait," Falah said.

According to Falah, walking areas often serve as a place for social interaction that strengthens bonds between neighbors and people in a society. Thus, walking has emerged as a beloved sport in Kuwait, especially since the state's

encouragement and provision of fantastic walking areas such as Shaheed Park, Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Center, Yarmouk Park, Mishref Oasis, Salmiya Boulevard, Kaifan Park, The Scientific Center, shopping malls and many other places, which have played a crucial role in boosting its popularity. By emphasizing its health benefits and creating dedicated walking spaces within communities, Kuwait has successfully integrated walking as a common healthy lifestyle among its residents.

CBK incubates 12th batch of graduates

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait has ushered in the 12th batch of freshly graduated citizens, qualified to be enrolled in the banking sector, under the umbrella of the "Kafaa" initiative launched in cooperation with Kuwaiti banks and supervised by the Kuwait Institute of Banking Studies (KIBS). The CBK said in a statement on Sunday that KIBS would receive enrollment applications from today until early February, noting that the program is devised to secure competent national cadres capable of contributing to Kuwait's development.

Participants will receive practical and theoretical lessons at local and renowned international institutes for 12 months. The program is one of the best "options for the new graduates who desire to work in the banking sector, the statement quoted Bassel Al-Haroun, the CBK Governor and KIBS Chairperson, as saying. - KUNA



Bassel Al-Haroun, the CBK Governor and KIBS Chairperson



Head of the Design and Photography department Mustafa Al-Bader

KUNA Center holds training program on photography

KUWAIT: Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) Center for Development of Media Skills started on Sunday a training program titled Principles of Photography, attended by a number of employees from the agency and Kuwait Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha). The program, presented by Head of the Design and Photography Department Mustafa Al-Bader, aimed to identify types of cameras and lenses as well as their uses and functions.

The training program, which runs until December 28, would explain some photography theories, applications on the camera and focus systems, how to use lighting in photography, and practical applications. The program would also include a field photography trip. The center, founded in 1995, is considered to be one of the most important media training centers, providing hundreds of training programs in various media fields and aiming to develop media capabilities and personal capabilities and improve professional media work. — KUNA



The training program (Principles of Photography) held in Kuwait News Agency (KUNA). — KUNA photos

Gold prices hit \$2,053

KUWAIT: Gold prices went up to \$2,053 per ounce after the closing of last week's exchange market, a historical price for gold in 2023. A report issued by the Kuwaiti company Dar Al-Sabaek said that last week witnessed significant jumps for gold as it approached the level of \$2,072 per ounce for a short period before declining to \$2,053 per ounce.

The pricing was supported by data received from the United States that indicated a decline in inflationary pressures and bets on an early reduction in interest rates by the US Federal Reserve (Central Bank). The report added that the rise in gold prices coincided with the decline of the US Dollar index against the basket of major currencies by 0.15 percent to close at 101.7 points and the decline in US personal consumption expenditure prices "unexpectedly" by 0.1 percent on a monthly basis (November 2023).

It was revealed that the market is preparing for the first cut in US interest rates by the end of the first quarter of 2024, explaining that "faster and more frequent cuts in interest" mean a further rise in gold during the coming period. The report indicated the futures prices of gold for delivery next February rose by 0.85 percent, reaching \$2,069 per ounce, achieving weekly gains of 1.65 percent.

The report expects that gold prices will continue to rise during the first quarter of 2024 due to several factors, the most important of which is the start of a cycle of declining US interest rates. The slowdown in global economic growth, the weakness of the US dollar, and the continued rise in geopolitical risks, especially military operations in the Middle East and threats of stopping global maritime shipping lines in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the Arabian Sea Regarding the local market, the report stated that the prices of gold (24 Karat) reached KD 20.3 per gram, while 22 Karat gold reached KD 18.6 and silver closed at KD 284 per kilo. — KUNA

Kuwait Airways increases fleet to 33 aircraft

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways has purchased and received the plane "Burgan," an Airbus

A320neo aircraft, the ninth one of this type that would be put into commercial service. Abdulmohsen Al-Fagaan, the KAC Chairman, said in a statement on Sunday that with the arrival of the "Burgan" Airbus plane, its fleet has increased to 33 aircraft, including three A330-200s, seven A320-200s, and ten Boeing 777-300ERs.

The KAC fleet also includes nine A320neo carriers and four A330-800 planes, Al-Fagaan

said, adding that the corporation has also made a deal with Airbus to purchase six Neo321A and ten 777-300ER carriers in the coming years. The newly bought aircraft, "Burgan," is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, he said. It is quite comfortable for passengers and has low fuel consumption. The KAC was founded in 1943 and launched its first flight in 1954. In 1962, the Kuwaiti government acquired all its stakes. — KUNA



Kuwait Airways officials receive 'Burgan' Airbus A320neo aircraft. — KUNA photos



Local

Minister refers officials to anti-corruption authority

Social affairs Minister dismisses director

KUWAIT: Minister of Electricity, Water, and Renewable Energy and Acting Minister of Public Works, Jassem Al-Ostad, referred two officials from the ministry to the public authority for anti-corruption (Nazaha) on suspicions of corruption. The ministry told KUNA in a statement that the investigative committee, established by Al-Ostad immediately after these violations came to light, proved that "it caused damage to many civilians and other parties." An investigation proved that the two deliberately disrupted tenders related to electricity and damaged electricity connected to civilian homes and other public projects.

According to the statement, "the deliberate disruption of tenders forced people to buy their own cables, further making them sign pledges to never demand compensation from the ministry," negatively affecting the ministry's reputation with claims of incompetence. In the previous months, Al-Ostad referred a number of officials

in government bodies under his supervision to the public prosecution and Nazaha for suspicions of corruption and misappropriation of public money.

Director fired

In another development, the Minister of Social Affairs, Sheikh Firas Al-Malik Al-Sabah, issued a ministerial decision to dismiss the director of the Union of Consumer Cooperative Associations, Abdulwahab Al-Fares, and refer him to the Public Authority for Combating Corruption, "Nazaha."

A final report submitted to the impartial investigation committee confirmed manipulation and fraudulent activities. The Director General of the Union has been assigned to handle urgent matters until after the elections of the Union, which are scheduled for next Wednesday. The minister rejected the "protest" resignation submitted by the head of the Union of Cooperatives.

Technological versus traditional education

By Ali Hamza

KUWAIT: The pandemic shifted many educational institutions from being present physically to using more virtual forms of education, including the use of many different tools, which helped students understand topics in their respective subjects better. After the lockdown was lifted and students returned to school for in-person education, many schools continued to use technology to help their students with subjects and access the materials necessary to study, which raised an important question — what is the better form of education?

Technological education is cost efficient and enables students to study regardless of where they are physically present. It offers flexibility, accessibility and a vast array of resources beyond the confines of a physical classroom. Online education platforms enable students to study at their own pace. However, despite the advantages, technological education presents its own set of challenges. The absence of face-to-face interaction may obstruct the development of essential social skills and personal connections crucial for overall growth. Many students get distracted and cannot concentrate due to the free access to the Internet while studying online.

Traditional education may struggle to keep pace with the rapidly evolving technology. However, it

helps students to develop important proficiencies such as social skills, discipline and personal connections, while immediate feedback through in-person interactions remains extremely useful. Kuwait Times interviewed students and a teacher to see what they prefer — here is what they had to say.

"Traditional education is limited to what's written in the book, while technological education offers a much wider range of explanations and videos through which students have a much higher chance of understanding the topic," said Suhail Barakat, a student studying in a school in Kuwait. "There are far more sources to learn from online and various websites, and we can do all of this for free. The quality of education on the Internet is better than the one offered to the average person, and it is more widely available," said Fadel Kandapath, a student studying in Kuwait.

"I feel like notebooks and readers are better because I don't prefer staring at a screen all day long. However, when the books are full of text with no images, it is boring and harder to understand. Videos and online education platforms are better for chapters that need a lot of visualization," said David Korah, another student studying in Kuwait.

"Modern education should be a balance between both traditional education and technological education. We cannot ignore the benefits of technological advancements and go back to the old days. Both have their own advantages and disadvantages if you choose to follow only one. However, you can avoid the disadvantages and benefit from the advantages if you wisely combine both methods of learning," said Beyza Oktay, a teacher teaching in an international school.

Pontifical Vicar Manuelian congratulates new Amir

Pontifical Vicar of the Armenian Prelacy of Kuwait and neighboring countries, Archimandrite Bedros Manuelian, extended warm congratulations to His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on assuming the reins of governance in the country. Archbishop Bedros hopes for further progress and prosperity in Kuwait under HH Sheikh Mishal's leadership, emphasizing the nation's loyalty and the people's well-being. He believes Sheikh Mishal will contribute to achieving peace and stability in the region, ushering Kuwait into a new phase of prosperity.

He praised Sheikh Mishal's clear, direct, and strong directives in the constitutional oath-taking speech, considering it a roadmap for the future. Archbishop Bedros expressed optimism about the new era, affirming that it signifies a continuation of the country's positive trajectory. He commended Kuwait as an exemplary country in promoting peaceful coexistence, religious freedom and tolerance. He highlighted Kuwait's significant humanitarian efforts and charitable initiatives, with HH Sheikh Mishal leading in wisdom, generosity and development.



Archimandrite Bedros noted the long-standing presence of the Armenian Church in Kuwait, attributing it to the warm and loving nature of Kuwaiti society. He described Kuwait as a model for communities fostering peace and harmonious coexistence. The prevailing characteristic in Kuwait, according to him, is love, evident to anyone living on Kuwaiti soil.

stc signs MoU with SACGC

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company — stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) under its educational "upgrade" initiative with the Sabah Al-Ahmad Center for Giftedness and Creativity (SACGC). The collaboration with SACGC, which is part of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS), will present a range of activities for children and young adults throughout 2024.

The signing ceremony, held at stc's head office, was attended by executives from stc and SACGC. Upon signing the MoU, stc aspires to continue showcasing its commitment to the community and its dedication to empowering the next generation of leaders specifically in science and technology. The MoU strongly aligns with some of the key objectives and pillars behind stc's CSR program, which is ultimately designed to foster an environment that nurtures education and innovation amongst the youth.

Through flagship programs like the educational 'upgrade' initiative, stc envisions a future where its efforts ripple through the Kuwaiti economy, fostering innovation, driving growth, and most importantly, empowering the nation's future leaders to steer Kuwait towards unparalleled success and prosperity.

As part of this collaboration, stc and SACGC will be hosting a series of events at stc's booth in Winter Wonderland Kuwait throughout the coming period. These events will offer a blend of educational and entertainment activities aimed at children and the younger generation. The aim is to spark curiosity and a love for science and technology, nurturing the talents of Kuwait's youth. Additionally, throughout 2024, stc and SACGC plan to roll out a variety of activities, including training sessions, coding, and technology related competitions, along with other engaging activities.

These initiatives are designed to provide hands-on experience and learning opportunities in the fields of science and technology, aligning with stc's commitment to social responsibility and educational development, being

a pioneer in the field of digital transformation. Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, commented, "We are proud to have signed this MoU with SACGC, and look forward to experiencing a fruitful collaboration that aims to inspire and empower the younger generation."

The initiatives that will be launched under the program are designed to equip the youth with the skills required for the digital age. We believe that by investing in these educational and developmental programs, we are not just nurturing talent but also contributing to the growth and advancement of our society. This MoU with SACGC aligns seamlessly with stc's vision of driving innovation and excellence in the field of technology and digital transformation, emphasizing our role as a catalyst for positive change in the community."

Al-Jasem added, "As part of its extensive CSR program, stc has consistently invested in initiatives supporting and benefiting various community segments, some of which focus on educating the younger generation, who are our future leaders. In addition to focusing on academic learning, stc's initiatives extend to strengthening practical skills, technology training, and career readiness, ensuring that participants are well-equipped for future challenges."

By fostering such educational opportunities, stc is actively contributing to the development of a knowledgeable, skilled, and dynamic workforce for the future. This approach reflects stc's dedication to empowering the community through education and knowledge, with strong faith to capture more of the youth by encouraging them through the groups we will be hosting in our upcoming initiatives, all while collaborating with institutions to create a wider societal impact."

Neda Al-Daihani General Manager of SACGC added, "We are delighted to partner with stc, a company that shares our vision of empowering the youth. Together, we aim to unlock the potential of Kuwait's young minds, nurturing their talents and guiding them towards a brighter future rich in opportunities and innovation."

Our alliance with stc will serve as a shared journey towards igniting the ambitions of our younger generation. We aim to equip them with the necessary resources and opportunities to excel in their endeavors. This collaboration signifies a pivotal step in creating a supportive ecosystem where our young minds can explore, create, and lead in various sectors, thus making significant contributions to our beloved nation."

Peru Ambassador Carlos Velasco Mendiola congratulates new Amir

On behalf of the Embassy of Peru, I extend my warmest and heartfelt congratulations to the new Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. This momentous occasion marks a new chapter in the history of Kuwait's esteemed nation, and I am confident that under His Highness's wise leadership, Kuwait will continue to prosper and flourish. Peru and Kuwait share a long history of friendly relations, built on mutual respect and understanding. Over the years, our two nations have collaborated on various fronts, including cultural exchange, economic and financial cooperation, as well as global partnerships. I am confident that these ties will be strengthened in the years to come, guided by His Highness's visionary leadership and unwavering commitment to building a brighter future for Kuwait.



KRCS inaugurates medical center in Yemen's Taiz

ADEN: A delegation from the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) inaugurated the Yusuf and Nora Medical Center in Taiz Governorate on Saturday to benefit 12,000 Yemenis. Speaking to KUNA, Deputy Chairman of KRCS Anwar Al-Hasawi stressed Kuwait's eagerness to provide further support and carry out development projects in all sectors and areas to alleviate the sufferings of Yemenis. Al-Hasawi, who is visiting Yemen to open some projects, expressed his pride in carrying out such schemes in some fields, including education and health, as well as others.

He stressed the importance of mitigating Yemenis' sufferings and determining priorities of support and the most important projects needed for Yemenis. Meanwhile, Shawqi Baazeem, president of Response Foundation for Humanitarian and Relief Works, said that this project contains a two-story building equipped with state-of-the-art technology and provides various health and medical services to citizens in various departments.

He added that the project contains a gynecology and obstetrics clinic, a laboratory, a pharmacy, a reception hall, an on-duty doctor's room, a radiology department, an emergency department for men and women, an operating room, and an intensive care room, in addition to other administrative and service departments. He indicated that this is one of the most important humanitarian projects in the region, as it aims to provide comprehensive healthcare for more than 12,000 people. The delegation includes vice president Al-Hasawi, general director Abdul Rahman Al-Aoun, as well as Shihab Al-Kharaz and Fawaz Al-Mazrouei. — KUNA



KRCS Deputy Chairman Anwar Al-Hasawi



KRCS delegation visits Yemen to inaugurate aid projects. — KUNA photos



Patients visit the Yusuf and Nora Medical Center in Taiz.



Yusuf and Nora Medical Center

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Faithful pray in the Church.

Christians in Kuwait mark Christmas, pray for peace

Low-key Xmas over Gaza war, Amir's demise

By Passant Hisham & Chidi Emmanuel

KUWAIT: It was a glorious but somber moment at the Catholic Church and National Evangelical Church in Kuwait as thousands of residents prayed in churches as part of the celebration marking the Christmas Day (25th December). Christmas services were held in churches across Kuwait on Sunday (Christmas Eve). Vigil mass and carols were organized all through the week.

Prayers were delivered in several languages including English, Arabic, Urdu, Tagalog, Tamil etc to cater for the diverse expatriate population in Kuwait. The Catholic Church and National Evangelical Church (NECK) premises were illuminated with decorative lights on the Christmas eve. Christian worshippers attended mass and other church activities as they mark the birth of Christ.

While delivering the day's sermons, the pastors and church leaders prayed for peace in the region. They thanked the Kuwait leadership for promoting peace and religious tolerance. "We congratulate His Highness the new Amir. We pray that God will bless him and grant him good health and wisdom," Pastor Jolly Joe of the Redeemed Christian Church of God said.

Outside the church premises, there was a heavy presence of Kuwait security operatives who are working earnestly to protect the faithful. Christmas in Kuwait feels different this year amid the Gaza conflict and the mourning period of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. At the Salmiya Catholic Church, Vector Almeida, an Indian expat, explained that unlike previous years, the church is not holding any musical events or competitions at the church as to respect the current situation of the country and the entire world. "It doesn't really feel right to

celebrate while people are suffering out there," he noted, referring to the Gaza war.

Compatriot Angelina Dcosta concurred, as she believes there's more to Christmas than playing music, exchanging gifts or decorating homes. "We are only going to celebrate Christmas this year with the hope that things will change, and that we are all going to be blessed. Not only us, but people everywhere, as this is truly needed at this time," she said. In expression of her condolences on the demise of Sheikh Nawaf, she added: "We're praying for his soul to rest in eternal peace, and may he receive grace. Everybody is so sad and touched by his loss."

Even with the lack of traditional forms of celebrations, people can still find a way to honor this occasion in their hearts and with their families. "Christians feels very solemn this year, but you can feel the spirit of Christmas deeply even if it's silent," said Salve Pajarillo, a Filipina churchgoer. Compatriot Dinand Conil noted the essence of Christmas is still reflected in the most precious details, in the bonding with his family and friends and in the basic practices of the religion's culture and traditions through praying together and visiting one another.

According to Conil, these kinds of religious practices are widely embraced by Kuwait. "I have been in Kuwait for more than 20 years, and I have seen the revolution of how the country has accepted the celebration of Christmas along the years," he pointed out. Allen Pinto, an Indian churchgoer, echoed his words. "We're really grateful for the government to give us the opportunity and freedom to celebrate our faith and our religion."

This occasion holds great significance for every Christian in Kuwait, and they appreciate the different forms the celebration has taken this year to respect the current circumstances. What is more



KUWAIT: Worshippers attend Christmas Eve service at the Holy Family Catholic Church in Kuwait City on December 24, 2023. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

important for them than celebrating is to keep Gaza and the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf in their prayers this year, as they all agreed on one message for Muslims and Christians: Never stop wishing for peace to prevail all over the world. Christians all over the world celebrat-

ed Christmas for the third year after the coronavirus pandemic. Unlike last two years, the Churches in Kuwait City are marking this year's Christmas without strict health protocols, requiring everyone to wear masks at all times. Faithful are no longer required to observe social

distancing in Churches. "Unlike the previous years, this year's celebration is mask-free but the death of Kuwait's Amir and the killings in Gaza have dampened the celebration. We pray for peace and end to wars," Roseline Cole, A Filipino expat told Kuwait Times.



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Pastor Jolly Joe



The Redeemed Christian Church of God choir members



Christmas decorations





Survivors recount Sudan war horrors

Rohingya flee kidnap, hunger in Bangladesh hoping for better life

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RAFAH: Palestinians wait to collect food at a donation point in a refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 23, 2023. — AFP

Gripped by hunger, Palestinians in Gaza queue for meagre food

More than 378,000 people experiencing 'catastrophic hunger' as Zionist attack nears 80 days

GAZA: When Bakr al-Naji realizes the meals he prepares each day for a charity in the Gaza Strip won't be sufficient to fill the stomachs of the children, his heart sinks. In Rafah, a city at the southern end of Gaza, thousands of people queue up for a little food at the Tkiyeh center, said Naji. The 28-year-old was displaced from Gaza City, but volunteers to cook for those facing the same circumstances.

"The most difficult moment, for me, is when I hand out the meals," he told AFP. "I feel a pang in my heart when there is no more food and the children complain and say they haven't eaten enough," he said. Faced with those pleas, most volunteers sacrifice their own meals.

According to UN's hunger monitoring sys-

tem (IPC) by the start of December more than two million Gazans were already facing acute food insecurity, with more than 378,000 experiencing "catastrophic hunger". The IPC report on Thursday said that there was a risk of famine which was "increasing each day" and warned that within weeks the entire population will face "acute food insecurity" or worse.

Humanitarian aid is only trickling into the besieged coastal territory, which the Zionist entity's army has been pounding since Oct 7. The entity claims its relentless ground and air military campaign is aimed at destroying Hamas after the Palestinian resistance group launched an attack on southern Zionist communities and military bases. Around 1,140

people, mostly civilians, died in the attack and subsequent Zionist military operation aimed at regaining control of Hamas-targeted communities. The Zionist attack on Gaza has killed more than 20,200 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry.

In Rafah, people crowded against a barrier separating the crowd from large, steaming pots of food. Adults and a large number of children were waiting with plastic bowls and small pots. "Lentils and bulgur wheat have disappeared from the markets, as well as peas and white beans," said Khaled Sheikh al-Eid, an official at the charity which serves around 10,000 people a day. His center survives thanks to

donations and volunteers and must constantly juggle what few supplies are available.

'Die of hunger'

"A can of beans has gone from one shekel (\$ 0.28) to six," said Naji. "People were poor before the war, even those who worked had barely enough to feed their children. How can they cope now?" he asked. "I fear that people will die of hunger."

In the morning, Salam Haidar, 36, was queuing outside the food center. "They told me that it's too early but I want to be sure that I get something," said the mother of three small children. "My son cries when he sees another child holding a piece of bread. He tried to steal

sweets from another child. I had to tell him it was very bad." Nur Barbakh, five months pregnant and displaced from Khan Yunis, was also waiting hours before the opening of the center in Rafah. "Sometimes I send my 12-year-old eldest son but he gets beaten up. He comes back crying and empty handed," said Barbakh. "If it wasn't for this center, we would have nothing at all," she said, holding three tomatoes and two shekels in her hand. "I couldn't find any bread".

"My children have lost a lot of weight, the hunger wakes them up at night," she said, adding that she was considering returning to her home in Khan Yunis, despite continuous Zionist bombing. "It's better to die at home as a martyr than to die of hunger," she said. — AFP

Anguish grows for families of Gaza's Christians

JERUSALEM: Khalil Sayegh lives in the United States and for days he anxiously awaited news of his family who had taken refuge in Gaza churches to escape Zionist bombing on Gaza. A few days before Christmas, he learned his father had died due to a lack of medical care, Sayegh said by telephone from Washington DC where he works as a political analyst. "I was told by a relative ... who had learned it from a priest," he said.

The news left him feeling shattered, he said, adding that he has yet to speak with other relatives stuck in Gaza which has been under heavy Zionist bombardment for nearly 80 days. The Zionist entity has cut off mobile and internet services, as well as electricity, multiple times since Oct 7. "Days go by without us having any news," said Sayegh, 29. "We live with fear ... not knowing if they are dead or alive, if they have food and water or if they are hungry."

Sayegh's family — his parents, two sisters and a brother — are among the 1.9 million people the United Nations estimates have been displaced in the territory of 2.4 million. His parents and one sister took shelter at the Catholic Holy Family Church in Gaza City, while his younger brother stayed in Khan Yunis as he needs kidney dialysis. His other sister fled to the nearby Saint Porphyrius Greek Orthodox church with her husband and two children. While there she gave birth to a third child, a boy named Khader. "I haven't even seen a picture of him. All I know is that he exists," said Sayegh.

'Pray for us'

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem reported that on Dec 16 two Christian women were "murdered" by a Zionist army sniper inside the same church where Sayegh's family are sheltering. Pope Francis deplored the deaths, which he said happened in a church complex "where there are no terrorists but families, children, people who are sick and have disabilities".

The Zionist army said it had "no reports of a hit on the church", stressing it "does not target civilians, no matter their religion". Back in Washington,



VIENNA: A man waves and waves Palestinian flags along Vienna's famous Mariahilfer shopping street, decorated with the Christmas lights on Dec 21, 2023. — AFP

Gaza-born Sayegh said he has put on hold studies he was undertaking in the field of human rights. "I just cannot function 100 percent," he said. "The only thing that keeps me going is to talk about what is happening and to remember that the people of Gaza have no voice of their own."

Sayegh is not the only person eager for news of loved ones trapped in Gaza. A Jerusalem-based nun, who declined to be identified, said she is only able to reach two other nuns sheltering at the Holy Family Church every three or four days. "They say they are well and ask us to pray for them," she said.

On Monday, they told her that water supplies were cut and that none of the displaced had been able to shower for at least two weeks. "God be with them. Their situation is miserable."

Father Ibrahim Nino of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem said the displaced at the church have

enough food, water and electricity to last them days and must be frugal. But regardless of the difficult situation, he said, they will celebrate Christmas mass.

This year, church leaders in Jerusalem and the city council of Bethlehem — home to the Church of the Nativity where Christians believe Christ was born — decided to dampen Christmas celebrations in solidarity with Gazans. And in a Christmas message, the patriarchs and heads of churches in Jerusalem lamented that "hope seems distant and beyond" reach for Palestinians caught up in 11-weeks of deadly violence on Gaza.

"Christmas should be a time of hope and celebration," said Sayegh. But "it's really hard to celebrate or feel any joy when Muslims and Christians are being massacred in Gaza and innocent civilians are dying." "I still rejoice in the fact that we know God is with us ... He feels the pain of people, of all people." — AFP

Christmas festivities cancelled in Syria in solidarity with Gaza

DAMASCUS: Christmas cheer has deserted the streets of Syria's cities, where the main churches have limited celebrations to prayers in solidarity with Palestinians suffering war in Gaza. "In Palestine, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, people are suffering," the Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo, Mor Dionysius Antoine Shahda, told AFP.

The northern Syrian city's central district of Azizia is usually home to a bustling festive market and a huge Christmas tree, while its streets are adorned with lights and trinkets. But this year, the main square is almost empty and there are no Christmas decorations in sight. "In Syria we cancelled all official celebrations and receptions in our churches in solidarity with the victims of the bombing on Gaza" by the Zionist forces, Shahda said.

The Syriac Catholic Church was not alone, with the leaders of three of Syria's major churches — the Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox and Melkite Greek Catholic patriarchs — announcing they were cancelling Christmas festivities and limiting celebrations to religious ceremonies. "Given the current circumstances, especially in Gaza, the patriarchs apologize for not receiving Christmas and New Year greetings," the trio said in a joint statement, adding they were limiting ceremonies to "prayers".

'Very sad'

Before Syria's civil war erupted in 2011, it was home to more than 1.2 million Christians, though huge numbers have fled since. The conflict had dampened Christmas celebrations, but festivities picked up in recent years as the main front lines froze and government forces retook control of large swathes of the country.

Still, gloom now prevails in the streets of the capital Damascus. Festivities are limited to a lone market, while the Greek Orthodox Mariamite Cathedral in Damascus has put up modest decorations and a small tree in its courtyard.

Damascus resident Rachel Haddad, 66, said she had been glued to her phone for more than two months, reading news of the devastation in Gaza, and did not have the heart to put up a Christmas tree. "This year was very sad. It began with the earthquake and ended with the Gaza war," Haddad said, referring to the Feb 6 tremor that ripped through southern Turkey and Syria, killing at least 55,000 people. — AFP

International

Rohingya flee kidnap, hunger in Bangladesh hoping for better life

185 refugees stranded on distressed boat in latest Rohingya tragedy

KUTUPALONG: Fleeing brutal violence in Myanmar, Rohingya refugees had hoped to find safety in neighboring Bangladesh, but many are risking dangerous sea crossings to escape hunger, kidnap and gang violence. Tears well up in Nur Kayes' eyes as the mother of two speaks of struggling to feed her family in a squalid camp in southeast Bangladesh, where UN funding shortfalls have left refugees without enough to eat.

"When neighbors eat something before my kids, they start crying," said the 27-year-old, who has been in a camp since fleeing her home in 2017. "I can't take my children's tears. They don't have food to eat. I spend my days and nights crying," she told AFP.

Bangladesh is home to around a million members of the stateless and mainly Muslim minority, many of whom fled a military crackdown in Myanmar six years ago that is now subject to a UN genocide probe. But hundreds are now making perilous journeys to Indonesia and Malaysia as dozens of Bangladeshi camps have become battlegrounds for rival armed groups who use the settlements as staging posts to traffic drugs and people. Police said security in the camps has worsened, with more than 60 refugees killed in turf wars and drug-related clashes this year — the highest number on record.

On Saturday 185 Rohingya refugees, mainly women and children, were stranded on a distressed boat last heard to be near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean. Around 70 of those onboard are children and 88 are women, the UNHCR refugee agency said in a statement.

"At least a dozen are feared to be in critical condition with one individual reported to have already died," said the United Nations in a statement calling for their urgent rescue. "Many more could die under the watch of numerous coastal states without timely rescue and disembarkation to the nearest place of safety."

Calls for restraint in DR Congo after tense vote

KINSHASA, DR Congo: Western embassies in Democratic Republic of Congo urged restraint on Saturday after leading opposition members called this week's election a "sham", some calling for it to be annulled. Five opposition leaders called in a joint statement for a protest march next Wednesday.

One election officer meanwhile said late voting in a few places in the country's far east had been authorized for Sunday. In a joint statement Saturday, 12 European embassies in the capital Kinshasa, and the Canadian embassy, called for calm. "So long as the vote count is continuing, we call on all the parties involved ... to show restraint," they wrote. The US embassy issued a similar call the day before.

Around 44 million people in the nation of 100 million were registered to vote, with more than 100,000 candidates running for various positions. President Felix Tshisekedi, 60, is running for re-election against 18 opposition candidates. The sheer scale of the DRC — roughly the size of continental western Europe — and its dire infrastructure make elections

'Bandits'

Kidnappings for ransom have also risen steeply. "Rohingya are tired of living in the camps," said Rohingya youth activist Saiful Arakani, 27. "They don't want to lose their lives in the hands of bandits." Kayes said one of her neighbors was kidnapped and she fears for her own safety.

"The kidnapers took him away while he was sleeping," she said, explaining that the gunmen forced the neighbor's family to hand over their life savings and borrow additional funds to pay more than \$1,350 in ransom for his release. "His family collected the money in five days and brought him back," Kayes said, adding that she would have no way to pay a ransom if her family were kidnapped.

Her husband Faruk is in jail for working illegally as a boatman, defying a Bangladeshi order banning Rohingya from employment outside the camps. Kayes cannot even afford to pay a lawyer to help him get bail. "Where would I get 4,000-5,000 taka (\$35-45), when I barely have anything for my family?"

She already works for a wealthier refugee family but must part with two-thirds of her UN food ration to repay debts incurred for her shelter made of tarpaulin and bamboo. Except for some who do aid work inside the camps, almost all the refugees are officially unemployed.

Two officials from Bangladesh's refugee commission told AFP that desperation had forced tens of thousands of Rohingya to flee the camps and find work as fishermen, salt farmers and construction workers. "Their entry into the local job market has driven down demand for local laborers", one official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "Understandably, local communities are angry. But can you stop it?"

'No matter if they die'

Arakani said young people wanted a "better and violence-free life" and dreamed of reaching Indonesia and Malaysia. "Rohingya young people are



UKHIA: This photo taken on Nov 23, 2023 shows a Rohingya man carrying relief supplies distributed at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Ukhiya, in Bangladesh's southeastern district of Cox's Bazar. — AFP

leaving the camps because they are desperate," he said. "They say no matter if they die at sea ... they want to go."

Since November, there has been a spike in journeys to Indonesia's westernmost province of Aceh — a voyage of about 1,800 kilometers (1,120 miles) — with the UN refugee agency reporting more than 1,500 arrivals in the biggest such wave since the 2017 crackdown in Myanmar.

Muhammad Rahim, a refugee leader, said hundreds of unmarried women and girls have lined up to go to Malaysia — home to a sizable Rohingya di-

aspota — hoping to find a well-off husband. "When they go, they don't care about their lives, they care about their stomach," said Muhammad Islam, 55, who sent his only son to Malaysia last year.

"Some of them die in the boats, and some of them are jailed if they are caught." But human traffickers charge between \$900 and \$1,800 for the risky journey on rickety boats to Indonesia or Malaysia — far more than many refugees can afford. For Kayes, leaving Bangladesh for a "better country" is just a dream. "If I had enough money, I also would have gone," she said. — AFP

Indians held over trafficking free to leave Monday

VATRY, France: Most of the roughly 300 Indians travelling on a plane detained near Paris over suspicions of human trafficking will be free to resume their trip Monday, French judicial sources said Sunday. The Nicaragua-bound Airbus A340 and its 303 Indian passengers have been held at Vetry airport, 150 kilometers (95 miles) east of Paris, since arriving Thursday from Dubai for refueling after an anonymous tip-off that it was carrying potential victims of human trafficking.

Four French judges began questioning the passengers Sunday to verify the "conditions and purposes" of their travel, and have two days to complete speaking to the passengers. The judges have the authority to extend the detention, but Paris prosecutors told AFP they expect the plane and its passengers to be cleared for departure late Monday morning "at the latest," without naming a destination.

The passengers of the flight operated by Ro-

manian company Legend Airlines are holed up in the airport. They include 11 unaccompanied minors, according to Paris prosecutors. Two passengers have been detained since Friday "to verify" whether their role "may have been different than the others in this transport, and under what conditions and with what objectives."

Ten of the passengers have requested asylum, a source close to the case said. Tarpaulin covered the entrance hall's glass exterior and nearby administrative buildings, while police and gendarmes prevented access. Individual beds, as well as toilets and showers, have been installed, the local prefecture said.

The Indian embassy in Paris Saturday posted on X that "embassy consular staff" are on site to working with French authorities "for the welfare" of detained passengers for an "early resolution of the situation." The 30 crew members were not detained. Some handled the Dubai-Vetry leg and others were to take over for the flight to Managua. According to Flightradar24, Legend Airlines has just four planes.

A source close to the inquiry told AFP that some of the Indian passengers were likely workers in the United Arab Emirates who may be traveling to Nicaragua as a jumping off spot for the United States or Canada. — AFP



KINSHASA: Officials from the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) start counting votes in Kinshasa on Dec 21, 2023. — AFP

a stark logistical challenge. Massive delays and bureaucratic chaos marred the vote on Wednesday, with election authorities struggling to transport voting materials to polling stations on time. Some stations were unable to open at all.

Officially, the country's electoral commission, Ceni, extended the vote only until Thursday for stations that had been unable to open on polling day. But ballots were still being cast on Saturday in remote areas, according to some officials, in a sign of continuing difficulties. — AFP

Gaza war casts pall of gloom...

Continued from Page 1

"The deaf international community must hear our voice." Speaking as he arrived at the Church of the Nativity, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, said: "We are here to pray and to ask not only for a ceasefire, a ceasefire is not enough. We have to stop these hostilities and to turn the page because violence generates only violence." Wearing a black and white keffiyeh, he called for unity among Palestinians of all faiths.

Church leaders in Jerusalem and the Bethlehem

city council took the decision last month to forego "any unnecessarily festive" Christmas celebrations, in solidarity with Gazans. The West Bank itself has also seen escalating violence since the start of the war, with more than 300 Palestinians killed by Zionist forces or settlers, local health officials say. "We have no taste for celebrations" during the war, said Mitri Raheb, a pastor from the Gaza Strip. He added that in the West Bank, too, every day "we cry for young people killed by the (Zionists)".

The West Bank has been occupied by the Zionist entity since the 1967 Arab-Zionist War. "All we want for Christmas right now is a ceasefire, a sustainable ceasefire to stop this atrocity," said Raheb. "Bethlehem gave Jesus (PBUH) to the world and it's high time for the world to give Bethlehem and Gaza peace." — AFP

War rages in Gaza on Christmas...

Continued from Page 1

her house early Sunday. "Who won?" she said. "Nothing has been achieved except killing civilians... They keep saying Rafah is safe. It is not safe. Nowhere is safe. Every house has a martyr and injured."

Zionist military spokesman Jonathan Conricus indicated that forces were close to gaining control in northern Gaza and that now "we focus our efforts against Hamas in southern Gaza". Fighting has raged in the main southern city of Khan Yunis, the birthplace of Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' leader in Gaza and the man the Zionist entity holds most responsible for the Oct 7 attack.

Elsewhere, Palestinian rescuers scrambled again to pull survivors and bodies from the rubble of a destroyed residential building, after a strike hit in the central city of Deir al-Balah. "I was praying when a huge explosion occurred," said Yazan Moqbel, a wounded man whose sister was still under the broken concrete. "Rubble fell on us. I didn't know what happened."

The head of the UN refugee agency, Filippo Grandi, urged an end to the suffering in the third month of the war. "For aid to reach people in need, hostages to be released, more displacement to be avoided and above all stop the appalling loss of lives, a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza is the only way forward," he wrote on X, formerly Twitter. "War defies logic and humanity, and prepares a future of more hatred and less peace."

And World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus similarly renewed calls for a ceasefire, saying: "The decimation of the Gaza health system is a tragedy." On Friday, the United States allowed the passage of a UN Security Council resolution that effectively called on the Zionist entity to allow "immediate, safe and unhindered" deliveries of life-saving aid to Gaza "at scale".

World powers had wrangled for days over the wording and, at Washington's insistence, toned down some provisions — including removing a call for a



GAZA: An injured Palestinian woman looks on amid Zionist bombardment in Rafah on Dec 24, 2023. — AFP

ceasefire. Separately, a leading member of Islamic Jihad — which has been fighting alongside Hamas — said the group's chief Ziad Nakhleh arrived in Cairo for talks on a truce and captive exchange, after the Hamas chief visited last week.

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas voiced hope Christmas would mark "a cessation of the (Zionist) war against the Palestinian people in Gaza, as well as across the occupied Palestinian territories". The Gaza war has heightened tensions across the Middle East. Cross-border fire has erupted almost daily between the Zionist entity and Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah movement.

And Yemen's Houthi rebels have fired at cargo vessels in the Red Sea, leading the United States to build a naval taskforce to deter the missile and drone strikes. The US military said four drones had targeted the USS Laboon, but had been shot down, and that an Indian-flagged tanker was hit and sent out a distress call. —AFP



RABAT: Moroccans hold placards and Palestinian flags during a protest on Dec 24, 2023 in solidarity with Gaza. — AFP

International

Survivors recount Sudan war horrors

RSF 'systematically kill all the people of dark black color', witness says

ADRE, Chad: Sitting outside her makeshift shelter in eastern Chad, Sudanese refugee Mariam Adam Yaya warmed up tea on some firewood in a bid to quell the pangs of hunger. The 34-year-old from the Masalit ethnic group crossed the border on foot after a four-day trek with no provisions and her eight-year-old son clinging to her back.

She said "heavily armed" men attacked her village, forcing her to flee and leave seven of her children behind amid brutal violence that has sparked fears of ethnic cleansing. Sudan has since April 15 been plunged into a civil war pitting army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan against Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, his former deputy and commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Thousands have fled for neighboring Chad and found refuge in overcrowded camps such as Adre where Yaya has settled. In the western Darfur region, paramilitary operations have left civilian victims belonging to the non-Arab Masalit group in what the United Nations and NGOs say is a suspected genocide.

In the West Darfur town of Ardamata alone, armed groups killed more than 1,000 people in November, according to the European Union. "What we went through in Ardamata is horrifying. The Rapid Support Forces killed elderly people and children indiscriminately," Yaya told AFP.

Trauma

Chad, a country in central Africa that is the world's second least developed according to the United Nations, has hosted the highest number of

Sudanese refugees. The UN says 484,626 people have sheltered there since the fighting broke out, with armed groups forcing more than 8,000 people to flee to Chad in one week. Formal camps managed by NGOs and informal settlements erected spontaneously have sprouted throughout the border region of Ouaddai.

A traumatized Amira Khamis, 46, said she was targeted due to her Masalit ethnicity and has lost five of her children. Recovering in an emergency medical structure run by the NGO Doctors Without Borders (MSF) near the Adre camp after shrapnel fractured her feet, she told AFP women and young girls were raped. "They systematically kill all the people of dark black color," she said.

Mahamat Nouredine, a 19-year-old who is nursing a fractured arm and has lost four relatives in the violence, said the RSF mercilessly hunted the Masalit community before he escaped to Chad. "A group of RSF followed us to a hospital and tried to kill everyone ... they laid us on the ground in groups of 20 and fired at us," he said. "Their unspoken goal is to kill people due to their skin color."

'Critical conditions'

The United States and other Western nations have accused the RSF and its allies of committing crimes against humanity and acts of ethnic cleansing. An estimate by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project puts the war's death toll at 12,000. Almost seven million people have fled their homes, according to the UN.

After surviving atrocities in their homeland



ADRE: Refugees fleeing the conflict in Sudan queue with their jerrycans to collect drinking water from the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) distribution point at a refugee camp. — AFP

and the perilous journey abroad, the refugees are now confronting the looming threat of famine. Yaya said she and her child have "barely" eaten since their arrival in Chad. The scarcity of water in the camps has generated tensions that humanitarian organizations have struggled to calm.

Gerard Uparpiu, MSF's project coordinator in Adre, said the influx of Sudanese refugees was creating a "worrying" situation. "We receive them in

critical conditions. They are shaken physically and psychologically," he added.

MSF's hospital is surrounded by fencing and constantly monitored by a guard, measures necessitated by the brutality of a conflict that has not spared the wounded. "They also attacked us when I was being taken to Chad to receive treatment," said Amir Adam Haroun, a Masalit refugee whose leg was broken by an explosive. — AFP

13 dead, 46 injured in Indonesia nickel plant explosion

JAKARTA: At least 13 people were killed and 46 injured in eastern Indonesia on Sunday in an explosion at a Chinese-funded nickel-processing plant, the owner of the industrial park that hosts the facility said. The island of Sulawesi is a hub for the mineral-rich country's production of nickel, a base metal used for electric vehicle batteries and stainless steel, and Beijing's growing investment has stoked unrest over working conditions at its facilities.

The accident occurred around 5:30 am (2130 GMT Saturday) at a plant owned by PT Indonesia Tsingshan Stainless Steel (ITSS) in the Morowali Industrial Park in Central Sulawesi province, a spokesperson for the complex said in a statement. "The confirmed number of fatalities is 13 people, consisting of nine Indonesian workers and four workers from China," the spokesperson said in a statement, revising the number of the fallen foreign workers down one to four.

Forty-six other victims were injured, mostly due to exposure to hot steam, he said. About 29 victims were referred to a government-run hospital in Morowali district, while 12 others were under observation at a clinic in the industrial complex and five people were receiving outpatient care.

An investigation showed the explosion happened during repair work on a furnace, which was closed for maintenance, when residual slag from the furnace flowed out and came in contact with flammable materials around the location. The fire was extinguished Sunday morning, according to the statement. Tsingshan Holding Group, the world's biggest nickel producer and China's biggest stainless steelmaker, holds a majority stake in ITSS. ITSS is a tenant in the industrial park, which is also majority owned by Tsingshan along with local partner Bintang Delapan.



SULWASI: A Chinese worker who was injured in the explosion at a nickel smelter furnace is brought to the Morowali Regional General Hospital on Dec 24, 2023. — AFP

Safety fears

The firm that runs the industrial park said it was "deeply saddened by this disaster, particularly for the families affected". It said the remains of several identified victims had been flown home, while the remains of one victim have been handed over to the family. Footage shared with AFP showed plumes of smoke emerging from the facility with emergency services at the scene and workers looking on. A photo shared with AFP showed the bodies of the victims lined up on top of orange body bags in a room in one of the clinics at the industrial complex. "Their faces were burnt, their clothes were all burnt," a worker at the industrial complex told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Acting Morowali district head Rachmansyah Ismail earlier told broadcaster Kompas TV that as of Sunday afternoon 25 of the injured — 15 Indonesians and 10 foreign nationals — had been immediately rushed to hospital after the blast. Seventeen were seriously injured while eight suffered moderate

injuries, he said. The manpower ministry will deploy a team tomorrow to investigate the accident, said ministry official Yuli Adiratna. He said the ministry was probing the operations of the company. "We are still gathering information and accurate data from the field on whether to stop the company's activities or not," Adiratna told AFP.

In January, two workers including a Chinese national were killed at a nickel smelting plant in the same industrial park after a riot broke out during a protest over safety conditions and pay. Deadly fires are not uncommon in Indonesia, a sprawling country of more than 250 million people where safety regulations are often flouted. In June a fire at the same plant left one dead and six others injured, in another incident that has stoked concern over safety at facilities funded and operated by Chinese companies. The facility where the riot and fire took place is operated by PT Gunbuster Nickel Industry (GNI), a local unit of China's Jiangsu Delong Nickel Industry. — AFP



LVIV: People sing carols as they take part in Christmas Eve celebration in Lviv, on Dec 24, 2023, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. — AFP

Ukrainians defy Moscow with first Dec 25 Christmas

KYIV: Many Ukrainians will on Monday celebrate Christmas Day on Dec 25 for the first time, after the government changed the date from the Orthodox Church observance of Jan 7 in a snub to Russia. Ukraine passed a law in July moving the celebration to Dec 25, the day when most of the Christian world marks Christmas.

The law signed by President Volodymyr Zelensky noted that Ukrainians wanted to "live their own life with their own traditions and holidays". It allows them to "abandon the Russian heritage of imposing Christmas celebrations on January 7", it added.

Christianity is the largest religion in Ukraine, with the Russian Orthodox Church dominating religious life until recently. Like the Russian Church, most

eastern Christian churches use the Julian calendar, dating back to Roman times, rather than the Gregorian calendar used in everyday life.

The date change is part of hastened moves since the invasion to remove traces of the Russian and Soviet empires, such as renaming streets and removing monuments. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine, a newly created independent church that held its first service in 2019, has also changed its Christmas date to Dec 25. It formally broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church over Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The political rift has seen priests and even entire parishes swap from one church to another, with the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine growing fast and taking over several Russia-linked church buildings in moves supported by the government. The historically Russia-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church, meanwhile, is keeping the Jan 7 Christmas date. This church claims to have cut ties with Russia because of the war but many Ukrainians view this with skepticism. — AFP

London police arrest 2 men after Banksy installation removed

LONDON: Police in London said on Sunday that officers had arrested a second man on suspicion of theft and criminal damage, after a Banksy artwork was removed from a south London street corner within hours of appearing. A man in his 20s arrested on Saturday over the incident the previous day has been released on bail until a date in mid-March pending further inquiries, the British capital's Metropolitan Police Service added.

The Banksy installation, a traffic stop sign covered with three aircraft resembling military drones, emerged at an intersection in the Peckham neighborhood on Friday morning. Less than an hour after the elusive street artist confirmed it was his latest work — posting a photo of it on social media — witnesses filmed it being removed by a man with bolt cutters, with the help of another man.

Images and video posted on social media showed one of the pair running off with the sign under his arm. The London police force initially said it had not been informed of an alleged crime. But Southwark Council, which is responsible for local services — including street signage — said late Friday that it wanted the sign back and had reported the incident to officers. By Saturday evening, Metropolitan Police said a man had been arrested, with news of the second apprehension following Sunday. The force asked anyone who witnessed the removal or "who may have information about the incident or the whereabouts of the sign" to call police.

Meanwhile, in a statement Friday, Councillor Jasmine Ali, deputy leader of Southwark Council, hit out at the unauthorized removal. "It should not have been removed and we'd like it back so everyone in the community can enjoy Banksy's brilliant work," she said. "We have reported the removal of our sign to the police to help get it back." The installation came was revealed at a time of heated discourse over the Zionist attack on Gaza, with world leaders divided over a decision to call for a ceasefire. — AFP

Tunisians vote for new chamber with little enthusiasm

TUNIS: Tunisians trickled into polling stations on Sunday in the first elections for a new second chamber of parliament under a constitution pushed through last year by President Kais Saied. Opponents of Saied argue the election is the latest step in the president's "authoritarian" agenda.

Saied, a former law professor who was elected president in 2019, seized executive powers two years later, sacking the government, dissolving parliament and declaring he would rule by decree. On Sunday, the nine million strong electorate has been asked to choose more than 2,000 councilors from around 7,000 candidates, according to the Independent High Authority for Elections.

Opponents of Saied had called for a boycott of the election, which they said was "illegal" and had been "imposed". A feeble turnout had been widely expected. Polling stations opened at 8:00 am (7:00 am GMT), and an AFP journalist in the capital Tunis said they remained almost empty by midday. "I have never seen such a low turnout during elections held in Tunisia since 2011," said an official in charge of one polling station in downtown Tunis, who asked not to be named.

The official was referring to the year in which a revolution overthrew president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 24 years in power. The protests that deposed Ben Ali helped to spark demonstrations and uprisings across the Middle East, a phenomenon later dubbed the Arab Spring.



MNIHLA, Tunisia: A woman holds her ballot while voting at a polling station during the 2023 local elections in Ariana province on the outskirts of Tunis on Dec 24, 2023. — AFP

"I understand the people who are ignoring these elections," Salah Habib, a 60-year-old who said he cast his ballot simply "to mark (his) presence", told AFP. Nadia Majer, a 23-year-old student who opted not to vote, said upon leaving a nearby gym: "I didn't understand anything about this election, and I don't want to understand anything".

More than 260 prominent Tunisian figures had signed a petition against what they called a "useless" election, saying Saied's government "continues to implement its political project imposed on" people in the country. They alleged the aim of the election was to "weaken local power, disperse it, and make it another docile instrument in the hands of the executive power".

Since February, authorities have jailed more than 20 members of the opposition, including the Ennahdha party leader Rached Ghannouchi and Jawhar Ben Mbarek, the co-founder of the National Salvation Front, among others.

The vote will result in the establishment of local, regional and district councils, allowing for the creation of the second chamber of parliament. President Saied's new constitution, which was approved at a referendum in July 2022, established two chambers of parliament — the Assembly of People's Representatives and a National Council of Regions and Districts.

The assembly, with very limited powers, began its work earlier this year after an election boycotted by the opposition and spurned by voters, with only 11 percent casting ballots. The inauguration of the council — the second chamber that voters were asked to elect on Sunday — is scheduled for June 2024. — AFP

Business

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2023

Deal ends Geneva airport strike

Industrial action leads to flight cancellations, delays



GENEVA: Strikers hold a picket line outside Geneva International Airport, after dozens of ground staff went on strike over a wage dispute with their employer, the Dubai National Air Travel Agency (DNATA) delaying flights during the busy holiday season, in Geneva, on December 24, 2023. — AFP photos

GENEVA: A deal has been reached to end an hours-long strike by ground staff at Geneva airport, which had caused numerous flight delays and cancellations during the holiday rush. "Victory!", the SSP public sector union said on X, formerly Twitter, shortly before midday. The workers began their strike about eight hours earlier, at 4 am (0300 GMT), demanding "dignified working conditions and decent wages" from their employer, the Dubai National Air Travel Agency (dnata).

The employees "have succeeded in repelling attacks on their retirement fund and in obtaining improved salaries, indemnities and overtime compensation", SSP said. Dnata, an Emirati airport service provider, confirmed in a statement "the resolution of the industrial action", adding that its employees had returned to work at noon. Around 80 strikers had gathered in front of the airport before dawn, wearing bright yellow safety vests and branding union flags and posters with messages like: "Dnata is killing me" and "Precarious work means grounded flights".

Luggage left behind

Geneva airport stressed Sunday that it had not been involved in the dispute between dnata and its employees, and said it regretted that the strike had gone ahead while negotiations were ongoing. The airport said six flights had been cancelled as a result, while some others had been delayed by more than an hour. In addition, "a number of flights were operated without loading or offloading luggage", the statement said.

Prior to the deal, airport spokesman Ignace Jeannerat told AFP that only flights assisted by dnata



GENEVA: This photograph shows a sign of Geneva International Airport, after dozens of ground staff went on strike over a wage dispute with their employer.

personnel had faced problems. "A majority of operations are going very smoothly," he said. Dnata reportedly counts around 600 staff at the airport who handle various ground operations, including ticketing services and baggage handling, for a number of international airlines such as British Airways, Air France and KLM.

Jeannerat said dnata had been tasked with assisting 85 of the 417 flights scheduled for Sunday, a day when the Geneva airport was expecting 52,000 passengers to travel through. All flights handled by dnata's competitor Swissport "are functioning normally... Zero problems", he said.

Pay hike, bonuses

According to the union, around half of the dna-

ta staff had agreed to take part in Sunday's strike, demanding a five-percent salary hike. After several rounds of negotiations, the parties had agreed to the three-percent wage increase proposed by the company, SSP said in a statement. The deal also provides for a 500-Swiss-franc (\$584) bonus in January, it said, meaning a total rise of more than four percent on average.

SSP, which had accused dnata of exerting "pressure" and threatening to fire striking staff, announced those threats had been dropped and the company had agreed to pay the workers for the hours they were on strike. Dnata said Sunday's agreement "reinforces our dedication to maintaining a strong social partnership, fostering a cooperative working environment, and ensuring the continued success of our company". — AFP

'Some way to go' to tame inflation

BERLIN: A European Central Bank board member warned the fight to bring consumer prices under control in the euro-zone was not over, despite a recent slowdown in inflation. "We still have some way to go and we will see how difficult the famous last mile will be," Germany's Isabel Schnabel said in an interview published on the ECB's website. The Frankfurt-based institution even believes inflation "may pick up again temporarily in the near term", Schnabel said.

The ECB "will only be satisfied if inflation falls sustainably" to its target of two percent, Schnabel said, adding that "we do not have any intention of adjusting our inflation target". Inflation slowed faster than expected in November to a two-year low of 2.4 percent, after peaking at around 10 percent last year. But the ECB warned the fight was not over as it froze borrowing costs for a second consecutive time in its final meeting of the year on December 14.

The pause left the benchmark deposit rate at a record high of four percent, following a historic streak of hikes to tame runaway prices. Schna-

bel also warned that there was little hope of consumer prices falling in the near future. "The prices are clearly higher than before the pandemic, and monetary policy cannot roll back that increase," Schnabel said. "People would not be better off if we plunged the economy into years of deep recession just to bring the prices back to their old levels," she added.

Italy's 'small' budget

Meanwhile, Italy's Senate adopted a budget for 2024 that critics say will do little to boost growth in the euro-zone's third largest economy. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has described the budget as "realistic" for a country hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic and rampant inflation. But critics have slammed the measures—worth around 24 billion euros (\$25.3 billion) in tax cuts and increased spending—as underwhelming.

"It's a small budget because essentially there were no resources," said analyst Wolfgang Piccoli from Teneo political risk consultancy. "There is nothing for investment (and) it's not a budget for growth," he said. The money is largely aimed at supporting households, workers and businesses, including income tax cuts for salaries up to 35,000 euros which will only last through 2024.

Around five billion euros is earmarked for public sector salary increases and three billion euros goes



FRANKFURT: The headquarters of the European Central Bank (ECB) are pictured on the banks of the river Main in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany.— AFP

to the national health service. Carlo Bonomi, the head of Italy's main business lobby group, slammed the "substantial absence of support for private investment and a strategy aimed at growth and competitiveness". Analysts have voiced concern that the budget is based on a government growth projection which is much more optimistic than official institutions, from the European Commission to the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank.

Rome is expecting the economy to expand by 0.8 percent this year and 1.2 percent next year. Italy's National Statistics Agency has forecast growth of just 0.7 percent for both years. The central bank has a similar projection for this year but sees a 0.6 percent expansion next year. The government

says it will raise some 21 billion euros between 2024 and 2026 through privatizations to help reduce the public debt, valued at 144 percent of GDP—the highest ratio in the euro-zone after Greece.

It has also included a spending review in the budget. "They have tried to create a bit more room for manoeuvre by putting forward this idea of privatization", but it is a "largely unrealistic" goal in light of Italy's past record on privatization, Piccoli said. And Rome's spending reviews "never yield any significant amount of money", he added. The budget now goes to the lower house of parliament, which will vote at the end of next week. It is expected to be adopted easily, as the parties in Meloni's ruling coalition have the majority. — AFP

Cuba gripped by economic crisis

HAVANA: Cuba's government is expecting the economy to shrink up to two percent in 2023, as the country is gripped by its worst economic crisis in decades that has prompted a record exodus from the island. "It is possible that this year we have a contraction that could be to the order of two percent," Economy Minister Alejandro Gil told parliament. Cuba's economy grew only 1.8 percent in 2022 after struggling to recover from a 10.9 percent contraction in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic which hit the vital tourism sector hard. The pandemic and a tightening of US sanctions in 2021, combined with structural weaknesses, have sent the economy into a tailspin.

Gil highlighted the "strong limitations" that Cuba - under a US embargo since 1962 - faces in terms of the availability of foreign currencies and fuel. He predicted inflation of 30 percent in 2023, compared to 39 percent in 2022. Economists estimate real inflation has reached triple-digit figures in recent years, as the price of the dollar continues to rise against the Cuban peso on the informal market to more than double the official rate. In 2021, a monetary reform phasing out a convertible peso pegged to the dollar, led the regular peso's value to plummet.

Prime Minister Manuel Marrero told parliament a "working group" would determine "what the exchange rate should be against the dollar." Gil said agricultural production and the manufacturing industry were in particular decline, while mass emigration of workers was fueling a "complex scenario." Tourism recovered somewhat as the island nation welcomed 2.4 million travelers in 2023, double the amount that came the previous year.

However, this is far less than the 3.5 million who had been expected. The dire economic situation has pushed unprecedented numbers of Cubans to flee, mainly to the United States via Central America. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) said nearly 425,000 Cuban migrants had come to the United States in the past two years, while another 36,000 had submitted asylum applications in Mexico - accounting for some four percent of the island's population. — AFP



HAVANA: Photo shows toys manufactured by the local development project Rutami Estudio that specializes in the design and manufacture of wooden educational toys.— AFP

Business

'Urban mining' offers green solution to old solar panels

What to do with old or worn-out solar panels?

YUMA: As the world pivots from planet-warming fossil fuels to renewable energy, a new pollution problem is rearing its head: What to do with old or worn-out solar panels? Thousands of photovoltaic slabs are being installed across the United States every day, particularly in the sunny west and south of the country, as states like California race towards greener energy production.

But with an expected lifespan of around 30 years, the first wave of solar installations is now coming to the end of its usefulness, sparking a rush to recycle things that might otherwise end up in the landfill. "What is about to happen is a tsunami of solar panels coming back into the supply chain," said Adam Saghei, chief executive of Arizona-based We Recycle Solar. "One of the challenges with any industry is, there hasn't been that much planning for a circular economy. "(Solar) is a sustainable form of energy; there needs to be a plan for the retirement of those assets."

Saghei's plan involves, among other things, reusing panels. Anywhere up to five percent of panels either have a minor production defect or get damaged

during transport or installation. These still-working panels can be refurbished and diverted to other markets, often abroad, Saghei says. But for the panels that no longer function—either because they're decrepit, or because they were damaged beyond use during installation, or smashed by hailstones—there's treasure to be found. "We're doing what's called urban mining," says Saghei, referring to a process that took his engineers three years to perfect.

That mining recovers silver, copper, aluminum, glass and silicone—all commodities that have a value on the open market. While the uses for the metals might be obvious, what to do with silicone and glass is less so, but nonetheless intriguing. "You can use it for sand traps on golf courses, you can refine it for sandblast mix, you can also use it for the stones or the glass mix that you get for outdoor fireplaces," says Saghei. With capacity to process up to 7,500 panels every day at the plant in Yuma, a surprisingly small amount goes to waste. "Depending on the make and model of the panels... we're able to get up to 99 percent recovery rate."

Logistics

For Meng Tao, who specialises in sustainable energy infrastructure at Arizona State University, developing an efficient lifecycle for solar panels is a pressing issue. With the United States among countries committed to weaning itself off fossil fuels following a landmark COP28 climate agreement, solar panel installation looks set to increase to a peak two decades from now. "Once it matures, then the annual installation and the decommissioning will be about the same," he told AFP. "But for the next 20 years... at least for the next 10 years... we'll just have more installations than retirements."

The problem with recycling, he says, is not just that the value of recovered materials from panels can be relatively low, but also the logistics. With panels distributed to thousands of sometimes far-flung rooftops, it can cost a lot of money just to get them to a recycling center. And unlike some jurisdictions, the United States imposes the cost of removal and recycling on the end user—making it more attractive for households just to dump their old units at the local landfill. "There has to be some policy support" to plug the gap be-



YUMA, Arizona: Damaged solar panels to be recycled are pictured at the We Recycle Solar Plant in Yuma, Arizona. — AFP

tween what consumers will pay and the total lifecycle cost of the panels, says Tao.

For Saghei, as for any business leaders, profitability is important. "You don't see too many getting into the business because recycling has a cost. It's not free. It's labor intensive. It's energy intensive," he says. But he does see a way forward. Recovering materials from old solar pan-

els that can be put back into new solar panels is—he is convinced—a winning proposition. "These are markets that are growing," he says. "Right through this process we are able, once the industry scales to even larger figures, to put those raw commodities back into the supply chain. "What's exciting is we're at the forefront." — AFP

Liberalizing Argentina's economy: What to know

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina's libertarian President Javier Milei this week unleashed a mega-decree to change or scrap 366 economic rules in a country accustomed to heavy government intervention in the market. The move is a first in Argentina's history, with none of its democratically elected presidents or dictators attempting such a massive dismantling of the system. It is also exactly what Milei promised on the campaign trail, where he would wave around a live chainsaw to symbolize his bid to slash public spending, as Argentina creaks under triple-digit inflation after decades of financial mismanagement. However, according to Argentine law, Congress still has the power to sink Milei's program. This is what you need to know about the decree:

What could change in daily life?

Ten days after taking office, and on the eve of the festive holidays, Milei presented his "necessary and urgent" decree to loosen some of the rules governing the country's economy as annual inflation hit 160 percent. One big change will be the removal of all constraints between tenant and landlord, such as laws on rental increases. In recent years landlords have increasingly priced their properties in dollars to avoid being stuck with rental income long overtaken by soaring inflation. This has been a nightmare for renters in a country where access to dollars had been strictly controlled.

Milei has also loosened labor laws, with the trial period for new employees going from three to eight months. Compensation laws for dismissal without cause have been modified in favor of companies and he plans to renegotiate labor agreements in force since 1975. He also scrapped limits on exports, and said the internet market will be liberalized. Milei also ditched rules preventing the privatization of state en-

terprises, and has already set his sights on national airline Aerolineas Argentinas and oil company YPF. He also moved to limit the right to strike, which is enshrined in the constitution.

What is the goal of the decree?

Milei, an outsider whose rise to the top office stunned much of the country, blames the interventionism and protectionism of previous governments for choking the economy. Before the announcement of the decree, the new government had already devalued Argentina's peso by more than 50 percent, and announced huge cuts in generous state subsidies of fuel and transport from January. "The goal is to begin the path of reconstruction of the country, to return freedom and autonomy to individuals and begin to dismantle the enormous amount of regulations that have stopped, hindered and impeded economic growth," said Milei. Of those protesting his measures he said: "There may be people suffering from Stock-

holm syndrome. They are infatuated with a model that impoverishes them."

Is it constitutional?

The opposition - recently ousted from government - has slammed Milei for the decree, and sees it as a way to bypass his lack of a majority in Congress. Milei's Libertad Avanza party, which is only two years old, has only 40 of the 257 seats in the lower house, and seven of 72 in the Senate. "This is not the way. Send the reforms as bills. Do not be afraid of democratic debate," said German Martinez, parliamentary chief for the Peronist coalition Union for the Homeland. Constitutional lawyer Emiliano Vitaliani told AFP that the highest laws of the land say that "in principle laws cannot be modified by decree and the president cannot replace Congress." Political scientist Lara Goyburu said the decision "leaps past all limits, decreeing many issues that need political agreements from Congress and the provinces." — AFP

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Business

Dollar trends lower amid increased expectations of lower interest rates

Gold continues to trend upwards, reaching an all-time high

KUWAIT: The US Dollar index continues to trade on a downward trajectory, closing the week at 101.71, after a steep decline that followed a dovish speech delivered by Fed Chair Jerome Powell. The decline served as a relief to some of the dollar's counterparts, where the British pound and the Euro gained momentum against the dollar, closing the week at 1.1010 and 1.2700 respectively. While the USDJPY currency pair was seen trading at a low of 140.9 this month, levels not seen since August, a drop that delivered a relief note to the Bank of Japan as they decided to keep interest rates unchanged in their latest monetary policy meeting held earlier in the week. A falling dollar seemed to have coincided with a drop in the bond market, with the 10-year treasury yields falling to around 3.84 percent, as the market is starting to bet on rate cuts in the upcoming months.

US consumer confidence climbs

The US consumer confidence report released in December showed an increase to a five-month high, with the index figure coming in at 110.7, higher than the previous figure of 101.0, and higher than the expected 104.6. The report showed an increase in confidence among all age groups in the US, with the largest increase showing in the 35-54 age group with annual incomes of \$125,000 and above. The increase comes despite continued worries of high inflation rates, with consumers indicating plans to purchase assets such as motor vehicles, houses, and major appliances in the next 6 months. The increase in confidence can be attributed to the recent rally in the stock market, with indices like the Dow Jones and the S&P 500 climbing up to record highs in the last quarter of 2023, as well as an easing in inflation and lower gasoline prices.

Resilient labor market

The number of Americans filing for new unemployment claims rose to 205k in the latest unemployment claims data released in December, higher than the previous figure of

203k, yet lower than the expected increase to 214k. The figure supports the narrative of a resilient and healthy job market, as Feds keep a close eye on employment data for indications about the economy's health, after a higher-than-expected retail sales data in November, which showed a 0.3 percent increase from the 0.2 percent decline in October. A resilient job market during tight economic condition has led to diminishing expectations of a recessionary state and supported the Fed's goal of achieving a soft landing in its battle against inflation.

Core PCE slows

The personal consumption expenditure price index (PCE) data released on Friday showed a 0.1 percent decline month-over-month, compared to forecasts of no growth. The annual PCE figure showed a 2.6 percent rise, down from 2.9 percent in October versus expectations of 2.8 percent. While the Core PCE (excluding food and energy prices) rose by 0.1 percent monthly versus expectations of a 0.2 percent increase. Annually the core index showed that prices increased by 3.2 percent, down from 3.4 percent in October, a fresh low since mid-2021. The figures released seemed to go in-line with what Fed officials want to see to determine that the current policies are applying pressure on inflation as the PCE serves as an early indication of inflation conditions in the economy.

Europe and UK

In the latest PPI data published, the prices of goods produced by Europe's largest economy dropped by 0.5 percent in the month of November, the fastest annual rate drop seen since 1949, hinting at further falls in inflation rates in the upcoming days. While producer prices of German industrial products fell by 14.7 percent from a year earlier, and exports of goods outside of the EU region dropping by 8.7 percent. The data comes in line with the contracting trend in Germany's economy in the past nine months. While the EURUSD currency pair is

Rates - 24th December, 2023

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	Low	High	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.0985	1.0887	1.1040	1.1010	1.0800	1.1100	1.1035
GBP	1.2769	1.2609	1.2790	1.2700	1.2500	1.2800	1.2707
JPY	142.33	141.65	144.95	142.41	141.00	145.00	140.38
CHF	0.8677	0.8711	0.8528	0.8555	0.8500	0.8900	0.8476

currently trading at a four-month high of 1.1028, potentially attributed to selling pressures for the US dollar, after expectations that the US interest rates would begin to fall in 2024.

UK retail sales rise

Retail sales data in the UK rose by 1.3 percent in the month of November, following a 0.0 percent no change reading the previous month. The data release was followed by a market reaction, leading the GBPUSD currency pair to rise to 1.27 and stabilizing at around 1.268, levels last seen in August. The marginal increase in sales, which is considered the fastest month on month since January, has indicated a resilient consumer as high rates continue to put pressure on economic conditions in the UK.

UK inflation drops

In the latest news released, inflation in the UK dropped to its lowest rate in two years, with the latest CPI year-over-year reading showing a 3.9 percent rate, lower than the 4.3 percent anticipated figure. While the drop was mainly due to a drop in energy prices, it has fueled expectations about when the Bank of England will be lowering interest rates in the upcoming year. BoE officials have taken a strict stance regarding their approach in fighting inflation and keeping rates higher for as long as needed. Keeping a close eye on economic trends in the upcoming period to determine the

next course of action.

Asia Pacific

The bank of Japan has decided to keep its ultra-loose monetary policy unchanged in its last monetary policy meeting held on December. The decision is considered in line with market expectations, while officials await further evidence about the conditions of prices and wages in Japan's economy, as positive data might push for a shift away from the massive monetary stimulus. The central bank also decided to maintain its dovish stance regarding negative interest rates, after some expectations for a near end to the current rates after a drop in the US dollar pushed the Japanese yen to gain some value the past weeks.

Reserve Bank of Australia

In the latest monetary policy minutes published by the Reserve Bank of Australia, board members have decided to keep rates unchanged at their current 4.35 percent rate, as opposed to a 25 bps rate hike. The decision comes after officials saw "encouraging signs" of progress towards their fight against inflation, which decreased to 5.4 percent in the third quarter, from 7 percent in the beginning of the year. The board members also indicated that demand continues to surpass supply, while consumption growth remains weak, stating that the risk of inflation could

remain high for a longer period. The AUDUSD currency pair, supported by a weaker US dollar, continued an upward trend throughout the week, closing the week at around 0.6801.

Oil shifts from downward trend

Oil prices showed a slight recovery in the week after a two-month downtrend which followed diminishing worries about the geopolitical tensions that affected the global economy. With the crude oil WTI futures climbing to 74.087 from a low of 68.98 in the previous week, and the Brent crude oil futures climbing to 79.58 from the previous 73.17. The increase can be linked to a decision made by the decision from the minister of Mineral Resources, Oil, and Gas in Angola, which was to retract the country's membership from OPEC, as it no longer serves the country's best interest. The decision came shortly after OPEC+ members held a meeting, in which it was decided to extend output cuts through 2024.

Gold rallies to record highs

Gold started the week with an upward rally after expectations for rate cuts from the Federal Reserve rose, gaining almost 83 dollars of value before settling in the \$2,050 price range. As geopolitical tensions seem to cool down, the focus on gold prices is shifted more towards the next course of action for the Fed.



NEW YORK: People walk outside of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in New York City. — AFP

Stock markets mixed ahead of Xmas break as US inflation cools

NEW YORK: Global stock markets traded in a tight range before the Christmas break, while Asia-focused tech shares were hammered after China announced additional curbs on online gaming. Wall Street stocks finished a choppy session mostly higher amid light trading volumes, with major indices yet again scoring weekly gains. London's FTSE 100 index finished virtually unchanged in a half-day session, despite fears of recession as data showed the UK economy shrank in the third quarter and flatlined in the prior three months. Paris was also flat while Frankfurt finished 0.1 percent higher. In the United States, government data showed the Fed's favored measure of inflation slowed on lower energy prices.

The personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index rose 2.6 percent from a year ago in November, markedly below October's 2.9 percent figure. The Fed has held rates at a 22-year high following a series of hikes aimed at taming inflation. The central bank will convene a policy meeting next month. "The key takeaway from the report is that it threads the needle for a Fed aiming to bring down inflation with higher rates, but not tank the economy in the process," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

Equities have been on an upward trajectory in recent weeks as a string of US figures show inflation coming down and the jobs market softening, while the economy is easing but appears safe from recession. Markets firmed higher last week after the US central bank signaled it would at last start cutting interest rates next year, in a major dovish pivot as inflation slows in the world's biggest economy. In Asia, stock markets diverged after China unveiled fresh plans to restrict online gaming.

The draft restrictions published online by the government regulator say they are aimed at limiting in-game purchases and preventing obsessive gaming behavior. The news sent tech giant Tencent plunging more than 15 percent in Hong Kong at one point while rival Netease was briefly down more than 30 percent. XD Inc sank around 20 percent, while there were also losses for Alibaba and Meituan. Beijing first moved against the gaming sector in 2021 as part of a sprawling crackdown on Big Tech, including a strict cap on the amount of time children could spend playing online.

The draft regulations announced Friday would introduce limits on recharging in-game wallets and abolish features meant to increase gameplay time such as rewards for daily log-ins. Pop-ups warning users of "irrational" playing behavior would also have to be introduced. "The clear signal does indeed seem to be that the wide-ranging tech crackdown is still ongoing, and may even be becoming more aggressive," said Michael Brown, a market analyst at broker Pepperstone. — AFP

Chinese automaker BYD to build factory in Hungary

SHANGHAI: China's top electric automaker BYD will build a car factory in Hungary, the company said, as it pushes forward with plans for expansion into Europe despite growing concerns around fair competition. BYD Europe said the factory in the southern city of Szeged would mark "a significant step toward green mobility in Europe" as it made the announcement on X, formerly Twitter.

Earlier this year, the firm became the first global manufacturer to pass the five million milestone in electric vehicle (EV) production, crowning itself "the world's leading manufacturer of new energy vehicles and power batteries". The growing success of Chinese EV firms in foreign markets has started to draw scrutiny, however. In China, the EV sector has benefited from decades of subsidies issued by Beijing in related tech fields. The European Union this year announced an investigation into these subsidies, citing unfair competition.

But Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's longstanding policy to "look East" has seen Asian businesses offered lucrative tax breaks, infrastructure and job creation subsidies to lure them

to his country. The factory "will be one of the largest investments in the history of the Hungarian economy", Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said in a statement, without giving a specific figure. BYD already has operations in Hungary, including an electric bus factory.

With the new car factory, the company "hopes to accelerate the entry of new energy passenger vehicles into the European market, further deepen (the firm's) global layout, and actively promote the green transformation of the global energy structure", it said on Chinese social media. The plant will be constructed in phases and is expected to create thousands of local jobs, BYD said. Hungary is set to become a major producer of EV batteries—second in Europe after Germany—with a huge factory also planned by Chinese group CATL. Originally specializing in battery production, BYD moved into the automotive sector in 2003 and has since become a heavyweight in EV production.

It still faces stiff competition from several local brands—including XPeng, Nio and Geely—but still announced a record quarterly profit in October. Foreign automotive leaders like Tesla, BMW, Mercedes and Audi depend on BYD for their batteries. The company ceased production of gasoline-powered cars last year, and is now focusing exclusively on hybrid and electric models. BYD launched its European offensive in 2022 at the Paris Motor Show, and targets growing sales with its Atto 3 small SUV and its Dolphin hatchback. — AFP



JIANGSU: In this photo, BYD electric cars waiting to be loaded on a ship are stacked at the international container terminal of Taicang Port at Suzhou Port, in China's eastern Jiangsu Province. — AFP

NO JINGLE IN ARGENTINE POCKETS AS ECONOMIC GRINCH RUINS CHRISTMAS



Aerial view of Plaza de la Republica square, where people queue to take pictures at the BA (Buenos Aires) sign decorated for Christmas. — AFP photos



Children deliver their letters with their Christmas requests in a letterbox next to a man dressed as Santa Claus ("Papa Noel" in Argentina) at the Alto Palermo shopping mall in Buenos Aires on Dec 19, 2023.



Argentine tailor Jorge Williams poses for a photo in a Christmas-themed coat in the Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires.



A Christmas tree adorns a shopping gallery in Buenos Aires.

Cecilia Rojas has scoured shops across greater Buenos Aires to find an affordable gift for her children this Christmas, which is set to be a gloomy affair as the country grapples with its worst economic crisis in decades. "Before I would buy from a well-known toy store chain, but now I look at smaller, neighborhood businesses to find a better price," the 47-year-old told AFP.

A psychologist, Rojas has a 17-year-old son as well as an eight-year-old who still believes in Santa Claus. "He wrote him a long letter," she said. This year her children will get one gift each, unlike in previous years when she tried to buy a few. Festive frugality is the order of the holidays as Argentina ends the year with annual inflation at 160 percent.

Toy prices have gone up between 110 percent and 230 percent this year, according to industry figures. Christmas shoppers have to be patient and wily. "You walk a little and find the same product in different businesses with different prices," said Agustina Gago, 23, who has a four-year-old son. "This year we are going to buy him a gift thanks to the help we get from our grandmothers and great-grandmothers, of which, luckily, there are several," she said with a smile.

Milei's not-so-merry measures

The country is also reeling from the head-spinning start to President Javier Milei's new government, which has issued hundreds of decrees to de-regulate the ailing economy. Milei, who campaigned with a

chainsaw vowing to slash state spending, has also announced huge cuts in generous state subsidies of fuel and transport from January and devalued the strictly controlled peso by more than 50 percent.

His government has also done away with a program to control the prices of some goods, introduced by the previous government to try and ease the impact of inflation. Milei has warned the country is on the brink of hyperinflation, and that things will get a lot worse before they improve. "They are starving the people, they are using policies that we already lived through, that did not work and that all they do is pauperize the working class," said 49-year-old teacher Alexandra Mazzei, who joined a protest against the new measures on Wednesday night.

'Bit of a hard time'

Shop owners have adapted to the yuletide belt-tightening. "I don't even stock the most expensive stuff anymore because people don't buy it," said Ruben Gerszonowicz, 63, who owns a toy store in Buenos Aires and said price mark-ups are a daily occurrence. He said this year was the first time in two decades he saw clients doing their Christmas shopping far in advance. However, he believes it is necessary to "have a bit of a hard time" for the economy to get back on track, as Milei has promised. — AFP

Nigeria economic crisis dampens Christmas spirit

Line up, they receive some rice, dried beans and other basic foodstuffs, whose soaring prices have left millions in Nigeria facing a bleak Christmas. The temporary food distribution in the courtyard of the Church of the Assumption in the economic capital, Lagos, has drawn a big crowd — some have travelled far. Christiana Adebaya, 58, arrived at 6:00 am after a more than two-hour bus ride. It's hard waiting for hours in the blazing sun but she has come to get rice for Christmas and New Year because food prices are too expensive right now, she told AFP.

As well as rice and beans, the food donations, organized by Catholic associations, include tomato concentrate, cooking oil and a 500-naira note (\$0.60). "We do not need a prophet to tell us that the rate of poverty has increased by the day," Reverend Francis Ike, wearing an immaculate white cassock and sunglasses, said. "People are finding it very difficult, even the rich people complain."

Painful reforms

Last year, 1,300 people benefited from the Christmas food handout. But Dominic Ekle, president of one of the associations taking part, said he had anticipated more people this year. Even so, he did expect this many, he said. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who came to power at the helm of Africa's largest economy in May, launched an ambitious reform agenda aimed at attracting investment and addressing a cost-of-living crisis.

He ended a costly fuel subsidy and lifted restrictions on the naira currency. Since then, fuel prices have tripled, the naira has lost 41 percent of its value against the dollar on the official currency market and, according to the World Bank, food prices have



Buyers shop in a stall selling Christmas decorations at Balogun Market in Lagos on Dec 18, 2023. — AFP photos

surged more than 31 percent. Overall inflation exceeded 28 percent in November. Poverty in Africa's most populous nation rose from 40 percent in 2018 to 46 percent this year, the World Bank said. The lives of some 104 million people — or nearly half the population — are blighted by poverty.

'Don't know it's Christmas'

At the Obalende market in Lagos, trade has slowed. "We don't know that Christmas is outside," fish seller Rifat Arigege, 41, said. Melody Samuel, 28, said she would not buy rice — the star ingredient in the season's celebrations — and will make do with a much cheaper dish made from cassava flour and pumpkin seed soup instead. No rice and "no money for presents for the children. We will just manage it and see," said the mother of three, whose husband is a teacher.

New clothes have become a luxury for a 59-year-old, who runs a cooking utensils shop and gave her name only as Mrs Betty. She took her time choosing at the popular Balogun market. "My daughter is pregnant and I have to buy some clothes for her for



Christmas decorations are seen on the streets of Victoria Island in Lagos.

Christmas and the grandchildren," she said. "I'm not buying anything for myself."

Traders complain of a tough year, compounded by a fresh shortage of cash that hits the informal economy. "The scarcity of naira affected a whole lot of things and didn't make business move so much," shoe seller Bidemi Bello, 48, said. "You can't even know there's Christmas in the air."

Ticket to ride

Some have sacrificed travelling to other regions to spend the holiday with family. Melody Samuel said she usually goes by bus to southeastern Ebonyi State. On Wednesday, the government announced it would subsidize the price of bus tickets in order to halve the cost between Dec 21 and Jan 4, to help families get together. Solomon Zakariah, 28, director of a bus company operating trips to the north, said he wanted to show some Christmas spirit. He has limited the increase this year in ticket prices for travel to the city of Kano. "We are trying to make it more affordable for them in order to go and unite with their own family for the holiday," he said. — AFP



Unique Ecuador nativity scene aims for historical accuracy



Women from the collective "Mujeres de Frente", with whom the co-design of this year's manger was carried out.

View of a manger depicting biblical and everyday scenes from Colonial Quito at the Del Carmen Alto Museum in Quito, taken on Dec 20, 2023. — AFP photos

A hunchback with goiter, a child decapitated by a soldier, and a woman with a bloodied face are among the unusual figures in an Ecuador nativity scene that aims to provide a realistic depiction of historical life. The vast creche belongs to the Descalced Carmelites, a religious order that has been present in Ecuador since 1653. Some 300 pieces, featuring pieces dating back to the 18th century, are on display in a wing of the otherwise cloistered monastery that has been transformed into a museum in the historic center of Quito.

The figurines recount biblical stories, but the monastery's collection, which also includes newer pieces from the 20th century, shows people in scenes of daily life under Spanish colonial rule as well. "It is very interesting to find pieces that show different cultures, diversity in the city. We have Indigenous people, Afro-descendants, chapetones (Spanish descendants)," museum coordinator Gabriela Mena tells AFP.

Several characters from the Yumbo Indigenous people appear with painted faces and feather headdresses. Afro-

scendants are shown wearing "highly decorated, French-style clothing," said Noralma Suarez, the manager of the museum's reserve collection. Elsewhere, mothers breastfeed their babies, the hunchback is depicted with a swollen neck — often a symptom of iodine deficiency — and a scene of domestic violence shows a man threatening a woman carrying a baby on her back, as blood runs down her face.

The nativity scene is a way "to show, to feel certain things that happened at a certain historical moment," such as health problems, said Suarez, referring to the character suffering from goiter. Each year the nativity scene adopts a theme, such as migration or natural disasters. This year, it aims to highlight the plight of women who often cannot enjoy Christmas with their families because they have to work to make ends meet.

The women and their children are represented by rag dolls, the first new pieces to be added to the nativity scene this century. The older figurines highlight artistic techniques such as sgraffito, when layers of plaster or paint are



Coordinator of the Del Carmen Alto Museum, Maria Gabriela Mena, holds a figure.

applied to a surface and then scratched away to create patterns and texture. Mena wants the nativity scene to be more than "a beautiful popular, cultural tradition" in which things like the roles of Indigenous and Black people, or violence, are seen as normal or folkloric. She in-

stead wants the display to reflect on issues such as racism, machismo or poverty. "It's like moving museum structures so that we question everything." — AFP



A figure depicting a hunchbacked man sick with goiter.



Mena shows figures made of rags by women of the "Mujeres de Frente" ("Women in Front") collective.



Figures representing everyday scenes from Colonial Quito are seen during the assembly of the manger at the Del Carmen Alto Museum.



'Pooper' figures star in nativity scenes in Spain

Look closely at a nativity scene in Spain's Catalonia region and you will likely spot an unusual figure — a peasant with his pants down and doing his business in the holy scene. The "caganer" — or "pooper" — figurine has long been a staple of Christmas in the northeastern region, usually placed in a discreet corner.

The defecating statuettes are believed locally to bring prosperity for the coming year. They have become increasingly popular with tourists, especially in Barcelona, the region's capital, where they are easily found in Christmas markets. The traditional clay figure depicts a peasant or shepherd wearing black trousers, a white shirt and the classic red Catalan cap called the barretina.

But the tradition has expanded to include famous figures. "It is very interesting. We are also very surprised to see they have all these figures, celebrities and also political figures. It's definitely a new experience for us," said Amy Hu, a 30-year-old tourist from the United States, as she browsed a selection of caganers in Barcelona.

One of the biggest caganer makers, family-run Caganer.com, currently sells 650 different models of the figures at its six shops in Barcelona and Madrid as well as online, where the United States accounts for the bulk of orders. The company expects to sell 140,000 of the figures this year, which retail for five to 21 euros (\$5-\$23). Sergi Alos, co-owner of the company founded by his mother in 1992, said the figures were a tribute, not a mockery. He said he



A customer looks at Catalan typical clay figurines, called "caganers" (poopies), at a shop in Barcelona on Dec 12, 2023.

was happy that tourists could "have something that is typically Catalan".

'An icon'

The roots of the caganer are vague but are generally thought to date from the 18th century. The figurines aim to "connect the people to the mystery of the nativity," said Josefina Roma, a retired University of Barcelona anthropology professor. She likened caganers to playful characters that appear in theological narratives to make them more understandable.

Xavier Borrell, the president of the 33-year-old Friends of the Caganer Association, which has around 100 members, said the figures "have gone beyond nativity scenes to become an icon". The

retired engineer owns 1,400 caganers, the bulk of them classic figurines of peasants. He said he was delighted that the statuettes had become popular tourist souvenirs in Catalonia, a wealthy region of around 7.7 million people that has its own distinct language. "In Catalonia we sell Mexican sombreros, Sevillian dresses, images of bulls, which are not typical of our culture, and the fact that tourists who come here take a caganer with them pleases me a lot," Borrell said.

Unusual gift

At Christmas markets across Catalonia, caganers rub shoulders with "tios", a log with stick legs and a smiling face and red hat that is also a staple in many homes during the Christmas season. Parents cover



An employee paints a caganer at a shop in Barcelona.

the log with a blanket and secretly place little gifts such as candies, nuts and small toys inside.

On Christmas Eve, or in some households on Christmas Day, children hit the blanket-covered log with sticks while encouraging him to "defecate" gifts. "It is a bit scatological," Borrell said. The log does not drop large gifts, which are traditionally considered to be brought by the Three Wise Men on Jan 6, the day of the Epiphany. — AFP

Octogenarian 'Aunty Ilonka' rings heavy church bells in Hungary



Bell ringer Jozsefne Szedlak, or as everyone calls her, Auntie Ilonka, rings the bell at noon in the Catholic church in Tereny, 88 km from Budapest, on Dec 22, 2023. — AFP photos



Auntie Ilonka holds a letter of wishes from the Hungarian president.

Following in the footsteps of her family's past five generations, Jozsefne Szedlak, or Aunty Ilonka as she is widely known, leaves her home to the nearby bell tower at least twice a day. As one of the few remaining bell ringers in Hungary, she has taken on the responsibility of tolling the bells at the Catholic church in Tereny, a village of 350 residents around 60 km north of Budapest. The heaviest bell there weighs around 450 kg.

"As long as my hands and feet can handle it, there won't be an automatic system," says the 80-year-old grandmother of three. "Because people say, and it's true, that bells die when they are automated, so a bell working by the press of a button does not chime

the same. The bell summons the living, mourns the dead and breaks the storms."

Around Europe, bell ringers have become increasingly rare as motorization has progressed steadily since the 20th century, said Ferenc Bajko, a campanologist who studies the history of church bells. "In Hungary, usually Protestant churches have them, where the bells are only used on Sundays. It is really unique to have someone manually ring the bells several times every day," he told AFP. Aunty Ilonka is a "great blessing," says Tereny mayor Andrasne Brozso.

Television crews and curious tourists regularly visit the village to meet her and even Hungarian President

Katalin Novak visited her last June. Usually Aunty Ilonka just uses one hand to chime a bell at noon or in the evening, saying a silent prayer to count the time. But on important Christian holidays like Christmas, she has to manually chime all three bells of the medieval church. So she sits down on a stool and uses both her hands and right foot to simultaneously toll them — not an easy feat, given their weight. "There is no need to go to the gym," she says with a hearty laugh.

Aunty Ilonka is also an active part of the local community. Mayor Brozso notes that she helps preserve the regional Paloc heritage by carrying out all ecclesial duties, being part of the folk choir, and keeping a collection

of antiques in a traditional peasant house. In colourful Paloc clothing, she proudly shows visitors around her informal museum with traditional furniture, tools and dresses, some dating back to the 19th century.

She says she has always been fascinated by old things and proud to carry on with a family tradition started by her great-great-grandfather. "I've been ringing bells for 60 years, but only about 10 years by myself, because before that I was just helping out my grandparents and parents," she says. — AFP



Auntie Ilonka walks in the village where she rings the bell in the Catholic church.



Auntie Ilonka stands in a room decorated with her parents' furniture and clothes at her family home.

How Ukraine independence song became a Christmas classic



The Ukrainian Radio Choir performs the traditional song "Shchedryk" during a recording at the Kyiv Radio House in Kyiv on Dec 22, 2023. — AFP photos



Pianist of the Ukrainian Radio Choir stretches before starting a recording session at the Kyiv Radio House.



Conductor of the Ukrainian Radio Choir, Yuliya Tkach, leads the choristers during a recording session in the amphitheatre of the Kyiv Radio House.

The catchy tune of "Carol of the Bells" may sound instantly familiar and evoke Christmas movies such as "Home Alone" but those humming along may have little inkling to the music's origins. Used in countless holiday films and even performed by The Muppets, Carol of the Bells, a staple in Western pop culture, stemmed from an early bid for Ukrainian independence.

The melody is a Ukrainian song called "Shchedryk", or New Year's carol, written by composer Mykola Leontovych and first performed in Kyiv at Christmas 1916. This Christmas Eve, Ukrainian Radio Choir will perform the piece at Kyiv's Philharmonic at a sold-out concert that re-treads some of that musical history. This comes as Ukraine celebrates Christmas on Dec 25 for the first time ever — in sync with the West — instead of on Jan 7 as in Russia.

'Musical diplomacy'

The Kyiv concert on Sunday will recreate the first US concert performance of the Shchedryk, at a time when Ukraine was in a fragile state of independence after World War I. The Ukrainian People's Republic had declared independence from Russia in 1918,

led by nationalist politician Symon Petlyura. To bolster the republic's standing, Petlyura decided to send the Ukrainian National Choir on a world tour.

"Petlyura wanted to persuade the Western entente to recognize Ukraine's independence, and so he initiated this project of musical diplomacy," said Tina Peresunko, who helped organize Sunday's concert. The cultural researcher has written a book about Shchedryk and its links to Ukraine's struggle for independence. The Ukrainian National Choir travelled to western Europe in 1919, then went to the United States, where Shchedryk had its national premiere at the Carnegie Hall in New York in October 1922.

Petlyura aimed "through song, through culture, through Ukraine's thousand-year-old folklore... to show that we are a nation, we are not Russians," Peresunko told AFP. "The idea was through song to convey the right of Ukrainian people to independence. "And it's very symbolic that it was Shchedryk, known to the world now as Carol of the Bells, became the hit of that tour."

Ultimately, though, Petlyura's musical diplomacy did not work and Ukraine became part

of the USSR. The original choir's singers remained in the US as emigres, fearing arrest by the Soviets. The composer of Shchedryk never enjoyed the worldwide reaction to his piece: he was shot dead at his father's house in 1921 by a Soviet agent, according to the Ukrainian culture ministry. But his music lived on. In 1936, an American with Ukrainian roots, Peter Wilhousky took Shchedryk's music and wrote English lyrics titled Carol of the Bells, that have made it synonymous with Christmas.

'Difficult time for Ukraine'

Ahead of Sunday's concert, the conductor of the Ukrainian Radio Choir, Yuliya Tkach, was leading a rehearsal in Kyiv, with singers wrapped up in scarves and jackets. "Is it heated in here?" she asked at one point. They were about to perform Shchedryk when an air raid siren sounded and they had to go down to a cellar.

Dressed in a traditional embroidered blouse, Tkach drew parallels between the turbulent time of the early performances of Shchedryk and now. "Then there was a war, then there was a real struggle resulting in the Ukrainian People's Republic," she told AFP. "Now this historical spiral is repeating itself."

The Kyiv concert on Sunday will recreate part of the program from the first US concert which featured Shchedryk. Tkach said the song is special to her: "First of all it's symbolic of Christmas holidays, secondly it is also about presenting Ukraine to the world, and thirdly, Mykola Leontovych is a composer dear to me."

The concert will also feature other songs from the original choir's world

tour, some now rarely heard. Peresunko scoured archives for the sheet music, some of which were only available in one copy. "It's an extremely interesting program," said Tkach. "Some of the works were just a revelation to me." The conductor said she would also like to take her choir on a tour abroad to "present the same repertoire to the world at this difficult time for Ukraine". — AFP



Choristers from the Ukrainian Radio Choir practise at Kyiv Radio House.

Sports

Joshua too strong for Wallin as Parker outpoints Wilder

Wallin's only previous professional loss had come against Fury

RIYADH: Former world champions Anthony Joshua and Joseph Parker re-established their heavyweight title credentials with victories on the same Riyadh bill on Saturday. British boxer Joshua produced one of his best performances of recent times by stopping Sweden's Otto Wallin, who was pulled out by his corner after the fifth round of a one-sided bout.

Earlier, Parker enjoyed a unanimous points-decision win over fellow former world champion Deontay Wilder, the New Zealander triumphing 118-111, 118-110, 120-108 in a dominant display that appeared to scupper pre-fight talk the American would next face Joshua.

There had also been speculation that whoever triumphed in a Wilder-Joshua bout would then face the winner of February's clash between Tyson Fury and Oleksandr Usyk, who between them currently hold all the major versions of the world heavyweight title.

But Joshua said he had paid no attention to Wilder's fight, telling DAZN: "I wasn't watching. I just focused on myself...Deontay, everything that he said about me, I could rip him apart right now, but I'm going to take the higher ground."

Victory gave Joshua his third win of 2023 after he beat Jermaine Franklin Jr by unanimous decision in April before a seventh-round stoppage of Robert Helenius in August. It also took the 34-year-old's professional record to 27 wins and three defeats as he inflicted the first inside the distance loss of Wallin's career. Joshua is looking to become a three-

time world champion following two defeats by Usyk and a shock 2019 loss to Andy Ruiz.

'God's plan'

"Not so much a throwback fight, just another day in the office," said Joshua. "You want to do whatever it takes to be victorious. That's all I want to be." Wallin's only previous professional loss had come against Fury. But he had no answer from the opening bell against Joshua, who with just over a minute of the fifth round remaining produced a superb left hook that had Wallin stumbling towards the ropes.

Earlier Parker, comprehensively defeated Wilder in the former World Boxing Council champion's first bout in over two years. "Everyone had other plans but this is God's plan," said Parker, 31, who improved to 34-3 with 23 knockouts after sparing with Fury.

Renowned as a knockout artist, Wilder was involved in a trio of dramatic bouts with current WBC champion Fury, drawing the first before losing the next two. Wilder's long period of inactivity appeared to count against the 38-year-old, with Parker—who lost the World Boxing Organisation title to Joshua by a unanimous points decision in Cardiff five years ago—landing the cleaner punches as well as producing several thumping roundhouse rights.

"Well done Joseph, he did a great job avoiding my punches," said Wilder, who fell to 43-3 with one draw and 42 knockouts. "We move on to the next



RIYADH: US' Deontay Wilder (L) competes with New Zealand's Joseph Parker during their heavyweight boxing match at the Kingdom Arena in Riyadh on December 23, 2023. — AFP

thing...We make no excuses. We'll be back for sure. We have a little bit more left."

But he added: "I've done a great job with

managing my money and investing. I'm a happy fighter. I'll be back soon and if not, it's been a pleasure." — AFP

India suspends newly elected wrestling federation

NEW DELHI: India's sports ministry said Sunday it had suspended the newly elected governing body of the scandal-hit wrestling federation, accusing it of ignoring rules by hastily announcing championships. The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) has "been instructed to suspend all its activities until further orders," the ministry said in a statement.

It comes just days after new WFI president Sanjay Singh was elected to replace his close ally Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, a lawmaker charged with sexually harassing women wrestlers. It was hoped the ballot would open the way to ending the federation's suspension by United World Wrestling, the international governing body, but the government's order throws that into doubt.

After his win on Thursday, Sanjay Singh met with the former head and announced that national junior wrestling championships would be held before the year's end. "The actions smack of complete arbitrariness on the part of the new president," the ministry statement said, adding that the new board "appears to be in complete control of former office bearers".

Many of India's top wrestlers had led a noisy sit-in protest campaign demanding Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh's ouster after the allegations came to light in January. The accused 66-year-old ruling party lawmaker has denied all charges and has 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. Wrestling is hugely popular in rural northern India, and star athletes saw a wellspring of public support.

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. She is also a witness in the case. — AFP

Chinese star Sun Yang set to miss Paris Olympics

BEIJING: Doping-tainted swimming star Sun Yang looks set to miss the Paris Olympics after China published its selection criteria for the 2024 Games. The Chinese Swimming Association said on Friday its team would be chosen based on the results of the world championships in 2023 and the 2024 world championships in Doha as well as results at the national championships, which will take place on April 19-27. That would rule out six-time Olympic medallist Sun, whose doping suspension does not end until May. The Chinese Swimming Association said in a statement: "The top 8 results from the finals of each swimming event from the 2023 Fukuoka World Aquatics Championships and the 2024 Doha World Aquatics Championships (and the) 2024 National Swimming Championship results will be treated as qualifying results." — AFP

Third Arab Tennis tourney begins in Doha

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Competitions of the third Arab Tennis Tournament began in Doha, Qatar Saturday at Khalifa International Tennis Complex. Arab Tennis Federation Secretary General Dr Abdullah Abdelaziz expressed his confidence in the Qatar Tennis Federation's ability to organize a unique edition of this tournament due to Qatar's facilities and the international complex, in addition to the experience of Qatar's in organizing major sports events.

Dr Abdulaziz conveyed greetings of the Chairman of the Arab Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah for all participants and organizers, adding

India women beat Australia by eight wickets

MUMBAI: India's women's cricket team cruised to their first-ever win against Australia in Test cricket Sunday, beating the visitors by eight wickets in a one-off match in Mumbai. India dominated play in the four-day match at the Wankhede Stadium, smashing 406 runs in the first innings to take a 187-run lead.

On the final day, Australia knocked out 261, with India's bowlers earning five wickets for just 28 runs, including right arm offbreak Sneh Rana—later awarded player of the match—taking two wickets in two balls.

Set a target of 75, India's skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's team chased down the runs in dramatic play in just under 19 overs for two wickets. For India's women, it was their first Test victory against Australia after 11 attempts since 1977.

It follows India's victory against England last week, also in Mumbai. Jay Shah, the Board of Control for Cricket in India secretary, celebrated the back-to-back Test wins.

"They conquered it with brilliance," Shah posted on social media, praising skipper Harmanpreet Kaur. "History made today!" India on December 16 thrashed England by 347 runs in another one-off women's Test, their first ever

Abrar Al-Musallam wins second round of Equestrian League

KUWAIT: Rider at the Hunting and Equestrian Club Abrar Al-Musallam won the title of the second round of the third edition of the show jumping tournament. Abrar Al-Musallam succeeded in the 9th heat "grand prize" to enter the differentiation round at a height of 140cm and took first place in 41.65cm without a fault. She was followed by Abdulrahman Al-Fuzaie, Ali Al-Kharafi, Ghazi Al-Jraiwai, Antonio Morozo and Hala Al-Mulla.

Member of Kuwait Olympic Committee Board of Directors Fatima Hayat and External and Internal Relations Department Manager at Zain, Kuwait Hamad Al-Musaibeeh handed the winners their medals and prizes.

The 130cm height event was won by Arus Al-Tanank and the 120cm was won by Mohammad Al-Mullaifi. Fatima Hayat said she was pleased with the strong competition in the local equestrian league, adding that there are elements in the beginners category who will have a bright future in this game, adding that KOC will continue supporting this game.

that the success achieved in the first two editions which was held in Kuwait had given the ATF board members a motivation to continue, while giving the opportunity to all member states to host it.

He also appreciated the efforts of the Public Authority for Sport in facilitating the role of the Arab Federation, headquartered in Kuwait and it is seeking to remove all obstacles the federation faces.

Dr Abdulaziz thanked chairman and board members of Qatar Tennis Federation for hosting the third edition, as he wished all players success and hoped they present a level that befits the status of this tournament.

Meanwhile, Executive Director of QTF Saad Al-Muhannadi welcomed the tournament's guests and all participants in this Arab event, adding that his country's federation will employ all its facilities in order to bring out this tournament at its best, and lauded the efforts of the Arab Tennis Federation and its role in promoting the tennis sport.

Assistant Secretary General of the ATF Waleed Sami said the participation of the best Arab players in this tournament will give it major clout, and expected matches to be highly exciting.



MUMBAI: Australia's Annabel Sutherland plays a shot as India's wicketkeeper Yastika Bhatia watches during the final day of the women's Test cricket match between India and Australia at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on December 24, 2023. — AFP

win at home against the rivals.

India's victory margin against England was the largest by runs in women's Test cricket and also their first Test win against England

at home. "Everything went very well for us," Kaur told reporters on Sunday. "Hopefully after these two wins we will get many more Test games in upcoming games." — AFP



Fatima Hayat and Hamad Al-Musaibeeh with the winners.



Sports

Arsenal hold Liverpool in title showdown to seal top spot

Liverpool are unbeaten in their past 11 games against Arsenal

LIVERPOOL: Arsenal ensured they will spend Christmas Day on top of the Premier League as they held title rivals Liverpool to a pulsating 1-1 draw at Anfield on Saturday. Mikel Arteta's side took an early lead through Gabriel Magalhaes, but Mohamed Salah hauled Liverpool level before the interval.

A draw was arguably the right result after both sides flexed their muscles to show why they have emerged as the leading contenders to win the title. Chasing a first title since 2004, Arsenal sit one point clear of second placed Liverpool heading into the festive period.

The team that has topped the Premier League at Christmas has gone on to win the title in six of the past 10 seasons, but the draw on Merseyside was also a boost to the chasing pack. Third placed Aston Villa are level on points with Liverpool, fourth placed Tottenham are three points further back, while champions Manchester City are six points adrift of the leaders with a game in hand.

Liverpool are unbeaten in their past 11 games against Arsenal at Anfield. However, coming a week after their goalless stalemate against Manchester United, this was another frustrating result for Jurgen Klopp's team. "Oh my god, how strong are they? The good news is we are good as well," Klopp said.

"We pass instead of shoot, four or five times we do that, it's a lesson. But generally the game is great." Arsenal weren't completely satisfied either. Last season they led 2-0 at Liverpool but ended up drawing 2-2, a result that started their collapse in the title race.

Their failure to hold on this time should not have such a damaging impact, but it was still a missed opportunity. "Proud of the performance but the final pass went astray a few times. That's where the

frustration lies," Arsenal forward Bukayo Saka said.

Klopp had urged Liverpool fans to give Arsenal the "proper Anfield experience" after saying he was unhappy with the atmosphere during Wednesday's 5-1 rout of West Ham in the League Cup. But Arteta was well aware of the maelstrom lying in wait, likening the visceral Anfield experience to being thrown around in a "washing machine".

Red wave

Responding to Klopp, the Liverpool faithful belated their 'You'll never walk alone' anthem as loudly as ever before kick-off, but Arsenal took just 30 seconds to show they were unfazed. A flowing move cut open the Liverpool defence and ended with Gabriel Jesus's shot deflecting just over.

It was a warning and Arsenal took the lead after only four minutes. Martin Odegaard delivered a perfect free-kick into the Liverpool area and Gabriel rose to thump his header past Alisson Becker from eight yards. The Brazilian defender celebrated by cupping his hands to his ears in front of the Kop.

Anfield was stunned but not silenced. Falling behind was nothing new to Liverpool, who had trailed in eight other Premier League games this season and only lost one of them. Liverpool were controversially denied a penalty by VAR when Odegaard handled in the area after slipping under pressure from Salah.

Salah took it upon himself to ensure Liverpool weren't left to rue that debatable decision as the Egyptian conjured a superb 29th minute equaliser. Trent Alexander-Arnold's raking pass picked out Salah down the right flank and he glided away from Oleksandr Zinchenko into the area before smashing a fierce strike past David Raya at his near post.



LIVERPOOL: Arsenal's Brazilian defender #06 Gabriel Magalhaes (C) heads the ball past Liverpool's Dutch striker #18 Cody Gakpo (C-L) and Arsenal's German midfielder #29 Kai Havertz (C-R) to score his team first goal during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Arsenal at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England on December 23, 2023. —AFP

A thrilling half concluded with Arteta holding his head when Gabriel Martinelli shot wide moments after Saka ran through on goal but failed to finish. Klopp's men had the momentum after the break and Joe Gomez rifled inches wide, while Harvey Elliott's long-range strike deflected onto the post.

They should have been in front in the 73rd minute

when a break from an Arsenal corner climaxed with Salah teeing up Alexander-Arnold, but the ball took a slight bobble and his shot cannoned back off the crossbar with just Raya to beat.

As the relentless Red wave kept surging toward the Kop, Gomez's effort drew a good stop from Raya, but Arsenal held on. — AFP

Kompany hails 'milestone' for EPL's first female referee

LONDON: Burnley manager Vincent Kompany congratulated Rebecca Welch for a "milestone" achievement after she became the first woman to referee an English Premier League football match by taking charge of the Clarets' 2-0 win at Fulham on Saturday.

Welch, a 40-year-old from Washington in north-east England, was working for the National Health Service when she began her refereeing career in 2010. She rose through the officiating ranks and, in 2021, became the first woman appointed to referee a match in the English Football League when she took charge of the fourth-tier fixture between Harrogate and Port Vale. Welch was also the first female official to referee matches in the Championship and third round of the FA Cup. Kompany, who spoke to Welch after full-time at Craven Cottage, said: "I wanted to congratulate her because it's a big moment."

"After the game it's fair to say that it's a milestone moment and may there be more, and the best thing will always be when someone is judged on merit." But



LONDON: English referee Rebecca Welch gestures during the English Premier League football match between Fulham and Burnley at Craven Cottage in London on December 23, 2023. — AFP

you have to have a first and this is it, so well done (to her) and I'm happy to be part of this moment."

Welch had little to do early on during a slow start in London on Saturday before her decision to not award a Vitinho handball frustrated Fulham. Welch remained unmoved by players' reactions when making her rulings and was happy to play advan-

kick-off. Leeds captain Pascal Struijk's early header, Leif Davis's own-goal and Crysencio Summerville's penalty ensured the game was all but won at half-time to the delight of home fans at Elland Road. Joel Piroe's goal early in the second half set the seal on just Ipswich's third league defeat of the season as Leeds extended their unbeaten home record this season to 12 matches and moved to within seven points of their opponents.

Elsewhere, Taylor Harwood-Bellis's header gave Southampton a 1-0 victory at QPR to make it 15 matches without defeat—the Saints' longest unbeaten run since 1950. Southampton ended the match down to 10 men following the 89th-minute sending-off of Shea Charles, but held on to all three points.

Middlesbrough moved to within three points of the play-off places with a 1-0 win over West Brom at the Riverside thanks to Morgan Rogers's goal. Watford left it late to beat Blackburn Rovers 2-1 and

tage for both sides whenever possible in a match in which long-range strikes from Wilson Odobert and Sander Berge gave Burnley only their third league win of the season.

She booked Calvin Bassey after 25 minutes for striking Josh Brownhill. The Fulham defender refused to walk towards Welch when signalled by her on three occasions but eventually approached the referee and was cautioned. Welch's name was greeted by cheers when read out by the public address announcer at Craven Cottage ahead of kick-off. But Fulham fans became increasingly annoyed as Welch's first few decisions went in favour of the visitors and they cheered sarcastically when the hosts were awarded a foul in midfield.

It was hard to argue with Welch's decisions until that point, although whistles and chants of "don't know what you are doing" rang round the ground after she waved off Harry Wilson's appeals just inside the visitors' half—although this was the sort of comment any referee might expect.

Welch maintained her composure and authority throughout an assured Premier League debut. Last month, Welch became the first woman to act as fourth official in a Premier League game as part of the team for Fulham's match against Manchester United. Welch has also taken charge of several high-profile women's fixtures, including games at the 2023 Women's World Cup. — AFP

move to within two points of the play-offs.

Rovers led through Adam Wharton's third-minute goal but Mileta Rajovic equalised in the 83rd minute and, four minutes later, Rhys Healey's effort completed the comeback. Norwich stayed level on points with Watford as they easily saw off struggling Huddersfield 2-0 at Carrow Road thanks to second-half goals from Sam McCallum and Borja Sainz.

Michael Beale's first game as Sunderland head coach ended in disappointment as the former Rangers manager's side lost 3-0 to Coventry at the Stadium of Light. Tatsuhiro Sakamoto opened the scoring in first-half stoppage time, with Callum O'Hare and Kasey Palmer on target in the second half.

Plymouth came from 3-1 down to share the points in a 3-3 draw with Wayne Rooney's Birmingham City while Steven Schumacher's time in charge of Stoke started a goalless draw against Millwall. The luckless Akin Famewo scored two own-goals as Sheffield Wednesday lost 2-1 at home to Cardiff. — AFP

Rudolph brings Christmas gift to Steelers

MIAMI: The Pittsburgh Steelers kept their playoff hopes alive and severely damaged the Cincinnati Bengals' chances of making the NFL post-season with a 34-11 win over their AFC North rivals on Saturday. The Buffalo Bills also remain in contention in the AFC East after eking out a 24-22 win at the Los Angeles Chargers thanks to a late Tyler Bass field goal.

Quarterback Mason Rudolph, making his first start of the season for Pittsburgh, threw for 290 yards and two touchdowns as he repaid head coach Mike Tomlin for his decision to promote him over Mitch Trubisky. The Steelers snapped a three-game losing streak with a form-busting victory against a Bengals team that had won their last three.

With two games of the regular season remaining, both teams are now on 8-7 as they attempt to clinch a wildcard spot. The Baltimore Ravens have already secured a place in the playoffs as AFC North winners. Steelers receiver George Pickens, who had come in for some intense scrutiny after some poor blocking in last week's loss against Indianapolis, scored both touchdowns as he put up 195 yards on four receptions.

Pickens got the Steelers off to a hot start when on the second play of their first possession he grabbed a pass short left from Rudolph, jinked to evade the Bengals defense and then powered away for an 86-yard score. Bengals quarterback Jake Browning, who has coped well deputising for injured starter Joe Burrow, had a tough time, throwing two interceptions in the first half, but the Steelers offense was firing on all cylinders.

Calvin Austin extended the lead at the start of the second quarter with a seven-yard run and Najee Harris made it 21-0 with a three-yard rush. A 50-yard field goal from Chris Boswell sent Pittsburgh in with a 24-0 lead at the half.

The Bengals needed to come out strong after the interval and they did just that with Browning finding Tee Higgins who accelerated away after the catch for an 80-yard touchdown. A successful two point conversion, with Browning's shovel pass collected by Joe Mixon reduced the deficit to 16. — 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
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752

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Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

Hospitals

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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

MADALA MARESU (old name), S/o GUNNESWARA RAO, Age 52, Resident D.No. 1-2, Mallipudi, Penmantra Mandal, WG Dist-534124, A.P. Passport No. (Z2816686) My Surname wrongly mentioned on passport as MADALA MARESU instead Correct Surname VEDALA MARESH. I request the passport concerned authorities be pleased to consider my new name and correct it as VEDALA MARESH. **(#4577) 25-12-2023**

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**

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Wolves inflict Christmas Eve misery on inconsistent Chelsea

Chelsea's fourth defeat in six league games



WOLVERHAMPTON: Wolverhampton Wanderers' Gabonese midfielder #10 Mario Lemina (C) heads the ball to score his team first goal during the English Premier League football match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Chelsea at the Molineux stadium in Wolverhampton, central England on December 24, 2023. — AFP

WOLVERHAMPTON: Wolves inflicted a fourth defeat in six matches on Chelsea on Sunday, beating the London side 2-1 in the first Christmas Eve Premier League match since 1995. Mauricio Pochettino's men dominated possession at Molineux but wasted their chances in a captivating game, littered with careless mistakes by the visiting side. Mario Lemina and Matt Doherty put Wolves 2-0 in front but they were made to sweat when Christopher Nkunku pulled one back on his Premier League debut. The defeat means a miserable Christmas for inconsistent Chelsea, who are stuck

in 10th place in the Premier League after their fourth defeat in six league games, with Wolves behind them only on goal difference.

There were chances at both ends early in the game. Nelson Samedo burst forward but could not find Matheus Cunha on the left before Armando Broja stumbled on the ball in the box at the other end when well placed. Chelsea's Nicolas Jackson was also guilty of failing to make the most of some good openings. Chelsea wasted a gilt-edged opportunity to take the lead shortly after the half-hour mark when Raheem Sterling caught Joao Gomes in

possession 40 yards out and drove forward.

The England forward was one-on-one with Jose Sa with two players to his right but he opted to shoot rather than pass and it was saved by the Wolves goalkeeper. Wolves had a chance to break the deadlock in the closing moments of the half when Hwang Hee-chan burst through but he blasted over from an angle.

The home side started the second half brightly and came within a whisker of taking the lead when Chelsea's Lesley Ugochukwu deflected Joao Gomes's shot onto the outside of the post. But they

broke the deadlock in the 51st minute when Lemina did not even need to get off the ground to head a Pablo Sarabia corner home.

Substitute Nkunku came agonisingly close to equalising when his shot was hacked off the line. Instead, Wolves doubled their lead in stoppage time. Substitute Hugo Bueno crossed and Chelsea were only able to block the ball as far as the waiting Doherty, who finished calmly from close range. France international Nkunku pulled one back when he headed home in the 96th minute but Gary O'Neil's side hung on to take all three points. — AFP

Pistons slump to record-equalling 26th NBA defeat

NEW YORK: The Detroit Pistons matched an NBA single-season mark for futility on Saturday, slumping to a 26th straight defeat in a 126-115 loss to the Nets in Brooklyn. As the Los Angeles Lakers snapped a four-game skid behind 40 points from LeBron James and reigning champions Denver and Eastern Conference contenders Boston and Milwaukee posted comfortable victories, the Pistons matched the league's longest single-season losing streak—set by the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and the 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers.

Detroit, an iconic franchise that won NBA titles in 1989, 1990 and 2004 -- hasn't won since October 28. Mikal Bridges scored 29 points with six rebounds and seven assists to lead the Nets—and had seven players score in double figures.

Jaden Ivey scored 23 points and Cade Cunningham added 22 for the Pistons, who coughed up 14 turnovers leading to 22 Nets points. Brooklyn out-scored Detroit 62-42 in the paint and held an 18-9 edge in second-chance points and never trailed after the first quarter.

The Pistons were in the hunt, down by six late in the third quarter, when the Nets put together a 15-0 scoring run to pull away. Detroit will try to turn the tables when they play the Nets in Brooklyn again on Tuesday, when a defeat would land them with the single-season record—and put them one away from matching the longest losing streak ever, the 28-game slide of the 76ers that spanned the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Pistons coach Monty Williams said he'd seen some good things from his team, and he praised their continuing determination in



CHARLOTTE: Nick Richards #4 of the Charlotte Hornets defends Nikola Jokic #15 of the Denver Nuggets as he drives to the basket during the second half of an NBA game at Spectrum Center on December 23, 2023 in Charlotte, North Carolina. — AFP

the midst of the morale-destroying slide. "Losing is awful in this league," Williams added. "And we've had a lot of it. I'm proud of the way that they just keep battling every night. Our guys don't want to be a part of any kind of losing streak, whatever. But every day they come back with focus and drive and grit trying to win a game."

In Oklahoma City the Lakers, struggling since capturing the inaugural in-season tournament crown, snapped their four-game losing streak with a 129-120 victory over the Thunder. Lakers coach Darvin Ham shuffled his lineup, starting Jarred Vanderbilt in place of D'Angelo Russell in a bid to "lean in" to the defensive effort.

But it was NBA all-time leading scorer James who set the tone, scoring 15 of his 40 points in the fourth quarter as the Lakers ruthlessly suppressed the Thunder's bid to rally from a 26-point deficit.

Anthony Davis scored 26 points and grabbed 11 rebounds and Rui Hachimura added 21 points off the bench for the Lakers, who had 37 total assists and 16 three-pointers. In New York, Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 28 points to lead Milwaukee to a

130-111 victory over the Knicks, stretching the Bucks' winning streak to seven games.

The Greek star added seven rebounds and seven assists while Bobby Portis came off the bench to deliver 23 points and a team-high 11 rebounds for the Bucks, who improved to 22-7. The Bucks remained second in the Eastern Conference behind the Boston Celtics, who improved to an NBA-best 22-6 with a 145-108 victory over the Clippers in Los Angeles.

In Charlotte, the Nuggets used a dominant third quarter to take control and held on for a 102-95 victory over the Hornets. Michael Porter Jr. scored 22 points, Nikola Jokic had 18 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists before fouling out late and Denver out-scored the Hornets 30-9 in the third period on the way to a fourth straight win.

The Nuggets trailed by six at halftime but opened the third quarter on a 25-1 run, the Hornets unable to make a basket until the final minute of the period. The Golden State Warriors, with 28 points from Klay Thompson and 27 from Stephen Curry, notched a fifth straight victory, 126-106 over the Portland Trail Blazers. — AFP

INEOS' Ratcliffe agrees deal to buy 25% of Man United

LONDON: INEOS chairman Jim Ratcliffe has agreed a deal to buy a 25 percent stake in Manchester United for about £1.25 billion (\$1.6 billion) and will take control of the Premier League club's football operations, it was announced on Sunday. The British billionaire, 71, will also provide \$300 million for future investment in the club's Old Trafford stadium.

A club statement said: "Manchester United announces that it has entered into an agreement under which chairman of INEOS, Sir Jim Ratcliffe, will acquire 25 percent of Manchester United's Class B shares and up to 25 percent of Manchester United's Class A shares and provide an additional \$300 million intended to enable future investment into Old Trafford. As part of the transaction, INEOS has accepted a request by the board to be delegated responsibility for the management of the club's football operations."

Ratcliffe said he wanted to see struggling United back on top of European football and committed himself for the long term. "As a local boy and a lifelong supporter of the club, I am very pleased that we have been able to agree a deal with the Manchester United board that delegates us management responsibility of the football operations of the club," he said.

"Whilst the commercial success of the club has ensured there have always been available funds to win trophies at the highest level, this potential has not been fully unlocked in recent times. We will bring the global knowledge, expertise and talent from the wider INEOS Sport group to help drive further improvement at the club."

The agreement ends more than 12 months of speculation over the own-



Jim Ratcliffe

ership situation and heralds a new era for the troubled Premier League club. Unpopular owners the Glazers, who bought the club for £790 million in 2005, announced in Nov 2022 that they were considering "strategic alternatives" to help United grow, sparking a protracted process.

Ratcliffe and Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al-Thani made rival offers in the region of £5 billion for a complete takeover, but that fell short of the Glazers' valuation. Sheikh Jassim withdrew from the process, while Ratcliffe continued to pursue a minority shareholding. United have not been crowned Premier League champions since Alex Ferguson's final season in charge, in 2013.

They languish eighth in the Premier League, 12 points behind leaders Arsenal, and have been knocked out of the League Cup and the Champions League. Manager Erik Ten Hag's position is also likely to come under close scrutiny after the Dutch coach failed to build on ending United's six-year trophy drought by winning the League Cup last season. Ratcliffe's group have extensive involvement in sport, owning French Ligue 1 club Nice and Swiss side Lausanne-Sport, as well as the INEOS Grenadiers cycling team. — AFP