

4 Kuwaiti artist creates fusion of Arabic-Japanese calligraphy



5 Palestinians in West Bank boycott Zionist products



13 UNESCO listing brings new shine to N Africa metal art

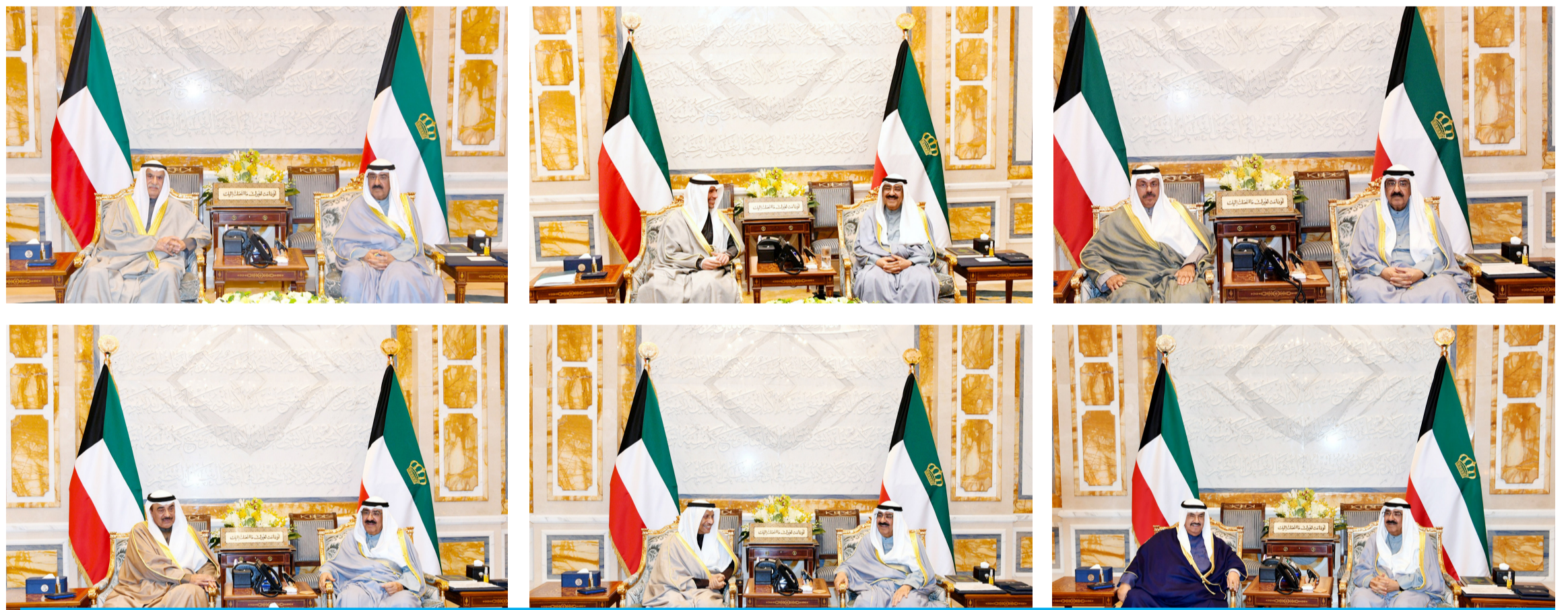


16 Wood treble gives Nuno first win as Forest boss



Amir holds talks to form new govt

MPs demand parliamentary probe into healthcare company for expats



KUWAIT: (Clockwise from top left) HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah holds talks with received National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun, former speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah, former prime ministers HH Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, HH Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace on Dec 26, 2023. — KUNA photos

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Tuesday held customary talks at Bayan Palace with current and former Assembly speakers and prime ministers over forming a new Cabinet. He received National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun and former speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem. He also received HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah, who resigned last week, and former prime ministers HH Sheikh

Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, HH Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah.

These are customary consultations held by HH the Amir in accordance with the constitution before naming a prime minister to form a new Cabinet. The outgoing prime minister HH Sheikh Ahmad submitted his resignation on Dec 20, hours after HH Sheikh Mishal took the oath in the National Assembly to assume his powers as the new Amir of Kuwait, succeeding Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sa-

bah, who passed away on Dec 16.

HH the Amir will decide whether to reappoint HH Sheikh Ahmad to form the new Cabinet or name a new figure from the ruling family to form the Cabinet. The process may take a few days, but it could take longer.

Meanwhile, five lawmakers on Tuesday submitted a motion calling to form a three-member investigation committee by the Assembly to probe findings of the Audit Bureau on suspected violations at the Health Assurance Hospitals Co

(Dhaman), a firm set up a few years ago to provide healthcare for expats in Kuwait.

The company was supposed to start its services several years ago, but suspected corruption and wrongdoings prevented the company from operating its clinics and hospitals, which have been ready for years. The Assembly had asked the state Audit Bureau to probe alleged irregularities at the company and the bureau submitted its report to the Assembly. Now the five lawmakers are calling for a parliamentary probe of the bureau's findings.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Blast near Zionist embassy in Delhi

NEW DELHI: Indian police were investigating reports of a blast near the Zionist embassy in New Delhi on Tuesday that did not cause any casualties. Officers cordoned off the embassy as they combed through the surrounding areas following the report of the late afternoon blast. — AFP

Explosions off south Sinai coast

CAIRO: Explosions were heard off the coast of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula on Tuesday, with witnesses reporting that they saw something fall into the Gulf of Aqaba. Al Qahera News, which has links to state intelligence, said the blasts occurred about two kilometers from the Egyptian town of Dahab. — AFP

Explosions, missiles off Yemen coast

DUBAI: Explosions were heard and missiles were sighted near a vessel transiting the Red Sea on Tuesday near the port of Hodeida on Yemen's west coast, the UK Maritime Trade Operations said, adding the ship and its crew are safe. — AFP

Bodies of missing Kuwaiti, Saudi found in Iraq

KUWAIT: Two bodies found by Iraqi authorities are believed to be those of a missing Kuwaiti and his Saudi companion who had disappeared in the western Anbar

province, Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah said on Tuesday. Expressing his "anguish" over the harrowing ordeal, the minister extended his condolences to the families of the victims, saying his ministry is in close contact with Iraqi authorities to uncover the details of the incident.

Sheikh Salem praised the efforts of Iraqi authorities in discovering the fate of the missing individuals in a prompt and timely manner. Hunters from wealthy Gulf states often make trips to Iraq's southern and western desert in search of hawks. Iraqi security

officials had said on Monday an initial investigation showed that one of the victims' vehicles was attacked by gunmen and contact had been lost with the two.

The desert region is known to be a hiding place for Islamic State militant groups that are still active, the two security sources said. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the incident. One police officer told Reuters on condition of anonymity the victims had been in an extensive desert area that is very dangerous because Daesh (Islamic State) is still active there. — Agencies

Zionists still lusting for blood in Gaza

GAZA: The Zionist entity on Tuesday kept up its strikes against Gaza targets despite grave concern expressed by the United Nations, and international calls for a halt to the Zionist-Hamas war. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu again vowed there would be no peace until the destruction of Hamas, the Islamist movement that rules Gaza, and the military said the war would last months.

The Zionist army said it struck military sites and tunnel shafts in Jabalia, northern Gaza, as well as in Khan Yunis in the south, as heavy ground combat continued. Black smoke clouded the sky over central Gaza on Tuesday afternoon and, in the south, horse-drawn carts carried some victims to hospital in Khan Yunis, AFP images showed.

The withering military campaign in Gaza has caused mass civilian casualties, widespread hunger and reduced much of the coastal territory to rubble. Internet and telephone services were again cut across the Palestinian territory, "due to the ongoing offensive", announced Gaza's main telecoms firm, Paltel.

Continued on Page 6



HEBRON: Palestinians mourn over the bodies of Ahmad Yaghi, 17, and Ibrahim Al-Titi, 31, who were killed during a Zionist army incursion in the Al-Fawwar refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, during their funeral on Dec 26, 2023. — AFP



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Kuwaiti workforce soars

Most advanced and fair country in terms of women's equality

KUWAIT: In the quarterly report Labor Market Information System (LMIS) issued, some statistic numbers are either incorrect or need explanation and interpretation. They contradict all the goals of development, demographics, and labor policies. After excluding family sector employment, these statistics indicate that total employment increased in one year - June 2022 to June 2023 - by about 173,100 workers, or a rate of 9.0 percent, and became about 306,500 workers if we add family sector employment to it.

Thus, the increase percentage in one year is about 11.9 percent. In detail, the total Kuwaiti workforce as of June 30, 2023, scored about 447,100. Female workers scored about 258,900 forming about 57.9 percent of the total Kuwaiti workforce. This means that Kuwait is the most advanced and fair country in the world in terms of women's equality. On the other hand, we may interpret figures as an artificial and unsustainable labor market whose goal is employment as long as public finance can absorb disguised unemployment.

Official statistics officers should provide their interpretation of these numbers. The growth rate of Kuwaiti labor in one year was about 1.94 percent and was about 11.1 percent for non-Kuwaiti labor - ie, more than five times the growth of Kuwaiti labor. This caused a decline in the percentage of Kuwaiti labor to the total labor force from 22.9 percent to 21.4 percent. If true, it contradicts all the goals of

the government's visions, development plans, and programs of successive governments because of its negative impacts on the country's economic, financial, and social performance.

However, if this is untrue, as we hope, then the country needs a revolution in the production of its statistics. Today's growth and modernization in the world have increased, and become digital. We are aware that the national statistics in the country are lagging and poor. The employment percentages according to nationality are as follows: 24.5 percent for Egyptians, 23.1 percent for Indians, and 21.4 percent for Kuwaitis (21.7 percent in another table in the same report).

These percentages are after excluding the family sector. If we add family sector workers these percentages become 30.2 percent for Indian workers, 16.8 percent for Egyptian workers, and 15.5 percent for Kuwaiti workers. We hope not to be understood as our position towards expatriate workers as seeking decent living is a legitimate and humanitarian matter.

What we mean here is that there should be a link between the country's goals for development and the labor force efficiency and its number. But unfortunately, the foregoing numbers do not explain. We are awaiting an official authority to provide it - something that we cannot find an explanation for in the aforementioned numbers, and we hope that official bodies will interpret it.

Energy Statistics

The British Petroleum Company published on its website the "BP Statistical Review of World Energy" No 2023, which indicates that the global energy consumption rate in 2022 rose by 1.1 percent. Global growth rates of energy consumption compared with 2021 level scored +13.0 percent for renewable energy, +3.1 percent for oil, +0.7 percent for hydroelectricity, +0.6 percent for coal, while declined by -3.1 percent for natural gas and by -4.8 percent for atomic energy.

The Middle East region produced 32.8 percent of global oil production in 2022, 30.743 million barrels daily of global oil production (93.848 million barrels daily). Saudi Arabia's share of oil production was 12.9 percent, Iraq 4.8 percent, UAE 4.3 percent, Iran 4.1 percent and Kuwait 3.2 percent. North America produced 26.9 percent of global oil production (USA 18.9 percent), CIS 14.9 percent (Federal Russia 11.9 percent), Asia Pacific produced 7.7 percent (China 4.4 percent), Africa produced 7.5 percent, South and Central America produced 6.8 percent (Brazil 3.3 percent) and Europe produced 3.3 percent of the world oil production with Norway alone producing 2.0 percent.

Asia Pacific consumed 36.3 percent of the global oil consumption (China 14.7 percent, India 5.3 percent, Japan 3.4 percent, South Korea 2.9 percent),

while North America consumed approximately 24.2 percent (USA 19.7 percent). Europe and the CIS consumed 19.3 percent (Federal Russia 3.7 percent). 2 North America produces 29.8 percent of global production and consumes slightly less gas than what it produces, ie 27.9 percent of global consumption (USA 22.4 percent); Europe and the CIS consume approximately 26.7 percent of global natural gas consumption (Federal Russia 10.4 percent).

Asia Pacific consumes 23.0 percent (China 9.5 percent) and produces 16.8 percent of world production. This means that natural gas consumption is largely concentrated in its production sites. Asia-Pacific excels others by 75.7 percent share of global coal production (China 50.6 percent). Europe and the CIS produce 13.3 percent of global production (Federal Russia 5.9 percent), while North America accounts for 7.1 percent (USA 6.4 percent).

Asia Pacific consumes approximately 80.8 percent of global coal consumption (China 54.8 percent), while Europe and the CIS consume approximately 9.2 percent and North America consumes around 6.5 percent. In conclusion, oil still has the lead in energy components as it constitutes 31.6 percent of the total, with 26.7 percent for coal, 23.5 percent for natural gas, 7.5 percent for renewable energy, 6.7 percent for hydroelectricity and 4.0 percent for atomic energy. — AL-SHALL

Food Authority and KISR sign contract

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Food and Nutrition has signed a contract with the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) under which the Institute will provide advisory and operational services to the Authority's food laboratories. Reem Al Fulajj, Chairman of the Board of Directors and Director General of the Authority, stressed the Authority's keenness to operate its laboratories in accordance with the latest international systems, practices, and standards.

"The Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research is the ideal partner as a scientific and research reference in the fields of its specializations and has extensive experience in dealing with scientific and technical developments on an international scale," she said. Al-Fulajj indicated that the contract will last for a period of five years and specializes in providing advisory and operational services to food laboratories of the



KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Food and Nutrition and Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) officials sign a contract to provide advisory and operational services to the Authority's food laboratories. — KUNA

General Authority for Food and Nutrition.

She pointed out that the contract will also contribute to the development of analytical systems and procedures in line with the latest international standard methods to keep pace with development in the field of laboratories. The Acting Director General of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, Dr Meshaan Al-Otaibi, said that this comes within the framework of supporting the Authority's efforts to ensure the sustainability of food safety.

Al-Otaibi pointed out that the Institute's

efforts with state agencies began ten years ago, as it previously cooperated with the Kuwait Municipality in some projects, research, and technical assistance in establishing a central laboratory for food control, determining instrumentation specifications and analysis protocols, and establishing a risk-based system for food samples and analysis. He added that the institute has designed the central laboratory for food control to conduct food analyses and ensure their compliance with GCC and international standards. — KUNA

Kuwait Representative to Arab League presents credentials

CAIRO: The Permanent Kuwaiti Representative to the League of Arab States, Ambassador Talal Khalid Al-Mutairi, presented his credentials to Arab League Secretary General Ahmad Abul-Gheit. During the event, Al-Mutairi renewed Kuwait's appreciation for the role the league played in reinforcing Arab cooperation and relayed Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Saleem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's greetings and wishes to extend joint Arab cooperation.

In a statement to KUNA, Al-Mutairi expressed his appreciation and pride in the high trust bestowed upon him in honor of representing Kuwait in the League, stressing Kuwait's keenness to support joint Arab cooperation for the benefit of the Arab countries and their people.



Al-Mutairi praised the work that Kuwait did in bringing peace and security internationally, strengthening preventative diplomacy, and its humanitarian efforts in providing aid to Arab countries, one of which was the Kuwaiti Air Bridge that provides aid to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. — KUNA

stc marking a year filled with exceptional community contributions

KUWAIT: Supporting the community in various ways has been a longstanding commitment under stc's extensive and sustainable corporate social responsibility (CSR) program. Considering its role as a pioneer in Kuwait's telecom market, stc leveraged its resources and expertise to launch or participate in community driven initiatives that have a far-reaching and positive impact on the community.

With a focus on key areas such as education, environmental sustainability, sports, youth empowerment, and entrepreneurship, stc has implemented programs that aim to foster long-term growth and development in the community. These programs are designed to empower individuals and businesses, especially the younger generation, SMEs, and entrepreneurs, by providing them with the knowledge, support, and opportunities to succeed. Through these efforts, stc has established itself as more than just a telecom provider, but a strong contributor to the social and economic fabric of Kuwait.

stc's programs and initiatives in 2023 were diverse and sustainable, each targeting specific community needs and causes that coincided the Company's values and beliefs. These efforts were reflected through various programs, including the three primary initiatives launched under the CSR agenda. Under the

nized under each initiative in line with stc's approach to creating lasting positive changes and building a better future for the younger generation in Kuwait.

Empowering the youth

The 'Weyak' umbrella played a pivotal role in stc's CSR framework by empowering Kuwait's younger generation and the entrepreneurial landscape. This innovative program was specifically designed to cater to the needs and aspirations of Kuwait's youth, as well as SMEs and startups. By providing essential support, 'Weyak' helped young entrepreneurs and innovators transform their visionary ideas into tangible realities. This initiative fostered an environment where creativity and business acumen could flourish, significantly contributing to the nation's economic vitality.

A crucial element of the 'Weyak' initiative was stc's collaboration with Dawrat & COFE App. The partnership with 'dawrat' brought forth a variety of educational programs, workshops, and courses, all tailored to equip young entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in a competitive market. By integrating digital technology into these learning modules, stc ensured that participants were well-versed in the latest digital trends and practices, which are indispensable in today's digitally evolving business world.

While stc continued to enable and activate the strategic agreement with COFE App, the region's premiere online coffee marketplace, through a series of interactive activities including online activations and special events. Further amplifying the impact of 'Weyak' was the launch of inspireU Program in the Kuwait Market, an entrepreneurial state-of-the-art incubator and accelerator designed to support start-ups and SMEs in Kuwait.

Three start-ups were selected from the Kuwaiti market to take part in the 10th intake of inspireU program hosted by stc group, based on the criteria defined under the program to be among the 20 companies participating in the tenth edition of the inspireU program. Winning projects will have access to several networking opportunities through participation and visits to international conferences. In addition, inspireU provides financial support to enable start-ups to realize their ideas and dreams. In essence, the 'Weyak' initiative included multifaceted programs that exemplified stc's commitment to nurturing a thriving ecosystem for young entrepreneurs and innovators.

Focusing on education

The 'upgrade' initiative, another key component of stc's 2023 CSR program, demonstrated the Company's deep commitment to education stewardship. Several initiatives were launched throughout the year under the umbrella of the educational 'upgrade' initiative, each serving a different purpose. This focus mirrors stc's understanding of the nature of academic excellence in building a sustainable future.

One of the notable initiatives focusing on education was stc's sponsorship of the 2nd Watheefi Career Fair during 2023. This event presented a pivotal



opportunity for young Kuwaitis to explore a wide array of career paths and professions. By bringing together over 120 entities from both the private and public sectors, the fair served as a vibrant setting of opportunity and guidance. For stc, the Watheefi Career Fair also served as a strategic investment in the nation's future, ensuring that young people had access to the information and networks necessary to make informed career choices.

stc continued its support for academic excellence by sponsoring the graduation ceremony for disabled students for the second year in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. 100 students with physical disabilities were honored amongst their proud families, friends and teachers in a celebratory initiative that aligned with stc's core values of promoting leadership and self-growth.

It is worth mentioning that stc adopted this graduation ceremony for the 1st time in Kuwait last year as part of the MOE initiative to bring all students together under one roof to celebrate their success. As part of stc's strategic partnership with the Kuwait University to support and empower students, the Company held several 'stc Diwaniya' sessions in the presence of social media influencers and personalities along with young Kuwaiti entrepreneurs at Kuwait University.

'Because we care'

The 'Because we care' initiative, the third primary campaign under stc's 2023 CSR framework, illustrated the Company's deep commitment to fostering health and environmental sustainability within the Kuwaiti community. This initiative, launched prior to 2023, encompassed various campaigns, each designed to make a tangible impact on the well-being of individuals and the environment. stc launched and participated in numerous campaigns that aimed to spread

awareness on various health issues and environmental causes that impact members of the community.

A highlight of the 'Because we care' initiative for 2023 was the "Our Environment, Our Life" campaign, a collaborative effort with Kuwaiti personality Youssef Al-Omran, also known as "Bu Jarrah", and a large group of volunteers. This campaign focused on the environmental preservation and safety of Abu Al-Hasaniyah Beach. The shoreline cleanup and proper maintenance of this beach area primarily focused on protecting the delicate coastal ecosystem and having a safe environment for beachgoers.

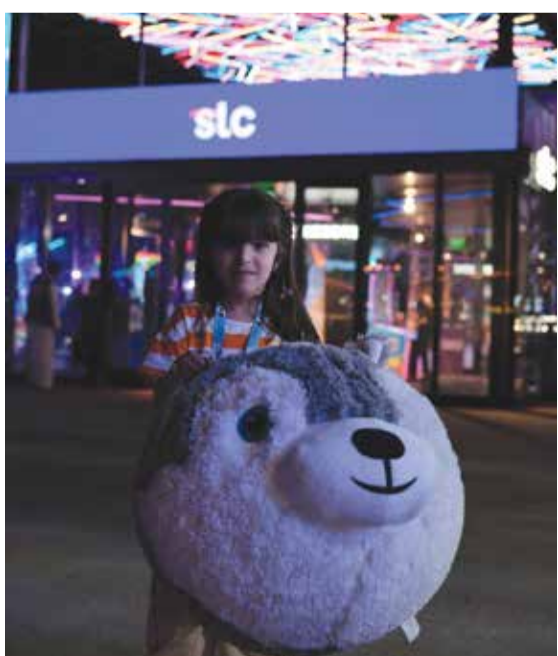
Another significant aspect of the 'Because we care' initiative was the organization of the annual health initiatives related to Blood Donation, Breast Cancer and Prostate Cancer where stc collaborated with various entities to promote and raise awareness on these health issues and the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The comprehensive nature of the "Because We Care" initiative, with its focus on both environmental sustainability and personal health, reinforced stc's role as a responsible corporate citizen.

'Winter Wonderland Kuwait'

In an effort to empower and enable the youth, stc sponsored 'Winter Wonderland Kuwait', in strategic partnership with TEC as it aligns with the Company's commitment to participate in various initiatives that engage with the community, especially with the areas of education, youth empowerment, health, sports, entrepreneurship, and others that serve the community. stc's sponsorship falls in line with the Company's extensive corporate social responsibility (CSR) program, which aims to create a positive social impact, especially through strategic collaborations with government entities and companies within the private sector.

Strengthening community ties

Collaborating with a diverse range of partners, including the Kuwaiti Government, private enterprises, non-profit organizations, and community members, stc has exemplified the power of collective effort in driving social change. These partnerships have broadened the scope and impact of stc's CSR program and enriched the Company's understanding and approach to addressing complex societal challenges. The synergy between stc and its partners underlines the notion that social responsibility transcends individual or corporate boundaries. It is a collaborative journey that unites different sectors of society towards a common goal.



'Weyak' umbrella, the first of stc's three primary initiatives for the year, the emphasis was on supporting young entrepreneurs, business start-ups and SMEs, capitalizing on the strong momentum gained from previous campaigns.

The second primary initiative was the educational 'upgrade' umbrella, which aims to contribute towards empowering the youth and supporting the local education initiatives. The last primary initiative is the 'Because we care', which aims to spread awareness on health and wellness, environment and other humanitarian causes. Numerous activities were orga-

Local

Amir receives congratulatory messages

Bahrain Crown Prince

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a congratulatory cable from Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Bahrain Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, expressing his congratulations to His Highness on assuming the top office. In the cable, the Bahraini Crown Prince wished His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal good health and further success in leading Kuwait to a much more prosperous and promising future. His Highness the Amir sent a reply cable to the Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, expressing his utmost appreciation for the heartfelt sentiments.

Jordan Crown Prince

His Highness the Amir received a congratulatory cable from Jordanian Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah II, expressing his congratulations to His Highness the Amir on assuming the top office. The Jordanian Crown Prince wished His Highness the Amir good health and further success in leading Kuwait to a prosperous and promising future.

Pope of Alexandria

His Highness the Amir received a congratulatory cable from Pope Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, expressing his congratulatory

ulations to His Highness. In the cable, the Pope of Alexandria wished His Highness the Amir good health and success.

Germany President

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier Diwan sent a congratulatory cable to His Highness the Amir. In turn, His Highness the Amir sent a reply cable expressing his utmost appreciation for the heartfelt sentiments.

Kazakhstan President

His Highness The Amir received a cable of congratulations from the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, on the occasion of his assumption of office, wishing him success in his endeavors. The President further wished His Highness the Amir good health and wellbeing.

Thailand King

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a congratulatory cable from Thailand King Maha Vajiralongkorn, expressing his congratulations to His Highness on assuming the top office. The King wished His Highness the Amir good health and success.

Croatia President

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a congratulatory cable from Croatian



KUWAIT: New Amir HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah applauds as he swears in before lawmakers as the country's 17th Amir, at the Kuwaiti parliament. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

President Zoran Milanovic, expressing his congratulations to His Highness on assuming the top office. The Croatian leader wished His Highness the Amir good health.

Bulgaria President

His Highness The Amir received a congratulatory cable from the President of

the Republic of Bulgaria, Rumen Georgiev Radev. The president expressed his congratulations to His Highness on assuming the top office and wished him good health and success.

Kosovo President

The President of the Kosovan Republic, Vjosa Diwan, sent a congratulatory

atory cable to His Highness, Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on Tuesday.

Eritrea President

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a congratulatory cable on Tuesday from the President of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, on assuming the top office.

Nicaragua President

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a congratulatory cable from the President of the Republic of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega. In turn, His Highness the Amir sent a reply expressing his utmost appreciation for the heartfelt sentiments.

Gabon President

His Highness Amir received a congratulatory cable from Gabon's interim president, Gen. Brice Oligui Nguema, on assuming the top office.

Ghana President

His Highness the Amir got a congratulatory cable on Monday from the President of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo. In turn, His Highness the Amir sent a reply cable expressing his utmost appreciation for the heartfelt sentiments of the president. — KUNA

Low-carbon hydrogen: Most promising environment-friendly energy resource

Kuwait exploring new opportunities

KUWAIT: Low-carbon hydrogen is shaping up to become one of the most promising energy resources that would lead to a better environment and help achieve the goal of carbon neutrality set by countries around the world. Hydrogen, as an element, is a safe and clean source of energy that does not produce pollutants while burned and has several applications, including as a source of heat for housing or a raw material in the industrial sector. Recently, it has attracted attention as a future clean energy resource.

There are around 17 methods to produce low-carbon hydrogen, which emits less than 2.4 kilograms of carbon dioxide for every one kilogram of hydrogen. The two most important kinds of low-carbon hydrogen are those produced by wind and solar-powered devices, known as "green hydrogen," and those extracted from natural gas as byproducts. On this issue, several experts spoke to KUNA about the validity of the new, promising energy resource.

The usage of low-carbon hydrogen is a new venture, and Kuwait is keen on capitalizing on such an opportunity, Manager of the Energy Efficiency Technologies Program at Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) Dr Fotouh Al-Ragom told KUNA. Dr Al-Ragom affirmed that Kuwait had an abundance of renewable natural resources, noting that it could use solar and wind energies to produce green hydrogen not only for national consumption but also as a material to export to other countries.

Carbon neutrality

She indicated that there were many countries beginning to show increasing interest in such viable energy resources, adding that Kuwait had taken some serious steps to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 in the oil and gas sectors, a step necessary for an ambitious plan for total carbon neutrality for all sectors of the state by 2060.

It is very important to focus on decreasing direct and indirect carbon emissions to achieve the aforementioned goal, she affirmed, saying that it could be achieved by decreasing the burning of gas in extraction and production operations as well as bolstering the circular economy, a model of production that focuses on sharing, leasing, and reusing energy to lessen carbon emissions.

Dr Al-Ragom also indicated that utilizing solar energy to produce electricity would also contribute to lessening carbon emissions. She asserted that Kuwait's efforts in this regard were in line with the global pledge for renewable energy sources and efficiency, which increases such energy resources by threefold, a measure that would decrease temperatures by 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030. She also men-



Dr Fotouh Al-Ragom



Wael Abdulmotai

tioned Kuwait's vision to save 15 percent of its need for renewable energy resources by 2030, in line with the global pledge.

Dr Al-Ragom also revealed that there were various state entities cooperating on this matter. Also speaking on the matter of low-carbon hydrogen usage, natural gas industry expert Wael Abdulmotai at the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) said that hydrogen use was not a novelty; the resource was used in the past as a raw material in various industries to create products. The increasing interest in hydrogen nowadays is due to its practical usage in future clean energy production, indicated Abdulmotai, affirming that there were obstacles that needed to be addressed before embarking on a wide-scale usage of hydrogen.

He said that the main concern with the production of low-carbon hydrogen as a resource was the high cost of the material, which was fivefold the cost of producing natural gas. To better utilize low-carbon hydrogen, the infrastructure must be built to allow for international commerce, like in the case of oil and natural gas, he affirmed, saying that policies must also be devised to ensure the organization of the process for the benefit of consumers and producers. Abdulmotai indicated that Arab countries were at the forefront of using green and blue hydrogen as resources for energy and other applications.

He pointed out that Arab countries were interested in low-carbon hydrogen as a material to be exported to markets in Europe and Asia, adding that announced products in this regard reached 82 until last November. Abdulmotai affirmed that the



Abdullah Al-Mutairi



Facilities for transporting and exporting hydrogen. — KUNA photos

Arab world had viable future infrastructure to produce low-carbon hydrogen and invest in this promising industry, stressing that the process should be done in cooperation and also in partnership with global participants.

He pointed out that there were a number of declared projects within this domain, which marked the first stepping stone for this economic endeavor, adding that there were other projects within this domain, chiefly among them the Saudi NEOM Green Hydrogen Company, a project in which production was fully sold as part of a 30-year binding agreement. In regards to Kuwait, the expert said that hydrogen was produced as a part of the oil industry's operations with the material known as "grey hydrogen," a byproduct used in refineries and petrochemical complexes.

There are proposed projects to capture carbon elements in gray hydrogen and transform them into blue hydrogen, which is a low-carbon product that might be used in green projects, said the expert. Abdulmotai said that Kuwait was among the countries that adopted a long-term vision and strategy to utilize renewed energy resources for sustainable usage, revealing that the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) announced its 2040 strategy to transform Kuwait's usage of energy by 2050, allocating a sum of \$410 billion to achieve this goal.

Renewable energy

The strategy includes plans to produce renew-

able energy resources by 2025 to use in KPC operations by 2050, he said, adding that by 2030, such a plan would include operations for the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) and apply it to other companies under the banner of KPC by 2040. Abdulmotai also mentioned that there were plans to harness and contain carbon to use it locally by 2050, adding that producing green hydrogen was part of KPC's strategy by 2040. Meanwhile, CEO of EnerTech Holding Company, part of the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), Abdullah Al-Mutairi, indicated that hydrogen and its energy usage have a history dating back 200 years, with the material being part of the internal combustion engine technology.

He said that the continuously decreasing cost of renewable energy in the past decade provided an opportunity to power the "new economy" based on the heavy use of electric technology, which in turn led to less carbon emissions and a safer environment. Some countries have now geared towards the usage of green hydrogen technology, namely Oman, which launched its main renewable energy project, the Green Energy Oman (GEO), a project aimed at producing green hydrogen and carbon-free fuel for national and global consumption. GEO, he revealed, was a multiparty partnership amongst Shell Global, Kuwait, Oman, and Singapore with the aim of producing 25 megawatts from solar and wind energies and also producing 1.8 million tons of carbon-free green hydrogen annually. — KUNA

KJA and PAAET conclude six-week training program on educational media

KUWAIT: Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) and Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) successfully concluded their joint training program, spanning six separate weeks with a total of 90 training hours. The program, focused on educational media, took place at the Ibn Al-Haytham Center from October and was marked by an honoring ceremony attended by KJA President Adnan Al-Rashed.

Jalal Al-Tabtabaei, Deputy Director General for Training at PAAET, described the educational media program as the first of its kind, emphasizing its strategic partnership with KJA and the management under the Ibn Al-Haytham Center. Tabtabaei expressed satisfaction with the program's success, particularly highlighting the enthusiastic participation of students and the evident joy among the graduates. He noted that this collaboration marked the first of many, hinting at future programs in areas like military and health media.

Rashed underscored the significance of the partnership with PAAET. He emphasized that this collaboration stemmed from the initiative of Tabtabaei and the participation of Dr Hassan Al-Jajam, the Director of PAAET. Rashed stated that the training program

aimed to strengthen community partnerships, with a particular focus on supporting and training employees in educational and academic institutions in the realm of educational media.

Rashed acknowledged the association's efforts in preparing for the session and its success in collaboration with PAAET. He pointed out previous attempts to conduct similar courses in cooperation with the ministry of education and commended PAAET's proactive involvement in supporting and embracing the course.

Highlighting KJA's commitment to serving the community and its institutions, Rashed affirmed the continuation of targeted courses to train press workers and promote press institutions, both in the government and private sectors. Hamad Al-Hamad, Director of the Ibn Al-Haytham Center, confirmed the success of the educational media program. He noted that the program, consisting of 90 training hours, included workshops, lectures and field visits. Hamad praised the competence of the lecturers and the dedication of the trainees, with 18 graduates representing various educational institutions in Kuwait.

Fatima Al-Azmi, the supervisor and coordinator of



KUWAIT: Participants take a group photo as they successfully concluded their joint training program. The program was marked by an honoring ceremony attended by KJA President Adnan Al-Rashed.

the educational media training program, highlighted the comprehensive nature of the six-week training period. She detailed the topics covered, including journalistic arts relevant to public relations and media practitioners. Azmi pointed out the diverse subjects covered, such as educational media, methods of dealing with the public, preparing media campaigns, press interviews, emergency plans, rumor response and refutation and the qualification of official spokespersons. All graduates received certificates equivalent to diplomas.

Azmi emphasized the planned expansion of specialized programs in military media, health, environmental and oil media. She encouraged government agencies to participate in these programs to enhance the expertise and skills of their workers in various media fields. Dr Mohammed Al-Jabali, delivering the graduates' speech, expressed his pleasure and appreciation for the program. He described it as a rich scientific experience and a rare academic vision, representing an aspiration for a prosperous future in the field of educational media.

Local

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Citizen jailed 10 years

KUWAIT: The Court of Cassation upheld the 10-year jail sentence for a citizen for brutal assault on an Asian woman who committed suicide by throwing herself out of an apartment window.

Driver detained

In another development, a reckless driver has been detained. The driver was seen in a viral video where he assaulted security personnel.

API and Jordan's Bank Association ink MoU

KUWAIT: The Arab Planning Institute (API) signed a Memorandum of Understanding Tuesday with the Association of Banks in Jordan for the purpose of developing training work in the fields of entrepreneurship, consultations, and financial awareness.

Al-Shami hailed Jordanian banks as an additional value to the Institute, pointing out that API is exposed to the work of private sector institutions in the Arab world to offer qualitative value to consultations, training, and youth empowerment.

The Director General of the Association of Banks in Jordan, Dr Maher Al-Mahrrouq, told KUNA that this cooperation aims to develop small and medium enterprises, promote financial culture and awareness, and encourage entrepreneurship.

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: An aerial view of the iconic Kuwait Towers. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

LAPA-LOYAC to launch 'Return 2024' festival

KUWAIT: As the genocide, tragedy, and crimes against humanity in Gaza continue, LAPA-LOYAC is getting ready to launch the 'Return 2024' festival (third edition) in order to shed light on the Palestinian cause and support the Palestinian artists in Palestine.

The festival will start on March 3rd and continue until March 6th. The first day will be opened with a monodrama play titled 'The Gazelle of Akka' by Palestinian artist Raeda Taha. The second day will be a dancing performance by the LAPA troupe titled 'The Palestinian Story.'



Artists perform in support of cultural resistance and rehabilitation of cultural centers destroyed by the Zionist occupation.



Kuwaiti calligrapher Shaimaa creates Arabic-Japanese art

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti calligrapher Shaimaa Al-Azmi has affirmed that calligraphy is a well-established art, expressing a special attachment to Japanese calligraphy, namely works with reed pens.

Using the brush and the pen, Al-Azmi said the Japanese calligraphy dated back to the fifth century AD, inspired by the Kanji language of Chinese characters, indicating that the kanji used to be exclusive to the high classes of society.

Japanese letters used by calligraphers range between 51 and 5,000, inspired by the hiragana and kanji, she said, explaining that the hiragana is the Japanese native language, while the kanji is a blend of Japanese and Chinese letters estimated at more than 5,000 characters.

Elaborating, she said the Japanese calligraphy shodo is divided into three categories: kaisho (of split letters), gyosho (of semi-connected letters) and soshu (of connected letters). Blending Arabic letters with Japanese ones enables the artist to make creative formative work.



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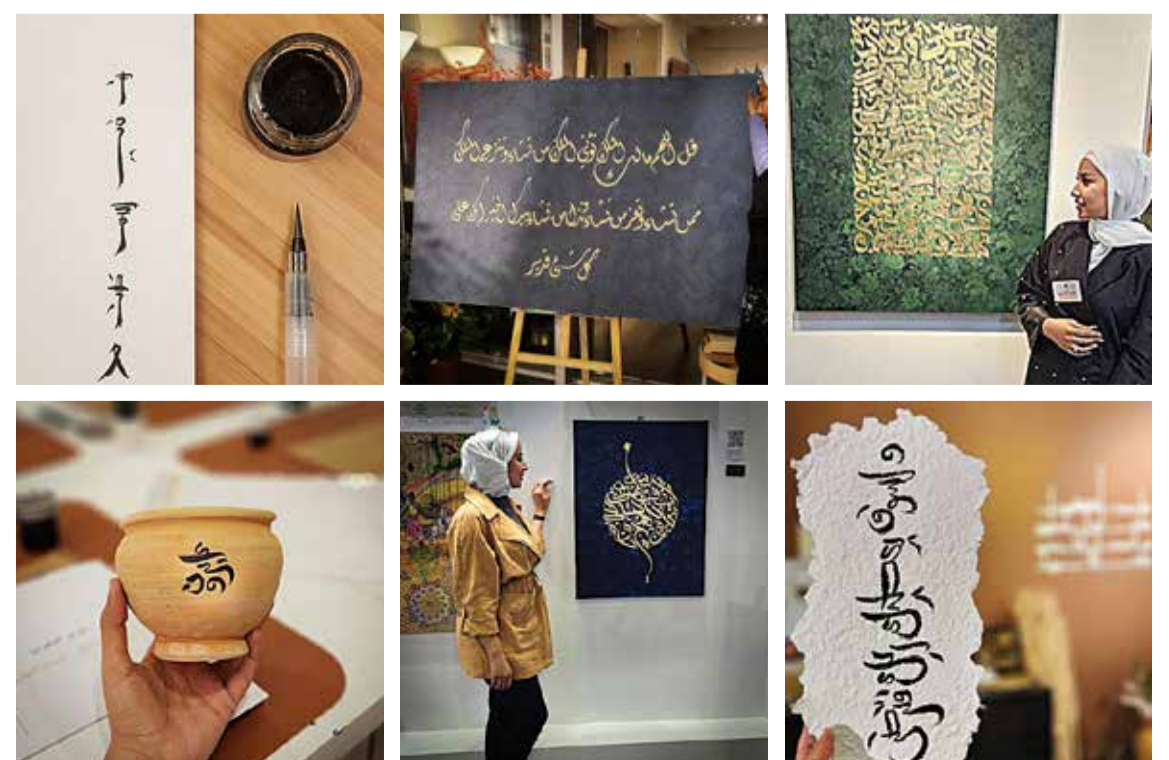


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Family killed in Russian strike on northern Syria

Ukraine strikes Russian warship, challenging Kremlin's 'dominance'

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RAMALLAH: A shopper reaches for a tin of pickled cucumbers on a shelf bearing a label marking them as local products, at a supermarket in Ramallah. — AFP photos



A woman holds a sign which reads 'we have the choice' during a demonstration urging the boycott of Zionist products.

Palestinians in West Bank boycott Zionist products

Despite Palestinian products gaining popularity, some shopkeepers say boycott not feasible

RAMALLAH: Since the war in Gaza began, plenty of posters, stickers and leaflets in the occupied West Bank have urged Palestinians to boycott Zionist products and buy local. "By us, for us," reads the slogan of the new campaign that has spread across towns in recent weeks, as calls to ban Zionist goods also grow in other countries.

The slogan is everywhere at one well-known supermarket chain in the West Bank, where "Made in Palestine" fare like water, milk and toilet paper take pride of place. "It's all about highlighting Palestinian products," said Omar Bawatneh, manager of a branch in Ramallah. The chain estimates that sales of Zionist products at its stores have dropped by 30 percent since October, when the Zionist entity began escalating its attacks on Palestine.

The Zionist entity's relentless ground and air military campaign in Gaza has so far killed more than 20,900 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.

Zionist violence in the West Bank, occupied by the Zionist entity since 1967, has also flared since the outbreak of the war. More than 300 Palestinians in the occupied West Bank have been killed by Zionist forces and settlers since Oct 7, according to the Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah.

At supermarkets across the occupied territory, young people in particular have "developed a political conscience and are consuming more and more Palestinian products", Bawatneh said. "They look at the labels, go online to see the list

of products to boycott," he added, referring to the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Global momentum

Launched by Palestinian civil society organizations in 2005, BDS advocates political and economic action against the Zionist entity over its treatment of Palestinians. The movement is regularly accused of anti-Semitism by the entity and its key backer the United States. But co-founder Omar Barghouti told AFP "the BDS movement categorically opposes all forms of racism, including Islamophobia and anti-Semitism". He said it drew inspiration from South Africa's anti-apartheid movement.

The founders have three demands: "Ending (the Zionist entity's) 1967 military occupation, dismantling its system of apartheid, and respecting the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their lands and receive reparations." BDS also advocates a boycott of Zionist sports, cultural and academic events, and calls for pressure on foreign companies that "collaborate" with the entity. Eighteen years after its emergence, the campaign has gained global momentum, with branches in 40 countries.

"I support this movement because we can only change things here through international pressure," said Ofer Neiman, a member of the group. "This is a very good campaign that uses the principles of non-violence and human rights to bring about change," the left-wing activist said. In his daily life, he "tries to boycott products from settlements".

'Zero Zionist products'

But others say a boycott is just not practical. The owner of a shop selling sanitary and heating equipment in downtown Ramallah said it would be "impossible" to run his business without Zionist



A demonstrator holds a sign calling for the boycott of Zionist products during a demonstration in Ramallah on Dec 26, 2023.

goods. It's extremely difficult to get hold of top-quality bathtubs and plumbing that is not made in the Zionist entity, he said. "My customers want the best product for their home," said the Palestinian shopkeeper, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals. "You can eat Palestinian food, but we haven't been able to develop our industry."

In a report this year, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development said Palestinian households were struggling under the "severe economic impact of (Zionist) restrictions" in much of the West Bank. In annexed east Jerusalem, stores are

full of Zionist items. Traders use a wholesale system overseen by a Zionist official who "makes sure there's a balance" between Zionist and Palestinian products, Bawatneh said. In El-Bireh, near Ramallah, Mohamed Ali said his grocery shop has been stocked with "zero Zionist products for 10 years".

Instead, he mainly buys Turkish, Jordanian and Chinese products, as well as French canned goods. On one occasion, he said, soldiers had tried to "intimidate" him and shut down his shop. But he explained: "I refuse to give money that will go to the (Zionist) military who will kill Palestinians." — AFP

Zionist strike destroys Gaza refugee camp

AL-MAGHAZI REFUGEE CAMP: Residents of Gaza's Al-Maghazi refugee camp returned to their neighborhood on Monday only to find blocks of concrete strewn where their homes had stood just a day ago. "These houses are destroyed. Our house was bombed," said camp resident Abu Rami Abu al-Ais amid the debris. "There's no safe place in the Gaza Strip."

Late on Sunday three houses in the camp were hit by Zionist air strikes that killed at least 70 people, according to the health ministry in Gaza. AFP was unable to independently verify the information. The Zionist entity says it issues evacuation orders and warnings so civilians can get to safety before military activity, but Zeyad Awad said there was no advisory before the strike. "What should we do? We are civilians, living peacefully and wanting only safety and security," he said. "Yet we are suddenly struck by Zionist warplanes without any warning."

The Zionist military said it was "re-viewing the incident". "Despite the challenges posed by Hamas terrorists operating within civilian areas in Gaza, the IDF (military) is committed to international law including taking feasible steps to minimize harm to civilians," it told AFP. Swathes of the Gaza Strip have been razed in blistering Zionist bombardments during more than two months of war.



DEIR AL-BALAH: A wounded Palestinian is wheeled out to attend a mass funeral, for those killed in an overnight Zionist strike on the Al-Maghazi refugee camp, at the Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir Al-Balah on Dec 25, 2023. — AFP photos

'They chased us'

On Monday returning camp residents were shocked to see the scale of destruction, some describing how their children had panicked when the blast occurred. "The (Zionist) army does not spare civilians ... They (are) causing extensive, enormous destruction and panic in the hearts of my children," said Awad. "My child said to me 'Protect me. What's happening? I can't breathe.'" AFP footage showed several residents walking through the debris, inspecting the damage caused by the night-time strike. Some hugged each other and burst into tears. Several charred vehicles could be seen scattered on the roads, while children searched through the wreckage to find their books.

Al-Maghazi camp is one of several in Gaza and was established in 1949, according to the UN, to shelter refugees who were forced to flee their homes to make way for the creation of the Zionist entity the year before. Many who fled Al-Maghazi camp after the strikes on Sunday were doing so again, after already escaping attacks in northern Gaza.

One of them was Rawan Manasra, originally from Beit Hanun. The strike in the camp decimated her family, she said. "They (Zionist army) killed my five brothers. I no longer have brothers. They killed them along with their children and wives," Manasra told AFP. "Every day there are strikes ... They tell us to move from the north to the south, then they chase us and attack us." — AFP



Men recover the body of a victim killed in the aftermath of a Zionist strike on Al-Maghazi refugee camp.



Palestinians mourn their relatives, killed in a Zionist strike on the Al-Maghazi refugee camp.

International

Ukraine strikes Russian warship, challenging Kremlin's 'dominance'

Ship carried Shahed drones used by Russia to attack Ukraine: Kyiv

MOSCOW: The Kremlin on Tuesday acknowledged a Ukrainian attack had damaged a warship in the occupied Crimean port of Feodosia in what Ukraine and its Western allies called a major setback for the Russian navy. Ukraine said its air force destroyed the Novochoerkassk landing ship, with President Volodymyr Zelensky joking on social media that the vessel had now joined "the Russian underwater Black Sea fleet".

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu informed "about the damage to our large landing ship" to President Vladimir Putin in "a very detailed report", the president's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists. Ukraine's military said earlier that its air force had destroyed the Russian naval ship in a missile attack on the eastern Crimean port.

The Ukrainian defense ministry wrote on X that the "Novochoerkassk landing ship was destroyed in Feodosia tonight". It published an unattributed photo showing flames and smoke in a port at night. "Ukraine's aviation did an excellent job. Crimea is Ukraine. There is no place for the occupier's fleet here," the ministry wrote. In his post on social media, Zelensky wrote: "The occupiers will not have a single peaceful place in Ukraine".

The attack comes after Ukraine struck the Black Sea fleet's headquarters in Sevastopol in September, forcing Moscow to move warships to ports further east. British defense minister Grant Shapps wrote on Twitter that "this latest destruction of Putin's navy

demonstrates that those who believe there's a stalemate in the Ukraine war are wrong!" "Russia's dominance in the Black Sea is now challenged," he added.

Ship 'transported Shaheds'

Ukraine's air force said that its tactical aviation attacked the Novochoerkassk with cruise missiles at around 0030 GMT in the area of Feodosia. Videos posted on social media showed a fire on the horizon in a port area, followed by a loud explosion and a much larger burst of flames and smoke. Ukraine's armed forces said that "on board of the ship were Shahed drones that Russia uses for attacks on Ukrainian cities". Ukraine frequently carries out strikes in Crimea, particularly targeting the Russian military.

In April 2022, it sank the cruiser Moskva, the flagship of the Black Sea fleet. The Novochoerkassk was previously used by Russia for its military intervention in Syria. The governor of the Russian-annexed peninsula, Sergei Aksyonov, wrote on Telegram: "Sadly, one person was killed and two others were wounded in an enemy attack on Feodosia."

Crimea's Krym 24 television reported that two had been hospitalized in a moderately severe condition. Aksyonov said earlier that the city's port was cordoned off following "an enemy attack" that caused a "detonation" and fire. Six buildings were damaged, mostly with broken windows, the governor said, and some local residents have been evacuated. — AFP



FEODOSIYA: This photograph posted on the Telegram channel @VentdeCrimee on Dec 26, 2023 shows smoke rising above a damaged warship following a Ukrainian attack in the port of Feodosiya, Russian-controlled Crimea. — AFP

French man arrested for murdering wife, four children

MEAUX, France: French police on Tuesday arrested a 33-year-old man with a history of psychiatric illness on suspicion of murdering his wife and their four children, a prosecutor said. The bodies were discovered on Christmas Day, the latest in a series of shocking cases around Paris in recent months where men have allegedly murdered their families.

Authorities found the bodies of the 35-year-old woman and her children — aged nine months, four, seven and 10 years old — at home in the town of Meaux east of Paris on Monday evening, after worried friends and family sounded the alarm, local prosecutor Jean-Baptiste Bladier said.

The French man, a plumber, has been receiving treatment since 2017 for depression and psychotic behavior, the prosecutor said. He was already held in 2019 after stabbing his partner in the shoulder blade when she was pregnant with their third child and trying to kill himself. She had refused to press charges, the prosecutor said.

He was treated again after that attack and said he did not mean to harm her. The case was dropped as he was deemed to be "mentally deficient". The couple, who had met in high school, married in October.

'Very violent'

Police broke in through a bedroom window of their ground-floor flat to find a "very violent crime scene" covered in blood, the prosecutor said. A police source said the mother was lying in the corridor,



MEAUX, France: People lay flowers just in front of the ground floor flat where the bodies of a woman and her four children were discovered. — AFP

while the children were found dead in their rooms, in the kitchen and bathroom. "The mother and the two girls had received a very high number of knife wounds," the prosecutor said. The two younger boys had no stab wounds and may have been suffocated.

Neighbors told police they had heard cries downstairs during the night of Dec 24 to 25. The suspect, who was arrested near his father's home in the neighboring town of Sevran on Tuesday morning, had not yet been questioned but told police he "knew why he had been detained", and "spoke of his unhappiness and depression", Bladier said. He had wounds to his hand.

An inquiry has been opened into the murder of minors under 15 years old, and murder by a part-

ner. Autopsies were to be carried out in Paris on Wednesday. People tied flowers to the railing outside the family's flat on Christmas Day. The local community is in shock. "His wife was kind, she spoke to everybody," said one local called Antonio, 69, who did not give his surname.

The Paris region has recently seen a series of infanticides. In late November, a 41-year-old man confessed to killing his three daughters, aged four to 11. Police found them dead in his home in the town of Alfortville, in the southeastern suburbs of the capital. A month earlier a gendarme killed his three daughters before killing himself at his home in Vemars, north-east of the capital. — AFP

Militants kill 3 in Uganda Christmas Day arson attack

KAMPALA, Uganda: Militants from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) jihadist group burned a grandmother and two children to death on Christmas Day in western Uganda, local officials said Tuesday.

The attack in a remote village of Kamwenge district comes a week after 10 people were killed in the same area by the ADF, a deadly militia affiliated to the Islamic State group. Kamwenge resident district commissioner Isiah Byarugaba told AFP the attackers set a home ablaze with the victims inside. "The ADF rebels killed three people, an old woman and her two grandchildren. They were burnt in their house last night," he said.

The army and police were pursuing the attackers, he added. "We are on the ground to assess the situation, and (are) mobilizing the local community against such cowardly attacks by ADF terrorists against innocent civilians".

On Dec 19, ADF rebels killed 10 people at a trading post in Kamwenge, a district near the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where the militia is based. The ADF are accused of having massacred thousands of civilians in DR Congo in recent years and of carrying out jihadist attacks over the border on Ugandan soil.

Originally a Muslim-majority coalition of armed Ugandan groups, the IS claims the ADF as its central African affiliate. DR Congo launched joint military operations with Uganda against the ADF in Nov 2021 but rebel attacks have continued. — AFP

Zionists still lusting for blood in...

Continued from Page 1

"We are gravely concerned about the continued bombardment of Middle Gaza by (Zionist) forces," Seif Magango, spokesman for the United Nations Human Rights Office, said in a statement. "It is particularly concerning that this latest intense bombardment comes after (Zionist) forces ordered residents from the south of Wadi Gaza to move to Middle Gaza and Tal al-Sultan in Rafah."

Netanyahu, however, reiterated the Zionist entity would stay the course. "Hamas must be destroyed, Gaza must be demilitarized and Palestinian society must be deradicalized," he argued in a Wall Street Journal op-ed published late Monday. "These are the three prerequisites for peace", he wrote.

On Tuesday the Zionist entity's army chief Herzi Halevi told a news conference that the war "will continue for many more months", a point made earlier this month by Defense Minister Yoav Gallant who said "it will last more than several months". The Zionist campaign has killed at least 20,915 people, mostly women and children, according to the latest toll issued Tuesday by Gaza's health ministry.

The army says 158 Zionist soldiers have been killed inside Gaza. AFP TV images from Gaza City's devastated and largely deserted Tal al-Hawa area showed dirt roads winding through mountains of rubble amid multistorey buildings pancaked by strikes or standing askew. "The destruction is very great, and all the owners of the place have been displaced to the south," said one Palestinian man. "May God help people through the misfortunes they are in."

Some residents of Al-Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza returned to the ruins of their homes after strikes that Gaza's health ministry said killed at least 70 people. Sean Casey, a World Health Organization Emergency Medical Teams coordinator, was part of a WHO mission to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in central Gaza's Deir al-Balah

city after the refugee camp strikes. In a video shot inside the hospital, Casey appeared to be fighting back tears as he described a nine-year-old boy, Ahmed, "being treated basically with sedation to ease his suffering as he dies", after receiving a head wound when a building was struck.

Only a minority of Gaza's hospitals are even partly functioning, says the WHO, whose Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus repeated his "call for an immediate ceasefire". The Zionist army said it was "reviewing the incident" at Al-Maghazi and added it is "committed to international law including taking feasible steps to minimize harm to civilians". The Zionist entity has been under increasing pressure from its allies to protect non-combatants.

Gaza's 2.4 million people are enduring dire shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine, with only limited aid entering. An estimated 1.9 million Gazans have been displaced, according to the UN, many having fled south. Netanyahu told members of his conservative Likud party on Monday that he was ready to support the voluntary migration of civilians out of the Gaza Strip, the Zionist newspaper Haaretz reported.

He reportedly told party members "our problem is not whether to allow an exit, but that there will be countries that are willing to absorb an exit". In a statement, Hamas rejected as "absurd" any such discussion. "There can't be exile and there is no other choice than to remain on our land." United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said the idea of pushing Palestinians into Egypt "is a nonstarter".

Blinken was meeting on Tuesday with the Zionist entity's Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan "for face-to-face consultations on a number of matters related to the conflict in Gaza and the return of hostages held by Hamas", National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said.

The war has stoked regional tensions. An anti-tank missile fired by Lebanon's Hezbollah movement wounded nine soldiers as they rescued a civilian injured in another cross-border strike, the Zionist entity's military said. Violence has also surged in the Zionist-occupied West Bank, where two Palestinians were killed on Tuesday. — AFP

Iraq slams US after strikes on pro-Iran forces

BAGHDAD: US air strikes targeting pro-Iranian forces in Iraq claimed at least one life and drew an angry response from Baghdad Tuesday amid high regional tensions over the Zionist-Hamas war in Gaza. Iraq condemned as "a clear hostile act" the overnight US strikes, saying they had killed one member of the security forces and wounded 18 other people, including civilians.

Washington has repeatedly targeted sites used by Iran and its proxy forces in Iraq and Syria in response to more than 100 attacks on American and allied forces since the Oct 7 outbreak of the Gaza war. Yet another rocket barrage was fired later on Tuesday morning at US and allied forces in Syria, at an American patrol base in Al-Shaddadi, but without causing casualties or damage, said a US military official.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin earlier announced the overnight strikes, saying that "US military forces conducted necessary and proportionate strikes on three facilities used by Kataeb Hezbollah and affiliated groups in Iraq". Austin said "these precision strikes are a response to a series of attacks against US personnel in Iraq and Syria by Iranian-sponsored militias".

The attacks had included a drone strike Monday by Kataeb Hezbollah and affiliated groups on Arbil Air Base, Austin said. It wounded three US military personnel, one critically, said US National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson. US President Joe Biden had directed the US strikes in a call with Austin and other national security officials, a statement said. Biden "places no higher priority than the protection of American personnel serving in harm's way," it added. "The United States will act at a time and in a manner of our choosing should these attacks continue."

Washington considers the Iran-backed Kataeb Hezbollah, or Hezbollah Brigades, a terrorist organization. The group forms part of the Hashed al-Shaabi coalition of former paramilitary forces integrated into Iraq's regular armed forces. The latest drone attack Monday against American forces was claimed by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a loose formation of armed groups affiliated with the Hashed al-Shaabi.



BAGHDAD: Members of the group Kataeb Hezbollah carry the body of their fallen comrade Hassan Hammadi Al-Amiri during his funeral on Dec 26, 2023 after he was killed in a US airstrike. — AFP

A funeral was held for the dead fighter, attended by dozens of people who shouted "No, no to America", an AFP photographer said. Many in the crowd carried Hashed flags and photos of Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani who was killed in a US strike in Baghdad in Jan 2020. A US military tally has counted 105 attacks against its troops in Iraq and Syria since Oct 17, most claimed by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which opposes US support for the Zionist entity in its war against Hamas.

The United States — which led the 2003 invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein — now has about 2,500 soldiers deployed in Iraq and around 900 in Syria as part of efforts to prevent a resurgence of the jihadist Islamic State group. Baghdad strongly condemned the latest US military action. "It runs counter to the pursuit of enduring mutual interests in establishing security and stability, and it opposes the declared intention of the American side to enhance relations with Iraq," it said in a statement.

Questioned by AFP, an Iraq interior ministry official said one strike had targeted a Hashed site in Hilla, capital of Babylon province. One person was killed and 20 wounded, the official said, giving a higher injured toll than the government. Four others were wounded in a second strike in Wasit province, the official said, a casualty toll confirmed by security sources in both Babylon and Wasit provinces.

One Hashed faction leader, Hadi Al-Amiri, denounced the US strikes, in a message on his Telegram channel, demanding that the Iraqi government "set a timeline for the departure of these foreign forces at the earliest opportunity". — AFP

International

Family killed in Russian strike on northern Syria

War monitor says 3 fighters died in Zionist strike that killed Iran general

ARMANAZ/BEIRUT: Russian air strikes on the last major armed opposition stronghold in Syria killed five civilians from the same family, including three children, rescuers and a war monitor said on Tuesday. Moscow is one of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's key backers, providing him with military, political and economic support in the country's 12-year civil war.

"On Dec 25 at 10:00 pm (0700 GMT) Russian warplanes targeted civilian houses" on the outskirts of the town of Armanaz, in Idlib province, said Abdel Halim Shehab of the White Helmets voluntary search-and-rescue group.

Members of the White Helmets, which operates in rebel-held areas of northern Syria, pulled the victims from under the rubble of their house, he said. "The victims were from the same family of six: five of them were killed and a child survived," he said, identifying the dead as the father, mother and three of their children.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor with a network of sources across the war-torn country, also said Russia carried out the strikes. The Britain-based organization reported the same toll of five dead and said the family's house was located on farmland near Armanaz.

On Tuesday, Syrian state news agency SANA reported that the army had downed and destroyed "eight terrorist drones in Idlib and Aleppo provinces". Citing the defense ministry, it said forces responded to attempts to attack villages, towns and "military points".

A brutal Syrian government crackdown on Arab Spring-inspired protests that erupted in 2011 spiraled into a devastating war involving foreign armies, militias and jihadists. More than half a million people have been killed in the conflict. Russia's intervention in the war since 2015 has helped forces loyal to Assad claw back much of the territory

they lost to rebels early in the conflict.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist group led by Al-Qaeda's former Syria branch, controls swathes of Idlib province and parts of neighboring Aleppo, Hama and Latakia provinces. The HTS is considered a terrorist organization by Syria, the United States and the European Union. It regularly clashes with Syrian and allied Russian forces. On Sunday, Syria's defense ministry said its forces had shot down seven drones launched by "terrorist organizations" in Hama and Aleppo provinces. Since 2020, a ceasefire deal brokered by Russia and rebel-backer Turkey has largely held in Syria's northwest, despite periodic clashes.

3 fighters dead

Three fighters were killed in a Zionist strike that left a senior general with Iran's Revolutionary Guards dead near the Syrian capital, a war monitor said on Tuesday. The strike on Monday targeted Razi Mousavi, the most senior commander in the Quds Force — the foreign arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — to be killed outside Iran in nearly four years.

"Two foreign fighters and one Syrian fighter were also killed in the (Zionist) strike," said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor. Mousavi was targeted shortly after he entered a farm in an area controlled by Iran-backed groups, said the British-based monitor with a network of sources on the ground. Residents in the Sayyida Zeinab district south of Damascus, where the strike hit, reported that Iran-backed groups have tightened security there. On Monday, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi expressed condolences for Mousavi's death, saying Zionist "will certainly pay for this crime".

An IRGC statement said that Mousavi was a "companion" of Qasem Soleimani, the former Quds force leader killed in a US drone strike in Bagh-

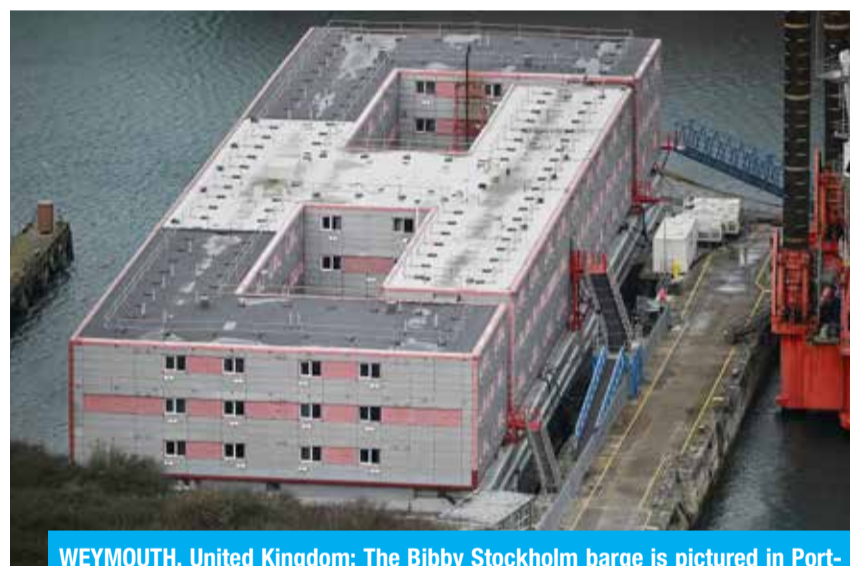


KAFR SHALAYA: An aerial picture shows mourners attending the funeral of five members of the same family, killed overnight in a Russian airstrike, at their village of Kfar Shalaya in Syria's Idlib province on Dec 26, 2023. — AFP photos

dad nearly four years ago. There was no immediate comment from the Zionist entity, which has intensified attacks in Syria, particularly against Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement, since its war with Hamas, which Tehran supports, began in October.

Iran has long backed Syrian President Bashar

al-Assad's government, with Tehran and the groups it supports helping him claw back territory lost in more than a decade of war. The Zionist entity rarely comments on reported strikes in Syria but has repeatedly said it will not allow arch-enemy Iran to expand its presence there. — AFP



WEYMOUTH, United Kingdom: The Bibby Stockholm barge is pictured in Portland Port on the south-west coast of England on Dec 20, 2023. — AFP photos

In UK seaside town, asylum seekers 'not treated like humans'

WEYMOUTH: In the damp December cold, a blue bus stops near Weymouth town center in southwest England. A few men get off, relieved to be spending a few hours away from what they call their "prison" — a barge housing asylum seekers.

Hasan James, a 38-year-old Nigerian, is one of around 200 migrants staying on the Bibby Stockholm in the port of Portland, around 20 minutes' drive from Weymouth on the Dorset coast. "We have limited mobility. It is just like prison security," James, wrapped in a warm parka jacket and hat, said of the controversial accommodation, detailing its detection scanners and searches.

Before the UK authorities sent him to the facility a month ago, James, who arrived in Britain on a now-expired tourist visa, was living in a hotel in London. "Not everything is awful on board," he said, pointing out that he liked the food, but he said he found the feeling of isolation "really challenging". "It makes me feel like I'm in a different world," he told AFP.

Migrant charities have questioned living conditions on the vessel. One migrant on the barge used a translation app on his phone to tell AFP: "Everything is very bad there. They don't treat us like humans." Britain is currently seeing record numbers of migrants arriving on its southern coast by small boats from northern France. Almost 30,000 people have arrived so far this year. More than 110,000

migrants have made the sea crossing since Britain began publicly recording the arrivals in 2018.

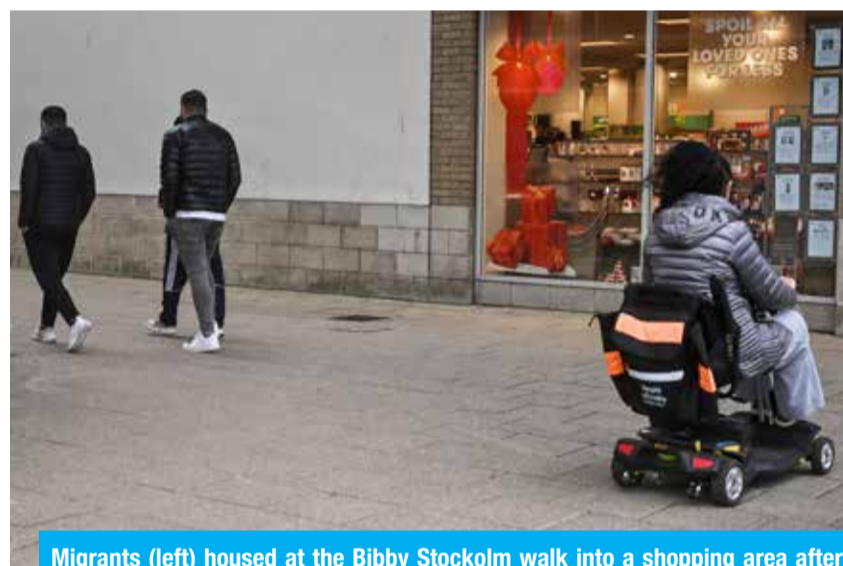
To reduce the cost of housing them in hotels while their asylum applications are assessed, and to discourage new arrivals, the government announced in April that it would put around 500 asylum seekers on the barge. The first arrived in August but had to leave a few days later following the discovery of Legionella bacteria in the water supply. They began returning in mid-October. Earlier this month, an asylum seeker on board died.

'Fresh air'

Lodman, a 50-year-old Iranian, arrived two weeks ago. He also struggles with his limited freedom. "It's really bad, like a prison. It's depressing," he says. A 22-year-old Iraqi man, who arrived illegally by boat from France and who did not want to give his name for fear of harming his asylum application, said he disliked the lack of privacy.

He showed a video of the room, just a few square meters (square yards) in size, that he shares with another person, and said guards show indifference when some residents complain. "They don't care," he explained, dragging frantically on a cigarette.

Activities do take place on board, including a gym, but "there are too many people", the young man lamented. Many of the men head to Weymouth whenever they can, sometimes several times a week. A special bus



Migrants (left) housed at the Bibby Stockholm walk into a shopping area after arriving on a bus in Weymouth where the Bibby Stockholm barge is located.



Floral tributes are seen at the gates of Portland Port in honor of one of the men living on the "Bibby Stockholm" who died on Dec 12.

service takes them there, the last one returning to the barge late at night. In the seaside town, they buy a Coca-Cola with their weekly allowance of £9.58 (\$12) and mill about. "(We come) just to walk and for the fresh air," said the Iraqi. The idle men do not go unnoticed by passers-by.

"There are not a lot of black people here," said James, "so people here know we come from the barge." "Some wave at us. Some have been saying 'Merry Christmas'. They are welcoming," he smiled. The Iraqi noticed that some local residents look at him. "Oh he's a refugee," he hears them say. "It is not racist but ...," added the migrant.

Mental issues

Some residents of Portland, a small town of 13,000 inhabitants, expressed anger when the government an-

nounced its plans for the barge, which has continued to attract controversy. Earlier this month, an asylum seeker on the Bibby Stockholm died.

Authorities are investigating the cause of death, but charities said it was suicide and have questioned living conditions there. In front of the barriers that prevent access to the port, flowers and messages left in tribute to the man — a 27-year-old Albanian, according to British media — remain.

"We missed the chance to get to know you, but we will fight to end inhumanity," reads one tribute. James did not know the man but said some residents were starting to "fight mental issues". No asylum seeker knows when he will leave the barge. "(But) we are praying that it will soon be over," said James, bringing with it the right to remain in the United Kingdom. — AFP

Indian army to probe alleged Kashmir deaths

SRINAGAR, India: India's army has launched an investigation into the alleged deaths of three civilians taken into military custody after a deadly rebel attack on soldiers in Kashmir, police said Tuesday. The three men were among a group of eight detained by the army last week in Poonch, near the frontier that divides the restive Himalayan territory between India and Pakistan.

They were arrested a day after militants ambushed and killed four soldiers who were travelling to an army outpost in the district. "The army has ordered a Court of Inquiry to investigate the circumstances which led to the deaths of three civilians," a senior police official in Kashmir told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Internet services were shut off in Poonch and neighboring Rajouri district after the attack on Indian soldiers. But on the weekend, footage purporting to show Indian soldiers physically abusing some of the detainees was published on social media and shared widely.

One man among those detained told the Indian Express that he had appeared in the viral video. Mohammad Ashraf, 52, told the newspaper he and the other detainees were stripped, beaten and had their open wounds painfully smeared with chili powder.

Three army officers had been transferred from their posts while the army probe was underway, the newspaper added. The other five civilians detained by the military had sustained injuries and were being treated at a hospital in Rajouri.

Indian army chief General Manoj Pande visited Poonch on Monday and told commanders to conduct their operations "in the most professional manner", according to an army statement that did not mention the allegations. Residents of Topa Pir, the site of last week's attack on soldiers, told AFP on condition of anonymity that the eight civilians taken into army custody were all from their village.

Rebel groups have waged an insurgency in the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir since 1989, demanding independence or a merger with Pakistan. The conflict has left tens of thousands of civilians, soldiers and militants dead.

India has more than 500,000 troops permanently stationed in Kashmir and, like Pakistan, claims the divided territory in full. It blames Pakistan for backing the militants, a charge Islamabad denies, saying it only supports a Kashmiri struggle for the right to self-determination.

This month India's top court upheld a 2019 decision by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to revoke the limited autonomy of the Muslim-majority region. That move was accompanied by mass arrests and a months-long internet and communications blackout to forestall protests. — AFP

Navalny says he's 'fine' after weeks of lost contact

MOSCOW: Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny on Tuesday said he was "fine" after a "pretty exhausting" 20-day transfer to a penal colony beyond the Arctic Circle. Navalny's supporters said on Monday that the Kremlin critic, whose whereabouts had been unknown for more than two weeks, was now in the penal colony in Russia's far north and had been visited by his lawyer.

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm total-

ly relieved that I've finally made it," Navalny wrote on X. "I'm still in a good mood, as befits a Santa Claus," he said, referring to his winter clothing and beard. The US State Department said it remained "deeply concerned for Mr. Navalny's wellbeing and the conditions of his unjust detention".

Navalny mobilized huge anti-government protests before being jailed in 2021, after surviving an assassination attempt by poisoning. He has spent most of his detention at the IK-6 penal colony in the Vladimir region, some 250 kilometers (155 miles) east of Moscow.

A court in August extended his sentence to 19 years on extremism charges, and ruled he be moved to a harsher "special regime"

prison that usually houses particularly dangerous prisoners. The facility that Navalny is currently being held in is not a "special regime" one although there is one of that category in the same location.

One major difference from his previous place of detention is that any letters will take much longer to reach Navalny as they would go through the regular postal service rather than email. Navalny posted on X that he arrived at the Arctic penal colony in the village of Kharp on Saturday and was visited by his lawyer on Monday. Prisoner transfers in Russia can take weeks as inmates are moved by train to far-flung facilities in what was known as the Gulag in Soviet times. — AFP



MOSCOW: A screen shows jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny as he arrives at a court in Moscow on Sept 26, 2023. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2023

Morocco launches first social benefits program

Beneficiaries to receive direct monthly payment



OUIRGANE, Morocco: A displaced Moroccan woman carries bags in a temporary camp in the hamlet of Imzilne in the Ouirgane commune, some 60 kilometers south of Marrakesh. — AFP photos

RABAT: Nearly a million low-income Moroccan families are due to receive government aid, authorities announced on Monday, launching the kingdom's first and much-awaited social benefits program. Beneficiaries will receive a direct monthly payment starting at 500 dirhams (\$50), Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch told a government meeting, according to an official statement. The first payments under the new scheme will be made on Thursday, it said.

Government spokesman Mustapha Baitas said in late October that the aid to families was expected to cost Morocco 25 billion dirhams through 2024. The launch comes a decade after the program was proposed, and as part of an overhaul of social services announced in 2020 by King Mohammed VI. The king's agenda also introduced in 2021 basic health coverage for all Moroccans. Once reserved only for

civil servants and private sector employees, the health care scheme provided coverage for 3.8 self-employed Moroccans and their families, official news agency MAP said, based on data for September.

It also provided free health care to about 10 million low-income Moroccans, paid for by the state. The reforms are rolled out at a time of economic slowdown and deepening inequalities in Morocco, a country of 36 million people. According to the latest estimates by the central bank, Morocco's economy will end 2023 with a growth rate of 2.7 percent and 6.1 percent inflation. Government aid so far has been indirect, with the state subsidizing some goods but not offering payments to low-income people.

6th consecutive year of drought

Morocco is heading towards its sixth consecu-



TAFRAOUT, Morocco: Photo shows the skull of an animal of the camelidae group on the dry Oued Tijekht in the Moroccan Sahara desert, near the central city of Tafraout in Morocco.

tive year of drought as rising temperatures lead to decline in rainfall, the North African country's water minister said. "We have entered a critical phase after five years in a row of drought, which our country has never experienced before," Nizar Baraka told a news conference. Drought has been a major concern for Morocco, whose agriculture sector employs about one-third of Moroccans of working age and accounts for 14 percent of exports, according to authorities.

The last three months "showed that we are heading into another drought year, God forbid," Baraka said, noting rainfall had dropped 67 percent below the average for that period of the year. Water scarcity is exacerbated by warmer temperatures which increase evaporation in dams. The agriculture ministry forecasts average temperatures rising

1.3 degrees Celsius by 2050. Morocco's dams are currently filled only to 23.5 percent, down from 31 percent at the same time last year, Baraka said, describing "a very dangerous situation".

But he said he was hopeful "because the next three months (are usually) the rainiest in our country". Local authorities might still need to cut off water supply temporarily, Baraka said. In the face of water scarcity, authorities have been betting on seawater desalination. Morocco plans to build seven desalination stations with a total capacity of 143 million cubic meters annually by the end of 2027. According to official data, there are currently 12 desalination stations in the country with a total capacity of 179.3 million cubic meters annually. The construction of a station in Casablanca, the country's largest city with 6 million inhabitants, is set to begin next month. — AFP



TUNIS: Tunisian men lead camels at the port of La Goulette in Tunis as Tunisia welcomes cruise ship from Europe, with more than 800 tourists on board. — AFP

Tunisian tourism bounces back to record levels

TUNIS: Tunisia's tourism sector bounced back this year with 8.8 million visitors, an official said Thursday, breaking pre-pandemic records and earning the country over two billion euros. Most visitors to the north African country came from nearby Algeria and Libya followed by France. "Our goal was to get back to 80 percent of tourism flow recorded in 2019," said Aymen Rahmani, director of studies and cooperation at the Tunisian national tourism office. As of December 10, "Tunisia has exceeded this goal" with 8.8 million visitors compared to 8.7 million over the same period of 2019, before the Covid pandemic hit, said Rahmani.

"If we keep the same trend, by the end of 2023, we will reach 9.6 million visitors," he added. Tourism revenues had reached 6.7 billion Tunisian dinars (about two billion euros), said Rahmani, who added that they could reach 6.9 billion dinars by the end of 2023. Tunisia significantly relies on tourism, which was impacted by the pandemic but also jihadist attacks that left 60 foreigners dead in 2015 at the Bardo museum in Tunis and a seaside resort in Sousse.

According to the World Bank, the sector's ongoing recovery has allowed Tunisia—which is mired in debt of around 80 percent of GDP—to partially rebalance its current deficit. The lender projects economic growth of only 1.2 percent for Tunisia this year. Years of drought have dealt a blow to agriculture while the war in Ukraine long made cereal and energy imports more expensive. Visitors from Algeria headed the list with 2.7 million this year, followed by 2.1 million Libyans and 974,000 French visitors, according to the country's tourism office. — AFP

'Beyond our borders': Vietnam tech firm VNG takes on world best

HO CHI MINH CITY: VNG co-founder Le Hong Minh's first taste of international competition was as a gamer for Vietnam at an early e-sport tournament in South Korea. Two decades later, he says he's ready to face the world's best again as he takes his tech company public. The firm—headquartered in buzzing business hub Ho Chi Minh City—is one of Vietnam's leading game publishers, but it also runs a digital wallet, cloud services and Vietnam's most popular messaging platform.

Months after Vietnamese electric vehicle maker VinFast made its debut on the Nasdaq, hitting the headlines around the world as its valuation skyrocketed and then crashed, VNG is also planning a listing in New York. "I challenge the game team by saying that in the next three to five years we need to become a global game company," Minh, 46, told AFP from his office on the banks of the Saigon river. To do that, "we need to be on a global stage, with access to global capital and talent". In Vietnam, VNG's products are already deeply embedded in people's lives.

Its Zalo app has 75 million active users in a country of 100 million people, outperforming Facebook to make it Vietnam's most popular messaging platform. The communist nation has a young and tech-savvy population, but it's not just them who use Zalo, whose default language is Vietnamese and which is tailored to the domestic market. "Zalo is very convenient to use for us," Ha Thi Minh Hoan, 74, told AFP. "As we are old, we stay at home more and we use Zalo for communication. We share photos, chat, have fun with each other. "If there is no Zalo, life may be a bit boring and monotonous I think."

Small beginnings

VNG was born in 2004 as Vinagame, a start-up with just five people, who prepared the launch of their—and Vietnam's—first online game by travelling the country on motorcycles. They plastered



HO CHI MINH CITY: Photo shows workers on their computers at the headquarters of Vietnamese internet firm VNG in Ho Chi Minh City. — AFP photos

posters for the game across 5,000 internet cafes, the founders say. They have now moved on to fintech and AI, with a mission to show the world what Vietnam—one of the world's fastest growing economies—and its engineers are capable of. But games remain a big part of the business plan, with 80 percent of revenue still earned in that division.

Publishing around 10 games a year in Vietnam and in various parts of Southeast Asia including Thailand and Indonesia, they are trying to expand further afield, into Latin America and the Middle East, where they also want to push games they make in-house. "It is a natural progression," said Lisa Hanson, CEO of Niko Partners, an Asian games market intelligence firm, noting that Singapore's Sea, a gaming and e-commerce company, had found success in South Asia and the Middle East with mobile game Free Fire.

Two years before Minh co-founded Vinagame, he travelled from what was then still a poor and underdeveloped Vietnam to play e-sports at one of the first World Cyber Games, held in Daejeon, South Korea in 2002. "I still remember the emotion. I said to myself this is the pinnacle of my career as a gamer," he said.

"The ultimate goal of anyone any good is to... play with the best people in the world, right?" He has that same aim for VNG, he says, which as Vietnam's first billion-dollar start-up is pitching its "homegrown digital ecosystem" to investors across the globe.

It's the right time to do it, said Huy Pham, senior lecturer in finance at RMIT University in Ho Chi Minh City. "When VinFast made its debut, they really attracted the attention of international investors," he said. "So there is growing momentum (with Vietnamese companies) - it's the best time to get money."

The firm counts Chinese internet giant Tencent and Singapore state investor Temasek among its shareholders. But it will need access to serious cash as it makes plans to build a large language model tailored to Vietnam, he added, as well as expand the reach of its games. The company suffered total losses of \$86.7 million in 2022 and \$27.4 million in the first six months of 2023, the company said in its filing to the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in August. "If they expand to another market that will increase the costs... increase the losses," Huy said. — AFP



Staff work at the headquarters of Vietnamese internet firm VNG in Ho Chi Minh.



A staff member of the Vietnamese internet firm VNG works at the VNG headquarters

Business

EU to loosen budget rules

European Union trying to keep spending under control

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

Dutch minister Sigrid Kaag said: "This agreement provides for fiscal rules that encourage reforms, with room for investments and tailored to the specific situation of the member state in question. "They work counter-cyclically so that potential economic growth is not cut short. In addition, rules must also be better adhered to, which too often has been an issue in the past."

The fiscal straitjacket imposed on EU members - limiting countries' debt to 60 percent of GDP and public deficits to 3 percent - was loosened during the COVID pandemic to allow greater state spending. This was meant to be a temporary reprieve, but launched a two-year debate between countries led by Germany that wanted a return to rigorous controls and others led by France that wanted more flexibility to allow spending to finance, for example, the transition to green energy or arms deliveries to Ukraine.

The compromise deal reconfirms the three percent deficit target. But it softens the rules for how quickly and a severely a country has to cut spending to get back within the parameters. "It was a hard road. It was a difficult path to tread. And now we have finally

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

Route back to stability

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

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

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



DUISBURG: A steelworker is seen at the blast furnace (Hochofen) Schmelzern at the steel works of Thyssen-Krupp Steel Europe AG in Duisburg, western Germany. — AFP

increase in the cost of debt linked to high interest rates will be taken into account

Berlin also wants a public deficit target of 1.5 percent of GDP be assigned to the most indebted countries, in order to preserve a margin of safety in relation to the three-percent ceiling. To achieve that, an adjustment of at least 0.4 points of GDP per year

will be required, which can be reduced to 0.25 points in the event of reforms and investments. The debt will have to fall by one percentage point per year on average over four or to seven years. Compared to the old rules, a French official argued "the deficit target is less restrictive, the pace of reaching it is more progressive and rewards investment". — AFP

British PM hails EU post-Brexit tariffs deal

LONDON: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has hailed a deal with the European Union to delay post-Brexit tariffs on electric vehicle sales that were due to kick in from January. It comes after the European Commission agreed earlier this month that it would back a one-off postponement until the end of 2026 of the planned 10-percent tariffs, in a major reversal of its previous position. The U-turn, which came after the UK and EU automotive industries raised cost concerns, paved the way for the announcement of the agreement.

It will see so-called "rules of origin" rules and resulting tariffs phased-in more gradually. "We have been listening to concerns of the sector throughout this process, and I know this breakthrough will come as a huge relief to the industry," Sunak said in a statement. He added the move would "keep costs down for businesses and

for people at home who want to make the switch to electric vehicles".

The need for the delay stems from disruption to the global supply chain caused by the pandemic and war in Ukraine, according to Sunak's Downing Street office. Britain formally left the EU in January 2020 and, during a subsequent transition period, sealed the post-Brexit free-trade agreement with the bloc which came into effect in 2021.

Under that deal, tariffs were to start on January 1, 2024, on vehicles that do not have at least 45 percent UK- or EU-made content, and with batteries that are at least 50-60 percent sourced from those countries. The industry expects the delay to imposing the requirements will save car manufacturers and consumers up to £4.3 billion (\$5.5 billion) in additional costs, Sunak's office said. The director-general of the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association (ACEA), Sigrid



DOVER: Ferries dock at the empty parking in Dover port, south England. — AFP

de Vries, said the agreement brought "much-needed certainty" to the electric vehicle battery supply chain.

"Instead of penalizing green industries, today's decision is recognition that it takes time to build up emerging value chains," she added. "It is also a strong signal that the EU is willing to uphold the competitiveness of its critical industries." The

chief executive of the UK's Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT), Mike Hawes, called the deal "a win for motorists, the economy and the environment". "Maintaining tariff-free trade in EVs will ensure consumers retain the widest and most affordable choice of models, at a time when we need all drivers to make the switch," he added. — AFP

Insect compasses and fire-fighting vines: 2023's nature-inspired tech

PARIS: Even as human-caused climate change threatens the environment, nature continues to inspire our technological advancement. "The solutions that are provided by nature have evolved for billions of years and tested repeatedly every day since the beginning of time," said Evripidis Gkaniats, a University of Edinburgh researcher. Gkaniats has a special interest in how nature can educate artificial intelligence. "Human creativity might be fascinating, but it cannot reach nature's robustness—and engineers know that," he told AFP. From compasses mimicking insect eyes to forest fire-fighting robots that behave like vines, here's a selection of this year's nature-based technology.

Insect compass

Some insects—such as ants and bees—navigate visually based on the intensity and polarization of sunlight, thus using the sun's position as a reference point. Researchers replicated their eye structure to construct a compass capable of estimating the sun's location in the sky, even on cloudy days. Common compasses rely on Earth's weak magnetic field to navigate, which is easily disturbed by noise from electronics. A prototype of the light-detecting compass is "already working great", said Gkaniats, who led the study published in Communications Engineering. "With the appropriate funding, this could easily be transformed into a more compact and lightweight product" freely available, he added. And with a little further tweaking, the insect compass could work on any planet where a big celestial light source is visible.

Water-collecting webs

Fabric inspired by the silky threads of a spider web and capable of collecting drinking water from morning mist could soon play an important role in regions suffering water scarcity. The artificial threads draw from the feather-legged spider, whose intricate "spindle-knots" allow large water droplets to move and collect on its web. Once the material can be mass produced, the water harvested could reach a "considerable scale for real application", Yongmei Zheng, a co-author of the study published in Advanced Functional Materials, told AFP.

Fire-fighting vines

Animals aren't the only source of inspiration from nature. Scientists have created an inflatable robot that "grows" in the direction of light or heat, in the same way vines creep up a wall or across a forest floor. The roughly two-metre-long tubular robot can steer itself using fluid-filled pouches



LA TESTE-DE-BUCH: Employees of the National Forests Offices (ONF) look for bark beetles -wood-destroying insects — in La Teste-de-Buch, southwestern France, where a wildfire ravaged the area. — AFP

rather than costly electronics. In time, these robots could find hot spots and deliver fire suppression agents, say researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "These robots are slow, but that is OK for fighting smouldering fires, such as peat fires, which can be a major source of carbon emissions," co-author Charles Xiao told AFP. But before the robots can climb the terrain, they need to be more heat-resistant and agile.

Kombucha circuits

Scientists at the Unconventional Computing Laboratory at the University of the West of England in Bristol have found a way to use slimy kombucha mats—produced by yeast and bacteria during the fermenting of the popular tea-based drink—to create "kombucha electronics". The scientists printed electrical circuits onto dried mats that were capable of illuminating small LED lights.

Dry kombucha mats share properties of textiles or even leather. But they are sustainable and biodegradable, and can even be immersed in water for days without being destroyed, said the authors. "Kombucha wearables could potentially incorporate sensors and electronics within the material itself, providing a seamless and unobtrusive integration of technology with the human body," such as for heart monitors or step-trackers, lead author

Andrew Adamatzky and the laboratory's director, told AFP. The mats are lighter, cheaper and more flexible than plastic, but the authors caution that durability and mass production remain significant obstacles.

Scaly robots

Pangolins resemble a cross between a pine cone and an anteater. The soft-bodied mammals, covered in reptilian scales, are known to curl up in a ball to protect themselves against predators. Now, a tiny robot might adapt that same design for potentially life-saving work, according to a study published in Nature Communications. It is intended to roll through our digestive tracts before unfurling and delivering medicine or stopping internal bleeding in hard-to-reach parts of the human body.

Lead author Ren Hao Soon of the Max Planck Institute for Intelligent Systems was watching a YouTube video when he "stumbled across the animal and saw it was a good fit". Soon needed a soft material that wouldn't cause harm inside the human body, with the advantages of a hard material that could, for example, conduct electricity. The Pangolin's unique structure was perfect. The tiny robots are still in their initial stages, but they could be made for as little as 10 euros each. "Looking to nature to solve these kinds of problems is natural," said Soon. "Every single design part of an animal serves a particular function. It's very elegant." — AFP

Burgan Bank continues serving customers during the New Year's holiday

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank has announced that it will be officially closed on Sunday, December 31, 2023, during the New Year's holiday. The Bank will resume normal operating hours at all branches on Tuesday, January 2, 2024. However, to accommodate Burgan Bank customers, the Airport Branch will continue to operate 24/7 during the holidays.

For more information about any products and services during the holiday, customers can contact Burgan Bank's contact center or WhatsApp. Customers can also continue to conduct their financial transactions easily and securely using the Burgan Bank mobile app or the online banking platform. Burgan Bank would like to take this opportunity to extend its best wishes and greetings to everyone in Kuwait in celebration of the New Year.

Serbia vows to allow vehicles with Kosovo licence plates to enter

BELGRADE: Belgrade will allow vehicles with Kosovo licence plates to enter Serbia beginning in the new year, a government official said, paving way to end a long-standing dispute over the issue. With Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence from Serbia, a move which Belgrade along with its key allies Russia and China refuse to recognize, car plates became a flashpoint over their display of national symbols that former warring foes both object to.

Until now, vehicles from either Kosovo or Serbia could cross the border only if they placed stickers to hide the respective symbols. The head of Serbia's office for Kosovo did not specify if the practice would continue under the new regulations. The decision was made to "enable freedom of movement to all vehicles" from Kosovo, state-run RTS reported on Monday, quoting the head of Serbia's office for Kosovo Petar Petkovic.

The decision will begin to be implemented starting from January 1, Petkovic said, but underlined that a "disclaimer" will be posted on every border crossing. "Allowing all vehicles to enter traffic... is purely a practical decision, to ease the position of individuals and their freedom of movement and cannot be interpreted as recognising unilaterally declared independence of so-called Kosovo," Petkovic said. Serbia agreed to recognize Kosovo licence plates and vice versa after a European Union (EU) mediated deal in 2011, but the decision was never fully implemented.

The EU on Tuesday welcomed Serbia's "positive step". "It demonstrates that making progress in the process of normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is possible," EU foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stano. "This decision paves the way for full abolition of the sticker regime. The EU now expects Kosovo to respond in a similar manner," Stano said on social media. Last year, Kosovo pulled back from the controversial decision to penalise drivers who did not swap vehicle licence plates issued by Serbia for those issued by Pristina.

Kosovo Serb minority -- which remains loyal to Belgrade and still considers itself a part of Serbia despite Kosovo's 2008 recognition on independence -- reacted first by leaving the local administration in the Serb-majority north Kosovo, and then by setting up roadblocks, occasionally clashing with the police. But since then, "99 percent" of Kosovo Serbs voluntarily swapped licence plates for Pristina-issued ones, Petkovic said, explaining that the move was necessary for their daily lives. There has been no response yet from the Kosovo government if they would reciprocate the measure initiated by Serbia. — AFP

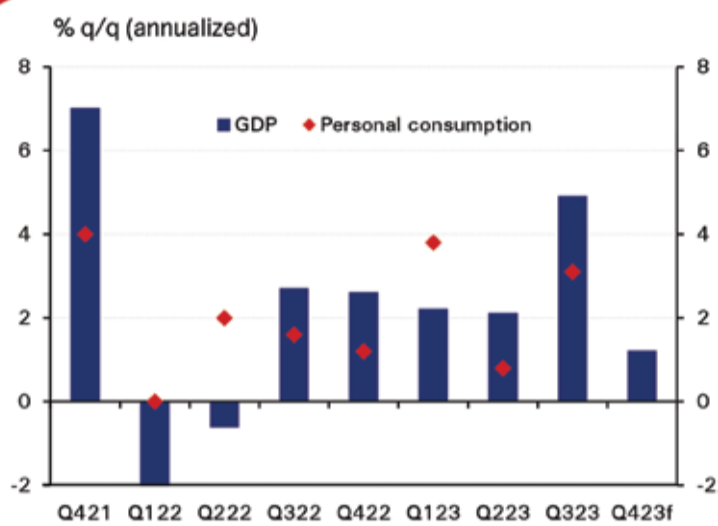
Business

NBK Economic Report

Global economy to remain under pressure as rate cut hopes mount

Europe's economy heads toward recession

Chart 1: US real GDP and personal consumption growth



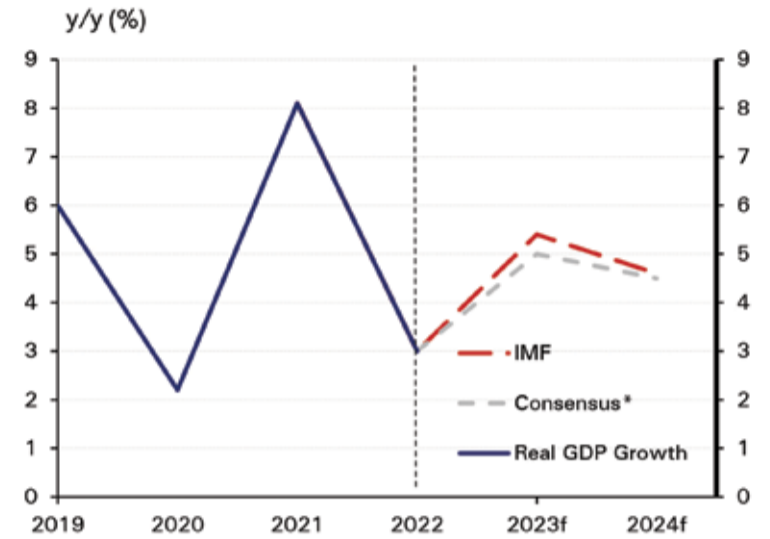
Source: Haver, Refinitiv; Note: Q4 23 forecasts are from third-party

Chart 2: Eurozone and UK GDP growth



Source: Haver

Chart 3: China GDP growth



Source: Haver, Refinitiv, IMF

KUWAIT: Going into 2024, the global economy faces headwinds as earlier monetary tightening continues to filter through with a lag. Although current indicators are still far from flashing any significant recession, the global growth outlook, led by developed markets, has softened in the last few months. Meanwhile, inflation seems to be on a downward trend, boosting hopes of a soft landing – though core inflation still has some way to fall to return to pre-COVID levels.

Interest rates in the US are likely at their peak, with the Fed signaling a pivot away from tightening, and projecting several rate cuts next year. Elsewhere, China continues to grapple with a deepening property downturn, pushing the authorities to do more to support the outlook. India however remains one of the few bright spots for the global economy, with growth holding at above 7 percent in Q3.

US momentum fading

The US economy, having overshot expectations in the last two quarters, now seems to be losing some momentum as consumer spending develops fatigue and the delayed effect of aggressive monetary tightening steadily shows up. GDP in Q3 grew at a sharp and better-than-expected 4.9 percent annualized rate versus 2.1 percent in Q2.

Household spending was robust and residential investment rose following two consecutive years of declines. However, economic indicators in Q4 have been patchy, with retail sales (+0.3 percent m/m) and industrial production (+0.2 percent m/m) rising in November after large drops in October, and mixed PMI survey readings (manufacturing and services at 46.7 and 52.7, respectively). The upshot is that the market expects a sharp slowdown in GDP growth to 1-1.5 percent in Q4.

US real GDP and growth

However, the labor market remains solid, giving credence to the soft-landing scenario, as job gains picked up in November (+199K, lower than the average of 2022-23 but above pre-COVID) and wage growth accelerated (+0.4 percent m/m), with the unemployment rate dropping (3.7 percent). Jobless claims have been volatile but are historically low. Consumer price (CPI) inflation has broadly decelerated, with the core rate unchanged at 4 percent y/y in November. This is double the Fed's target but well off its 6.6 percent peak last year. With the Fed funds target interest rate now at 5.25-5.50 percent, real policy rates are in positive (and restrictive) territory, representing a brake on economic momentum.

Tighter policy, along with headline inflation slowing to just 3.1 percent y/y in November, have led futures markets to predict the Fed will bring forward its first rate cut to as soon as March and cut rates rather aggressively after that (over 125 bps in total by end-2024). The FOMC's revised dot-plot projection in December showed a smaller easing of 75 bps in 2024. This is more an aggressive loosening than it previously projected, but Fed officials will be mindful of declaring victory over inflation too soon, with core PCE inflation set to exceed the 2 percent target until 2026.

Homelessness soars in rural England as living costs hit poor

LONDON: Homelessness in rural England has risen by 40 percent in five years with many sleeping in the open air, tents or makeshift shelters, a British rural charity said on Tuesday. A cost-of-living crisis in the G7 nation and the world's sixth-biggest economy, fuelled by high inflation, has left many Britons struggling to make ends meet, as bills for food, energy, rent and mortgages increase.

Inflation is coming down from a 41-year peak of 11.1 percent in October 2022 to 3.9 percent in November, but charities believe a range of factors, notably cuts to welfare payments in the last decade and a housing shortage, has exacerbated food poverty and homelessness. The CPRE charity, which campaigns for affordable housing in rural England, said homelessness in the countryside had increased from 17,212 in 2018 to 24,143 in 2023, with wages stagnating and housing costs rising in many areas.

Table 1: Real GDP growth rate

	2022	2023f	2024f
US	2.1	2.4	1.2
Eurozone	3.5	0.5	0.6
UK	4.1	0.5	0.4
Japan	1.0	1.6	0.8
China	3.0	5.0	4.5
India*	7.2	6.4	6.7

Source: Refinitiv (third-party forecasts) Note: *FY ending March of the following year

Europe's economy

Economic activity in Europe trended lower in Q3 due to pullbacks in consumer spending, investment, and industrial output amid high inflation and elevated borrowing costs. Preliminary Euro-zone Q3 GDP estimates showed growth turning negative at -0.1 percent q/q (+0.2 percent in Q2) and almost flat at 0.1 percent y/y, slowing sharply from Q2's 0.5 percent. Following the negative Q3 print, the bloc is on the cusp of a technical recession: the October and November PMI scores remained below the 'no change' 50 mark, potentially signaling another output drop in Q4.

The European Commission downgraded its economic growth projections for 2023 and 2024 to 0.6 percent (from the previous estimate of 0.8 percent) and 1.3 percent (from 1.4 percent), respectively. Deteriorating economic activity has fed concerns that the ECB may have over tightened monetary policy – especially with the most recent November inflation print of 2.4 percent y/y slowing from October (2.9 percent) and well below expectations.

ECB policymakers have pushed back against market expectations of sharp rate cuts, but the markets are pricing in a first cut in March or April. It has been a similar story in the UK. The economy stagnated in Q3 (0.0 percent q/q; +0.6 percent y/y), then unexpectedly shrank 0.3 percent m/m in October. Meanwhile, inflation fell more than expected to 3.9 percent in November (from 4.6 percent in October) and wage growth cooled in the three months to October.

The Bank of England is also seen cutting rates next year but at a more moderate pace than the ECB or the Fed, given the UK's higher inflation levels currently. On the fiscal side, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt in November unveiled a package of demand and supply-side measures aimed at easing the cost-of-living burden for households and stimulating economic growth, worth on average 0.6 percent of GDP per year over coming years.

"The sharp rise in rural homelessness shows the real-life impact of record house prices, huge waiting lists for social-rent housing and the boom in second homes and short-term lets," it said.

The charity said 12 local authorities across England – designated as predominantly rural – had levels of rough sleeping higher than the national average of 15 people per 100,000. The town of Boston, northeast of London, was England's worst-affected rural local authority for rough sleeping, the charity said. It said 48 people per 100,000 were sleeping rough in town in September 2023 – the latest month for which data is available.

Boston was followed by Bedford, north of London with 38 per 100,000, and North Devon in southwest England with 29. "Unlike those in urban areas, people sleeping rough in the countryside are often hidden out of sight, camping in fields or sheltering in farm buildings," the charity said. "They are also less likely to have access to support services. This means the analysis, which uses the government's own data, almost certainly underestimates the scale of the crisis." The charity said 300,000 people are waiting for social housing in rural England – where the average house sells for around £420,000. — AFP

percent Q2, due to unfavorable base effects. Growth is on track to meet the government's target of 'around 5 percent', after averaging 5.2 percent YTD.

Recent data has been patchy. Retail sales growth missed expectations despite accelerating to 10.1 percent y/y in November (October 7.6 percent) helped by a supportive base effect, but growth in industrial output reached a more than two-year high of 6.6 percent y/y. Meanwhile, real estate activity remains on a downward trajectory, with an accelerated fall in YTD property investment (-9.4 percent y/y) and existing house prices (-3.3 percent y/y) in November. Amid the deterioration, property developers have been facing liquidity issues and defaulting on obligations.

The ripple effects are also felt in the shadow banking sector with last month Zhongzhi, a large wealth manager, revealing a \$36 billion funding shortfall as such institutions typically took outsized property-related exposures during stronger days. Additionally, consumer price inflation in November fell deeper into deflation (-0.5 percent y/y) as consumption failed to pick up. Exports and imports have been volatile in October-November on weak domestic demand and a soft global economy.

Amid these challenges, the government has stepped up policy support measures, including using unconventional monetary policy such as providing cheap liquidity to property developers, mortgage rate cuts to boost housing demand, and increased infrastructure spending. However, investors are still looking for the government to act more decisively to support growth, including potentially outright policy interest rate cuts. Improved long-term prospects remain tied to successfully shifting the economic model away from being overly dependent on infrastructure investments and exports to spurring sustained domestic consumption.

India's Q2 growth

India's economy has maintained its robust momentum, with growth expected at the fastest pace among major global countries next year. GDP expanded by an above-consensus 7.6 percent y/y in Q2 (July-Sep), slightly slowing from 7.8 percent in Q1, supported by strong manufacturing activity and government spending. Still, this year's erratic monsoon season has dampened rural demand, while challenges remain on the external front as exports have been weak.

Confirming the strength in the domestic sector, fiscal revenues have been solid, remaining on track to achieve the government's fiscal deficit target of 5.9 percent of GDP this year (from 6.4 percent last year). The government may have space to accelerate spending on infrastructure as well as populist measures before next year's general election. On the back of outperformance in Q2, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) upgraded its growth projections for this year (FY23/24) to 7 percent from 6.5 percent earlier and around 6.5 percent for Q1-Q3 FY24/25.

Meanwhile, consumer price inflation increased to a three-month high of 5.6 percent y/y in November on surging agri-products prices after irregular rains impacted crop yields. Nonetheless, the peak inflationary phase seems behind us. The RBI has maintained its stance on policy rates (repo rate at 6.5 percent), but the bank recently increased the risk weight on some unsecured consumer loans to curb excessive demand.



LONDON: Shoppers carry their shopping bags along Oxford Street during the Boxing Day sales in London on December 26, 2023. — AFP



Illustrative photo shows the NORAD logo on a cell phone screen while the tracker follows Santa flying over New York City on a computer monitor in Los Angeles on Dec 24, 2023. - AFP photos

US-Canada military center 'tracks' Santa for 68th year

A joint US-Canadian military monitoring agency continued this year its decades-long Christmas tradition of tracking Santa's whereabouts, helping children around the globe find out when his reindeer-powered, present-filled sleigh would be coming to town. A 3-D, interactive website at www.noradsanta.org showed Santa Claus and his reindeer on their imagined worldwide delivery route, allowing users to click and learn more about the various cities along the way.

The Santa tracker presented by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) dates to 1955, when a Colorado newspaper advertisement printed a phone number to connect children with Santa but mistakenly directed them to the hotline for the military nerve center. To avoid disappointing the little ones, NORAD's director of operations at the time, Colonel Harry Shoup, ordered his staff to check the radar to see where Old Saint Nick might be and update the children on his location.

When not spreading holiday cheer, NORAD conducts aerospace and mari-

time control and warning operations — including monitoring for missile launches from North Korea, something that may have been on Santa's mind this year as he passed over, with the most recent ICBM test just days ago. Sixty-eight years later NORAD was continuing its tradition of setting up a temporary call center out of its Colorado headquarters to answer children's burning questions.

A photo posted by the group on Facebook showed rows of people answering phones, some in uniform and others wearing red Santa caps. Some top-level US dignitaries — namely President Joe Biden and wife Jill Biden — joined in on the holiday action. "This evening, the President and First Lady participated in the North American Aerospace Defense Command Santa tracking calls with children and families across the country," the White House said in a statement.

Earlier Sunday the tracker went down for a short while, leaving children in the Pacific region in the dark about his exact position. "Hey #SantaTrackers! We may be having a couple of technical difficulties with our tracking map, but #Santa is

still flying! He is headed to Fiji next!" the group which runs the tracker said on its Facebook page, before announcing a fix one hour later.

Father Christmas had begun his journey with an out-of-this-world first stop, according to NORAD: The International Space Station orbiting Earth. The reindeer-pulled sleigh was also seen traversing the Zionist entity as well as flying over southern Gaza, crisscrossing Africa, and venturing southward to Palmer Station, a research facility in Antarctica.

Santa then headed up through South America, bound for the United States as he unloaded approximately 100,000 gifts every second. Around 10:00 pm local time (0300 GMT), Kris Kringle and his reindeer were spotted entering US airspace near Fort Lauderdale, Florida, before continuing their journey across the rest of the country — with nearly 5.5 billion presents, and counting, delivered worldwide. - AFP



Photo shows a cell phone with NORAD's Santa Tracker on screen nestled in a Christmas tree.



Afghan grooms stand next to decorated cars outside the wedding hall.

Afghans marry in mass ceremony to cut costs

Fifty couples married Monday in a joint ceremony in the Afghan capital — a growing practice to reduce the astronomical cost of traditional weddings in the impoverished country. The couples were joined in matrimony in one of the dozens of glitzy wedding halls that punctuate Kabul, but the ceremony itself was somewhat austere. Since the return of the Taliban in August 2021 weddings have become low-key affairs, with dancing and music effectively banned after authorities deemed such activities un-Islamic.

In front of the City Star wedding hall near the airport, around a hundred turbaned men dressed in traditional shalwar kameez chatted in groups — not a single woman present. They decorated cars with green ribbons and red plastic roses forming hearts to carry the newlyweds away. Roothullah Rezayi, 18, due to leave with his wife in a few hours, told AFP he could not afford a solo wedding.

"A traditional wedding would have cost us at least 200,000 to 250,000 Afghanis (\$2,800 to \$3,600), but this time it will be between 10,000 and 15,000 Afghanis," he said. The young man, a member of the Hazara minority and from Ghor province, earns barely 350 Afghanis per day doing odd jobs. "We invited 35 people from our two families, otherwise it would have been 300 to 400," said the groom, a plastic flower in the breast pocket of his waistcoat worn over a white tunic.

Donations to each couple from the Selab Foundation, who organized the event, are equivalent to \$1,600 — a huge amount in one of the poorest countries in the world. They will also leave with a cake, a kit containing toothpaste, shampoo and moisturizer, and a carpet, blanket and a few household appliances to start married life.

A thousand guests

Hundreds of male guests wrapped in traditional patu shawls attended the ceremony in a



The grooms look on during the mass wedding ceremony. — AFP photos

large, chilly hall, festooned with garlands. An official from the ministry for the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice gave a speech, and there were recitations from the Holy Quran. The brides-to-be were kept out of sight in a separate wing, however, and journalists were prohibited from approaching them. It was only after lunch that the women appeared, fully veiled.

Larger, more pricey weddings in Afghanistan can bring together more than 1,000 guests and cost over \$20,000. For Monday's mass wedding, 600 couples applied. For some of the lucky chosen ones, it has been a long wait. "I've been waiting for this day for three years," said Samiullah Zamani, a 23-year-old farmer from Kabul province. "I can't wait to see her," he said of his fiancée. — AFP



Afghan volunteers distribute flower bouquets to the grooms.



An Afghan security personnel walks through the mass wedding ceremony at the wedding hall.

Lifestyle

Fantasy fair featuring Dali, Basquiat returns to life in Calif

Mesmerizing carousels and Ferris wheels designed by Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf that spin to music by Miles Davis or Philip Glass — this is “Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy”. With works designed by prominent 20th-century artists, the resurrected show bills itself as the world’s first art amusement park, a one-of-a-kind psychedelic fair.

Luna Luna recently opened its doors in Los Angeles. Its features include a mirrored fun house signed by Salvador Dali, a pavilion from Roy Lichtenstein, an enchanted forest by David Hockney, and a marriage chapel designed by Andre Heller, the Austrian multimedia artist who brought the “Forgotten Fantasy” to life nearly four decades ago.

Heller, an aficionado of traveling fairs and circuses, and with far-flung interests in film, music, theater, sculpture and more, recruited some of the most established names from the last century’s art scene as well as some talented newcomers to create Luna Luna: An amusement park designed to make art accessible to ordinary people.

The fair debuted in Hamburg, Germany in 1987, but after drawing thousands of visitors, money ran out, bureaucratic obstacles mounted, and plans for a world tour had to be shelved. Luna Luna ended



Visitors experience the “Dalidom” by Salvador Dali at “Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy” on Dec 22, 2023 in Los Angeles. — AFP photos



The Keith Haring painted carousel is seen at “Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy”.



Visitors experience the Painted Ferris Wheel by Jean-Michel Basquiat.

up being packed away in 44 shipping containers in Texas for the next 35 years. That’s when Drake got involved. The superstar rapper and singer heard about Luna Luna, said he was “blown away” by the concept, and had his music company, DreamCrew, buy and restore the fair’s attractions.

Drake and other investors put \$100 million into the project, a Luna Luna executive told the New York Times. Breathtakingly unique pieces emerged from the dusty containers — like Haring’s carousel, in which distinctive figures seem to come to life like colorful dancers, or Basquiat’s Ferris wheel, which has a strong social-protest component.

“Just seeing something like this artwork in a carnival form, I’ve just never seen this before. It definitely was beyond our expectations,” said visitor Douglas Hickman, 38, who spent several minutes staring with fascination at the Basquiat Ferris wheel. “Being an artist myself, I feel like it’s just a one-of-a-kind experience.”

‘A time capsule’

Unlike the fair’s original opening in Germany, which took place in an open-air park, this one is set in an enormous warehouse. Dark backgrounds help create a psychedelic or museum-like effect. Also unlike the German experience, the public will not be able to ride on Luna Luna’s attractions, as was originally intended; they are now viewed as relics to be preserved.

Still, thanks to the spinning motion of the rides, an intoxicating play of colorful lights and the meticulous musical curation, visitors feel immersed in a carnival from another time. “We would love to go on” one of the rides, said Adam UMBER, who was



Visitors experience the fantastical carousel by artist Arik Brauer featuring eight different characters, among them a butterfly, a she-wolf, a mermaid and hand-horse that double as seats.

with his four-year-old son Elias. “But I think it’s fabulous. It’s a time capsule and you get to experience something that’s as old as ‘87, but has not been in view” since then.

While rides like the carousel and the Ferris wheel are only for viewing, visitors can immerse themselves in the magic of other attractions — like the Dali dome, Hockney’s enchanted forest or the Heller wedding chapel. A sign in the chapel, under oversized caricatures of a bride and groom, bears the playful in-



Visitors experience sculptures by artist Kenny Scharf at “Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy”.

vitiation: “Marry a friend or marry a foe; marry a shoe or marry a crow; marry whomever or whatever you wish, be it a bike or be it a fish. For love is love at Luna Luna, even if you love a tuna!”

Yoori Kim, who came to the Los Angeles fair to celebrate her 35th birthday, took those words to heart and decided to marry... herself. “I just recently got clean,” she said. “So I figured this is a good moment to celebrate my sober life and... the rest of the time I have on this world. I feel a little overwhelmed be-

cause it’s so stimulating,” she said. “The great artists in the 20th century that I never got to meet, I feel like they’re living through their artwork right now. “It’s such a good feeling to be in the middle of all that. We need more of this.”

“Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy” will be in Los Angeles until the spring of 2024. — AFP



The Kenny Scharf painted chair swing ride in motion.



Visitors at “Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy”.

UNESCO LISTING BRINGS NEW SHINE TO NORTH AFRICAN METAL ART

Mohamed Amine Htiouich began honing his metal engraving skills as a teenager. Now the 37-year-old Tunisian is training the next generation in the ancient art, recently recognized by UNESCO. Htiouich first worked on copper, then silver and finally gold at the family's workshop in the old medina of Tunis. Two decades later, he offers free apprenticeships to young enthusiasts in the art of manually cutting words or symbols into jewelry and household objects, a craft often passed down from father to son.

"I don't want to see this tradition disappear," said Htiouich. "I'm afraid that one day there will be no succession." The long-standing tradition, which has been practiced across North Africa and the Middle East for centuries, was added last month to UNESCO's intangible heritage list. While it is gaining recognition abroad, local artisans regret that metal engraving remains undervalued at home and suffers from a lack of government support.

The UNESCO designation "commits us to preserving this exceptional knowhow", said Imed Soula, a Tunisian artisan who helped get engraving nominated for the list. Soula told AFP that local craftsmen were "inspired by the aesthetic, religious and cultural references of their societies" when creating the exquisite works.

'No craftsmen' left

At his workshop in the Den Den suburb of Tunis, Chiheb Eddine Ben Jabballah often teaches the craft to women looking to make jewelry or baskets with chiseled-copper ornaments. The 68-year-old — who also heads Tunisia's national chamber of craftsmen — has trained hundreds of engravers over a career spanning five decades.

But he said the apprenticeships are often too short, lasting only three months. "It takes at least two years to learn all the techniques of engraving," he explained of the craft, which dates back to the Carthaginians. The large variety of techniques stems from



A Tunisian artisan engraves a design onto a copper plate at his shop in the souks of the medina of Tunis on Dec 7, 2023. — AFP photos



the intermingling of Islamic civilization and Mediterranean traditions, along with indigenous Amazigh heritage and Far Eastern influences. Proud of his rich profession, Ben Jabballah regretted however that it had become "little valued" at home.

In Morocco, artisan Abdelilah Mounir believes the UNESCO designation will "help on the tourism and commercial level". "It is good international publicity," said Mounir, who sells copper items in the northern city of Fez. But for Mohamed Moumni, a jeweler from the northwestern city of Sale, demand is not the issue in Morocco — a popular tourist destination with renowned craftsmanship. "The problem is the scarcity of people who know how to do it. We can no longer find craftsmen," he said.

'Magnificent trade'

In Libya — thrown into chaos since the fall of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 — artisans complain of a crippling lack of support. "There's very little development of the craft," said Youssef Chouchine, 60,

one of the few remaining craftsmen in Tripoli's medina. Without assistance from authorities, "it's only demand that keeps the craftsmen going", Chouchine said. "The majority of old craftsmen have left the trade already... It's not a good situation," he added.

Public initiatives are also few and far between in Algeria, but engraved metal remains in high demand. Each region has its specialty, including gold jewelry in Tlemcen and silver rings, necklaces and bracelets — sometimes embellished with coral — in Kabylia and Aures. "It's a magnificent trade," said Walid Sellami, a 37-year-old jewelry designer from Algiers. "You don't need to talk to people to make sales. They can see the jewelry for themselves," he added from his little workshop.

Sellami learned his craft from the Internet after finding no available training in his city. The UNESCO designation "won't change much", he said. Still, he is "happy and proud" that the ancestral custom has now gained more recognition. — AFP



A Tunisian artisan engraves a design onto a copper plate at his shop.



A Tunisian artisan displays a copper plate to a tourist at his shop.



Walid Sellami, an artisan jeweller, displays some of his work.

Sports

Rabada takes five wickets as India struggle on first day

South African paceman Burger rattles India on Test debut

CENTURION: South African fast bowler Kagiso Rabada took five wickets as India struggled on the first day of the first Test at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Tuesday. India were 176 for seven at tea after being sent in. Rabada had figures of five for 41 – his 14th five-wicket haul in Test cricket. KL Rahul battled through to the tea break in challenging conditions and was on 39 not out.

India could have been in deeper trouble after being reduced to 24 for three. Both Virat Kohli (38) and Shreyas Iyer (31) were dropped with their scores on four. Kohli and Iyer went on to add 68 for the fourth wicket before both were dismissed in an inspired three-wicket spell by Rabada immediately after lunch. Iyer was bowled by a ball which cut back off the pitch and Kohli was caught behind off a superb delivery which swung away late. South African captain Temba Bavuma left the field with a strained left hamstring injury before lunch and did not reappear.

A bulletin from the South African dressing room stated that there would be “daily medical evaluations to determine his participation in the match”. The start was delayed by 30 minutes because of damp patches on a pitch which had been under cover for 40 hours before Tuesday morning because of rain.

There was plenty of assistance for the bowlers, but only new cap Nandre Burger offered consistent support to Rabada.

At the start South Africa claimed three early wickets but missed what could prove to be two crucial chances on the first morning of the first Test against India in Centurion on Tuesday. India were 91 for three at lunch after being put in to bat with Nandre Burger making an immediate impact on his Test debut, taking two for 23.

Virat Kohli (33 not out) and Shreyas Iyer (31 not out) put on an unbeaten 67 for the fourth wicket after the tourists had been left reeling at 24 for three. Both could have been dismissed on four. Iyer was dropped by Marco Jansen when he slashed Kagiso Rabada to backward point. In the next over Kohli flicked Burger to midwicket and was put down by Tony de Zorzi. Bavuma's decision to bowl first, on a ground where uneven bounce has been a factor in the later stages of previous matches, appeared to have paid off when three wickets fell in the first hour.

Indian captain Rohit Sharma was caught at long leg off Rabada for five. Burger then struck twice, having Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill caught behind for 17 and two respectively. — AFP



CENTURION: South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (3rd R), South Africa's Dean Elgar (2nd R), South Africa's Keegan Petersen (R) and South Africa's Tony de Zorzi (2nd L) celebrate after the dismissal of India's Virat Kohli (L) during the first day of the first cricket Test match between South Africa and India at SuperSport Park in Centurion. — AFP

Hazem beats top seed Benjamin in third Arab Tennis Masters tourney

KUWAIT: Syrian tennis player Hazem broke out the first surprise of the third Arab Tennis Masters Tournament being held in Qatar by beating first seed Lebanon's Benjamin Hassan (7-6, 6-2) on Monday in the quarter finals round.

Hazem will meet Egypt's Mohammad Safwat in the semi-finals as he beat Algeria's Sameer Raqeq (6-2, 6-2). Tunis's Mohammad Aziz Daqaz is into the semifinals by beating Egypt's Kareem Maamoun (6-2, 6-3), and will meet Lebanon's Hadi Habeeb who beat Morocco's Yaseen Al-Dulaimi (7-5, 6-2).

Meanwhile, Mohammad Safwat said all matches were tough due to having 16 of the best Arab players participating. He said the previous edition was according to the groups system, and the player had a chance to compensate for a loss, but the current one means a loss will negate the chance to compete for the title, and will go for the consolation rounds, which increased the challenge and made matches stronger.

He said the Arab Tennis Federation (ATF) took Arab Tennis to new levels of development and that the current tournament had a major role in promoting the game and increased its popularity among upcoming players and hoped the tournament be held every year.

ATF Assistant Secretary General Waleed Sami



Hazem



Mohammad Safwat

said the levels players are displaying are a source of pride, adding that ATF was keen on the participation of ATP ranked players in order to increase competition among players and that what took place.

“The start is awesome and the pub at the end is awesome, so I like the whole event.” SHK Scallywag, another supermaxi, was in third place after taking a penalty turn, organisers said. It had tacked close to Andoo Comanche as the yachts left Sydney harbour, prompting a protest by Comanche. Weather is pivotal in the blue water classic, first held in 1945. This year marks the 25th anniversary of a fatal storm that tore into the 1998 race fleet, whipping up mountainous seas and wild winds in which six men died, five boats sank and 55 sailors were rescued.

‘All or nothing’

For the 2023 edition, weather forecasters are predicting storms, lightning, hail and strong winds as the boats sail southwards down the New South Wales coast on their way to Hobart. Sailors face a risk of “severe” thunderstorms, said the Bureau of Meteorology's senior meteorologist Gabrielle Woodhouse.

In a final briefing on race morning, she predicted easterly but “very erratic” winds in the early stages as a low pressure system creates strong winds, heavy downpours and possible hail, hindering visibility. Vessels still on the water Friday could face a southeasterly swell with waves of three-to-five metres (10-16 feet), she said.

David Witt, skipper of the Hong Kong-owned SHK Scallywag, said the forecast looked “very exciting” for his crew. “So it's all or nothing for the Scallywags yet again,” he said in a social media message to supporters before the race. Last year, Andoo Comanche crossed the finish line first with a time of one day, 11 hours, 56min and 48sec. But the overall winner of the race under a handicap system was 52-foot Celestial, which claimed the coveted Tattersall Cup. — AFP



SYDNEY: Yacht SHK Scallywag competes during the annual Sydney to Hobart yacht race on Boxing Day at Sydney Harbour on December 26, 2023. — AFP

Australia frustrate Pakistan in 2nd Test

MELBOURNE: A stubborn Marnus Labuschagne weathered a storm to help steer Australia to 187-3 on a rain-disrupted opening day of the second Test in Melbourne Tuesday against a probing and resilient Pakistan attack. At stumps, he was unbeaten on a glacial 44 off 120 balls and Travis Head was not out on nine after nearly three hours' play were lost to rain.

Pakistan's bowlers found plenty of movement in the overcast conditions and were rewarded with the wickets of David Warner (38), Usman Khawaja (42) and Steve Smith (26). But a patient Labuschagne was immovable as the hosts look to seal the three-Test series after thumping the visitors by 360 runs in Perth.

Pakistan captain Shan Masood won the toss and opted to bowl first on a pitch suited to the seamers. Spearheaded by Shaheen Shah Afridi, Pakistan bowled a good length and found early swing, with Warner dropped on two by Abdullah Shafique, who put down a regulation catch at second slip.

Warner, who made 164 in the first innings at Perth in his farewell Test series, was also fortunate to get away with an edge that sailed over the slips for a boundary on 17. His luck ran out with a rash shot off part-time spinner Agha Salman in the final over before lunch, with Babar Azam holding a catch at slip

off a thick outside edge.

Warner's long-time opening partner Khawaja has been embroiled in a dispute with the International Cricket Council over how he can bring attention to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. He was denied a bid to display a sticker showing a black dove holding an olive branch on his bat and instead played with the names of his daughters on his shoes.

The 37-year-old hit a boundary off the second ball he faced and looked destined for a big score before speedster Hasan Ali, back in the team after being overlooked for Perth, drew an edge that Salman took well in the slips to leave Australia on 108-2.

With dark clouds overhead, the lights were turned on mid-afternoon with Labuschagne and Smith in survival mode as the bowlers turned the screws before the rain arrived. The conditions eventually cleared and play resumed in front of a sparse crowd, with many of the 62,000 fans giving up and going home. Smith and Labuschagne continued to play defensively, with runs hard to come by.

Labuschagne finally relieved some pressure when Aamer Jamal was brought on, hitting his first boundary in 75 balls, with the grin on his face telling a story. It was similarly slow going for Smith, who was given out lbw on 19 after a big shout from Afridi, but a review showed the ball going high.

He was less fortunate against Jamal soon after. The umpire ignored an appeal from wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan for a catch, but Pakistan reviewed and it showed a faint edge, ending a 147-ball partnership. — AFP



MELBOURNE: Pakistan's bowler Shaheen Shah Afridi (R) fields the ball as Australia's batsman Usman Khawaja (L) looks on, on the first day of the second cricket Test match between Australia and Pakistan at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne on December 26, 2023. — AFP

Khawaja sports shoes with daughters' names in Pakistan Test

MELBOURNE: Australia's Usman Khawaja wore shoes marked with his daughters' names as he batted against Pakistan on Tuesday, after being banned from wearing references to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. An AFP close-up photo of the 37-year-old's shoes showed the names of Khawaja's daughters Aisha and Ayla taped to the side of his footwear during the opening day of the second Test in Melbourne.

Khawaja, who was out for 42, had 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 match.

The logo, which he displayed during training on Sunday, also had the words 01:UDHR—a reference to Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—written on it. Khawaja, a Muslim, was previously 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. Khawaja posted an Instagram message on Monday seemingly venting his frustration: “Merry Christmas everybody. Sometimes you just gotta laugh. Cya at Boxing Day!” He marked his post with the hashtags #inconsistent and #doublestandards.

Cricket Australia chief executive Nick Hockley said Khawaja was “passionate about human rights”. “We supported Usman with an application (to the

ICC) which really felt non-partisan, non-religious, apolitical,” he told broadcaster ABC of Khawaja's bid to wear the dove symbol. “Equally, the ICC has its regulations and they are there for good reason so we have to respect those.

“But I think the main way we deal with this (type of issue) is through good communication and working together.” Last week, Khawaja spoke about how the Zionist entity-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 just imagine my young daughter in my arms ... I get emotional talking about it again. I don't have any hidden agendas.” The ICC has been contacted for comment. — AFP



MELBOURNE: Australia's batsman Usman Khawaja has the names of his children written on his boots on the first day of the second cricket Test match between Australia and Pakistan at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne on December 26, 2023. — AFP

Sports

Ravens top 49ers in duel of NFL leaders, Raiders stun Chiefs

Dallas Cowboys atop NFC East with two games to play

LOS ANGELES: Baltimore quarterback Lamar Jackson threw two third-quarter touchdown passes and the Ravens defense dominated to beat the San Francisco 49ers 33-19 in a battle of the NFL's conference leaders.

In a game touted as a potential Super Bowl preview, the Ravens intercepted San Francisco quarterback Brock Purdy four times. Ravens safety Kyle Hamilton, who said before the game he felt "a little disrespected" that Baltimore were branded the underdogs, had two of those interceptions as the team's defense set an early tone before Jackson took control.

Jackson had given up a safety when he tripped over an official in the end zone and was called for intentional grounding. The 49ers then settled for a field goal before the Ravens scored 13 straight points.

Baltimore led 16-12 at halftime, and Jackson stretched the lead with a touchdown pass to Nelson Agholor early in the third. Purdy threw his fourth interception of the game on the next play and Jackson promptly followed up with a scoring pass to Zay Flowers.

Things got even worse for the 49ers when Purdy departed the game in the fourth quarter after a sack that left him with a stinger—nerve trouble that temporarily affects feeling and muscle control in the shoulder and arm. Backup Sam Darnold connected with Ronnie Bell for a touchdown, but Marcus Williams intercepted a Darnold pass in the end zone late in the fourth to effectively seal the win.

Jackson connected on 23-of-35 passes for 252 yards and led the Ravens with 45 rushing yards. The Ravens improved to 12-3, best in the AFC, while NFC West winners San Francisco fell to 11-4 -- level in the NFC with the Detroit Lions and Philadelphia Eagles, who beat the New York Giants 33-25 earlier Monday.

The day's other game saw the Las Vegas Raiders de-

fense produce two touchdowns in a matter of seconds to key a 20-14 upset at Kansas City that put the Chiefs' bid to lock up the AFC West division title on hold.

With their own offense sputtering, the Raiders defense took full advantage of multiple miscues from the reigning Super Bowl champion Chiefs and quarterback Patrick Mahomes. The Raiders trailed 7-3 when defensive tackle Bilal Nichols recovered a fumble and ran eight yards for a touchdown with 4:55 left in the first half.

A two-point conversion attempt was unsuccessful, but on the first play from scrimmage on the Chiefs' ensuing possession, Raiders cornerback Jack Jones intercepted Mahomes and raced 33 yards for a touchdown that put the Raiders up 17-7 with 4:48 remaining before the break.

Las Vegas' dominant defensive performance also included four sacks of a visibly frustrated Mahomes. Harrison Butker also missed a field goal attempt and the Chiefs twice failed to convert on fourth-down plays in the second half. Mahomes completed 27 of 44 passes for 235 yards and the interception. Isiah Pacheco rushed for a touchdown but departed early with a concussion after losing his helmet and taking a knee from a teammate to the head. At 9-6, the Chiefs can still clinch an eighth straight AFC West title with a victory over the Cincinnati Bengals next week.

Eagles snap skid

"I still believe that we can go do what we want to do," Mahomes said after the sloppy performance. "If we clean it up, we can beat anybody. I truly believe that, but we've got to prove that we can do it."

The Raiders improved to 7-8 to keep their playoff hopes alive. In Philadelphia, the Eagles beat the New York Giants 33-25, snapping a three-game losing



HOUSTON: (FILES) Joe Flacco #15 of the Cleveland Browns looks to pass against the Houston Texans during the first quarter at NRG Stadium in Houston, Texas. — AFP

streak to take a one-game lead over the Dallas Cowboys atop the NFC East with two games to play.

Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts scored a "tush push" touchdown—his teammates behind him helping to shove him forward—for his 15th rushing touchdown of the sea-

son. That set an NFL record for quarterbacks, surpassing Cam Newton's 14 in 2011. Hurts threw for 301 yards and a touchdown, and also saw an interception returned for a touchdown. Running back D'Andre Swift had 92 rushing yards with a touchdown. — AFP

Inoue KOs Tapales to become undisputed bantamweight champ

TOKYO: Japan's Naoya Inoue became an undisputed world champion at a second weight on Tuesday after knocking out the Philippines' Marlon Tapales in the 10th round to claim all four super-bantamweight belts.

The unbeaten Inoue, nicknamed "Monster", sent Tapales to the canvas with a huge right hand in Tokyo to add the WBA and IBF titles to his own WBC and WBO belts. Inoue, who took his record to 26-0 with 23 KOs, becomes only the second man to unify all four world titles in two different weight classes.

American Terence Crawford became the first after beating compatriot Errol Spence for all the welterweight belts in July. "I think super-bantamweight is the most suitable weight class for me at the moment," said the 30-year-old Inoue.

"Next year and the year after that, I want to prove that I can become an even stronger fighter." Inoue completed his rampage through the bantamweight division in December last year, becoming the first undisputed world champion at the weight in half a century before vacating his titles.

He needed just two fights to become the super-bantamweight division's first-ever undisputed champion. He beat American Stephen Fulton in July in his debut at the weight to claim the WBC and WBO belts.

But he had to dig deep to beat Tapales, who clawed his way back into the fight after Inoue floored him in the fourth round. "He was very tough with a strong mentality," said Inoue. "I think the way I was able to knock out a strong fighter like that in the 10th round is proof of all I've been doing, so I'm relieved."

Inoue went on the attack straight away against Tapales, who upset Uzbekistan's Murodjon Akhmadaliev by split decision in April to win the IBF and



YOKOHAMA: Japan's WBC and WBO super bantamweight champion Naoya Inoue (front L) and Philippines' WBA and IBF super bantamweight champion Marlon Tapales (front R) pose as they pass the official weigh-in at a hotel in Yokohama, Kanagawa prefecture, ahead of their four-belt world super bantamweight title unification match at Tokyo's Ariake Arena on December 26. — AFP

WBA titles. Inoue landed some early punches while the 31-year-old Tapales stayed in his defensive shell.

The Japanese fighter dropped his opponent at the end of the fourth round after a flurry of head shots, only for Tapales to get up and beat the count. Inoue went straight back to work at the start of the fifth, although Tapales also landed some big shots.

Tapales steadied the ship but Inoue maintained the upper hand and finished his opponent with a ferocious straight right hand. "He kept a poker face throughout and didn't show that my punches were doing him any damage, so I was quite surprised when he went down in the tenth round," said Inoue.

tournament hosted by the Chinese Xiangqi Association (CXA).

But his joy was short-lived, with the CXA on Monday announcing that Yan would have his title revoked and prize money confiscated after had been caught "disrupting public order" and displaying "extremely bad character".

The association was also forced to address rumours circulating online that Yan had cheated during the competition by using anal beads equipped with wireless transmitters to send and receive signals. Yan allegedly clenched and unclenched rhythmically to communicate information about the chess board via code to a computer, which then sent back instructions on what moves to make in the form of vibrations, according to reports circulating on the Chinese social site Weibo.

Tapales saw his record drop to 37-4 with 19 KOs. Inoue has won world titles in four different weight divisions, having also triumphed at the light-flyweight and super-flyweight levels. He knocked out England's Paul Butler in December last year to become the first undisputed bantamweight world champion since Panama's Enrique Pinder in 1972.

He also became only the ninth undisputed world champion since the four-belt era began in 2004, and the first in the bantamweight division. After vacating his titles, his younger brother Takuma claimed the WBA bantamweight belt in April with a win over Venezuela's Liborio Solis. — AFP

"Based on our understanding of the situation, it is currently impossible to prove that Yan engaged in cheating via 'anal beads' as speculated on social media," the CXA said. However, he was still stripped of his title and banned from playing for a year after his celebrations went wayward. "Yan consumed alcohol with others in his room on the night of the 17th, and then he defecated in the bathtub of the room he was staying in on the 18th, in an act that damaged hotel property, violated public order and good morals, had a negative impact on the competition and the event of Xiangqi, and was of extremely bad character," the association said in a statement.

The association did not disclose the amount of prize money Yan was forfeiting, but Xiangqi tournaments often promise winners tens of thousands of yuan (thousands of dollars). — AFP

Mullins eyes King George with Allaho

LONDON: Allaho bids to give legendary Irish trainer Willie Mullins a third win in an intriguing renewal of the prestigious King George VI Chase at Kempton Park on Tuesday. Allaho missed all of last season but returned to win the Clonmel Oil Chase this term setting him up for a tilt at the race considered only second to The Cheltenham Gold Cup over jumps.

He faces just five rivals, including defending champion Bravemansgame and the sublimely talented but unpredictable Shishkin described as a "bit of a plonker" by his venerable trainer Nicky Henderson. Allaho sat out last season—after winning a second successive Ryanair Chase at the Cheltenham Festival in 2022 -- with a rare spleen complaint.

Mullins, 67, was happy enough with the horse's performance in winning in November to aim him at the King George, a race the trainer won with Florida Pearl in 2001 and Tornado Flyer in 2021. His son Patrick, who is his assistant, says they expect a big run from the favourite although he added a caveat.

"Since he won the Punchestown Gold Cup and showed he can stay three miles, the King George has definitely been on the radar, and with his owners (Cheveley Park Stud) it's a nice fit," said Mullins on Saturday. "He's nine, going 10, coming back from a year off the track, so it's hard to think he's still at his very best, but hopefully he might still be good enough to win."

'Hunting horn'

Both Bravemansgame—who if victorious would give trainer Paul Nicholls a record-extending 14th win in the race—and Shishkin come into the contest on the back of disappointing displays. Bravemansgame looked a shadow of the horse that won last year's King George by 14 lengths and finished an excellent second in the Cheltenham Gold Cup in March as he filled the runner-up spot in the Grade One Betfair Chase in November.

Nicholls, though, thinks the horse will be better for that run—which followed another runners-up spot on his debut this term.

"Bravemansgame won the race last year and then the season before he won the Kauto Star (Novices' Chase) around Kempton," said the 61-year-old. — AFP

Chinese chess rocked by cheating rumours

SHANGHAI: The world of Chinese chess is in uproar over rumours of cheating and a bad behaviour scandal that saw the national champion stripped of his title Monday after a victory celebration ended with him defecating in a hotel bathtub.

Xiangqi, or Chinese chess, has been hugely popular for hundreds of years across Asia—and 48-year-old Yan Chenglong beat dozens of contenders last week to win the title of "Xiangqi King" at a national

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
Khalidiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764

Change of Name

I, PATHAN MUBBATSHER KHAN ABDUL RAHIMKHAN Holder of Indian Passport No. W7999298 Having Permanent Address Darugala Mohalla, Nr Motasutharwada Lunawada, Mahisagar, Pin: 389230, Gujarat, India Residing In Kuwait At Present, Hereby Declare That Henceforth My Name Will Be Read As Under: Given Name MOBSIRKHAN ABDULRAHIMKHAN And Surname PATHAN.
27-12-2023

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



NEWCASTLE: Nottingham Forest's US goalkeeper #01 Matt Turner (front) fights for the ball with Newcastle United's English striker #09 Callum Wilson during the English Premier League football match between Newcastle United and Nottingham Forest at St James' Park in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. — AFP

Wood treble gives Nuno first win

Forest's first win in eight games, second success in their last 15 matches

LONDON: Nuno Espirito Santo clinched his first win in charge of Nottingham Forest as Chris Wood's hat-trick against his former club Newcastle inspired a 3-1 victory, while Liverpool will go top of the Premier League if they avoid defeat at Burnley later on Tuesday.

Wood left Newcastle to join Forest in a £15 million (\$19 million) deal in June, but had scored only four times for his new club. The 32-year-old New Zealand international managed just two league goals for Newcastle last term, but he surpassed that meagre total with a treble in 60 minutes at St James' Park.

Alexander Isak's first half penalty put Newcastle ahead, but Wood equal-

ised just before the break. He struck twice more in the second half to give former Tottenham manager Nuno his maiden victory with Forest in his second game in charge after replacing the sacked Steve Cooper.

It was Forest's first win in eight games and only their second success in their last 15 matches. Forest moved five points clear of the relegation zone ahead of the rest of the day's matches.

Newcastle's fifth defeat in their last seven games in all competitions leaves them seven points adrift of the top four in seventh place. Nuno's first game in charge ended in a painful 3-2 stoppage-time defeat

against Bournemouth at the City Ground last weekend.

Morgan Gibbs-White fired narrowly wide in the opening minutes as Forest tried to erase the bitter taste from Nuno's first game. But Newcastle took the lead in the 23rd minute when Sweden striker Isak was tripped in the area by Ola Aina.

Isak picked himself up to squeeze the penalty past Matt Turner for his 10th goal this season. Anthony Elanga wasted two good chances to equalise when he fired into the side-netting and shot straight at Newcastle keeper Martin Dubravka moments later when a pass to the unmarked Wood looked the better option.

Lethal Wood

Forest kept battling and Dan Burn's goalbound effort was scrambled away by the visitors' defence before they equalised in first half stoppage-time. Making amends for his earlier mistake, Elanga was the provider as he took Gibbs-White's pass and cut back a low cross that Wood finished from close-range. Isak should have restored Newcastle's advantage seconds later, but his header lacked the power to beat Turner.

Gibbs-White nodded inches past the post immediately after the interval. In keeping with their lively opening to the second half, Forest snatched the lead in the 53rd minute. Elanga was the catalyst

again with a superb through-ball and Wood did the rest, twisting and turning until he had space to guide a cool finish past Dubravka.

Wood was in the mood and he completed his hat-trick on the hour, surging onto Murillo's pass and slaloming around Dubravka to slot home. Later on Boxing Day, second placed Liverpool will climb above leaders Arsenal with a draw or win against second bottom Burnley.

Third placed Aston Villa will aim to step up their unexpected title challenge with a victory at troubled Manchester United. In the day's other matches, Sheffield United face fellow strugglers Luton and Bournemouth host Fulham. — AFP



KUNA beat PIFSS in Ministries Futsal league

KUWAIT: Kuwait News Agency's (KUNA) Futsal team won 4-0 against the Public Institution for Social Security (PIFSS) in the Ministries and Public Entities Futsal league match held in Kazma Sports Club.

The league kicked off on Tuesday with group B featuring KUNA, Kuwait National Guard (KNG), PIFSS, Kuwait University (KU) and Ministry of Education. — KUNA



Doncic dazzles in Mavs win, Celtics top Lakers

LOS ANGELES: Luka Doncic scored 50 points, hitting the 10,000-point plateau as he propelled the Dallas Mavericks to a 128-114 victory over Phoenix on Monday as Boston downed the Lakers in a Christmas clash of storied NBA rivals.

Doncic drilled eight three-pointers, his long trey with 4:52 left in the first quarter taking him past 10,000 career points. The 24-year-old Serbian is the sixth-fastest to reach 10,000 points in terms of age and tied for the seventh-fastest in terms of games played at 358.

Doncic's milestone bucket put the Mavs up 21-11. But he and the Mavericks had plenty more work to do against a determined Suns team that rallied from a 15-point deficit and led by six early in the fourth quarter.

A 17-4 scoring run midway through the final quarter carried Dallas to a 115-106 lead and Dallas held on from there, Doncic revelling in the victory in front of hostile Suns fans. "It's fun for me," said Doncic, who added six rebounds, 15 assists, four steals and three blocked shots. "When you make a shot, the whole gym is quiet. So that's the best feeling in the world."

Grayson Allen scored 19 of his 32 points in the third quarter for Phoenix. Devin Booker added 20 points and 10 assists and Kevin Durant scored 16, but the night belonged to Doncic. He made

all 12 of his free throws as he became the fourth player to score 50 or more points on Christmas, which the NBA traditionally celebrates with a slate of marquee games.

On Monday that included the Celtics at the Lakers—the two teams with the most NBA titles at 17 apiece. Kristaps Porzingis scored 28 points and pulled down 11 rebounds and Jayson Tatum added 25 points for the Celtics, who withstood a 40-point effort from Lakers star Anthony Davis in their 126-115 victory.

Lakers star LeBron James scored just 16 points on five-of-14 shooting. The Celtics roared out of the gate to a 12-0 lead and led by as many as 18 before the Lakers began to chip away, trimming the deficit to one point at halftime.

Both teams got a scare late in the second period, when James and Jaylen Brown collided. Both went down, James holding his left knee and Brown his back, but both returned to the game. Tatum said the thing he liked best about the victory was how Boston responded after the Lakers closed the gap, taking a two-point lead early in the third on Jarred Vanderbilt's dunk.

"And it's a big win, right? It's Christmas day and it's tough to win on the road," Tatum said after the Celtics improved to a league-best 23-6. The day started with the New York Knicks' 129-122 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks at Madison Square Garden, where Jalen Brunson scored 38 points and the Knicks halted Milwaukee's seven-game winning streak. The Knicks had lost their previous nine games against Milwaukee, including a 130-111 decision on Saturday. — AFP