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## No end in sight to Gaza war

Zionists pound Gaza on Christmas as strikes kill dozens



GAZA: Palestinians pray for people killed in an overnight Zionist strike on the Al-Maghazi refugee camp during a mass funeral at the Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir Al-Balah in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 25, 2023. — AFP

GAZA: The Zionist entity on Monday said it was "intensifying the fighting" against Hamas in Gaza, where relentless strikes across the Palestinian territory exacerbated the dire conditions for civilians in the war's 12th week. As war raged, Christmas festivities in Bethlehem were effectively scrapped in the Zionist-occupied West Bank. The city's usually vibrant streets had only a handful of worshippers and tourists.

The Zionist entity's military campaign in Gaza, including extensive aerial bombardment and siege, has killed at least 20,674 people, mostly women and children, according to the Gaza health ministry. Four major Zionist strikes since Sunday killed more than 100 people, the ministry said. But Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed on Monday after visiting Gaza, "We're not stopping," according to a statement from his Likud party. "We're intensifying the fighting in the coming days," he told party members.

Later, addressing parliament during a special session on the 129 captives the Zionist entity says remain in Gaza,

Netanyahu was booed by families awaiting their loved ones' return after 80 days in captivity. "Now! Now!" relatives chanted as Netanyahu said Zionist forces needed "more time" to increase military pressure on Hamas, which he argued would help to secure the captives' release.

In Gaza, the health ministry said a Zionist air strike killed at least 70 people on Christmas Eve at the Al-Maghazi refugee camp established in 1949. Rows of victims' bodies, shrouded in white bags, lined the ground at Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir al-Balah, central Gaza, ahead of a mass funeral. The Zionist entity has been under increasing pressure from its allies to protect civilians during its military campaign. Speaking with Netanyahu on Saturday, US President Joe Biden "emphasized the critical need" for such protection, the White House said.

Zeyad Awad, a resident of Al-Maghazi, said there was no evacuation warning before the strike that caused "extensive, enormous destruction and

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### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### Kuwaiti missing in Iraq

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah phoned his Iraqi counterpart Fuad Hussein on Monday for more information on the whereabouts of a Kuwaiti believed to be missing in Iraq's western Anbar province. Iraqi authorities underlined their concern and launched an immediate probe into the circumstances surrounding the incident, said a Kuwaiti foreign ministry statement, emphasizing the matter is being vigorously pursued to uncover the fate of the missing citizen. Earlier reports said two Kuwaitis were kidnapped and their vehicle was torched in Anbar. — KUNA

#### Kuwait inflation up 3.79% in Nov

KUWAIT: Kuwait's annual consumer price index (CPI), indicating inflation, increased by 3.79 percent in November, according to the Kuwait Central Statistical Bureau. The monthly inflation rate for November was 0.23 percent. The rise in annual inflation was attributed to increased prices across major categories, especially food, education and clothing. Food and beverages recorded a 5.81 percent increase, while clothing saw a 6.86 percent rise. Other notable increases were observed in housing services (3.13 percent), health (2.41 percent), transport (2.95 percent), and communication (3.06 percent). Excluding food and beverages, the CPI recorded a 3.38 percent hike in November on an annual basis. — KUNA

#### Kuwait welcomes Yemen roadmap

KUWAIT: The ministry of foreign affairs welcomed on Monday a statement issued by the Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations to Yemen Hans Grundberg on reaching a roadmap to resolve the Yemeni crisis. The ministry said it is awaiting the completion of the signing process of this important agreement to confirm Kuwait's support for all endeavors made within the framework of reaching a comprehensive and lasting peace in Yemen. — KUNA

### World marks Christmas in shadow of war

VATICAN CITY: People donned Santa caps on beaches, ski slopes and streets around the globe on Monday to celebrate Christmas, as Pope Francis called for an end to the wars in Gaza and Ukraine that this year have cast a shadow over one of the world's favorite holidays. Red and white Santa outfits appeared on surfers from Australia to Florida, on cyclists in the smog-filled streets of New Delhi and intrepid souls braving chilly Channel waters for a holiday dip near Britain's Dover.

In his annual Christmas Day "Urbi et Orbi" mass at the Vatican, Pope Fran-

cis called for an end "to every war, to the very mindset of war, an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly". May peace "come in (the Zionist entity) and Palestine, where war is devastating the lives of those peoples", he said. "I reiterate my urgent appeal for the liberation of those still being held hostage."

"I plead for an end to the military operations with their appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims, and call for a solution to the desperate humanitarian situation by an opening to the provision of humanitarian aid! I implore peace for Ukraine. Let us renew our spiritual and human closeness to its embattled people," he said, also calling for the resolution of conflicts simmering in the Middle East, Africa and the Caucasus. The Gaza war made for a somber

Continued on Page 6

### Zionist strike kills senior Iranian general in Syria

TEHRAN: A senior general with Iran's Revolutionary Guards was killed Monday by a Zionist strike in Syria, the military force said, with Tehran vowing to make the Zionist entity "pay for this crime". Iranian state media also reported the death of Razi Moussavi, describing him as "one of the most experienced advisors" of Quds Force, the foreign arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

There was no immediate comment from the Zionist entity, which has repeatedly said it will not allow archenemy Iran to expand its presence in Syria. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi expressed condolences for Moussavi's death, saying the Zionist entity "will certainly pay for this crime". The general "was killed during an attack by the Zionist regime a few hours ago in Zeinabiyah district in the suburbs of Damascus," Tehran's official IRNA news agency reported.

Moussavi was "active in the field of providing logistical support to the axis of resistance in Syria," IRNA said, referring to groups backed by Tehran and arrayed against the Zionist entity. The IRGC in a statement said Moussavi was killed in a "missile attack" and also vowed to avenge his death.

Continued on Page 6

### Palestinians recount torture by Zionists

GAZA: Palestinians held by the Zionist army in the Gaza Strip had suffered torture, two freed detainees and a medic said Sunday. The two men were among hundreds detained by Zionist forces over alleged links with Hamas during the Zionist entity's ongoing ground offensive in the besieged Hamas-run territory.

About 20 men released from Zionist custody "have bruises and marks of blows on their bodies", Marwan Al-Hams, hospital director in the southern city of Rafah, told AFP. Hams said the freed Palestinians were admitted to Al-Najjar hospital upon their release.

Nayef Ali, 22, said he was detained in Gaza City's eastern Zaitun suburb and later taken to a Zionist detention facility, and showed cuts on his wrists and other parts of his body. "They (Zionist troops) tied our hands behind our backs for two days," he said. "We were not allowed to eat or drink, neither were we allowed to use the toilet," he added. "There were only beatings and beatings." Ali said the detainees were put in an area along the border with the Zionist entity where it was "freezing cold". "They threw cold water on us before transferring us to a prison, where it was again torture and beatings."

Khamis Al-Bardini, 55, also detailed torture by Zionist soldiers, saying they poured "cold water on our heads through the night" along with "beatings during the day". — AFP



VATICAN CITY: People wave Palestinian flags in St Peter's Square during the Christmas Urbi et Orbi blessing from the Pope at The Vatican on Dec 25, 2023. — AFP



Razi Moussavi



GAZA: Injured Palestinians who were detained by the Zionist military await treatment at Al-Najjar hospital in Rafah on Dec 24, 2023. — AFP



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# Cabinet grateful for global condolences for late Amir

## Amir receives deputy chief of National Guard, ministers

KUWAIT: The Cabinet on Monday thanked leaders from the Gulf Arab region and the world alike for their messages of sympathy following the demise of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. These gestures are a testament to Kuwait's "amicable and historic" relations with the international community, the Cabinet said amid its weekly session presided over by HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

The ministers reminisced about the late Amir's accomplishments during his rule, recalling his great sacrifices and immense contributions towards Kuwait's prosperity and

development, saying his memory will forever live in the annals of the nation's history. The Cabinet went on to congratulate HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on assuming power, wishing him every success as he seeks to keep national development and prosperity on an upward trajectory.

Earlier on Monday, HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal received at Seif Palace Deputy Chief of the Kuwait National Guard Sheikh Faisal Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah. HH the Amir also received First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Sabah. — KUNA



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah chairs a Cabinet session on Dec 25, 2023. — KUNA

In my view

## Kuwaitis: People of goodness and peace



Dr. Khalid A Al-Saleh

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People have characteristics and merits, and many sociologists, including Ibn Khaldun, have explained the differences between various groups. Ibn Khaldun conveyed this idea by stating, "If the soul becomes accustomed to something, it becomes part of it," emphasizing the influence of habits on shaping the nature and characteristics of different peoples. He stressed that when souls become accustomed to certain traits, these traits become integral to their morals and shape their identity.

If Ibn Khaldun were with us today, he might highlight the prevailing spirit and constant characteristic of the Kuwaiti people – their love for goodness and desire to live in peace. He would likely strive to elucidate the reasons behind these overarching characteristics.

The unwavering characteristics of the Kuwaiti people have fostered solidarity and cooperation in their pursuit of goodness and peace, despite occasional competition and conflicts. In times of distress, they stand united, seeking peace and cooperating for the greater good. This unity was notably evident when His Highness the late Amir Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, passed away. The hearts of all Kuwaitis united in prayer for their leader and in mourning his loss, maintaining the peace of their country.

Contrary to misconceptions, Ibn Khaldun would likely argue that elections and relative freedom have not divided the Kuwaiti people. He might assert that sectarianism or tribalism has not corrupted the inherent nature of Kuwaitis. Those who hold such beliefs have not grasped the authenticity of tolerance and the love of goodness deeply embedded in the Kuwaiti people.

The foreign policy of Kuwait reflects the inherent characteristics of its people. The genuine love for goodness has transformed every Kuwaiti, regardless of location, into a beacon of kindness. Kuwaitis, including students abroad, commonly establish funds to assist the needy, showcasing a deep-rooted philanthropic nature that sets the standard for others.

The love for peace guides Kuwait towards a moderate policy in its international relationships. Rather than provoking or antagonizing, the nation aims to spread love and peace, shrugging off insults. This commitment to peace is a defining trait of a state and its people who have adopted goodness and peace as their guiding principles.

May Allah have mercy on His Highness our late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and may Allah bless His Highness our current Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. May his steps bring reform and propagate goodness and peace. Amen.



KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality held inspection campaigns across Kuwait to identify construction violations on Dec 25, 2023. — KUNA



## Municipality cracks down on violations at construction sites

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality on Monday continued its inspection campaigns across the six governorates of Kuwait to identify construction violations, aiming to uphold the security and safety of workers and those overseeing residential construction projects.

Abdullah Al-Jaber, a construction supervisor in the engineering audit and follow-up department at the Capital Municipality, reported the campaign in Jaber Al-Ahmad revealed several serious security and safety violations in ongoing construction projects. As a response, numerous warnings and citations were issued to the responsible contractors.

Among the observed violations were issues related to the implementation of security and safety standards for workers and the areas surrounding the construction sites. An alarming discovery included a fire hazard adjacent to a building under construction, prompting the evacuation of all workers. The responsible contractor was summoned to face legal consequences as per municipal laws and regulations.

Jaber highlighted other violations, such as workers neglecting to wear safety helmets and



failing to adhere to necessary precautions, endangering their safety. These violations are forwarded to the relevant authorities within Kuwait Municipality for further action, following due legal procedures to determine the extent of the violations as specified in the regulations.

He emphasized that these campaigns, conducted throughout the year in all six governorates, are an essential prerogative of Kuwait Municipality. They serve the dual purpose of confirming compliance and sending a clear message to regulatory bodies to enforce the correct laws and regulations, even if it temporarily hinders the construction process. The primary objective is to safeguard the well-being of workers, the security of buildings, and the surrounding areas.

Over the past four months, the Capital Municipal-



ity has issued 52 reports citing violations of building regulations and 16 warnings related to building regulations. Additionally, 14 engineering offices and contractors have faced repercussions for non-compliance with building regulations.

Separately, the supervisory team of the department of public hygiene and road works in Ahmadi governorate took action by removing 17 unauthorized camps in response to a complaint circulating on social media. The Municipality issued a reminder to citizens intending to camp this year, urging them not to set up camps in locations not designated by the Municipality. It emphasized that inspection teams will promptly remove any camps set up outside the specified areas. It called for strict adherence to the regulations and conditions governing the establishment of spring camps. — Agencies



KUWAIT: A student is honored at Kuwait University's fifth exhibition of educational game projects. — KUNA photos



Participants with their edtech project.

## Students' edtech games showcased at KU exhibition

KUWAIT: Under the patronage and presence of the Acting Director of Kuwait University Dr Meshari Al-Harbi, the Department of Curriculum and Teaching Methods at the College of Education organized the fifth exhibition of educational game projects. The event, supervised by Dr Abdullah Al-Failakawi and attended by the Acting Dean of the College of Education Dr Issa Al-Balhan, took place in the lobby of the College of Education in Sabah Al-Salem University City.

Dr Harbi emphasized the significance of incorporating technology into education, highlighting the need to enhance the educational process with modern perspectives for the current generation. Dr Failakawi expressed his satisfaction with the outcome of student projects related to educational games. These projects, covering various subjects and academic levels, aimed to create enjoyable educational tools to enhance the learning experience.

The exhibition showcased innovative and creative ideas from both male and female students, receiving positive feedback and encouragement from visitors. At the end of the event, Dr Harbi, Dr Balhan and Dr Failakawi honored the exhibition participants, expressing gratitude for their efforts and support for students.



## Unauthorized camps removed in Ahmadi

KUWAIT: The supervisory team of the department of public hygiene and road works in Ahmadi governorate took action by removing 17 unauthorized camps in response to a complaint circulating on social media. The Municipality issued a reminder to citizens intending to camp this year, urging them not to set up camps in locations that are not designated by the Municipality. It emphasized that inspection teams will promptly remove any camps set up outside the specified areas. It called for strict adherence to the regulations and conditions governing the establishment of spring camps.



Local

# KFAED grants \$88m to refugees, displaced persons in past 7 years

Fund plays effective role in pushing economic and social progress



Syrian children in Iraq are among the beneficiaries of KFAED's support.

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) has given multiple grants worth \$88.1 million to refugees and the displaced throughout the world between 2016 and 2022. KFAED, one of the Kuwait's main philanthropic body, dedicated substantial grants for cancer patients among refugees and relocated persons, provided diverse healthcare and improved living conditions for distressed people in Syria, Bangladesh, the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Yemen.

The fund's acting director general Waleed Al-Bahar said in an interview with KUNA that the fund's global humanitarian policy is primarily aimed at providing financial assistance for diverse sectors, namely infrastructure, healthcare and education, among others. Elaborating, Bahar said KFAED's policy also aims at helping refugees and people in similar difficult conditions, and victims of conflicts and disturbances as well as natural catastrophes.

Touching on the policy's basic principles, Bahar affirmed that the strategy is broader, covering various aspects, such as giving a hand in efforts to restore peace in troubled areas and attaining sustainable economic and social development. Furthermore, Bahar affirmed that the fund plays an effective role in pushing economic and social progress in Arab and developing countries by providing financial and technical support.

Ahead of preparing aid dispatches, KFAED decision-makers examine areas of dire need for sending urgent assistance. Shedding further light on the work mechanisms, Bahar said they study the needs in such badly-stricken regions. Some of such tasks are done in coordination with relevant UN agencies and other partners. Once the relief supplies have been delivered, the leading person-

nel ensure that they have reached the targeted segments and have proven effective in alleviating their hardships.

In Lebanon, KFAED gave \$1 million to the Children's Cancer Center of Lebanon, which treats Syrian refugee patients, in 2016. The same year, it provided \$9 million for the King Hussein Foundation Cancer Foundation and Center in Jordan. Some \$9 million went for Lebanon's Council of Construction and Development to finance development projects in 2016, and \$1 million was given to King Hussein Cancer Foundation and Center in Jordan in 2017.

In 2017, KFAED earmarked \$1 million to relieve Rohingya refugees living in squalid conditions in Bangladesh, a sum of \$1 million was dedicated for King Hussein Center in 2018, while \$10 million was dedicated for improving living conditions for Syrian refugees in Kurdistan in Iraq in 2018, Bahar told KUNA. He added some \$2 million worth of aid was allotted for the Children's Cancer Center in Lebanon in 2019. Also in 2019, the fund granted \$9 million for building schools for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and sent \$2 million to the King Hussein Foundation in Jordan.

The next year, it granted \$14 million for the Children's Cancer Center in Lebanon and \$2.4 million for relief projects for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In 2020, \$2.6 million went for Syrian refugees in Iraq, in addition to \$2 million for King Hussein Foundation in Jordan the year after. As for the impoverished Rohingya, many living in squalor in haphazardly built camps in Bangladesh, KFAED extended its long and generous hand, relieving them with \$3.7 million in 2021. That same year, it granted \$3.5 million for utilities at the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, followed with \$1.9 million for basic



A KFAED delegation visits a project in Kurdistan in Iraq. — KUNA photos

healthcare for them and \$1.5 million also for them later. Between 2021 and 2022, KFAED granted \$20 million to the UN agency that cares for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), in addition to \$2 million for Yemen. In 2022, \$2.1 million was dispatched for war-afflicted Yemen.

KFAED, the state's main humanitarian agency,

was established in Dec 1961, deemed at the time as the first such foundation in the entire Middle East. Humanitarian aid is part of Kuwait's external policy and officials have affirmed advocacy of "humanitarian diplomacy," Kuwait's exclusive category of diplomacy. The UN had earlier designated Kuwait as the "center of humanitarian action". — KUNA



The Kuwait-funded medical camp for heart patients in the Yemeni city of Mukalla. — KUNA photos



## Yemen hails Kuwait for opening medical camp in Mukalla

**ADEN:** Yemen's Health Minister Qassem Bahaibah on Sunday expressed gratitude for Kuwait's support to the Yemeni people in all domains, especial-

ly the medical sector. This came during Bahaibah's inauguration of a Kuwait-funded medical camp for heart patients in the city of Mukalla in Hadramout governorate. He thanked the Kuwaiti donors who helped open this camp under the supervision of the Kuwait-based Rahma International Society as part of the 'Kuwait by Your Side' campaign.

He appreciated Rahma contributions for this camp and thanked HH the Amir of Kuwait and his government for such efforts. Bahaibah pointed out this camp is considered one of the most

important medical camps, as it provides surgical services mainly for heart patients, alleviating financial burden from families in crisis.

Imad Abdel-Rahim, Vice President of the Yemen-based Altawasil for Human Development organization, which executed the project on behalf of Rahma Society, said the camp aims to carry out 40 operations on patients needing stent placements. The camp is run by cardiac surgery specialists using modern medical techniques at the Pulse of Life Center in Mukalla, he said. — KUNA

## Gaza Ship unloads aid in Arish for entry into Gaza

**CAIRO:** Kuwait Society for Relief (KSR) on Monday announced the complete discharge of Gaza Ship's load of humanitarian aid for Palestinians in Gaza at Al-Arish port in preparation for its entry through Rafah crossing to the Strip. KSR Director General Abdulaziz Al-Obaid told KUNA that the ship, which sailed from the Turkish Mersin port, completely discharged its cargo after docking at Al-Arish port, carrying 1,200 tons of various necessary relief materials.

This humanitarian shipment has about 525 tons of flour, water and basic foodstuff suitable for over a year, and about 75 tons of necessary medical supplies, he added, in addition to 540 tons of shelter and hygiene packages and about 60,000 pieces of winter clothing. Deputy Director General of KSR Omar Al-Thuwaini, also supervisor of the "Gaza Ship" campaign, said that after the ship's cargo is unloaded, it will be brought overland to Gaza via Rafah.

Thuwaini commended the efforts made by ministries in Kuwait, Kuwaiti charitable societies, Turkish Red Crescent (TRC) and those responsible for managing Turkish ports. KSR signed an executive contract with TRC, in which 30 Kuwaiti charitable societies participated, to facilitate operating a ship loaded with necessary relief materials for the people of Gaza. According to the contract, TRC oversaw purchasing relief materials, shipping them to Turkish ports and then unloading them in Egyptian ports to be taken into Gaza through Rafah, while KSR covers more than two-thirds of the total cost for all stages of shipping and management. — KUNA



Kuwait Red Crescent Society inaugurates the Khaled Al-Saqer Model Hospital in Yemen's Taiz governorate. — KUNA photos



## KRCS inaugurates hospital in Taiz

**ADEN:** The Kuwait Red Crescent Society announced the opening of the Khaled Al-Saqer Model Hospital in Taiz governorate in Yemen, during the visit of a Kuwaiti Red Crescent delegation. The hospital, covering an area of 1,335 sq m and comprising two floors, will benefit around 12,000 Yemenis in the Jabal Habashi district as part of the ongoing "Kuwait by Your Side" campaign.

Fares Al-Maliki, the director of Jabal Habashi district, expressed sincere gratitude to Kuwait for their continu-

ous support through projects that address the essential needs of Yemenis across various provinces. He emphasized that the hospital would bring hope and life to people who face challenges due to the distances from central hospitals in Taiz and the resulting pressure on these facilities. Maliki acknowledged the significant impact the project would have on healthcare services in the district.

Anwar Al-Hasawi, Deputy Chairman of the Kuwait Red Crescent Society, leading the visiting delegation, said Kuwait, along with its benefactors, is actively implementing numerous humanitarian and developmental projects in Yemen to improve living conditions and provide necessary medical care. He mentioned that these projects are designed to address the core needs of various segments of Yemeni society, aiming to alleviate their hardships.

Executive Director of "Response Foundation" Tareq Lakman, highlighted the importance of the project in enhancing healthcare infrastructure in the Jabal Habashi region and the entire Taiz Governorate. The hospital is expected to significantly improve healthcare services for patients and contribute to overall healthcare advancement in the area.

The visiting KRCS delegation, including Anwar Al-Hasawi, Abdulrahman Al-Awn, Shahab Al-Kharraz and Fawaz Al-Mazrooei, is set to inaugurate several development projects and monitor the progress of other initiatives in the governorates of Taiz, Shabwa, Hadramout and Marib. The delegation had previously inaugurated the equipped and integrated Yusuf and Nora Health Center in the Al-Masraakh district of Taiz on Saturday. — KUNA



Relief material is unloaded from Gaza Ship in the Egyptian port of Al-Arish. — KUNA



## SACGC to participate in Qatar web summit

**KUWAIT:** The Sabah Al-Ahmad Center for Giftedness and Creativity, part of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS), has announced its participation in Web Summit Qatar, scheduled from Feb 26 to 29. The center is supporting eight Kuwaiti entrepreneurs and startups within the youth category to showcase their projects at this prestigious event.

Director General of the Center Dr Nada Al-Daihani highlighted that Kuwait's presence in this global event, the first of its kind in the Middle East and Africa, serves as a platform to promote and support Kuwait on the map of global innovation and entrepreneurship. It also provides an opportunity to explore the latest innovations in the technology and programming sector.



Dr Nada Al-Daihani

The Qatar Web Summit is a globally recognized technology conference that attracts leaders from the tech industry, investors, and emerging entrepreneurs worldwide. Daihani emphasized that the summit is part of the international events organized by the World Web Summit, joining the ranks of the Lisbon Web Summit, Rio Web Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Collision in Toronto, and RISE in Hong Kong.

The summit is significant for bringing together thousands of entrepreneurs, investors, and international leaders in Doha to foster connections within the technology world. The event serves as a platform for collaboration in the technology sector across regions, including the Middle East, Africa, India, Europe, North and South America and Asia.

Kuwaiti entrepreneurs participating in the summit will have the opportunity to learn from their peers, explore business development strategies, and enhance their innovative capabilities. The event facilitates interactions with founders of technology companies, entrepreneurs, investors, customers and partners from around the world. — KUNA

### Photo of the day



**KUWAIT:** A commercial aircraft flies before the rising waxing gibbous moon on December 25, 2023, two days ahead of the cold full moon. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

# What do domestic workers do to cope being away from loved ones?

## Technology helps alleviate pain of separation and alienation

By Ghadeer Ghoulm

**KUWAIT:** During difficult circumstances that may affect people's lives, some are forced to leave their homelands and families in search of better finances. However, this may come at the cost of emotional challenges, such as feelings of loneliness and alienation. Domestic labor is one of the most prevalent examples of this issue. Recognizing this group and the challenges they may face, and considering that in most cases the circumstances do not allow them to seek the help of psychologists to alleviate their mental state, Kuwait Times spoke to two domestic workers — Gretel and Davy — to learn what they do to alleviate the pain of separation and alienation.

In Kuwait, where a significant number of domestic workers reside away from their families, smartphones have played a crucial role in bridging distances, fostering connections and reducing feelings

of loneliness. Despite the disheartening distance, Gretel is grateful for the revolution of smart devices that keep her in constant link with her family, which facilitates regular communication, providing emotional support.

"It is undeniably depressing to be away from my child and watch him grow through a screen, but I am always reminding myself that I am away from him for a reason," she said. Through video calls, voice messages, and instant messaging applications, domestic workers can stay connected with their loved ones, offering a sense of presence despite physical separation. The ability to witness important milestones, such as birthdays or cultural festivities, uplifts their spirits and ensures they remain engaged in the lives of their families.

On her part, Davy mentioned the significant role that having children plays in the household where she works. There is a little girl who reminds her of her own daughter. Despite the limited connection

between Davy and this girl, Davy takes care of her and worries about her a lot, because she reminds her of her own daughter. "My daughter is around the same age as this 8-year-old girl. One of the most beautiful moments I experience with this girl is when I wake her up from her nap after school so she can eat. I also enjoy the small conversations between us while she is preparing a snack while I finish some work in the kitchen," said Davy.

She added that when she travels, she misses her a lot and always remembers her with a simple gift from her hometown. These individuals may not have the means to receive professional emotional and mental support from therapists, but they seek what helps and comforts them, whether through electronic communication or by forming bonds with people who can sometimes just be children that fill their hearts with a beautiful memory of those who they are separated from them due to circumstances.



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Ahmad Al-Nowaibet with Flare Fitness coaches.

## stc concludes awareness campaign on men's health

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Telecommunications Company — stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, concluded its prostate cancer awareness campaign under the slogan 'Your Health Your Happiness' in line with the international men's health awareness month, November. The campaign launched under the "Because We Care" umbrella comes as an annual initiative organized by stc, aligning with the fundamental goals of the health pillar within its comprehensive CSR framework.

The initiative aimed to spread awareness on prostate cancer while stressing on the importance of performing regular checkups that can detect the disease at an early stage. This initiative comes as part of stc's robust CSR strategy, wherein health is a central theme, demonstrating the Company's unwavering commitment to elevating health standards and fostering a culture of wellness both internally and across the wider community.

stc organized a challenge in collaboration with Flare Fitness to participate in at its booth in Winter Wonderland Kuwait in the presence of Ahmad Al-Nowaibet, PR & Social Media Manager at stc and several Flare Fitness coaches. Winners of the competition got a chance to win one of stc's various gifts, while participating in an initiative that helped educate the public on prostate cancer.

stc extended its heartfelt gratitude to Flare Fitness for their invaluable collaboration in making the prostate cancer awareness campaign a resounding success. This partnership exemplifies the power of collective efforts in addressing critical health issues in the community and around the world. By engaging the community through interactive challenges and educational initiatives, stc reinforced its dedication to nurturing a culture



of wellness and proactive healthcare in Kuwait. These efforts reflect stc's enduring commitment to social responsibility and its ongoing endeavor to positively impact society, further cementing its role as a pioneer in community-oriented initiatives.





Serbian protesters set up road block over alleged vote fraud

## Killing, looting by RSF leave Sudanese villagers in panic

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ZABABDEH: Father Elias Tabban, 50, (center) walks in the Church of Visitation, where the Virgin Mary is believed to have rested during her trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in the predominately Christian village of Zababdeh on Dec 24, 2023 ahead of Christmas Mass. — AFP photos

# West Bank Christian village prays for peace in Gaza

‘Everybody is thinking: When is it our turn?’



Palestinian boy scout Elias Diab, 23, poses for a portrait outside the Church of Visitation.

**ZABABDEH, Palestine:** An unusual silence fell over the streets of Zababdeh, a Palestinian village that is home to one of the biggest Christian communities in the occupied West Bank. On any other Christmas Day, Palestinian Christians would have flocked from surrounding towns to enjoy the fairy lights and a festive market in the village of some 5,000 people.

But as the war rages in Gaza and violence also surges in the West Bank, the Christian community here is in no mood to celebrate Christmas on Monday. This year its members are praying for peace and mourning the dead, worried too about violence even closer to home.

Early on Christmas Day, AFP journalists heard gunfire and sirens in nearby Jenin, the city that has seen near daily raids by the Zionist forces. “How can we celebrate?” said Nazeria Yousef Deabis, 76, who has lived in Zababdeh all her life and never known the atmosphere so somber. There is no Christmas tree in her house.

“People don’t feel festive — they’ve lost friends and relatives in Gaza,” she said. “The occupation is destroying Jenin and children are being brutally killed.” The Zionist army claims its frequent raids in

Jenin, especially on the adjacent refugee camp, target “terrorists”, but the Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah says many of the dead are civilians. Zionist forces and settlers have killed more than 300 people in the West Bank since the start of the war, Palestinian health officials say. The Zionist entity has occupied the West Bank since the Six-Day war of 1967.

### ‘We need peace’

The Zionist entity’s relentless ground and air military campaign in Gaza has killed more than 20,200 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory’s health ministry. The entity claims the bombardment is aimed at destroying Hamas after the Palestinian resistance group launched an attack on southern Zionist communities and military bases on Oct 7. Around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, died in the attack and subsequent Zionist military operation aimed at regaining control of Hamas-targeted communities.

The violence has had a knock-on effect on people’s livelihoods. In Zababdeh’s hushed streets, Gabi Khadar’s Christmas decoration shop is crammed with unsold festive stock — tinsel, boxloads of bau-

bles and more than 20 plastic Christmas trees. Not a single tree has been bought this year.

The 55-year-old Anglican Christian is now in debt and struggling to pay rent. He had to tell his children not to expect big gifts. “My 16-year-old son understands,” Khadar said. “He told me he doesn’t need new trainers this Christmas — he can make do with the old ones.”

Despite the circumstances, some religious services went ahead. Father Elias Tabban, 50, led a solemn mass at the Catholic Church of the Visitation. Hundreds of Palestinian Christians stood in the pews and sang in a show of unity as plumes of incense rose up through the church.

Tabban said the community had been devastated by the war in Gaza. One woman in Zababdeh had lost her two sisters along with their husbands and children when a bomb hit an Orthodox church there, he said. People were also afraid their village could be the next target. “Everybody is thinking: ‘When is it our turn?’” Tabban said. But Christmas offered a chance to rally around Palestinians in need and pray for an end to the violence, he said. “We need peace more than ever before.” — AFP

## Deadly Zionist raids leave Palestinians Jenin camp reeling

**JENIN:** Palestinian Mawaheb Marei is mourning a double tragedy — her relatives suffering and dying in Gaza, and the killing of her teenage son, a victim of the Zionist entity’s frequent raids in the occupied West Bank. “I wish I could wrap him in a coat”, Marei told AFP, like she had done every winter to keep her son, Eid, warm.

The 15-year-old was killed on Oct 25 in a Zionist raid on Jenin refugee camp where the family live in the northern West Bank, said the mother. “Now, it doesn’t matter if I live or die in the raids.” Marei said she had also lost six relatives in the Zionist attack on Gaza.

The Zionist army carries out regular raids on the Jenin camp and adjacent city, often triggering gun battles between troops and Palestinian militants. The army says it is targeting “terrorists” in its raids, but the Palestinian health ministry says many civilians are among the dead.

When Marei heard that her son had been hit, she frantically searched local hospitals, and eventually found him intubated and dying from shrapnel wounds. “So many innocent children have been killed,” she said.

The camp, a stronghold of Palestinian armed groups, was originally built to house Palestinians forcibly displaced during to make way for the Zionist entity’s creation in 1948. It is now home to more than 23,000 people. AFP correspondents in Jenin saw houses in the camp sprayed with bullets, and children’s clothes lying strewn in the wreckage. Zionist forces and settlers in the West Bank have killed more than 300 Palestinians since Oct 7, Palestinian health officials say.

Standing in a bombed-out Jenin mosque strewn



Ghada Marei, mother of 27-year-old Leena Marei (left on the poster) who was killed in Gaza on Dec 10 with her two children Adam (right on the poster) and Layan (left on the poster), stands next to relatives at their home in the Jenin refugee camp.

with shattered tiles, Hani al-Damaj, an elderly Palestinian who lived next door, said he and his relatives were lucky to escape alive when it was hit. A Zionist air strike tore through the Al-Ansar mosque in October, leaving the lower floors a skeleton. Staircases rise into the sky, leading nowhere.

### ‘Our future in Zionist hands’

The Palestinian health ministry said the strike had killed two men, while the Zionist army said it targeted and killed “terror operatives” who used the mosque’s basement as a command center. In Damaj’s bedroom, within touching distance of the mosque, chunks of concrete ripped through the wall, showering the mattress with rubble.

Other camp residents told AFP that some people had been killed in their beds by stray bullets during Zionist operations. In a multi-day raid earlier this month, Zionist forces killed 11 people and a sick 13-year-old boy died after he had been prevented from reaching hospital, Palestinian health authorities said.



JENIN: Hani al-Damaj surveys the damage to his house at the Jenin refugee camp on Dec 23, 2023, after it was damaged by a Zionist military operation in the camp. — AFP photos

Among the wounded was a 27-year-old woman shot in the chest, said the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. The military said at the time that troops had seized dozens of weapons and dismantled multiple bomb-making laboratories. Last month, the Zionist army killed 14 people in the deadliest single raid in the West Bank since 2005, the Palestinian health ministry said.

The Zionist entity has occupied the Palestinian territory since the Six-Day War of 1967. Earlier this month footage showed Zionist soldiers inside another mosque in the camp reciting a Jewish prayer through the loudspeakers, in what the Palestinian presidency called a “shameful desecration”. The army said the soldiers had been taken off duty. Soldiers were also accused of breaking into the nearby Freedom Theatre, where an AFP correspondent saw a trail of damage. “What is this kind of behavior from a soldier?” said the theatre’s artistic director Ahmed Tobasi. “Our life, our future, our sleeping, our breathing — it’s in (Zionist) hands.” — AFP

## Thousands rally against Zionist entity in Morocco

**RABAT:** Protesters marched Sunday through Morocco’s capital in support of Palestinians, calling for an end to the Zionist attack on Gaza. The crowd in Rabat of about 10,000 people denounced what protest leaders called a “war of extermination” as well as the normalization of relations between Morocco and the Zionist entity. The protesters were called to the streets by a disparate group of organizations backing the Palestinian cause, including left-wingers and members the Islamist Justice and Charity movement. They marched along Mohammed V Avenue in the heart of the city, beneath banners declaring “stop the war of extermination in Gaza, stop normalization”.

In 2020, Morocco joined a number of Arab countries in establishing diplomatic and trade relations with the Zionist entity under the US-brokered Abraham Accords. As part of the deal, Rabat received US recognition for its claim to sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. On Mohammed V avenue, numerous protesters wielded banners condemning the “destruction of hospitals” in Gaza and Zionist settlements in the occupied West Bank. Posters called for “free Palestine” and to “save Gaza”.

The crowd chanted slogans lauding the “resistance of the Palestinian people” and directed particular fury at the United States for its support of the Zionist war against Hamas. “When you bomb massively without distinction between military targets and civilians, including babies — that is a genocide. We must call a spade a spade,” said Jihane, a 27-year-old protester. In Rabat, Hachimi Damni, a 62-year-old protester, said he had come to express his opposition to the bombing in Gaza and normalization with the Zionist entity. Public expressions of opposition to the Abraham Accords had been rare before the war in Gaza. Yet it is now a regular feature of the multiple large protests that have swept Morocco since Oct 7, with demonstrators on Sunday chanting that normalization had been “treason”. — AFP



## International

# Killing, looting by RSF leave Sudanese villagers in panic

## Paramilitaries continue rampage south of Wadi Madani: Witnesses

**AL-JAZIRA STATE:** On a countryside road in battle-ravaged Sudan, the hum of a passing vehicle turns villagers' blood cold, fearing the arrival of paramilitaries plundering their way south in their war against the army. "They've created a state of total panic," said Rabab, who lives in a village north of Wad Madani, the Al-Jazira state capital and latest site of fierce battles between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Like others AFP spoke to, she requested to be identified by first name only out of fear of retaliation from fighters who have consistently targeted civilians during more than eight months of war. On Saturday at least eight people were killed by RSF fighters in a village in Al-Jazira state, witnesses told AFP, saying they had been shot after trying to stop their looting.

Just south of Khartoum, more than half a million people had sought shelter in Al-Jazira after the fighting overwhelmed the Sudanese capital. This month, however, paramilitaries pressed deeper into the state and shattered one of the country's few remaining sanctuaries, forcing more than 300,000 people to flee once again, the United Nations said.

Those who remain — unable or unwilling to leave — have found themselves in what the Red Cross has called "another death trap". Since April 15, Sudan has been gripped by a war pitting army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan against his former deputy, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo. By the end of November, at least 12,190 people had been killed in the fighting, according to a conservative estimate from the Armed Conflict and Location Event Data project.

The United Nations says more than

seven million people have been displaced by the war. At least 85,000 had sought refuge in Wad Madani. In the village of Aykura, 30 kilometres (19 miles) north of Wad Madani, one resident told AFP by phone that "the RSF has taken everything — the cars, the trucks, the tractors". He, too, stressed the need for anonymity to protect him from paramilitary violence.

### 'At war with us?'

Before the war, Al-Jazira was a key agricultural hub. However, as the RSF has moved southwards from Khartoum it has taken over swathes of agricultural land and terrorized the farmers that till it. By Saturday, RSF fighters were seen north of Sennar, about 140 kilometers south of Wad Madani, according to witnesses.

The RSF has become notorious for looting property, with civilians who fled watching in horror as fighters posted videos of themselves on social media taking joyrides in stolen cars and vandalizing homes. In the market of Hasaheisa, a town 50 kilometers north of Wad Madani, an AFP correspondent saw shop doors flung open with the merchandise looters had not wanted strewn on the ground.

Omar Hussein, 42, stood in the wreckage of his family business. Every store and vehicle they owned was destroyed. "Is the RSF at war with the army or with us?" he said. On Saturday, fellow Hasaheisa resident Abdin found "seven men in RSF uniform carrying machine guns" at his door. They questioned him about the car in his driveway, "and took it at gunpoint". When Rabab was robbed, she did not receive the courtesy of a knock. "They fired their guns in front of the house, stormed in and left no room unsearched," she said.



GEDAREF: Displaced people fleeing from Al-Jazira state arrive in Gedaref in the east of war-torn Sudan on Dec 22, 2023. — AFP

### Free rein

Home invasions have been a hallmark of RSF takeovers — as have sexual assaults. According to Sudan's Combating Violence Against Women Unit, most sexual violence occurs "inside homes, when gunmen — whom survivors describe as wearing RSF uniforms — break in and assault women and girls". Both the RSF and the army have been accused of a range of systematic violations including indiscriminate shelling

of residential neighborhoods, arbitrary detention of civilians and torture. In Tambul, halfway between Khartoum and Wad Madani, witnesses said RSF members rampaged through one of the state's main markets, shooting into the air at random. And many who tried to flee the onslaught were unable to.

Activists, who risk their lives to document the horrors, said the RSF had set up checkpoints across the state, stopping

civilians as they tried to flee and ordering them to turn back. Three days into the RSF's assault on Wad Madani, the army said it opened an investigation into "the retreat of forces from their positions" in the city. Burhan warned every "negligent and complacent person" would be held to account after the RSF — accused of committing atrocities in the Darfur war where it fought on behalf of the army — had free rein. — AFP

## Iran rejects US claims on Tehran targeting tanker

**TEHRAN:** Iran's foreign ministry rejected Monday as "worthless" Washington's claims that a drone attack targeting a tanker off the coast of India was "fired from Iran". Saturday's targeting of a Japa-

nese-owned chemical tanker came amid a flurry of drone and missile attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the Red Sea in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, where the Zionist entity has killed more than 20,400 people, mostly women and children, since Oct 7. The Pentagon later openly accused Tehran of the attack.

"We declare these claims as completely rejected and worthless," said foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani when asked about the US accusations. "Such claims are aimed at projecting, distracting public attention, and covering up for the full support of the American government for

the crimes of the Zionist regime in Gaza," he added. The Zionist entity claims its relentless ground and air military campaign is aimed at destroying Palestinian resistance group Hamas which launched an attack on southern Zionist communities and military bases nearly 80 days ago. Around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, died in the attack and subsequent Zionist military operation aimed at regaining control of Hamas-targeted communities.

Kanani also slammed as "repetitive" and "threadbare" recent remarks by UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron who branded Iran a "malign

influence in the region and the world" and urged a "set of deterrent measures against" it. The Islamic republic, which supports Hamas financially and militarily, has hailed the Oct 7 attacks as a "success" but denied any direct involvement.

Yemeni rebels' recent attacks on shipping vessels in the Red Sea have prompted major firms to reroute their cargo vessels around the southern tip of Africa, a much longer voyage with higher fuel costs. Iran has repeatedly dismissed US and Zionist accusations that Tehran was involved in attacks by the Houthis, saying the group was acting on its own. — AFP



GAZA: Palestinians inspect damage at the Al-Maghazi refugee camp on Dec 25, 2023 after an overnight Zionist strike. — AFP

## No end in sight to Gaza...

Continued from Page 1

panic in the hearts of my children". The health ministry said 10 members of one family were killed in a Zionist strike in Jabalia camp, northern Gaza, and 18 people died in an overnight bombardment of Khan Yunis in the south. Christmas Day brought no respite, with the army saying it continued its ground, air and sea operations and struck several Hamas targets, including commanders.

Before dawn, a Zionist strike "targeting a house" in central Gaza's Al-Zuwaita area, near Al-Maghazi, killed at least 12 people, mostly women and children, the Gaza health ministry said. In southern Gaza, an AFP correspondent reported heavy bombings through the night in Khan Yunis and Rafah.

Grasping empty containers, dozens of Gazans waited on a street in Rafah for food to be distributed. "Now there is real hunger. My children are dying of hunger," said one of them, Nour Ismail. Vast areas of Gaza lie in ruins and its 2.4 million people have en-

dured dire shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine, alleviated only by the limited arrival of aid trucks. An estimated 1.9 million Gazans have been displaced, according to the UN, many fleeing south and crowded into shelters or makeshift tents in the winter cold.

"A humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza is the only way forward," said the head of the UN refugee agency, Filippo Grandi. The World Health Organization said it led missions to barely functioning hospitals in northern Gaza at the weekend. It described growing desperation and starving people stripping an aid truck of supplies. "Everyone we speak to is hungry," said Sean Casey, a WHO emergency coordinator. "There's the risk of famine."

The Zionist entity lashed out at the UN on Monday over its response to the war. Foreign Minister Eli Cohen accused the world body of "hypocrisy" and said its chief Antonio Guterres "legitimized war crimes", adding his ministry would not extend one UN employee's entry visa and would refuse entry for another.

Netanyahu on Sunday said the war was exacting a "very heavy price" on the Zionist entity's military. The army on Monday announced two more deaths among its ranks, bringing to 156 the number of troops killed since the Zionist entity's ground assault began on Oct 27. — AFP

## World marks Christmas in...

Continued from Page 1

Christmas in Bethlehem, the biblical city in the occupied West Bank. The town did away with its giant Christmas tree, marching bands and flamboyant nativity scene that normally draw tourists, settling for just a few festive lights. In the center of town, a huge Palestinian flag had been unfolded with a banner declaring that "The bells of Bethlehem ring for a ceasefire in Gaza." "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."

Ukraine, invaded by Russia nearly two years ago, this year is celebrating Christmas on Dec 25 for the first time, jettisoning the traditional Orthodox date of Jan 7, which is feted in Russia. "We believe that we really should celebrate Christmas with the whole world, far away, far away from Moscow. For me that's the new message now," said one smiling parishioner in Odesa, Olena, whose son is a medic on the front line.

The date change — moving away from the Julian calendar favored by the Orthodox Church — is part of numerous moves since the invasion to remove traces of the Russian and Soviet empires. The Ukrainian military said that it had shot down 28 of the 31 drones that Russia launched on Christmas Day at its neighbor, with no casualties reported.

Britain's King Charles III echoed the pope's calls for peace in his first Christmas address since being formally crowned monarch in May. Acknowledging the "increasingly tragic conflict around the world", Charles said he prays "that we can also do all in

our power to protect each other". In another first, Charles, a long-term environmental campaigner, delivered the message standing next to a living rather than cut Christmas tree. "To care for this creation is a responsibility owned by people of all faiths and of none," Charles said in the pre-recorded message broadcast on British television at 1500 GMT.

In countries not afflicted by war, festive revelers opened presents and donned the red and white Santa hats for a shot of holiday cheer. In Sydney, Australia, residents and tourists headed to the beach to enjoy the heat of the Southern Hemisphere's summer. In Florida, thousands descended on Cocoa Beach for the annual "Surfing Santas" celebration that raises funds for a charity helping cancer patients travel for treatment and the local surf museum. In Sri Lanka, the president granted an amnesty to more than 1,000 convicts across the country to mark Christmas, prison officials said.

In southern Turkey, much of which was devastated by an earthquake in February, faithful prayed for new beginnings. "It's important for us to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But it's a very sad Christmas," said Vehbi Tadrasgil, a 55-year-old who lost his wife and two of his three children in the quake that killed at least 50,000 people in Turkey and more than 5,000 in neighboring Syria. "I hope that their souls are here, I am certain that our prayers rise to them," he said in front of the ruins of a church in Antakya.

Twenty kilometers away in Samandag, a generator powered the lights on a tree in front of the Saint-Ilyas church, which survived. "After the earthquake, our community — 400 families — was annihilated. With this Christmas, we want to wish everyone rebirth, love, joy and peace. We must move forward, rebuild a new life," said Father Yumurta. "It will be a new beginning," he said. — AFP

## Zionist strike kills senior Iran...

Continued from Page 1

The statement noted that Moussavi was a companion of General Qassem Soleimani, Iran's revered Quds commander who was killed in Baghdad in a US drone strike in 2020. Next week Iran will mark the fourth anniversary of Soleimani's assassination.

Iran's state TV said Moussavi was targeted by "three missiles" and aired footage showing smoke rising from the area of the strike. A Britain-based monitor, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, reported Zionist strikes on positions used by Iranian groups and by Lebanon's powerful Tehran-aligned Hezbollah in the Sayyida Zeinab area. Residents re-

ported hearing loud explosions and seeing columns of smoke rising from farms in the area.

The Zionist entity has launched hundreds of air strikes on its northern neighbor since Syria's civil war began in 2011, primarily targeting Iran-backed forces and Hezbollah fighters as well as Syrian army positions. The Zionist entity, which rarely comments on reported strikes in Syria, has intensified attacks there particularly against Hezbollah since the start of its war against Hamas — also backed by Iran — on Oct 7.

The Islamic republic, which supports Hamas financially and militarily, has hailed the Hamas attacks as a "success" but denied any direct involvement. Iran does not recognize the Zionist entity and has made support for the Palestinian cause a centerpiece of its foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution. — AFP



## International

# Serbian protesters set up road block over alleged vote fraud

## Serbian president condemns attempted 'forcible takeover'; Russia blames west



**BELGRADE:** Opposition supporters gather in front of Belgrade's city council building as police officers stand behind the building's doors during a protest a week after the parliamentary and local elections in Serbia.

**BELGRADE:** Protesters on Monday launched the first of several announced roadblocks in Belgrade over alleged electoral fraud in Serbia's recent parliamentary and local elections, an AFP reporter saw. President Aleksandar Vucic meanwhile denounced the violence in the capital the previous evening and claimed there was evidence it had been planned in advance.

A few hundred demonstrators blocked the street in central Belgrade where the public administration and local self-government ministry is located. The protesters, mainly students organized under the "Borba" (Fight) movement, were supporting the outcry from the opposition that started on December 18th, a day after the elections.

They are calling for a revision of the electoral list, claiming that it was the source of the alleged electoral fraud. "I am born 2002, and I thought that there would be no need, as my parents did, to fight for democracy through the street," 21-year-old politics student Emilija Milenkovic told AFP. "But I have to," she added.

She was wearing the badge of "Otpor", the students' movement that in the past organized protests against former president Slobodan Milosevic. After the Dec 17 elections, Vucic's party said it had secured a commanding victory. But international observers — including representatives from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) — reported "irregularities", including "vote buying" and "ballot box stuffing".

The allegations led to continuous protests in front of Serbia's electoral commission building lasting several days. Seven members of the main opposition camp, united under the banner "Serbia Against Violence", meanwhile began a hunger strike aimed at getting the results annulled.

### Russia blames West

On Sunday evening, Serbian opposition demonstrators broke windows as they tried to storm Belgrade city hall. A heavy police presence pushed them back with the help of pepper spray. Vucic



**Students display a banner depicting Serbian anti-riot police units as they block one of the main streets during a protest in Belgrade, on Dec 25, 2023. — AFP photos**

said two police officers had been "severely injured" during the protest, with others sustaining lighter injuries. More than 35 "bullies" were being prosecuted, he added. He described the incidents as an attempted "forcible takeover of state institutions" and said there was evidence that everything had been prepared in advance.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabic told a local TV station Sunday that the scenario had been known in advance and thanked Russian security agencies "who had information that had shared with us". Early Monday, Vucic met the Russian ambassador in Belgrade Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko and briefed him on the Sunday's incidents.

Shortly before, Russia had denounced what it said was Western interference. "The attempts of the collective West to destabilize the situation in the country are obvious," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told state-run news agency RIA Novosti. A deputy from the opposition "Serbia against Violence" coalition, Radimir Lazovic re-

ported: "Always everyone else is at fault except the government." He said he had been beaten by police during Sunday night's clashes. It was still possible for the crisis to end "if they admit the fraud and cancel the elections", he told AFP.

Serbia and Russia have historically close ties and Belgrade did not join international sanctions against Moscow for its Ukraine offensive. Serbia has however condemned Russia's aggression at the United Nations. Russia's ambassador to Belgrade Aleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko met with Vucic on Monday and accused Western countries of trying to retaliate against the Serbian leader.

"The attempts to destabilize Vucic's power are linked to his firm stance in refusing to join anti-Russian sanctions," he said in a televised interview following the talks. Serbia is almost entirely dependent on Russian gas. Russia also crucially backs Serbia over Kosovo, rejecting its independence and helping shut the former province out of the United Nations. — AFP

## 'I'm a Mandalay girl': Teenage soldier fights on Myanmar's front

**SHAN STATE, Myanmar:** An 18-year-old recruit in one of Myanmar's pro-democracy fighting units prepares to launch a drone strike on junta troops, driven by anger and her mother's call for revolution. Moe Moe is one of hundreds of women training, living and fighting alongside men in the "People's Defense Forces", upending gender norms in the mostly Buddhist country.

She grew up during a rare period of democracy in Myanmar and, after the military ended it with a 2021 coup, joined one of the dozens of PDF units that formed to end the junta's rule. Moe Moe initially worked with a group organizing protests against the military but, after months of the junta's deadly crackdown, decided to become a fighter.

"I can't stand the military's injustice," she said after carrying out the drone strike in Shan state, which neighbors the more populous Mandalay region. "They killed innocent civilians. The main reason I joined was because of my anger." Moe Moe, wearing the group's camouflage fatigues and its red peacock badge stitched onto her arm, said she had friends in the Mandalay PDF who invited her to fight with them. "I was born in Mandalay, I'm a Mandalay girl. So, I joined Mandalay PDF," she said.

Moe Moe, who uses a pseudonym for security reasons, is one of around 100 women in the Mandalay PDF, which has clashed regularly with the junta in Shan state and Mandalay. Moe Moe and other women make up around a third of the group's drone unit, challenging the military's dominance of the skies by flying commercial drones adapted to carry bombs that can be dropped on junta positions.

"If I drop bombs directly onto a military target I feel very good for the rest of that day. It motivates me," she said. "I want more drone missions and to



**This photo taken on Dec 9, 2023 shows female members of the Mandalay People's Defense Forces (MDY-PDF) standing guard at their base camp. — AFP photos**

better show what I can do." Soe Thuya Zaw, a male soldier in charge of drone operations, said his women comrades had proved to be formidable assets. "We believe in the ability of women. When we were thinking how would be best to use the abilities of female soldiers, we decided that they would be most suited to the drone force," he said.

### 'Come back home'

Women in the Mandalay PDF are also performing a range of other duties, including joining patrols and working as medics. Wearing combat trousers and T-shirts, female recruits go for morning jogs along dirt tracks hurried by the sharp blasts of an instructor's whistle. Later they go through a punishing routine of squats and sit-ups before lining up for a meal of rice and meat at the canteen. Women also work in the administration that keeps the Mandalay PDF funded and fed.

At an office table cluttered with laptops and paper, a group of women are busily at work when another whistle blast announces an air raid drill and they run, files in hand, to take shelter in a nearby trench. In another shelter women sit dismantling and cleaning rifles with rags and oil, keeping the group's

precious arsenal of weapons in good order. In recent weeks the Mandalay PDF has joined fighting in Shan state driven by an alliance of three ethnic minority groups. The uptick in clashes means more work for Mandalay PDF's female medical staff. At one health post — consisting of a bed placed outside a house alongside a trolley containing a few bottles — a doctor and nurse change a wounded fighter's dressing.

Back at the camp in the late afternoon sun, several women sit round a campfire, clothes hanging on lines strung between trees and a clutch of rifles resting against a table. Two are on patrol duty and pick up their weapons and head out into the forest as the light dwindles.

They are wearing full camouflage fatigues, plus red lipstick that matches the red badges on their uniforms. As the night settles in, they group by the fire to eat by the light of their phones and talk of home. It is a place Moe Moe often finds herself thinking about, and especially the people she has left behind. "Sometimes I miss home," she said. "But every time I talked with my mum on the phone she told me 'my daughter, we are fine, just come back home after the revolution'. When I remember her words, I am fine." — AFP

## AI could 'supercharge' disinformation during 2024 US election

**WASHINGTON:** From fabricated images of Donald Trump's arrest to a video depicting a dystopian future under Joe Biden, the 2024 White House race faces a firehose of tech-enabled disinformation in what is widely billed as America's first AI election.

Campaigners on both sides of the US political aisle are harnessing advanced tools powered by artificial intelligence, which many tech experts view as a double-edged sword. AI programs can clone in an instant a political figure's voice and create videos and text so seemingly real that voters could struggle to decipher truth from fiction, undermining trust in the electoral process.

At the same time, campaigns are likely to use the technology to boost operational efficiency in everything from voter database analysis to drafting fundraising emails. A video released in June by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's presidential campaign purported to show former president Trump embracing Anthony Fauci, a favorite Republican punching bag throughout the coronavirus pandemic. AFP's factcheckers found the video used AI-generated images.

Other campaign-related examples of AI imagery include fake photos of Trump being hauled away by New York police officers and video of Biden declaring a national draft to support Ukraine's war effort against Russia.

### 'Wild West'

"Generative AI threatens to supercharge online disinformation campaigns," the nonprofit Freedom House said in a recent report, warning that the technology was already being used to smear electoral opponents in the United States. "Purveyors of disinformation are employing AI-generated images, audio, and text, making the truth easier to distort and harder to discern."

More than 50 percent of Americans expect AI-enabled falsehoods will impact the outcome of the 2024 election, according to a poll published in September by the media group Axios and business intelligence firm Morning Consult. About one-third of Americans said they will be less trusting of the results because of AI, according to the poll.

In a hyperpolarized political environment, observers warn such sentiments risk stoking public



**This photo taken on Dec 8, 2023 shows a female member of the Mandalay People's Defense Forces (MDY-PDF) repairing and cleaning a weapon.**

anger at the election process — akin to the Jan 6, 2021 assault on the US Capitol by Trump supporters over false allegations that the 2020 election was stolen from him. "Through (AI) templates that are easy and inexpensive to use, we are going to face a Wild West of campaign claims and counterclaims, with limited ability to distinguish fake from real material and uncertainty regarding how these appeals will affect the election," said Darrell West from the Brookings Institution.

"Game changing"

At the same time, rapid AI advancements have also made it a "game changing" resource for understanding voters and campaign trends at a "very granular level", said Vance Reavie, chief executive of Junction AI.

Campaign staff previously relied on expensive consultants to develop outreach plans and spent hours on drafting speeches, talking points and social media posts, but AI has made the same jobs possible within a fraction of that time. Reavie told AFP.

But underscoring the potential for abuse, when AFP directed the AI-powered ChatGPT to create a campaign newsletter in favor of Trump, feeding it the former president's false statements debunked by US fact-checkers, it produced — within seconds — a slick campaign document with those falsehoods. When AFP further prompted the chatbot to make the newsletter "angrier," it regurgitated the same falsehoods in a more apocalyptic tone. — AFP

## Plane with Indian passengers leaves France after probe

**VATRY, France:** A plane with close to 300 Indian passengers detained near Paris over suspicions of human trafficking took off Monday for Mumbai after being cleared for departure by French police, an AFP reporter said.

The Airbus A340 carrying 303 Indians had been bound for Nicaragua when it was detained last Thursday at Vatry airport, east of Paris, where it had stopped for refueling. It had arrived from Dubai and there was an anonymous tip-off that it was carrying potential victims of human trafficking.

Of the original 303 people on the passenger list, 276 were on the plane that took off just before 3:00 pm (1400 GMT). Among the passengers staying behind were two people questioned by French police over suspected people trafficking, but a judicial source said they had now been released after establishing that the 303 passengers had boarded the plane of their own free will.

Their suspects' release came because "the investigating judge was able to resist media pressure in this case", said their lawyer, Salome Cohen. The others, 25 people of whom two are minors, have sought asylum in France, the prefecture said. Their applications would be processed at Charles-de-Gaulle airport.

After questioning the passengers for two days, French prosecutors on Sunday gave the go-ahead for the plane to leave. A source close to the inquiry told AFP that the Indians were likely workers in the United Arab Emirates who had been bound for Nicaragua as a jumping off spot for the United States or Canada.

The passengers of the flight, operated by Romanian company Legend Airlines, were put up at the airport during the investigation. Beds, toilets and showers were installed, the local prefecture said, while police have prevented press and outsiders from entering the airport. The passengers included 11 unaccompanied minors, according to Paris prosecutors.

The Indian embassy in Paris Saturday posted on X that "embassy consular staff" were on site to work with French authorities "for the welfare" of detained passengers for an "early resolution of the situation".

The authorization for the plane to leave came after a French court ruled that any further detention of three of the passengers would be illegal. But Genevieve Colas, coordinator at the Secours Catholique-Caritas association, said the release of the plane had "surprised" her.

"What if they really are victims of people trafficking," she asked. "Then it wouldn't be right to just let them take off to another country." The 30 crew members were not detained. Some handled the Dubai-Vatry leg and others were to take over for the flight to Managua. According to Flightradar24, Legend Airlines has just four planes. — AFP



## Business

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2023

# Maersk prepares to return to Red Sea under US-led protection

Company says envisions 'chaos in Red Sea' to continue for months



Suez Canal: The Maersk Sentosa container ship sails southbound to exit the Suez Canal in Suez, Egypt, on December 21, 2023.

**COPENHAGEN:** AP Moller-Maersk A/S, the world's second-largest container line, said it's preparing to resume shipping through the Red Sea, thanks to a new multi-national maritime task force to protect vessels from attacks by Houthi rebels from Yemen, Bloomberg reported.

"We are currently working on plans for the first vessels to make the transit and for this to happen as soon as operationally possible," the company said Sunday in an advisory. "While doing so, ensuring the safety of our employees is of the utmost importance and our number one priority in handling the challenging situation in the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden area."

The announcement came just two days after the Copenhagen-based company said it envisions chaos in the Red Sea — caused by drone attacks from Houthis — to continue for months. In its Sunday statement, Maersk said that the creation

of Operation Prosperity Guardian, a maritime task force set up by the US and allies, is "most welcome news for the entire industry." The US and its allies say they are considering possible military action against the Houthis, which are backed by Iran.

Amid worries that the Zionist military's operation in Gaza may spiral into a regional conflict, the US accused Iran this weekend of being behind an attack on a tanker in the Indian Ocean.

Maersk stressed on Sunday that, while resuming transit in the Red Sea, "the overall risk is not eliminated in the area." The company said it would "not hesitate" to re-evaluate the safety situation for its vessels and employees. Houthi attacks on merchant ships have caused widespread avoidance of the southern Red Sea by the merchant fleet moving everything from manufactured goods and grains to oil and gas.

Last week, two more major shipping firms,

Mediterranean Shipping Company and CMA CGM, said they were suspending passage through the Bab al-Mandeb strait after the Yemeni rebel attacks in the area. The announcement by Italian-Swiss giant MSC and France's CMA CGM follows a similar decision Friday by two of the world's largest shipping companies, Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd.

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

Ships belonging to the Zionist entity or heading to its ports "will remain vulnerable to targeting until the aggression stops, the siege on Gaza is lifted, and humanitarian aid continues to flow"

to Gaza, Houthi spokesperson Mohammed Abdul Salam said on X. MSC, one of the world's largest freight shipping lines, said one of its container vessels had been targeted in the Red Sea and it was halting traffic through the strait until it was safe. No one on the MSC Palatium III was wounded but the ship suffered fire damage, the company said. CMA CGM said it had ordered all its vessels to leave the area and stay there until further notice.

The International Chamber of Shipping condemned the Houthi attacks which "threaten the lives of innocent seafarers and the safety of merchant shipping". Diverting Asia-bound shipping from the Red Sea to South Africa's Cape of Good Hope would increase costs and delays, the body noted. Consultancy S&P Global estimated that the detour would increase the distance between Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Singapore by 40 percent. — Agencies

## China's influence in Central America advances at a gallop

**PANAMA CITY:** Anchored in the heart of colonial San Salvador, a towering and expansive library was inaugurated recently by President Nayib Bukele, the latest sign of China's growing influence across Central America. With the Chinese ambassador at his side, Bukele toured the seven-storey building, erected at a cost of \$54 million paid for by China.

The building sprawls over 24,000 square meters (260,000 square feet), and contains gamer and robotics areas, interactive digital screens and both a digital library and shelves containing 360,000 books, the government said.

A day later, the son of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, Laureano Ortega, inspected 250 Chinese-made buses and thanked Beijing for the "special relationship" he asserted was lifting the nation out of poverty.

"The new politics of the region has accelerated China's influence and put distance between the United States and Central America, from the leftist authoritarian Ortega regime to the right-wing authoritarian Bukele regime," Evan Ellis, a researcher at the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, told AFP.

Since Costa Rica switched diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 2007, China has steadily gained ground in Central America, establishing relations with Panama (2017), El Salvador (2018), Nicaragua (2021) and most recently Honduras earlier this year.

"China's efforts in Central America have mostly been driven by an interest in isolating Taiwan," Margaret Myers, a specialist in China and Latin America at the Inter-American Dialogue, told AFP.

In Central America, only Guatemala and Belize are among the dwindling 13 nations that still maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan, a self-governing island that China considers part of its territory. "Central America is part of this isolation effort," said Salvadoran economist Cesar Villalona.



SAN SALVADOR: The China-funded National Library in San Salvador, El Salvador.

Nicaragua ratified a free-trade agreement with China, while El Salvador and Honduras pursue their own trade accords with the Asian giant. Still, commercial trade ties are heavily tilted in China's favor. In Costa Rica, for example, imports from China have reached \$3.35 billion while its annual exports total only \$400 million. El Salvador imports \$2.8 billion while exporting \$48 million, official trade figures show.

"China is very far. Our productive capacity is poor, and shipping costs and insurance rates make it hard to compete on cost. In Nicaragua, the deficit will grow" with the free-trade pact, said Enrique Saenz, a Nicaraguan economist living in exile in Costa Rica. But although these small economies are not commercially important to China, they are along key trade routes.

Panama, crucial due to its cross-isthmus canal, has had Chinese companies involved in the construction of maritime terminals on the waterway, of which China is the world's second largest client, after the United States.

China's largest banks have a presence in Panama's financial center and dozens of Chinese companies offer goods in the Colon Free Zone (at the Atlantic terminus of the canal). Panama's former vice foreign minister, Luis Miguel Hincapie, told AFP. Myers stressed that Central American countries "represent a notable market for Chinese tech exporters." — AFP

## Tokyo shares rise in quiet Christmas trade

**TOKYO:** Tokyo stocks advanced Monday in thin Christmas trading, following gains by US tech shares last week. The benchmark Nikkei 225 index added 0.26 percent, or 84.98 points, to 33,254.03, while the broader Topix index edged up 0.04 percent, or 0.97 points, to 2,337.40.

While trading slowed heading into Christmas, global investors generally continued to buy shares in the belief that the US economy will achieve a "soft landing" and that the Federal Reserve may turn to rate cuts in the coming year, Nomura Securities said. Many markets were expected to stay quiet over the Christmas holiday period, with stock markets throughout most of Asia closed on Monday.

Some players may be looking for an opportune time to sell stocks, as US shares have gained steadily

in recent weeks, Nomura added. High-tech shares attracted buyers after the Nasdaq advanced last week, while players also cheered the forex market regaining relative calm, IwaiCosmo Securities said.

"The market opened higher in the morning, but it gradually came to face selling pressure as investors sold their shares to adjust positions with only a limited number of participants," the brokerage said. The relative strength of Shanghai shares provided support for Tokyo shares, it added. The Shanghai Composite Index shed earlier losses and ended up 0.14 percent or 4.04 points to 2,918.81. The Taiwan Weighted Index edged up 0.05 percent, or 8.21 points, to 17,604.84.

Among major Tokyo shares, Toyota added 0.83 percent to 2,537 yen. SoftBank Group rose 1.25 percent to 6,099 yen. Sony Group added 1.04 percent to 13,120 yen. Nintendo gave up earlier gains and fell 0.17 percent to 6,934 yen. Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group also lost 0.74 percent to 1,207 yen. Energy developer Inpex rose 0.29 percent to 1,934 yen. Uniqlo operator Fast Retailing firmed 0.62 percent to 35,830 yen. — AFP



TOKYO: People take pictures with Christmas light installations in Tokyo on December 23, 2023. — AFP



## Business

# In tiny US community, big questions about chemical recycling

## Residents fear 'air pollution, water pollution, toxic chemicals'



**POINT TOWNSHIP:** The confluence of the West Branch of the Susquehanna and the Susquehanna River is seen from Shikellamy State Park Overlook just downriver from Point Township, Pennsylvania on October 30, 2023. — AFP photos



**Annmarie Weber** stands on the porch of her home overlooking the land where Texas firm Encina plans to build a chemical recycling plant for processing plastic materials, near the Susquehanna River in Point Township, Pennsylvania, on October 30, 2023.



**A group of local citizens** who formed the Save Our Susquehanna advocacy group over concerns about the impact of the proposed Encina chemical recycling plant on their community and the Susquehanna River, display signs in Point Township, Pennsylvania, on October 30, 2023.

**POINT TOWNSHIP:** On the banks of the Susquehanna river in rural Pennsylvania, a quiet, unassuming plot of land is the unlikely backdrop for a simmering debate over chemical recycling, a controversial process for dealing with plastic waste.

The technology promises to transform hard-to-recycle containers, food packaging, lids, mailers and endless other items into usable petrochemicals and is championed in particular by the plastic-producing fossil fuel industry.

But environmentalists call it a diversion endorsed by those with a vested interest in promoting plastic's continual use—counter to the key priority of reduction. Residents near the Pennsylvania plot meanwhile have their own concerns: The brush-covered terrain is the proposed site for the chemical recycling plant by a Texas-based company called Encina and has left those living nearby afraid of toxic contamination.

"They are acting as a refinery," Point Township resident Annmarie Weber told AFP from her kitchen about a half mile from the site, adding that she fears "air pollution, water pollution, toxic chemicals."

Unlike standard mechanical recycling, chemical recycling uses heat and chemical solvents to break plastic down into its most basic petrochemical building blocks. According to Encina's chief sustainability officer Sheida Sahandy, chemical recycling offers a valuable solution to turn "what was trash into a productive material"—a critical task as oceans and landfills fill up with plastic.

The raw materials created by chemical recycling can be used to make a variety of products like more plastic—but also fuel. While Encina says it won't produce fuel, many chemical recycling facilities do. Creation of fuel, says the nonprofit Beyond Plastics, only perpetuates "a cycle of petrochemical extraction, plastic production and burning."



**Local resident Conrad Whyne** stands on the front lawn of his childhood home, across the road from the site where Texas firm Encina plans to build a chemical recycling plant for processing plastic materials, in Point Township, Pennsylvania, on October 30, 2023.

According to Veena Singla, senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council, chemical recycling plants are often "permitted to release health-harming air pollution. And many of them are large-quantity hazardous waste generators as well."

### 'Indistinguishable materials'

Only nine percent of US plastic waste is recycled annually, according to latest government figures from 2018 -- with the majority of plastic ending up in landfills, incinerated or littered, including multitudes of single-use items.

At ExxonMobil, which has a chemical recycling plant inside its sprawling Baytown, Texas petrochemical complex, senior sustainability advisor Melanie Bower says the process is "a technology that's complementary to mechanical recycling."



**Associate Professor and Chair of Environmental Studies and Sciences Andrew Stuhl** poses for a portrait in his Bucknell University office in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, on October 30, 2023.

ExxonMobil's facility is one of only 11 US chemical recycling plants constructed, according to an October report by Beyond Plastics, which said the small number is indicative of a process that is "energy-intensive, expensive, and infeasible." Even if all 11 were operating at full capacity, the report said, they would handle less than 1.3 percent of US plastic waste generated per year. Exactly how each facility operates and precisely what it produces varies.

At ExxonMobil, raw materials produced by chemical recycling are mixed with raw materials derived from fossil fuels to become "indistinguishable from one another," Bower told AFP. While ExxonMobil uses the mixed materials to make things like new plastics, chemicals, alcohols and transportation fuels, it attributes the recycled content to "certified circular plastic."

Beyond Plastics alleges flexible accounting at some chemical recycling plants could mean plastics with minimal recycled content are unfairly labeled as recycled. From Dow to the American Chemistry Council industry group, corporate behemoths have thrown their weight behind chemical recycling. It's in the petrochemical industry's best interest to convince consumers: "Hey, we have a sustainable, green way to manage plastic waste," Singla said. "A really critical solution is: We need less plastic, period."

### Public resources

Back in Point Township, residents say they are alarmed by plans to use large amounts of river water to wash plastics before returning it to the Susquehanna. When the water goes back it "will have had a filtration process that it wouldn't otherwise have," Encina's Sahandy said. "And we have to comply with all sorts of requirements for making sure there's nothing sort of harmful in there."

But according to the company and local experts, there are no regulations that would apply to the plant on microplastics and PFAS "forever chemicals"—common additives in plastic that do not easily break down and have been linked to cancer, fertility issues and environmental damage.

On top of that, among the petrochemicals produced by Encina is benzene, a known carcinogen which residents fear could be released in the event of an accident or disaster, like flooding of the Susquehanna. When a company "proposes to use public resources like air, water and soil, it's only fair that their track record and the proposal is heavily scrutinized," Andrew Stuhl, chair of environmental studies and sciences at nearby Bucknell University told AFP. "I'm firmly on the side that there are way too many risks and unknowns." — AFP

## 'Doom for forests': Fears over new Cambodia land grants

**PREAH VIHEAR:** Eam Orn kneels in a forest in northwest Cambodia, pressing his hands together before an offering of bananas studded with smoking incense, and prays for the return of his land. He is one of hundreds of thousands affected by economic land concessions (ELCs) -- land grants to businesses that experts say have driven deforestation and dispossession.

From 2001 to 2015, a third of Cambodia's primary forests—some of the world's most biodiverse and a key carbon sink—were cleared, and tree cover loss accelerated faster than anywhere else in the world, according to the World Resources Institute.

The government halted ELCs in 2012, but a new grant has raised fears the moratorium could be over, even as Cambodians like Orn struggle with the policy's legacy. "If the state wants to compensate me with money, I don't want it," the wiry farmer told AFP in some of the last remaining forest near his village, Praeus K'ak. "I only want my land." Orn, of Cambodia's ethnic Kuy people, lives surrounded by more than 40,000 hectares (99,000 acres) of ELC. He lost eight hectares when the government granted it to subsidiaries of China's Hengfu Group in 2011, for a sugar processing facility touted as one of Asia's largest.

It was supposed to employ thousands,

but today its chimney stacks stand silent behind locked gates, and air blows in through broken windows. Reached by phone, a Hengfu employee in China confirmed the factory was closed, but said only top-level management knew why.

Cambodia formalized ELCs in 2001 with legislation allowing recipients to clear land for "industrial agricultural exploitation". Large tracts have, however, been handed to rubber, sugar and paper firms since at least 1993, according to the United Nations. A lack of transparency makes the scale hard to quantify, though Cambodian rights group LICADHO has tracked at least 313 concessions, covering more than 2.2 million hectares.

### 'All gone'

The country's protected areas, where commercial development is legally prohibited, have not been spared. ELCs covered 14 percent of them by 2013, according to NGO Forest Trends. Rampant deforestation in Cambodia predates ELCs, but the concessions have been a "predominant driver" since their introduction, according to a 2022 study in journal Scientific Reports that found a clear correlation between forest loss rates and ELC expansions.

And deforestation is not the only consequence. "Wherever there are ELCs,

there are (land) disputes," Pen Bonna, coordinator for rights group ADHOC in Preah Vihear province, told AFP. Cambodia's land records were largely destroyed by the communist Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s and after its fall people often settled without legal title. The 2001 law offered a path to ownership, but the complex process means few have obtained it, leaving villagers like Orn vulnerable to land grabs, despite frequent condemnation by rights groups and the UN.

"My family's livelihood and income has gone down... I'm older and can't work as a laborer," the father of seven said. He took out bank loans for food and clothing, and even worked at the sugar factory before it closed. "If we did not go, we had nothing to do." Thoeun Sophoeun, 29, also took out loans after losing around six hectares of farmland and access to the surrounding forest that once provided crucial additional sustenance. "We could enter the forest and easily bring meat and food back home but now it's all gone," said the mother of two.

### 'Farm with fear'

ELCs were long enthusiastically championed by former Cambodian leader Hun Sen as a way to bolster the country's economic development. "More Cambodians will be rich. I want to see more Cambodian millionaires. There are many of them in China," he said at the opening of a sugar factory on an ELC in 2012.

But that same year, faced with growing land conflicts and admitting the risk of a "farmers' revolution", Hun Sen announced



**PREAH VIHEAR:** This photo taken on December 6, 2023 shows workers plowing with tractor at the site of an economic land concession outside Praeus K'ak village in Preah Vihear province. — AFP

the ELC moratorium. He pledged the government would seize land from firms who cleared trees for sale or failed to develop their plots.

In Praeus K'ak, little has changed. Since the factory closed, villagers including Orn and Sophoeun have crept back onto farmland. "We farm with fear, because the state has not made any announcement," said Sophoeun. "We don't know whether they will come and take it back."

Locals say some company workers have leased plots to outsiders to farm, violating the ELC agreement, but the government has not acted. In January,

LICADHO sounded the alarm over what it called a new ELC, citing a March 2022 letter authorizing the transfer of nearly 10,000 hectares in northeastern Stung Treng province.

### 'Lost forever'

Locals told AFP that land has already been seized for a road, and described intimidation and the arrest of a villager who challenged the concession. "They don't let us grow anything," said Tha, who asked not to be identified by his full name to avoid retaliation. "They have threatened to arrest us one by one."

Licadho operations director Am Sam Ath said the group had identified other new land grants, including inside Botum Sakor National Park. "Now they use words like long-term lease," he said. But "it is similar to ELCs". He warned of "doom for forests" if the policy resumes, with little hope of transparency or monitoring.

Government officials from several ministries responsible for ELCs did not respond to AFP's request for comment. The drive for continued concessions comes despite evidence ELCs offer little economic benefit for the average Cambodian or state coffers. In 2022, the country's then-agriculture minister admitted that fewer than a million hectares of ELC were active, and the government was earning just over \$2 million in annual rent. — AFP



**This photo taken on December 6, 2023** shows villager Eam Orn splitting firewood at his home in Praeus K'ak village in Preah Vihear province.



**This photo taken on December 6, 2023** shows villagers praying in front of an ancient shrine in Praeus K'ak village in Preah Vihear province.



# Gulf Bank 2023: Pioneering sustainability and community engagement

Through a diverse array of initiatives, events and partnerships



Gulf Bank and INJAZ recognize the champions of the Company Program competition.



A group picture taken post-Iftar with individuals from the Ministry of Interior.



Distribution of Iftar meals.



Remarkable turnout witnessed at Gulf Bank's booth during Qout Market.



Ahmed Al-Amir speaking at COP28.

**KUWAIT:** In 2023, Gulf Bank, driven by its commitment to uphold sustainability principles, achieved significant milestones that brought it closer to the community. The bank stood out for its diversity in organizing a variety of programs and events tailored to meet the aspirations of the public and customers.

Ahmed Al-Amir, Deputy General Manager of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, expressed pride in the bank's continuous efforts to engage with the community at large, and its customers specifically. He highlighted the bank's dedication to being present and involved in various occasions, whether through direct interactions or across the bank's diverse social media channels.

Aligning with its five-year strategy, Gulf Bank showcased a distinctive model of sustainability in 2023. This initiative aimed to support sustainability on both environmental and community fronts, through thoughtfully selected and well-defined initiatives that bring tangible benefits to the community.

Al-Amir further elaborated on the achievements of the Corporate Communications Department, emphasizing the bank's excellence in fulfilling its social responsibilities. These accomplishments were evident in various aspects, encompassing:

#### 2024/2030 Sustainability Report and Strategy

Gulf Bank has launched its third annual Sustainability Report for the year 2022, highlighting a multitude of accomplishments in the areas of environmental, social, and governance (ESG). Concurrently, the bank is introducing its Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Strategy for the years 2024 to 2030, which will function as the primary framework steering the bank's future sustainability initiatives.

#### Involvement in the UN Climate Change Conference (COP28)

Gulf Bank took part in the State of Kuwait pavilion at the 28th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP28), part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Dubai from November 30 to December 12, 2023. The conference drew a substantial audience of over 70,000 participants from 198 countries, encompassing heads of state, government leaders, ministers, corporate officials, representatives from international organizations, academics, and media professionals.

#### Gulf Bank's Vision for Environmental Sustainability

In its commitment to reinforcing sustainability principles, Gulf Bank is set to launch its Environmental Sustainability initiative. The objective is to change societal norms to favor the use of reusable bags, in partnership with five of Kuwait's largest cooperative societies.

#### A Long-Term Partnership with INJAZ Kuwait

Celebrating a 17-year partnership, INJAZ Kuwait recognizes Gulf Bank, along with various institutions and companies supporting its initiatives aimed at equipping young individuals with essential skills for the job market. The collaboration focuses on nurturing a new generation of entrepreneurs.

INJAZ Kuwait recently revealed the winners of its annual competition, sponsored by Gulf Bank, with "Raskla" receiving the Best Student Company Award

in the university students' category and 'B-one' obtaining the same award in the high school students' category. Gulf Bank has committed to sponsoring the training of both winning companies in the 2023 Company Program competition, enabling them to represent Kuwait in the regional INJAZ competition held in Qatar, featuring participants from 14 Arab countries.

#### Sponsoring the Influencer Program

In its ongoing commitment to youth empowerment, Gulf Bank concluded its sponsorship of The Influencer program, organized by LOYAC Academy of Performing Arts (LAPA) – an affiliate of the non-profit organization LOYAC.

This initiative is designed to offer valuable training opportunities, equipping young individuals with essential mass communication skills, and preparing them to emerge as influential leaders in the future. The program focuses on imparting fundamental principles of effective communication, enhancing presentation skills, and cultivating the ability to create professional content.

#### Oud Fashion Talks Conference

For the second consecutive year, Gulf Bank orchestrated the second edition of the Oud Fashion Talks conference. The occasion extended over a two-day period at the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre, showcasing the involvement of both international and Kuwaiti designers. The primary objective of the conference was to enhance the capability of Kuwaiti designers in capturing the attention of their global counterparts through the brilliance and allure of their designs.

This year, the bank made significant efforts to improve the conference by increasing the number of participating designers and introducing workshops for the exchange of experiences between international and Kuwaiti designers. These efforts are geared towards assisting young designers in gaining fresh insights, ensuring they stay updated on the latest developments in renowned fashion houses worldwide.

#### GB Fit Sports Week

As part of its continuous commitment to promoting community sustainability and fostering healthier lifestyles, Gulf Bank successfully wrapped up the Ramadan GB Sports Week event at Al-Shaheed Park. The week-long event witnessed a significant turnout from the public, offering them an ideal opportunity to engage in exercise activities under the guidance of highly qualified trainers while enjoying the splendid weather.

#### Ramadan Food Baskets (Majla) Distribution

As part of its strategic partnership with the Kuwait Food and Relief Bank, Gulf Bank has distributed Ramadan food baskets (Majla) to families in need facing challenging living conditions. This initiative highlights the bank's notable commitment to social responsibility and aligns with its leading role in promoting the principles of sustainability within society.

#### Distribution of Iftar Meals

In collaboration with the Kuwait Food and Relief Bank, Gulf Bank distributed Iftar meals to those in need across specific areas of Kuwait. The initiative aims to

bring joy to the hearts of individuals facing challenges, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan.

#### Distribution of Electrical Appliances

Gulf Bank actively engaged in a humanitarian campaign led by the Red Crescent Society, by distributing electrical appliances to families facing economic challenges across Kuwait. This active involvement highlights the bank's commitment to promoting community sustainability, supporting the initiatives of civil society organizations in assisting underprivileged families, and fostering joy in households in need, especially during the holy month of Ramadan.

#### Easing the Burden of Debtors

As a part of its charitable endeavors during the holy month of Ramadan, Gulf Bank took part in the "Closest First" campaign, organized by the Takaful Charity Foundation, for the second consecutive year. The initiative aims to alleviate the distress of debtors facing economic challenges, burdened with debts and struggling due to their financial circumstances.

#### "Nuqsat Al-Khamees"

For the third consecutive year, as part of a series of diverse community events and initiatives during the holy month of Ramadan, Gulf Bank hosted "Nuqsat Al-Khamees" in collaboration with numerous Kuwaiti restaurants and bakeries. The event aimed to revive this authentic Kuwaiti tradition, strengthen the bank's ties with the community, and, on the other hand, support SMEs by assisting them in marketing their products.

#### Distribution of Refreshments After Ramadan Qiyam Prayers

As a part of its community-driven initiatives, Gulf Bank took the lead in distributing water bottles and refreshing cold beverages to worshippers in several mosques after performing Qiyam prayers in the last ten days of Ramadan.

#### Iftar Gathering with the Ministry of Interior

Recognizing the crucial role played by the men of the Ministry of Interior in ensuring community safety, Gulf Bank participated in a Ramadan Iftar with the General Directorate of the Coast Guard Base in Fintas. The event served as an expression of gratitude to all men of the Ministry of Interior, acknowledging their exceptional contributions in safeguarding the community. It highlighted their unwavering readiness to fulfill their national duty under any circumstances.

#### GB Masterclass Series

Gulf Bank continued to advance the GB Masterclass series, collaborating with experts in diverse fields such as cooking, photography, flower arrangement, design and style, Arabic calligraphy/writing, and other subjects of interest to the public and customers. Each session spanned a continuous two hours.

#### The Off-Road Challenge

In a commitment to reinforce the principles of social sustainability and its ongoing support for youth, Gulf Bank initiated the second edition of the Off-Road Challenge. Numerous young SUV enthusiasts partici-

pated, given the opportunity by Gulf Bank to indulge in their favorite sport. The event offered a platform for them to savor the thrill of challenges and competitions, all while competing for valuable prizes.

#### Sponsorship of the Kuwait Track Challenge Event

Gulf Bank played a pivotal role as the primary sponsor for the second edition of the Kuwait Track Challenge event, conducted at Kuwait Motor City over a span of two days, attracting the participation of 40 competitors.

#### Qout Market Sponsorship

Gulf Bank continued its commitment to supporting entrepreneurs and SMEs by serving as the main sponsor of Qout Market, the largest market in Kuwait that brings together local farmers, craftsmen, and food enthusiasts in one place. The event attracted more than 15,000 visitors.

#### Coral Donation to the Environment Public Authority

In its commitment to promoting environmental sustainability, Gulf Bank contributed by donating a quantity of corals to the Environment Public Authority for recycling. The corals were subsequently transported to the Jahra Reserve, highlighting the significance of their reuse in environmental preservation. This initiative further enhances the reserve's ability to function as an ideal environment for wildlife.

#### Recycling Electronic Waste

Aligned with international standards and guidelines for environmental protection, the bank securely disposed of approximately 22.3 tons of e-waste over two years, with 18 tons processed in the last year. This electronic waste encompassed items such as tablets, printers, monitors, keyboards, phones, servers, switches, wires, and various metals.

#### Continuous Support for the Diraya Campaign

For the third consecutive year, Gulf Bank continued to support the "Let's Be Aware" (Diraya) campaign by familiarizing its customers with secure avenues for savings and investment. The bank also provided education on the risks of electronic fraud through various channels, including social media, its website, and diverse media outlets.

#### Effective Utilization of Social Media Channels

Gulf Bank presented its innovative approach to social media at a regional conference organized by social media management expert, SprinklR. The event included representatives from several international companies and platforms, including Meta, TikTok, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. These platforms provided insights into the latest updates and new features that companies and business owners can leverage to connect with their audiences in a meaningful and engaging manner.



GB Fit event held during Ramadan.



Distribution of electrical appliances to needy families in Kuwait.



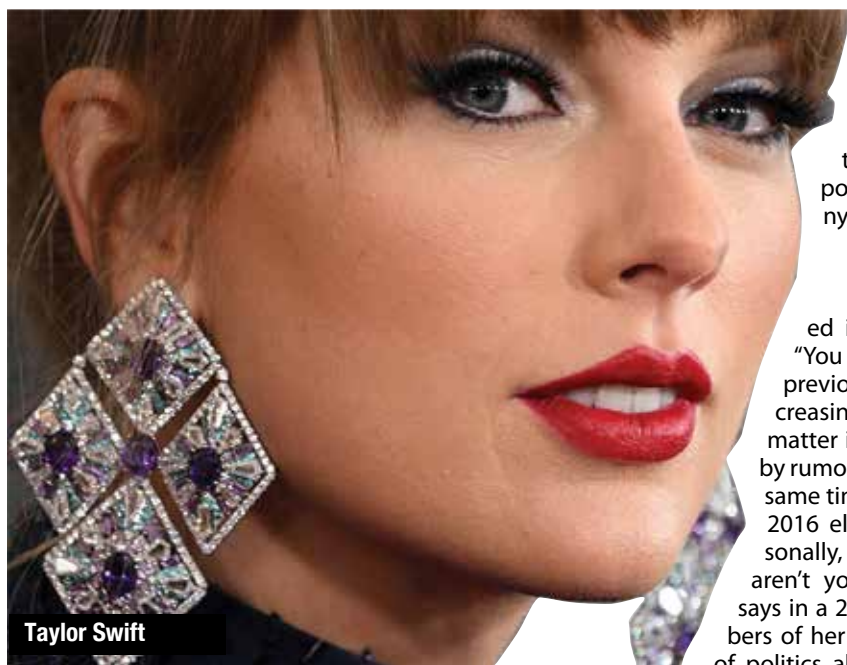
Wide participation witnessed at the off-road challenge.



Ahmed Al-Amir



# Swifties to the polls? Why eyes are on Taylor ahead of 2024



Taylor Swift

alone. Swift's 2020 endorsement of Biden, and her knack for using non-partisan campaigns to register her "Swiftie" superfans to vote, doesn't mean that politics comes without scrutiny for the superstar.

## Polarized political era

As America has descended into hyperpartisanship, the "You Belong With Me" singer's previously apolitical stance increasingly came under fire — no matter if the frenzy was fed mostly by rumor and on social media. At the same time, staying silent during the 2016 election bothered Swift personally, she would later say. "These aren't your dad's Republicans," she says in a 2020 documentary, as members of her team press her to stay out of politics ahead of the 2018 election, warning it could "halve the number of people that come to your next tour."

Nevertheless, she came out of the woods to endorse the Democratic Senate candidate in the state of Tennessee, where the Donald Trump-endorsed Republican ended up winning. As the country's division under the Trump presidency continued to pose a challenge to her — and other celebrities' — carefully curated, mass-appealing images, she endorsed Biden, castigating Trump for "stoking the fires of white supremacy and racism."

The key difference between then and now, perhaps, is just how much Swift — already a megastar — has seen her stature grow as she breaks music records, graces magazine covers and sees the press follow every detail of her increasingly public personal life.

## Swifties as a voting bloc?

Her fans are mostly young women who have come of age in America's hyperpolarized political era — and make up a key Democratic voting bloc. But

As Joe Biden's poll numbers flag ahead of next year's election, it might seem obvious for the president to look to the pop-star billionaire who endorsed him in 2020, and whose every move is endlessly cataloged by US media. It's a fact his campaign knows all too well. "Please do not tell us that we need a Taylor Swift strategy. We are tracking," quipped a recent communications job advertisement for his 2024 reelection bid.

And yet, in the highly polarized US political and media landscape, everything the superstar singer does or doesn't do is likely to invite a simultaneous deluge of praise and firestorm of fierce criticism. Swift, recently named Time magazine's Person of the Year, is viewed favorably by 70 percent of Americans — the sort of numbers that any president would kill for.

Perhaps none more than Biden, whose approval ratings recently dipped to 39 percent — the lowest of any recent US leader at this point in their presidency, according to polling firm Gallup, and also the fifth time his ratings fell below 40 percent in this year



The home of Amy and Brian Scott is decorated for Christmas in a Taylor Swift theme on Dec 14, 2023 in Naperville, Illinois.

Biden's numbers have dipped among the country's youth, especially as his administration has staunchly backed the Zionist entity in its war against Hamas. Swift, meanwhile, recently attended a fundraiser for aid for Palestinians, 20,000 of whom have died amid the conflict in Gaza begun when Hamas militants broke through the territory's border and killed 1,140 people.

According to a recent Harvard poll, the percentage of Americans aged 18-29 who "definitely" plan on voting for president has decreased from 57 percent to 49 percent, compared to those surveyed at this time in 2020. This is where Swift might have an impact. "I don't think the way these work is that when people see, oh, Taylor Swift endorsed Joe Biden, and they say, 'Well, that's who I'm going to vote for,'" Matthew Harris, a political science professor at Park University, told AFP.

"It's more along the lines of her ability to mobilize

people, to encourage people to register to vote," he added, noting that "these are people who may already be predisposed, or likely to vote, for Joe Biden." And in a tight election, as many predict 2024 will be, "those suburban areas... are really kind of the swing areas of American politics."

The often tight-lipped Swift has already quietly given a nod toward Biden's 2024 run, approving her song "Only The Young" to be used in a pro-Biden ad in October. There's clearly no bad blood between Swift and Biden, but the president's entreaties to US youth might go over better if he could remember the name of America's most popular musical artist. The 81-year-old last month mixed up Swift with pop star of yore Britney Spears. Such a gaffe could perhaps make him relatable to the average Swiftie's parents — and after all, they vote, too. — AFP

## AI-assisted piano allows disabled musicians to perform Beethoven



Yurina Furukawa, who has a rare muscle condition called congenital myopathy and requires breathing assistance, plays an AI-powered piano.

Inside the wood-paneled auditorium of one of Tokyo's most prestigious concert halls, 24-year-old Kiwa Usami presses just one index finger to the piano and summons the colossal swells of Beethoven's Ode to Joy, accompanied by an orchestra and choir. Usami, who has cerebral palsy, was one of three musicians with disabilities performing Symphony No. 9 with the Yokohama Sinfonietta at Suntory Hall on Thursday using an artificial intelligence-powered piano.

To assist players, the "Anybody's Piano" tracks the notes of the music and augments the performance by adding whatever keys are needed but not pressed. Usami, who started playing piano while in elementary school, helped inspire the AI program. Her dedication to practicing with one finger prompted her teachers to work with Japanese music giant Yamaha.

The result of their collaboration was a revised version of Yamaha's auto-playing piano, which was released in 2015. Thursday's Christmas performance was the first such concert. "It's a really powerful experience to play with an orchestra," 10-year-old Yurina Furukawa told AFP after a rehearsal on Wednesday. The "Anybody's Piano" allowed Furukawa, who has a rare muscle condition called congenital myopathy and requires breathing assistance, to perform

from a bed stationed in front of the grand piano.

Keeping rhythm by moving her left arm, she powerfully pressed the keys with the back of her right hand, with the AI-assisted piano filling in the notes to complete the performance. Unlike more traditional auto-play, the "Anybody's Piano" stops if a player hits the wrong notes. "When I miss a key or slow down, I feel the pressure from the piano to go on and press the right key," said performer Hiroko Higashino, 39.

Higashino, who was born with three fingers on her right hand, only began learning to play piano after the "Anybody's Symphony No. 9" concert program was announced. "If the piano helps me and adds two missing keys for me, I can more faithfully recreate the rich harmony, the music that Beethoven intended to express," she said.

Members of the 130-person audience described the Christmas performance as uplifting. "I haven't had such a heart-trembling experience like this for a long time," said Teruko Imai, a concertgoer in her 60s. "It was the best Christmas present for me." Another attendee, Koki Kato, 16, said she was "so touched." "The piano makes it possible for anybody to perform, which is a very good thing for music too." — AFP



This picture taken on Dec 21, 2023 shows Kiwa Usami, who has cerebral palsy and performs with one index finger, playing an AI-powered piano during a Christmas concert rehearsal of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Yokohama Sinfonietta orchestra in Tokyo. — AFP photos



Hiroko Higashino, who was born with three fingers on her right hand, plays an AI-powered piano.

## Artists use tech weapons against AI copycats

Artists under siege by artificial intelligence (AI) that studies their work, then replicates their styles, have teamed with university researchers to stymie such copycat activity. US illustrator Paloma McClain went into defense mode after learning that several AI models had been "trained" using her art, with no credit or compensation sent her way. "It bothered me," McClain told AFP. "I believe truly meaningful technological advancement is done ethically and elevates all people instead of functioning at the expense of others."

The artist turned to free software called Glaze created by researchers at the University of Chicago. Glaze essentially outthinks AI models when it comes to how they train, tweaking pixels in ways indiscernible by human viewers but which make a digitized piece of art appear dramatically different to AI. "We're basically providing technical tools to help protect human creators against invasive and abusive AI models," said professor of computer science Ben Zhao of the Glaze team.

Created in just four months, Glaze spun off technology used to disrupt facial recognition systems. "We were working at super-fast speed because we knew the problem was serious," Zhao said of rushing to defend artists from software imitators. "A lot of people were in pain."

Generative AI giants have agreements to use data for training in some cases, but the majority if digital images, audio, and text used to shape the way super-smart software thinks has been scraped from the internet without explicit consent. Since its release in March of 2023, Glaze has been downloaded more than 1.6 million times, according to Zhao.

Zhao's team is working on a Glaze enhancement called Nightshade that notches up defenses by confusing AI, say by getting it to interpret a dog as a cat. "I believe Nightshade will have a noticeable effect if enough artists use it and put enough poisoned images into the wild," McClain said, meaning easi-

ly available online. "According to Nightshade's research, it wouldn't take as many poisoned images as one might think." Zhao's team has been approached by several companies that want to use Nightshade, according to the Chicago academic. "The goal is for people to be able to protect their content, whether it's individual artists or companies with a lot of intellectual property," said Zhao.

## Viva Voce

Startup Spawning has developed Kudurru software that detects attempts to harvest large numbers of images from an online venue. An artist can then block access or send images that don't match what is being requested, tainting the pool of data being used to teach AI what is what, according to Spawning cofounder Jordan Meyer. More than a thousand websites have already been integrated into the Kudurru network.

Spawning has also launched haveibeentrained.com, a website that features an online tool for finding out whether digitized works have been fed into an AI model and allow artists to opt out of such use in the future. As defenses ramp up for images, researchers at Washington University in Missouri have developed AntiFake software to thwart AI copying voices.

AntiFake enriches digital recordings of people speaking, adding noises inaudible to people but which make it "impossible to synthesize a human voice," said Zhiyuan Yu, the PhD student behind the project. The program aims to go beyond just stopping unauthorized training of AI to preventing creation of "deepfakes" — bogus soundtracks or videos of celebrities, politicians, relatives, or others showing them doing or saying something they didn't.

A popular podcast recently reached out to the AntiFake team for help stopping its productions from being hijacked, according to Zhiyuan Yu. The freely available software has so far been used for recordings of people speaking, but could also be applied to songs, the researcher said. "The best solution would be a world in which all data used for AI is subject to consent and payment," Meyer contended. "We hope to push developers in this direction." — AFP



Lifestyle

# Singapore artisan family keeps effigy art alive



**T**an Chwee Lian picks up a small paddle, her finger resting on a groove worn into the wood over 70 years of making Buddhist and Taoist deities in her shop, one of the last of its kind in Singapore. Facing competition from mass-produced items and lacking heirs to take up the trade, the traditional craft is in danger of dying out. Tan's more-than-a-century-old shop in downtown Singapore, tucked between hip cafes and boutiques, is one of the city-state's last effigy establishments still making the wooden statues by hand.

The 92-year-old great-grandmother has been making the wooden statues since her arranged marriage to effigy craftsman Ng Tian Sang at the age of 18. "I sat beside (my husband) and watched... when he left to buy things or run errands I would take over, then he would come back and tell me what I did wrong," Tan told AFP while using the wooden paddle to roll out a piece of dough made of joss stick ash using a secret family recipe.

She rolled out the mixture until it was a thin thread, then used two bamboo sticks to attach it to a wooden statue in an intricate pattern to demonstrate thread sculpture, a traditional carving technique from southeastern China. Although she is now retired from crafting, she comes to the Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop daily, helping out with odd tasks from her desk at the front of the traditional shophouse stacked with hundreds of statues looking out from the shelves.

Her son, 71-year-old Ng Yeow Hua, runs the shop, making, selling and repairing Taoist and Buddhist idols for temples and devotees. Like many Singaporeans, the family's origins can be traced back to

China, from where many people emigrated in the 19th and early 20th centuries in search of a better life. Ng's grandfather founded the shop along with his brother in 1896, after moving to Singapore from Kinmen, an island in modern-day Taiwan.

Ng's son, Ng Tze Yong, is now reinventing the business by running tours of the workshop as well as educational programs on Chinese culture. Ng hopes the art can be passed down through the generations. "If (my son) has the interest he can continue, but don't force it," he told AFP. To ensure that the art continues, the 43-year-old former journalist decided to become an apprentice several years ago. He now works in the shop one day a week, in addition to his day job at a local charity.

**'Beauty of imperfection'**

Handmade effigies take up to three months to make by artisans who must pick up the skills over years of informal learning and are entrusted with trade secrets passed down over generations. In comparison, machine-made statues are mass-produced, cost a fraction of the price and can be delivered quickly. "The customers that come to us believe in the beauty of imperfection, of things made by hand..." the younger Ng said. "But yes, it has caused a decline in the business," he admitted. "I'm trying to learn the craft from my dad and my grandma before it's too late."

In addition to learning decorative techniques, he must familiarize himself with scores of Taoist deities, each with a unique story. "In Taoism (there) is this idea that you don't have to be perfect," he said. For the family, the pieces play



This photograph taken on Dec 7, 2023 shows Singaporean artisan Tan Chwee Lian, 92, with her grandson Ng Tze Yong, 43, and son Ng Yeow Hua, 71, at their Say Tian Hng workshop for Taoist statues in Singapore. — AFP photos



Ng gives a finishing touch to a Taoist idol.

an important role in the lives of their customers. Ng is recording all of his family's knowledge and eventually hopes to take on other apprentices to ensure the shop can keep operating beyond his generation. "The fact is that if (I) don't do anything, the shop dies." — AFP



Tan demonstrates thread sculpting of a Taoist idol.

# Japan's hand-forged knives a slice of samurai metallurgy

**B**lacksmith Yoshihiro Yauji pulls a piece of glowing metal from the forge in a Japanese village, continuing a tradition dating back centuries to when the region was renowned for crafting swords carried by samurai. He places the steel under a spring hammer and the sound of the metal being flattened and fortified into a kitchen knife echoes off the mountains surrounding the workshop.

"I believe that blades are the foundational root of Japanese culture," 40-year-old Yauji said. "If you can condense 700 years, 1,000 years or 1,500 years of technology into a single product, the appeal of the product will be different," he explained, adding that at first, he wanted to make "katana" swords once wielded by samurai.

Yauji started at 20 as an apprentice to Hideo Kitaoka, who helped found the collection of cooperative workshops that make up the Takefu Knife Village. After 18 years, Yauji launched his knife line in 2021. But in the 1970s and 80s, the city of Echizen where the knife village is located was in crisis, with artisans unable to compete with cheaper mass-produced tools.

Kitaoka and other top blacksmiths banded together to form a cooperative association and, with the help of famed designer Kazuo Kawasaki, began producing designs that turned Echizen knives into works of art. "At the time of my boss's generation, the environment was not like it is today; they were struggling just to survive," Yauji said. "My generation is on the upswing. So I feel it is necessary to once again improve our skills for the brand and its value to continue to exist." Around 80 percent of Echizen-made knives are now exported, Yauji said, making their way into professional kitchens around the world and even featuring on hit TV series "The Bear".

The forge at Takefu burns at 900 degrees Celsius, and the handmade Japanese blades drawn from the molten orange core, once hammered, shaped and polished, are sharp enough to split a hair. "The Japanese knife brings out the best of ingredients. Texture, bitterness, sweetness," Yauji said. "I think it is a knife specialized to bring out the true flavor of the ingredient itself."

Knife makers can spend an entire day perfecting a single piece. The metal is heated until malleable and then hammered — a process repeated several times — before being shaped, quenched in oil or water and left to cool. Once the temperature is stable, it is ready to be sharpened. Most blacksmiths hand the knife over to dedicated sharpeners at this stage.

Then, the utensil is ready for the final step of the process: Handle making. "Japanese cutlery is, in my opinion, about the hands learning to fit the tool" instead of the knife being designed for the comfort of the user, Yauji said. "It is a way of trying to establish a deeper connection."

**'Soul of a chef'**

Using his custom-made yanagiba (willow-leaf blade) sashimi knife, Chef Shintaro Matsuo slices a buttery slab of fatty tuna at acclaimed Osaka restau-



Knife maker Yoshihiro Yauji places a "santoku", a multipurpose knife, under a spring hammer at the Takefu Knife Village in the town of Echizen, Fukui prefecture.



A "yanagiba" knife - designed for slicing fish - is engraved at Yamawaki Cutlery in Sakai.

rant Koryu, considered one of the best fine-dining establishments in a city dubbed Japan's kitchen. Matsuo's dishes combine subtle flavors using ingredients from the surrounding Kansai region, all artfully presented with the help of blades made in Sakai, a small town on the outskirts of Osaka that is considered Japan's hocho (kitchen knife) heartland.

"The knife is an extension of my hand," the chef explained, proudly wielding the elongated blade specially made by blacksmith Minamoto Izumimasa. "Japanese steel allows the flavors of the food to remain intact," Matsuo added. Chefs in the country spend years honing their knife skills and patiently learning to master blades that

are often more challenging to use and require greater expertise.

"Japanese people have a unique sense of beauty when it comes to cutlery," said Ryoyo Yamawaki, whose Sakai-based company has been making knives since 1929. "Since ancient times, the Japanese sword is said to have been the soul of a samurai, and the knife the soul of a chef." — AFP



This photo taken on Nov 14, 2023 shows knives on display at the Sakai Traditional Crafts Museum in the city of Sakai, Osaka prefecture. — AFP photos



Yauji sharpens a freshly forged "santoku" knife at the Takefu Knife Village.



Chef Shintaro Matsuo fillets a yellowtail fish with a knife made in the nearby city of Sakai at his restaurant in Osaka.



Lifestyle

# Libya theatre stages comeback after country's years of turmoil

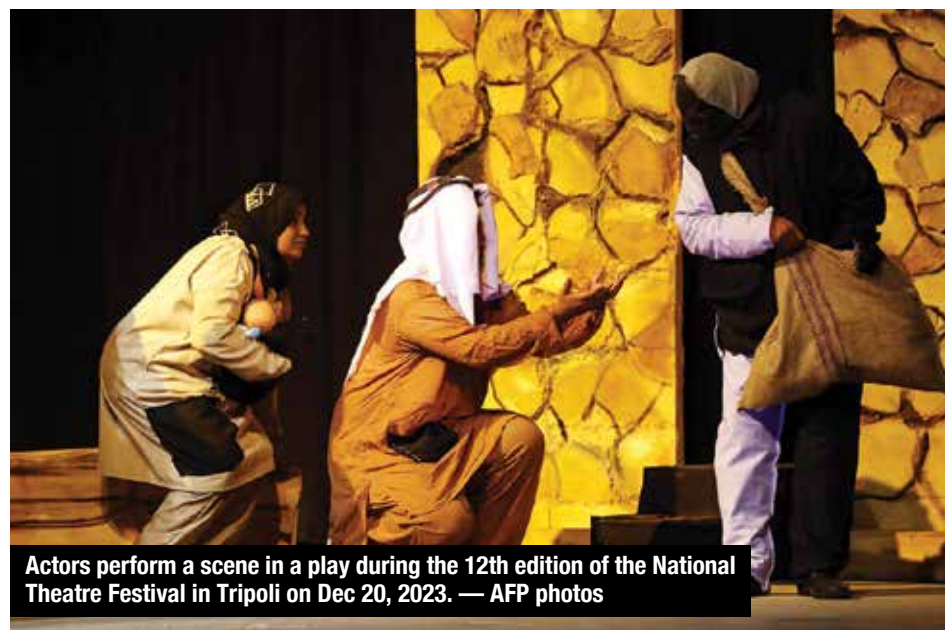
Dressed all in white, a man pretends to aim a slingshot towards another who, running away, tries to dodge the imaginary rock flung towards him. "Hassituha" (You Felt It), a mostly silent play from eastern Libya, symbolizes both the country's divisions between west and east, and the rebirth of Libya's National Theatre Festival, which staged a comeback this week in Tripoli after a 15-year hiatus.

When it last took place in 2008, the festival was to be held again in four years. Before that could happen, a NATO-backed uprising led to the overthrow and killing of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. With a myriad of militias subsequently vying for power, more than a decade of stop-start conflict followed before a period of relative stability.

Taking to stages in the capital Tripoli and Misrata, about 190 km to the east, performers came from 11 cities around Libya — a country split between a United Nations-supported government in the west and a rival administration backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar in the east. "Hassituha", performed at Tripoli's Scouts Theatre by a group who travelled from Marj in eastern Libya, was well received by an audience of more than 1,000 people.

"Some of them burst into tears" over the actors' performances, Muhammad Al-Khaitouni, a spectator, said after seeing the play. He said the actors "mostly used gestures and other non-verbal expressions, but they quickly conveyed the meaning to us". Accompanying his father and two brothers, Khaled Al-Muwadhaf, 14, said the actors demonstrated the suffering brought by the chaos, poverty and political corruption that has gripped the North African nation despite its oil wealth.

Ali Al-Qadiri, who directed the play, said he believed the show was a success because it touched on the circumstances of ordinary Lib-



Actors perform a scene in a play during the 12th edition of the National Theatre Festival in Tripoli on Dec 20, 2023. — AFP photos



yans, including a "lack of opportunities, and the economic stagnation that most cities in Libya suffer from".

**'Uniting Libyans'**

Anwar Alteer, director of this year's festival, told AFP, "we want to rekindle the flame and celebrate great artistic figures that the public must not be deprived of". More than 60 playwrights and performers took part in the festival, alongside dozens of directors and authors. Like "Hassituha", other performances touched on the painful aftermath of Gaddafi's fall and the chaos that ensued.

Salwa Al-Maqsabi, a Libyan actress who came from the eastern city of Benghazi to perform in Tripoli, said arts and theatre were a means of overcoming divisions among Libyans. "I am happy to be present in this sweet gathering," she said. "Theatre unites and does not divide, and it will succeed where politicians have failed."

"Ajyal" (Generations), a theatrical group from Derna, said they were optimistic about reviving the country's theatre despite the many challenges Libyans face. On Sept 10-11 a flash flood in Derna swept entire neighborhoods into the sea, leaving thousands dead or missing and more than 40,000

displaced. On top of the country's other challenges Derna still faces the task of rebuilding after the disaster.

But Milad Al-Hasadi, head of Derna's National Theatre, expressed hope for Libya's future. "Today we are here burdened, it is true, with wounds, pain and loss, but we are optimistic for our country and its artists who succeeded in reviving the national theatre," said Hasadi. "The conflict in Libya has isolated theatre from artists, and today we need to encourage and support every Libyan theatre, because their role is great in rejecting division, uniting Libyans, and sowing smiles and hope in our lives," Hasadi added.

The Tripoli-based government funded the festival's return, and members attended the opening. Abdel Basset Buganda, undersecretary of the Libyan culture ministry, told AFP that Libya's theatre had gained lasting momentum. "The Libyan artist has always sought to communicate with the public, but the interruption was caused by the neglect and political strife that harmed the arts, especially theatre," said Buganda. "Today, we are united with all Libyan artists to overcome this strife." — AFP



# As Senegal catches comedy bug, young standups seek wider appeal

Standup comedy is taking Senegal by storm, with a crew of young comics gaining recognition well beyond the West African country's borders. Shows with names like "Dakar fait sa comedy" ("Dakar does comedy"), "Fest' rire" ("Laugh Fest"), "Afrique du rire" ("African Laugh") are springing up across the capital Dakar. Some comedians already enjoy millions of followers on YouTube, Instagram or TikTok. Others play to standing-room only audiences in theatres.

Their inspiration comes from French stars such as Jamel Debbouze ou Gad Elmaleh, both of North African descent. And their humor tackles themes such as marriage and Senegalese mores and traditions although some subjects remain off-limits.

**Taboos**

"You can't make fun of everything in Senegal," says Babacar Camara, who goes by Abba No Stress on stage and is one of the country's leading stand-up comics. "You must not touch religion. Politics is also a sensitive subject." In 2015 he started the "Abba Show", holding it every three months. Today, it has become a must-see event for many Dakar residents. The goal,



he says, is to develop new talent, but also to seek wider exposure for Senegalese humor.

Abba acknowledges that, if they are to expand into international markets, Senegalese comics will have to work more in French than in Wolof, the local language. But while they wait for international recognition, some are already local heroes. Moustapha Niang, alias Toch, is one of the revelations of the "Abba Show", which has helped to totally change his life since he launched his career in 2020. Previously a upholsterer, he is now courted by Senegalese television shows and has almost a million followers on Instagram. Another success story is 33-year-old Mame Balla Mbow, whose short videos have attracted hundreds of thousands of followers.

**Insecurity**

But the path to success was not easy, he told AFP. "Many saw me as just a clown, someone without ambition," said the former law student who once wanted to be a manager. "Even my own family criticized me."

Today, he is one of the country's most famous comics. His face is splashed across advertisements, his videos sponsored by mobile phone company Orange create serious buzz and big brand names seek his patronage.

Toch's earnings come largely from advertising. But most comics barely make ends meet, he said. The sector is not organized, there are hardly any training schools, and financial insecurity is almost inevitable for anyone taking the plunge.

**Make 'em laugh**

At the French Institute of Dakar, artists were preparing to take the stage for a show to Abidjan, the commercial capital of Ivory Coast. Behind the scenes, some paced back and forth, while others remain seated and staring ahead tensely. Finally under the spotlights, Jordan got his show underway, cracking jokes about his romantic conquests, losing the thread, then getting back on track.

Interrupted by an infant's laugh, he quips: "Ah, the baby's into it!" and the crowd of about a hundred laughs. "We knew you were



A comedian performs during a comedy show at the Institut Francais in Dakar on Oct 20, 2023. — AFP photos



A comedian laughs backstage after finishing his set.

there little one!" he says and the crowd cracks up. Next on is Paveylmafofolle who opens with a classical dance routine — except she falls trying to perform a split in high heels, and the baby starts laughing again. "Hey kid, leave me alone! I'm trying to do a show," she cries, and

the crowd erupts. "Oof, it's always stressful," she says after she's finished her act, relieved to have won the crowd over. "You have to be really mentally strong to launch into this business." — AFP



Comedian Thioppinence prepares ahead of a comedy show.



## Sports

# Man United: Triumphs, tragedy and trophies

## Ratcliffe's deal latest twist in legendary club's story

**LONDON:** British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe's deal to buy a 25 percent stake in Manchester United is the latest twist in the remarkable story of one of the world's most famous football clubs. AFP Sport looks at the moments that helped make United a global phenomenon.

### A legend is born

Although the world now knows the Old Trafford giants as Manchester United and associates the team with their vivid red shirts, their story began in different colors. Railway workers founded Newton Heath in 1878 and, wearing "white shirts with blue cord", they won their first recorded match 6-0 against Bolton's reserves.

Served with a winding-up order after financial issues in 1902, Newton Heath, who wore a green-and-gold kit by then, were taken over by a group including local businessman John Henry Davies. Renamed Manchester United and playing in red shirts, the first of the club's English record of 20 top-flight titles was secured in 1908.

### Busby Babes and Munich disaster

Matt Busby would provide the impetus for United's first truly dominant era. The Scot was appointed as manager in 1945 and reigned for the next 24 years, revitalizing United with an infusion of homegrown talent. His young "Busby Babes" won successive titles in 1956 and 1957 and United became the first English team to compete in the European Cup.

But disaster struck in 1958 when eight United players, including the great Duncan Edwards, died after a plane crash at Munich airport on the way home from a European Cup quarter-final against Red Star Belgrade. Busby spent weeks in hospital before eventually returning to build another dashing young team from the ashes of the Munich tragedy.

### 'Holy Trinity'

George Best, Bobby Charlton and Denis Law formed the attacking triumvirate that spearheaded Busby's second golden generation. Best was the maverick genius whose pop star looks and dazzling skills made him famous beyond the world of football.

United won the English title twice before their defining moment in 1968, when they beat Benfica 4-1 to become the first English team to win the European Cup. It was a cathartic victory for Busby, who wept on the Wembley pitch a decade after the Munich disaster. "The moment when Bobby took the cup it cleansed me. It eased the pain of the guilt of going into Europe. It was my justification," Busby said.

### The Dark Ages

Busby's decision to step down in 1969 signaled the end of an era for United and the decline was so steep that United crashed into the Second Division in 1974. They won promotion at the first attempt and lifted the FA Cup in 1977, 1983 and 1985. But United never came close to regaining the title during a troubled period as their arch-rivals Liverpool reigned supreme.

### Fergie effect

United were rescued from their wilderness years by Alex Ferguson, who arrived from Aberdeen to manage the under-performing club in 1986. With 38 trophies, including 13 Premier League titles, during his 26-year reign, Ferguson fulfilled his aim of "knocking Liverpool off their perch" in spectacular fashion.

The Scot endured a difficult start that included calls for his sacking but United won the FA Cup in 1990, buying him time to fashion a vibrant side that secured the club's first league title for 26 years in 1993. Inspired by the flamboyant Eric



**MANCHESTER:** A statue of Matt Busby stands outside Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium in Manchester, northwest England on April 21, 2021. — AFP

Cantona, the club won their first league and FA Cup double a year later.

Ferguson's greatest moment came in 1999, when United became the first English club to win the Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup in the same year. It was United's "Class of '92" — the storied youth academy crop including David Beckham, Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes and the Neville brothers — who were the treble winners' driving force.

Showing the never-say-die spirit that epitomized United under Ferguson, they scored twice in the final minutes against Bayern Munich in the Champions League final. Ferguson, who also masterminded Champions League glory for United in 2008, responded to the incredible triumph against Bayern by exclaiming: "Football, bloody hell". It was a fitting phrase for a club that provides unforgettable drama on and off the pitch. — AFP

## Jim Ratcliffe: Man Utd fan turned part-owner

**LONDON:** British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe already has interests in football, Formula One and cycling. He now owns a slice of his boyhood club, Manchester United. It was announced on Sunday that the founder of chemicals giant INEOS had bought a 25 percent stake in the Premier League giants after a protracted saga. INEOS joined the race to buy United early this year after the club's owners, the Glazer family, said they were willing to listen to offers.

United fan Ratcliffe, who made an unsuccessful bid to buy Chelsea last year, has long been linked with the Old Trafford club. The 71-year-old already has an impressive sporting portfolio that includes French club Nice and Swiss team FC Lausanne-Sport. In 2019, cycling powerhouse Team Sky became Team INEOS and the following year INEOS bought a one-third stake in the Mercedes Formula One team.

Ratcliffe and INEOS confirmed their bid for majority ownership of Manchester United in February and went head to head with Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim Bin Hamad Al Thani, who subsequently pulled out of the race. The group vowed to make the Old Trafford side the "number one club in the world again" after a decade of under-achievement. They also pledged to be "the long-term custodians of Manchester United on behalf of the fans and the wider community".

Ratcliffe has not got quite what he wanted, with the Glazers still the majority shareholders at Old Trafford. The Americans, who completed a leveraged takeover in 2005, saddling the club with huge debts, have proved deeply unpopular with supporters.

Ratcliffe, nevertheless, will feel he can play a part in restoring United to the pinnacle of English and European football after a chastening decline since Alex Ferguson won the last of the club's 20 Premier League titles in 2013. He is one of Britain's wealthiest people -- Forbes estimates his net worth at \$23



**MANCHESTER:** A poster showing British INEOS Group chairman Jim Ratcliffe is seen outside the ground ahead of the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Bournemouth at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on December 9, 2023.

billion (£18.1 billion). But the glitzy world of international sport is a long way from Ratcliffe's humble beginnings, growing up in social housing near Manchester in northwest England.

Ratcliffe founded INEOS in 1998 and the company went on to become an industrial juggernaut in Britain. It operates 194 sites across 29 countries, generates \$65 billion annually and employs more than 26,000 people. Ratcliffe has continued to diversify INEOS, entering the automotive sector to build the INEOS Grenadier, intended to be a successor to the Land Rover Defender.

### 'Challenge yourself'

Despite his business success, Ratcliffe has remained something of an enigma. The Englishman,

who has skied to the North Pole and South Pole and climbed the Matterhorn, is a risk-taker but says he does not take unnecessary chances.

"To give you an example, I won't and would never jump out of an airplane, because you either live or die depending upon how well someone's packed your parachute," he told The Times earlier this year. "I'm quite careful, but you're only here once so you get more out of life if you challenge yourself a bit more."

How much of a risk Ratcliffe considers United to be is a matter for conjecture. INEOS says it is in the business of "helping extraordinary athletes achieve extraordinary things". Time will tell whether Ratcliffe can help turn around the fortunes of a club desperate to return to former glories. — AFP

## Three talking points from the Premier League

**LONDON:** Liverpool, Arsenal and Aston Villa all missed out on the chance to make a statement in the Premier League while Manchester City were away at the Club World Cup. Just six points separate the top five teams at Christmas and Pep Guardiola's men, in fifth spot, have a game in hand.

Elsewhere this weekend, Manchester United and Chelsea slipped to dispiriting defeats, with few signs from either club that they are close to turning the corner. AFP Sport looks at three talking points from the Premier League weekend.

### Manchester City's festive cheer

Pep Guardiola's men return from hammering Fluminense in the final of the Club World Cup six points behind leaders Arsenal with a game in hand despite just one Premier League win in their past six games.

The Gunners, top of the table at the festive period for the second straight year, will be satisfied with a point in a 1-1 draw at Liverpool as they hunt their first top-flight title for 20 years. It is not necessarily a good omen for Mikel Arteta's men, who have failed to win the league on any of the past five occasions that they have been top on Christmas Day.

Aston Villa's extraordinary run of 15 straight home wins in the league finally came to an end against bottom Sheffield United on Friday. But the 1-1 draw leaves them level on 39 points with second-placed Liverpool and just a point behind Arsenal.

### Toothless United sinking fast

Manchester United have gone from a team who could be counted upon to provide drama in victory or defeat to a side mired in mediocrity. Erik ten Hag's mantra has been that we will see a different United once injured stars such as Casemiro and Lisandro Martinez return.

They are expected back next month but, by then, United might already be out of the race for the top four. They suffered their eighth Premier League defeat of the season at West Ham. Eighth-placed United's main problem is that they cannot score -- they have now gone four consecutive matches without a goal in all competitions for the first time since 1992.

Marcus Rashford is stuck on two Premier League goals while Rasmus Hojlund has yet to get off the mark in the competition. A return of 18 goals from 18 games after the 2-0 defeat at the London Stadium is poor.



**LIVERPOOL:** Liverpool's Egyptian striker #11 Mohamed Salah celebrates after scoring 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

### Chelsea 'our own enemy'

Mauricio Pochettino has remained impressively upbeat during a difficult first season at Chelsea, sticking to his position that they are heading in the right direction. But the statistics are bleak for a club that has grown used to winning silverware over the past two decades.

No team have lost more Premier League matches in 2023 than Chelsea's 19 and only three sides have lost more across the big five European leagues this calendar year.

Argentine manager Pochettino lamented his side's lack of ruthlessness in front of goal after a flurry of missed chances in a 2-1 defeat to Wolves at Molineux.

"We're our own enemy," he said. "In the first half we were the better side. And because of lack of capacity to score, we didn't win the game." Chelsea, admittedly ravaged by injuries, have spent huge sums on players over the past 18 months but the owners will want to see a return on their investment sooner rather than later. — AFP



The INEOS logo is seen on a Mercedes Formula One car.

## INEOS's sports portfolio: F1 to sailing

**MANCHESTER:** British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe has expanded his sports portfolio by buying a 25 percent stake in Manchester United. Ratcliffe's petrochemicals company INEOS has already used its vast profits to fund a series of sporting projects in football, cycling, Formula One, athletics and sailing. AFP Sport looks at INEOS's record.

### Football

INEOS took control of French club Nice in 2019 in a reported 100 million euro (\$110 million) deal. Stated ambitions from Ratcliffe's brother Bob, who heads INEOS's football operations, to reach the Champions League within "three to five" years have not been realized yet, though they are second in Ligue 1 in the current campaign. Despite the backing of one of Britain's richest men, INEOS's football projects have focused on developing young talent rather than splashing out on big transfer fees. The company's first foray into football was a takeover of Swiss side FC Lausanne-Sport, in 2017.

It has been a bumpy ride, with two relegations and two promotions back to the top tier. "We made some mistakes at Lausanne, but we are fast learners," said Jim Ratcliffe when taking charge at Nice. However, fiscal responsibility has been central to INEOS's plans for Lausanne. "Clubs need to be successful off the pitch, as well as on it," said Ratcliffe.

### Cycling

INEOS invested in cycling in 2019 by taking over the British outfit Team Sky, which had dominated cycling. Sky won the Tour de France six times between 2012 and 2018, with Bradley Wiggins, Chris Froome and Geraint Thomas in the saddle and Dave Brailsford pulling the strings. Brailsford has since become INEOS' director of sport, overseeing multiple projects. Success at the Tour de France continued for the first year of Team INEOS as Colombian Egan Bernal claimed the yellow jersey in 2019. However, despite boasting the biggest budget in cycling at around 50 million euros, INEOS have since been eclipsed by UAE Team Emirates and Jumbo-Visma.

### Formula One

INEOS took a one-third stake in Formula One team Mercedes in 2020. However, after seven consecutive drivers' world championships with Lewis Hamilton or Nico Rosberg at the wheel, Mercedes have been usurped by Red Bull and Max Verstappen.

### Running

INEOS backed Eliud Kipchoge's successful effort to become the first man to run a marathon in under two hours in Vienna in 2019. Kipchoge was aided by a group of pacemakers, working in shifts, to form a V-shaped aerodynamic drag position using expertise that INEOS gained from cycling's peloton. However, the feat was not recognized by athletics chiefs as a world record due to the conditions used to aid the Kenyan. — AFP

### Sailing

INEOS Britannia, led by four-time Olympic champion Ben Ainslie, will challenge for the 2024 America's Cup in Barcelona after falling short in their aim of becoming the first-ever British winners in 2021. — AFP



Sports

# Australia skipper Cummins backs Khawaja on Gaza views

## Gesture to bring attention to Gaza crisis 'not offensive'

MELBOURNE: Australia captain Pat Cummins threw his support behind star opener Usman Khawaja Monday, saying his bid to bring attention to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza was "not offensive".

Khawaja has been denied permission by the International Cricket Council (ICC) to have a sticker showing a black dove holding an olive branch on his bat and shoes during the second Test against Pakistan.

The logo, which he displayed during training on Sunday, also had the words OI:UDHR -- a reference to Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- written on it. The 36-year-old, a Muslim, was stopped from wearing shoes emblazoned with the hand-written slogans "Freedom is a human right" and "All lives are equal" during the first Test in Perth. The ICC said they flouted its rules on messages that relate to politics, religion or race.

"We really support Uzzy. He's standing up for what he believes and I think he's done it really re-

spectfully," Cummins told reporters on the eve of the Test in Melbourne. "As I said last week, 'All lives are equal', I don't think that's very offensive and I'd say the same about the dove. That's Uzzy. I think he can really hold his head high with the way he's gone about it. But obviously there's rules in place and I believe the ICC have said they're not going to approve that. They make up the rules and you've got to accept it."

Khawaja wore a black armband during the Perth Test and was reprimanded by the ICC, but insisted it was for a "personal bereavement" and not politically-motivated. Last week, he spoke about how the Zionist-Hamas conflict had affected him.

"When I'm looking at my Instagram and seeing innocent kids, videos of them dying, passing away, that's what hit me the hardest," he said. "I don't have any agendas other than trying to shine a light on what I feel really passionately, really strongly about." — AFP



MELBOURNE: Australian batsman Usman Khawaja prepares to bat in the nets during a practice session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne on December 24, 2023. — AFP

## India eye ending South Africa Test series jinx

CENTURION: Two years after Virat Kohli shouted angrily into a stump microphone in what proved to be his final Test as captain, India will seek once again to breach the 'final frontier' for their Test series when they begin a two-match series at SuperSport Park on Tuesday.

South Africa is the only regular Test-playing country where India have yet to win a series. "There is a lot of pride to be able to keep that record intact," said South African captain Temba Bavuma on Sunday. "There will be extra drive and motivation (for India), so we will need to be at our best."

Kohli led a strong Indian team in 2021/22, with high expectations after successful tours of Australia and England. India won the first Test at Centurion but South Africa, inspired by then-captain Dean Elgar, succeeded in two hard-fought fourth innings chases in the remaining matches to clinch the series.

Kohli's frustration boiled over when a television review at a crucial moment in the decisive match went in favor of Elgar. He resigned as Test captain the day after the match. Both Kohli and Elgar remain as key batsmen for their teams, although not as captains.

Elgar, 36, who will retire from international cricket after the second Test in Cape Town, was axed as captain after a shake-up of the Test side earlier this year which included the appointment of Shukri Conrad as coach.

Conrad confirmed Elgar's decision to retire was based on a conversation between the pair but praised the opening batsman's "resilience, dog fight, pride in performance and that ability to never back down."



PAARL: Indian players celebrate following the dismissal of South Africa's Wiaan Mulder (L) during the third one-day international (ODI) cricket match between South Africa and India at Boland Park in Paarl on December 21, 2023. — AFP

They are qualities which will be much needed against India with South Africa lacking experience and quality in their top order batting. India, too, have question marks over their batting, with Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane no longer in their plans.

Both showed on previous tours an ability to withstand South Africa's fast bowlers on the country's traditionally lively pitches. South Africa will again be relying on pace to unsettle the Indian batsmen. "India have a quality batting line-up but we've got quality bowlers," said Conrad.

Young guns Marco Jansen and Gerald Coetzee played in four-day domestic matches last week but

the more experienced Kagiso Rabada (sore heel) and Lungi Ngidi (ankle sprain) both missed the opportunity to get some red-ball cricket. Conrad, though, expected both to be fit for the Test. "They'll be fresh, they'll be firing," he said.

India will be without fast bowler Mohammed Shami because of injury but Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj will still spearhead a potent attack. The matches will be the first for South Africa in the 2023-25 World Test Championship cycle. It's India's second series in the championship after they won one match and drew one against the West Indies in July. — AFP



MELBOURNE: Pakistan's Imam-ul-Haq bats in the nets during a training session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne on December 25, 2023, on the eve of the second cricket Test match between Australia and Pakistan. — AFP

Fair bit of grass, probably a little bit harder and not as green as last year."

Pakistan have been hit hard by injuries since Perth with fast bowler Khuram Shahzad and their two leading spinners, Abrar Ahmed and Noman Ali, all ruled out of the Melbourne match. They named a 12-man squad with

Sarfraz Ahmed and speedster Faheem Ashraf axed.

Mohammad Nawaz will take the gloves, with Mir Hamza and Hasan Ali in contention for Shahzad's place in the attack alongside veteran Shaheen Shah Afridi and impressive newcomer Aamer Jamal. With Ahmed and Ali sidelined, Sajid Khan is their only spin option. — AFP

## Rangers beat Motherwell to close on Celtic

GLASGOW: Rangers beat Motherwell 2-0 at a wet and wild Fir Park on Sunday to return to within two points of Scottish Premiership leaders Celtic. Kieran Dowell started and finished the move for the opening goal in the fourth minute before fellow midfielder Todd Cantwell doubled the lead 12 minutes later. The game should have brought more goals, but in a wind-affected encounter the strikes proved enough for Philippe Clement's men.

Rangers are now on 43 points after 18 games -- two behind champions Celtic with a game in hand. They face Ross County on Wednesday, with a crucial encounter at Celtic Park on December 30 looming large. Clement has gone 16 games unbeaten since taking over from Michael Beale in October.

"The players put their egos aside and only focused on the team," Clement told the BBC. "That is the mentality I want to see. It is important that players are ready for that but also that everyone in every position knows what to do. I know where the danger is when success is there. I am going to be very strict on the message that it is all about the team."

Rangers took the lead early in the match when Dowell robbed Harry Paton at the edge of the penalty area and played a one-two with Cyriel Dessers before blasting the ball home. The second goal came when left-back Ridvan Yilmaz's cross into the box was controlled by Abdallah Sima, with Cantwell running in to sweep the ball low past the diving Liam Kelly.

A speculative drive from Callum Slattery that skipped past the Rangers goal was Motherwell's only real response while the visitors continued to threaten sporadically. Motherwell had a penalty shout in the 75th minute when Yilmaz bumped Brodie Spencer to the ground but referee David Dickinson was unmoved. — AFP



GLASGOW: Rangers' Kieran Dowell celebrates his goal against Motherwell in the two teams' Scottish Premiership match on Sunday.

# Classifieds

### Hospitals & Clinics

#### Hospitals

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

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

#### Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733

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

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

### Change of Name

**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



## Dolphins secure playoff spot

Miami beat Dallas to book post-season place • Detroit clinch NFC North



MIAMI: Durham Smythe #81 of the Miami Dolphins jumps over Malik Hooker #28 of the Dallas Cowboys during the second half at Hard Rock Stadium on December 24, 2023 in Miami Gardens, Florida. — AFP

**MIAMI:** The Miami Dolphins booked their place in the NFL playoffs after a last second field goal from Jason Sanders gave them a thrilling 22-20 win over the Dallas Cowboys on Sunday. The Detroit Lions also secured a postseason spot after clinching the NFC North with a victory over the Minnesota Vikings, while the Seattle Seahawks' late win over the Tennessee Titans kept their season alive.

Quarterback Joe Flacco continued his remarkable late-career comeback in the NFL as he led AFC playoff hopefuls the Cleveland Browns to their third straight win with a 36-22 victory at the Houston Texans.

Miami becomes the second team in the AFC to secure a playoff place, following the Baltimore Ravens, but they were pushed to the brink by Dallas and their quarterback Dak Prescott. After a grueling, physical encounter, Dallas got in front with a touchdown with just 3:27 left in the game after Prescott led an outstanding 17 play, 69-yard drive which culminated in a brilliant touchdown catch in the corner, under intense pressure from Brandin Cooks.

But Miami quarterback Tua Tagovailoa responded in kind, managing the clock perfectly as he led

Miami down the field with a 64-yard, 12-play drive to set up Sanders. Sanders, who made all five of his field goal attempts including three from over 50 yards, made no mistake from 29 yards to seal a crucial victory over a Dallas side that had already grabbed a spot in the NFC's playoffs.

"I think the key was the guys just having competitive greatness," said Tagovailoa. "The defense did a great job, the offense did a great job, this is a great team and this is a great team win. It was a team win," he said.

Elsewhere, the Detroit Lions clinched their first division title since 1993 as they secured the top spot in the NFC North with a 30-24 win over the Minnesota Vikings. Jahmyr Gibbs had two rushing touchdowns for the Lions, the second coming early in the fourth quarter, but victory was only clinched with just 49 seconds left, when Ifeatu Melifonwu intercepted a pass from Vikings quarterback Nick Mullens -- the Lions' fourth pick of the game.

The Seattle Seahawks, fresh from their thrilling Monday night win over the Philadelphia Eagles, further boosted their NFC playoff chances with a 20-17 win at Tennessee. Seattle (8-7) trailed 17-13 in

the final minute of the game before Colby Parkinson pulled in a brilliant catch from a 5-yard pass from Geno Smith to win the game.

### Flacco back to his best

The Browns meanwhile turned to Flacco, a 38-year-old who was without a team at the start of the season, as their fourth quarterback in an injury-plagued year earlier this month, and he has kept them on track for a postseason berth. He looked back to his very best on Sunday as he threw for three touchdowns and 368 yards in a win which took the Browns to a 10-5 record in the AFC.

It was also a stellar day for his favored target, receiver Amari Cooper, who had two touchdowns and put up 265 yards on 11 receptions, the most receiving yards in a game this season and a franchise record. Flacco, a Super Bowl winner with Baltimore in 2012, was released by the New York Jets in the off-season and his career looked to be over until his unexpected return.

After a four-yard rushing touchdown from Jerome Ford set the Browns on their way, Flacco found Cooper wide left and the receiver raced into

the end-zone for a 75-yard score. The Texans responded immediately though, with Dameon Pierce showing his speed, power and agility as he returned the kick-off for a 98-yard touchdown.

Dustin Hopkins pulled his hamstring chasing Pierce, leaving Cleveland without a field goal kicker for the remainder of the game. But the inspired Flacco delivered a magnificent throw to find David Njoku in the end-zone with a 21-yard pass to ensure Cleveland went up 22-7 at the break.

The game was put beyond Houston's reach when Flacco again connected with Cooper on a seven-yard pass and, at the start of the fourth, Kareem Hunt ran in from a yard to make it 36-7. Meanwhile the Indianapolis Colts' postseason hopes suffered a blow with a 29-10 loss at the Atlanta Falcons. Recalled quarterback Taylor Heinicke avoided the turnovers that have hampered Atlanta this year as he threw for 229 yards and a touchdown to keep the season alive for the 7-8 Falcons. The Jacksonville Jaguars are fading out of contention in the AFC after suffering their fourth straight loss with a 30-12 defeat at the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. — AFP

## Surfing Santas ride waves, raise funds in Florida

**COCOA BEACH:** Santas of all stripes descended on Florida's Cocoa Beach this Christmas Eve -- not to deliver presents, but to ride some waves and raise funds for a good cause. Beginning early Sunday, the beach filled up with thousands of adults and children alike dressed as St Nick, elves or reindeer for the annual "Surfing Santas" celebration. Launched in 2009, the event raises funds for Grind for Life, a charity helping cancer patients travel for treatment, as well as the local surf museum.

While dozens of wetsuit-clad surfers headed out into the chilly water -- albeit much warmer than the North Pole -- others were content to lounge on the beach under cloudy skies, sipping cocktails and taking in the programming, including a costume contest and Hawaiian dance show. Under a tent, volunteers were selling T-shirts and raffle tickets to raise funds. Cocoa Beach lies along Florida's so-called Space Coast, just south of Cape Canaveral.

### 'Warms my heart'

"Surfing Santas" was born in 2009 from the mind of Cocoa Beach resident George Trosset after he saw a TV advertisement in which several people dressed



COCOA BEACH: A surfer dressed as Santa poses during the 15th annual "Surfing Santas" event in Cocoa Beach, Florida, on December 24, 2023. — AFP photos

as Santa take surfboards out of a car and jump in the ocean. Inspired by the ad, he went to a thrift store, bought an old red coat, tailored it to look like Santa's and went surfing. With him were his son, dressed as an elf, and his three-year-old grandson, who watched from the shore.

A local photographer captured that moment and published the image in the press. "The second year, we had 19 Santas. The third year we had 80... and now look at this. There's thousands of people," Trosset, now 70, told AFP. "It's so exciting to see what this goofy little thing has turned into." Teresa Dell'Oglio-Garrett, an Italian native who lives outside Cocoa Beach, visited the

festival for a second time to enjoy the "camaraderie and the happiness in the air." She remembers that when she first attended, back in 2017, there were only a few people, nothing like the crowd gathered Sunday morning on the beach.

Trosset still can't figure out how a little joke with his son and grandson turned into this celebration. When hundreds of people started joining the party, he thought maybe he could use the pull to do some good, and the charitable part of the event was born. "I'm told that we get millions of media impressions every year from surfing Santa," said Trosset. "If that's true, then we create millions of smiles every year -- and that warms my heart." — AFP



People dressed as Santa and the Grinch attend the 15th annual "Surfing Santas" event.



A surfer dressed as Santa carries a surfboard during the 15th annual "Surfing Santas" event.