

2 Major events that took place in Kuwait in 2023



5 eSIM cards help Gaza stay online



11 'Parasite' actor Lee Sun-kyun found dead



16 Liverpool go top as Nunez strikes, Hojlund caps Man Utd fightback



Gaza martyrs top 21,100

Even schools not safe • 6 killed in Zionist strike in occupied West Bank



GAZA: A woman mourns over the body of a loved one killed in Zionist bombardment at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 27, 2023. — AFP

GAZA: The Gaza Strip's health ministry said Wednesday the death toll from the war with the Zionist entity now tops 21,000, with a spokesman reporting 195 deaths over 24 hours. The Zionist entity again pounded Gaza with air strikes and shelling after its military chief warned the war raging with Hamas since the Palestinian group's Oct 7 attacks will last "many more months".

Explosions lit up the sky over the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis — a focus of heavy urban combat since the Zionist army said it had largely gained control over Gaza's north. A strike hit a house near Al-Amal hospital in Khan Yunis, killing 22 people and wounding 34, the Gaza health ministry said. Heavy firefights also raged again around Gaza City in the north, while an air strike wounded 11 people near Rafah, a far-southern city crowded with internally displaced people, witnesses said.

Gaza's spiraling humanitarian crisis has amplified calls for an end to the hostilities. Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly vowed to keep up the campaign to destroy Hamas. "This war's objectives are essential and not simple to achieve," armed forces chief Herzi Halevi said Tuesday. "Therefore, the war will continue for many more months."

The Zionist campaign has killed at least 21,110 people, according to the latest toll issued by Gaza's health ministry, about two thirds of them women and

children. The army said the number of Zionist soldiers killed inside Gaza had risen to 164.

Gaza's 2.4 million people have suffered severe shortages of water, food, fuel and medicines, with only limited aid entering the territory. An estimated 1.9 million Gazans have been displaced, the UN says. APFTV footage showed Palestinians who had been sheltering in a UN-run school in central Gaza's Nuseirat refugee camp fleeing south, seeking safety from the bombardment.

Displaced Gazans "don't know where to go", said one of them, declining to be named. "First, we're displaced to Nuseirat, then to Rafah." Even schools "are no longer safe" in Gaza, said the man. "A solution must be reached... Implement a ceasefire instead of bringing in aid."

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, in an interview on Egyptian television, charged that the Gaza war "goes beyond a catastrophe and a genocide". "Netanyahu's plan is to get rid of the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority," said Abbas, who is based in the occupied West Bank. The UN Security Council, in a resolution last week, called for the "safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale". The resolution, which did not call for an immediate end to the fighting, effectively leaves the Zionist entity with operational oversight of aid deliveries.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Car registration, transfer go online

KUWAIT: Vehicle registration renewal and transfer services will be available on the Sahel app by January and February respectively, the interior ministry announced Wednesday. Vehicle registration renewal can be done on the app starting from January 2, 2024, while the vehicle transfer service will be available starting from February 1, 2024, the ministry said. The new decision comes as per directions of First Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah.

Kuwait praises efforts to find student

CAIRO: Kuwait's cultural office in Egypt commended the efforts of local authorities in tracking the whereabouts of a Kuwaiti student who had disappeared in the Egyptian capital, citing the timely manner in which they were able to locate him. The student had experienced a "health scare" and is now in stable condition after receiving medical attention, a statement by the office said, quoting Kuwaiti cultural attache Dr Abdulrahman Al-Rajaan as denying the veracity of reports alleging he was physically harmed. He underlined all Kuwaiti students currently in Egypt are "safe and sound". — KUNA

Erdogan: Netanyahu same as Hitler

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Wednesday that there was "no difference" between Benjamin Netanyahu and Adolf Hitler as he stepped up his attacks on the Zionist leader over the war in Gaza. "There is no difference between the actions of Netanyahu and Hitler," he said during a ceremony in the capital in Ankara. "He (Netanyahu) is richer than Hitler. All kind of support comes from the West and the United States," Erdogan added. — AFP

Kuwait standing with Gazans is 'non-negotiable'

CAIRO: Standing in solidarity with the Gaza Strip against the heinous aggression is a 'non-negotiable' matter for Kuwait, a Kuwaiti lawmaker said on Wednesday. Speaking to KUNA on the sidelines of a preparatory meeting of the Palestine committee at the Arab Parlia-

ment, Kuwaiti MP and member of the Arab Parliament Ahmad Lari affirmed that his country's leadership, for decades, had refused all measures to force normalization with the Zionist entity.

He affirmed that the Palestine committee meeting came in continuation of the Arab Parliament's efforts to support Palestinians since the ghoulish Zionist military campaign began against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and beyond. Lari stressed the meeting would look into all avenues to gather international support to stop the

Continued on Page 6

Zionists defile bodies of 80 Palestinians

GAZA: The Zionist entity on Tuesday returned the bodies of 80 Palestinians killed in Gaza after seizing them from morgues and graves to check there were no Zionist captives among them, sources in the territory's health ministry said. The government media office in Gaza said the bodies had been delivered "mutilated" and accused the Zionists of removing "vital organs from them".

The bodies, which had been trans-

ported to the Zionist entity, were returned through the Red Cross to Hamas authorities who buried them in a mass grave in Gaza, the sources said. An AFP photographer saw a digger lowering the blue body bags into a trench in Rafah, in the far south of the narrow territory. Around 250 captives were taken to the Gaza Strip by Hamas fighters when they attacked the Zionist entity on Oct 7. Some 129 remain in captivity in Gaza.

Following inspection of the corpses, they were returned to the Red Cross through the Kerem Shalom crossing between the Zionist entity and the Gaza Strip. They were then transported in a truck to the mass grave, the sources said. The Zionist army did not immediately comment. — AFP

NY Times sues OpenAI, Microsoft in copyright clash

WASHINGTON: The New York Times sued ChatGPT-maker OpenAI and Microsoft in a US court on Wednesday, alleging that the companies' powerful AI models used millions of articles for training without permission. Through their AI chatbots, the companies "seek to free-ride on The Times' massive investment in its journalism by using it to build substitutive products without permission or payment," the lawsuit said.

With the suit, The New York Times chose a more

confrontational approach to the sudden rise of AI chatbots, in contrast to other media groups such as Germany's Axel Springer or the Associated Press that have entered content deals with OpenAI. The Times, one of the most respected news organizations in the United States, is seeking damages, as well as an order that the companies stop using its content—and destroy data already harvested. While no sum is specifically requested, the Times alleges that the infringement could have cost "billions of dollars in statutory and actual damages".

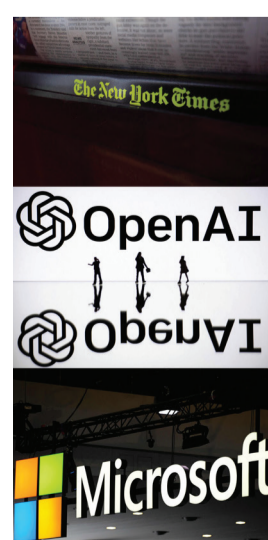
OpenAI and Microsoft couldn't immediately be reached for comment. Microsoft, the world's second



CAIRO: Kuwaiti MP Ahmad Lari attends a meeting of the Palestine committee at the Arab Parliament. — KUNA



GAZA: The shrouded bodies of Palestinians killed in northern Gaza and seized by the Zionist entity are buried in a mass grave in Rafah on Dec 26, 2023. — AFP



biggest company by market capitalization, is a major investor in OpenAI, and swiftly implemented the powers of AI to its own products after the release of ChatGPT last year. The AI models that power ChatGPT and Microsoft's Copilot (formerly Bing) were trained for years on content available on the Internet, under the assumption that it was fair to be used without need for compensation.

But the lawsuit, filed in a federal court in New York, argued that the unlawful use of the Times' work to build artificial intelligence products created a potential rival and threatened its ability to provide quality journalism. "These tools were built with and continue to use independent journalism and content that is only available because

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Major events in 2023



His Highness the (late) Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah departs to Italy, seen off by His Highness the (former) Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.



His Highness the (late) Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah departs to Italy, seen off by His Highness the (former) Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA photos

Kuwait Amir

Kuwait witnessed many local events in 2023 that covered many domains. Following are major events throughout the year:

January 26

Amiri order accepting the resignation of the government and assigning His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and his Cabinet to act as caretaker government.

February 6

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, issued directives to dispatch aid and medical equipment through airplanes to Turkey after a devastating earthquake that hit the southern part of the country.

February 9

As per the directions of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti Cabinet pledged \$30 million in aid of the quake-struck people in Turkey and Syria.

March 4

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah left for Italy on private visit.

March 5

An Amiri order appointed His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah as Prime Minister and tasked him with forming government.

March 19

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah returned home after private visit to Italy.

May 9

His Highness the Amir sponsored the Amir Football Cup's final game between Kazma SC and Kuwait SC. He was represented by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Sabah.

May 24

His Highness the Amir sponsored award ceremony of the Informatics Prize 2022 at Bayan Palace, and was represented by His Highness the Crown Prince.

June 7

An Amiri Order was published accepting resignation of His Highness the Prime Minister and his government, assigning them to act as caretakers.

June 13

An Amiri Order published naming His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Sabah as Prime Minister and assigning him to form a government.

June 14

His Highness the Amir headed to Italy on a private visit.

June 24

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah returned home from Italy's trip.

September 2

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah headed to Italy on a private visit.

September 9

His Highness the Amir ordered concerned bodies to send relief to Morocco following serious of quakes shaking the southern part of the country.

September 12

His Highness the Amir returned home from Italy trip.

November 29

His Highness the Amir was admitted to the hospital due to an emergency health problem to receive the necessary treatment and undergo medical examinations.

December 16

The Amiri Diwan announced demise of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and government announced closure of public and private institutions for three days and a 40-day mourning period.

December 18

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah took oath at a special National Assembly session becoming the 17th Amir of Kuwait.

December 20

His Highness the Amir accepted government's resignation.

Kuwait Crown Prince

January 16

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace Chairman of the Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences (IOMS) and the accompanying delegation participating in the 13th conference of the (IOMS), held under the auspices of His Highness the Crown Prince from 15 to 17 January.

January 16

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace visiting King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and the accompanying delegation.

January 27

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's Representative and Chief of His Highness the Crown Prince's Diwan, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, arrived in Saudi Arabia to attend the Formula E race due in Diriyah Governorate.

February 1

His Highness the Crown Prince and Amir Representative Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah attended at Bayan Palace flag hoisting ceremony, sponsored by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

February 6

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah patronized and attended the final match of His Highness the Crown Prince Cup between Al-Arabi and Al-Salmiya teams at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium.

February 14

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, patronized and attended the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) Award ceremony for the years 2020-21, as well as Al-Sumait Prize for African Development in the fields of education and health, at Bayan Palace.

February 15

His Highness the Amir Representative, His Highness the Crown Prince, attended a luncheon held by

ness the Crown Prince flew to London to attend the inauguration ceremony of King Charles III.

May 19

His Highness the Amir's representative, His Highness the Crown Prince delivered Kuwait's speech at the Arab Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

May 24

His Highness the Crown Prince received Vice President of Google Cloud Company Vinton Cerf.

July 19

His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince received, at Bayan Palace, His Highness the Prime Minister and his government for taking constitutional oath.

July 20

His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince inaugurated the National Assembly's first regular term of the 17th legislative session, urging MPs not to waste time to settle scores and irresponsible practices, but to achieve and develop.

August 8

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Gulf Cooperation Council Secretary General Jassem Al-Budaiwi.

August 28

His Highness Kuwait's Crown Prince headed to the UK to attend and sponsor a ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of the inception of Kuwait Investment Office at the invitation of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

September 23

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah attended the opening ceremony of the 19th Olympic Asian games.

September 23: His Highness the Crown Prince received Prime Minister of South Korea Han Duck-soo and accompanying delegation.

September 3: His Highness the Crown Prince received at Bayan Palace Judge Dr Adel Bouresli who swore in as the new president of Kuwait's Supreme Judicial Council and the head of the Court of Cassation.

October 20

Representative of His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince headed to Saudi Arabia to take part in ASEAN meeting.

October 21

Representative of His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince gave Kuwait's speech at the Cairo peace summit.

October 25

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah paid a visit to King of Britain and Northern Ireland, Charles III.

October 31

His Highness the Amir Representative, His Highness the Crown Prince gave a speech at the inauguration of the second session of the 17th legislative term.

November 11

Representative of His Highness the Amir, His



His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is laid to rest.

Sheikh Ali Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah at Azayez farm in Kuwait's northern Al-Abdali area.

April 9

His Highness the Crown Prince, representing His Highness the Amir, visited the traditional poets diwaniya and Kuwait Deaf Club.

April 10

His Highness the Crown Prince, representing His Highness the Amir, visited Kuwait Blind Society and Kuwait Disabled Sport Club.

April 10

His Highness the Crown Prince receives, at Bayan Palace, His Highness the Prime Minister and his ministers for taking oath.

April 17

His Highness the Crown Prince represented His Highness the Amir in giving a speech marking the last 10 days of Ramadhan and announced he would dissolve the 2020 National Assembly based on Article 107 of the Constitution.

May 4

His Highness the Amir's representative, His High-

August 29

His Highness the Crown Prince held talks with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, focusing on bilateral relations, which date back more than a century.

August 29

Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah attended celebration of Kuwait Investment Office (KIO) 70th anniversary.

September 20

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah departed to China to attend the 19th Asian Olympic Games at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

September 21

His Highness the Crown Prince met with Kuwaiti athletic mission participating at the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, China.

September 22

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and held official talks.

September 22

Several bilateral agreements have been signed between Kuwait and China in attendance of His Highness the Crown Prince and the Chinese President.

Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah gave Kuwait's speech at the joint Arab Islamic summit in Riyadh.

November 14

His Highness the Crown Prince received Google Cloud CEO Thomas Kurian and accompanying delegation at Bayan Palace.

November 21

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Kuwaiti athletes who won medals at the 19th Asian Games held in Hangzhou.

Kuwait government

January 9

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Barrak Al-Shaitan briefed the Cabinet on the strategic partnership deal signed with Google Cloud to support comprehensive digital transformation in all government and state-run bodies.

January 17

Kuwait's Cabinet issued a statement regarding a decree pardoning the freedom-restricting penalty imposed on a number of individuals in a court ruling.

January 23

The Cabinet decided on ending exceptional salaries

Local



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah addresses parliament after taking the oath.



The National Assembly approves amending some provisions of the Law 14/1973 with respect of establishing the Constitutional Court.



His Highness the former Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Chinese President Xi Jinping.



His Highness the former Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Britain's King Charles in London.



His Highness the Prime Minister sponsors and honors most valuable players of 2023.

as per article 80 of the social security law, and tasked the economic affairs ministerial Cabinet with examining all related decisions.

January 24

His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah handed government resignation letter to His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

February 6

Kuwait's council of ministers approved draft decision on demographic organization.

February 6

Upon directives from the state political leadership, the Cabinet ordered a private jet to be sent to the quake-hit areas in Turkey to evacuate Kuwaitis there.

March 5

Minister of Commerce and Industry and State Minister for Communication Affairs and Information Technology, Mazen Al-Nahedh, issued decision banning cash transactions of more than KD 10 in private pharmacies.

April 5

Minister of Social Affairs and Social Development Mai Al-Baghlhi signed resolutions stipulating recruitment of nationals at cooperative societies.

May 1

The government, in a meeting, approved a draft decree to dissolve the National Assembly and referred it to His Highness the Crown Prince and decided to send relief aid for Sudan.

May 3

The government approved, in an extraordinary meeting, a draft decree to call on eligible voters to cast ballots on the June 6, 2023 legislative elections.

May 15

The government approved a proposal by the Public Authority for Sport to hold an annual sports day nationwide.

May 18

Minister Al-Baghlhi instructed cooperative societies to pay 50 percent of their Zakat (alms) money for insolvent citizens.

May 29

Minister of Commerce and Industry Mohammad Al-Aiban signed a resolution allowing operation of 54 commercial activities without the need of having locations for them.

June 4

His Highness the Prime Minister sponsored and attended a ceremony to honor most valuable players of 2023.

June 7

The government discussed a resignation letter to His Highness the Crown Prince.

June 18

A decree issued regarding formation of a government headed by His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Sabah.

June 19

The government formed a ministerial committee with a mandate of coordinating priorities and laws with the National Assembly.

July 10

Kuwait Cabinet of ministers decided on printing 100,000 copies of Quran in the Swedish language and handing the copies out in Sweden to reaffirm the tolerance of the Islamic religion.

July 10

The Council of Ministers approved the government work plan for the 17th legislative term and referred it to the National Assembly.

July 12

Kuwait's council of civil service approved allowing Kuwaiti employees to both study and work within the country.

July 30

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah overturned timeframe condition for those who wish to

return voluntarily to military service.

August 14

Cabinet approved social allowance and children allowance for private miniscule business owners.

August 20

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Essa Al-Kandari announced that His Highness the Crown Prince approved several decisions on health insurance for retirees, amending constitutional courts laws, law on residential areas and on National Assembly elections.

September 3

Dr Adel Al-Mane was appointed by decree as Minister of Education, Higher Education and Scientific Research while Fahad Al-Jarallah was appointed Minister of Finance.

September 20

Amer Al-Ajmy was named head of local affairs sector and government spokesperson at the Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs office.

September 21

Civil service commission announced adopting flexible working hours Sunday to Thursday with seven working hours per day.

September 21

Representative of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah gave Kuwait's speech at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

September 24

Trial run for suggestions, questions and complaints feature within Sahel mobile was launched.

October 12

All celebratory manifestations in the country halted in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

October 16

Cabinet decided to postpone loan payments for small and medium enterprises for six months.

October 23

Social support allotment for nationals traveling to receive treatment abroad has been approved.

October 24

Social allowance for private sectors workers studying for higher studies has been approved by Cabinet.

October 25

Cabinet approved Kuwaitization of contracts draft decision.

October 26

Cabinet permitted children allowance for Kuwaiti women working in private sector under certain regulations.

October 30

Resignation of Minister of public works, Dr Amani Bugammaz has been approved and Minister of electricity, water and renewable energy Dr Jassem Al-Ostad had been assigned the portfolio.

October 31

His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah gave Amiri speech at the inauguration of the second session of the 17th legislative term.

November 5

Social support allotment for intermediate school graduates and less has been permitted by Cabinet.

November 15

CGC announced approval of social support allotments for nationals contracted to work in the divided zone.

November 20

Health Ministry issued decision allowing 30-week pregnant women a sick leave for the rest of her pregnancy without the need for a specialized committee.

December 16

Kuwait government mourned Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and named Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah as 17th Amir.

National Assembly

January 8
Kuwait's delegation headed by MP Mohammad Al-Mahan took part in Asian Parliamentary Assembly 13th session and the executive meeting.

January 10
National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun received a request from MP Mubarak Al-Hajraf to grill Finance Minister Abdulwahab Al-Rushaid.

January 16
MP Jenan Bushehri submitted to Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun a grilling motion against Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Barak Al-Shaitan.

January 18
The National Assembly's bureau approved several decisions scarping exceptional allowances for the secretary general and assistant secretaries.

January 27
Kuwait parliament caucus presented to Organization of Islamic Cooperation member states councils union meeting in Algeria rejection of human rights council decision on sexual orientation and identity.

January 9
National Assembly bureau reshuffled administrative organizational structure.

February 15
Top Lawmaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun hosted Saudi Audit Bureau chief Husam Al-Angari and Kuwaiti counterpart Faisal Al-Shaya.

March 11
Kuwait Parliament caucus participates in Asian and Islamic coordination meetings for the 146th Inter-Parliamentary Union conference.

March 12
National Assembly bureau approved appointing Khaled Buslaib as the assembly's Secretary General.

March 15
Chief of the parliamentary caucus Dr Mohammad Al-Mahan was voted by acclamation to be member of committee for United Nations affairs in the inter-parliamentary union.

March 19
The constitutional court annulled the 2022 national assembly and reinstated the 2020 formation.

March 20
The national assembly bureau held a meeting headed by speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanim.

March 21
Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanim affirmed respect to all the jurisdictions of His Highness the Amir in a joint press conference held at the national assembly along with deputy speaker Ahmad Al-Shahoumi and chief of parliamentary legislation committee, Dr Obaid Al-Wasmi.

May 5
Ministry of Interior started receiving applications for citizens wishing to run for the June 6 elections.

June 20
The parliament elected MP Ahmad Al-Saadoun as speaker.

July 11
National Assembly approved during ordinary session a number of recommendations submitted by a number of MPs on the desecration of holy Quran in Sweden aiming to curb the recurrence of such incidents.

July 13
National Assembly speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun announced that the assembly approved resignation of audit bureau chief Faisal Al-Shayaa.

July 13
National Assembly condemned in a statement desecration of Holy Quran in Sweden.

July 13
National Assembly approved in special session residential cities law and referred it to government, as well as amending pensioners health insurance law to include housewives.

July 18
National Assembly approved a number of recommendations submitted by MPs' on government program for the 17th legislative term.

July 18
The National Assembly elected a number of MPs by acclamation for the parliamentary caucus including Dr Hamad Al-Mutar, Mohammad Al-Mahan, Hamad Al-Obaid, Dawood Maarafi, Shuaib Shaaban and Fahad bin Jame.

July 26
National Assembly approved amending constitutional court law.

August 1
National Assembly approved law on National Assembly elections (Elections General Commission), and rejected public prosecution request lift immunity of MP Abdulwahab Al-Essa.

August 2
National Assembly approved a number draft bills on government budgets, ministries, administrations, and so on as well as recommendations relating to paychecks.

September 17
Executive-Legislative coordination committee held a meeting at the National Assembly to coordinate legislative priorities expected to be discussed during the term's second session.

September 23
Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun stated that verdict of the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court, rescinding the agreement on maritime navigation in Khor Abdullah with Kuwait, runs counter to the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council and is inconsistent with previously signed agreements.

October 16
Parliament Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun during emergency meeting of assemblies' heads of the OIC member states urged pan-Islamic cooperation to halt Gaza "genocide".

October 18
Kuwait National Assembly delegation participating at the 35th emergency conference of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU) categorically rejected the coercive eviction of Palestinians in northern Gaza.

October 25
Kuwait proposal on Palestine received 607 votes in IPU.

November 1
Parliament signed off several recommendations on Zionist violations in Gaza Strip.

November 7
Kuwait National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun spoke at the 17th GCC heads of parliaments meeting underlining the importance of adhering to international legitimacy resolutions on Palestinian issue to "embarrass the Zionist entity."

November 14
Parliament approved amendments on retirement pension and ended discussion of interpellation against Commerce and Industry Minister with no further suggestions.

November 21
The legislative parliamentary committee organized a forum on a modified electoral system.

November 28
National Assembly approved amendments on industry law and chamber of commerce law, as well as nomination of Essam Al-Roumi as Audit Bureau Chief and ended Prime Minister interpellation with no further suggestions.

November 29
Parliament amended law for people with disabilities as well as voted on laws regulating real estate agencies and combating monopoly on vacant lands.

December 18
National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun called for a special public session to be held for Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to be sworn in as the country's Amir.

Manpower to implement decision on Kuwaitization

KUWAIT: The Manpower Authority has initiated the procedures for implementing the decision of the Demographic Structure Amendment Committee regarding the Kuwaitization of government contracts. It aims to encourage young people to work in the private sector, as it asked government agencies to review their contracts before signing them to ensure the availability of job security clauses for workers in government contracts, as well as to review conditions that increase the percentage of national employment and create new job opportunities.

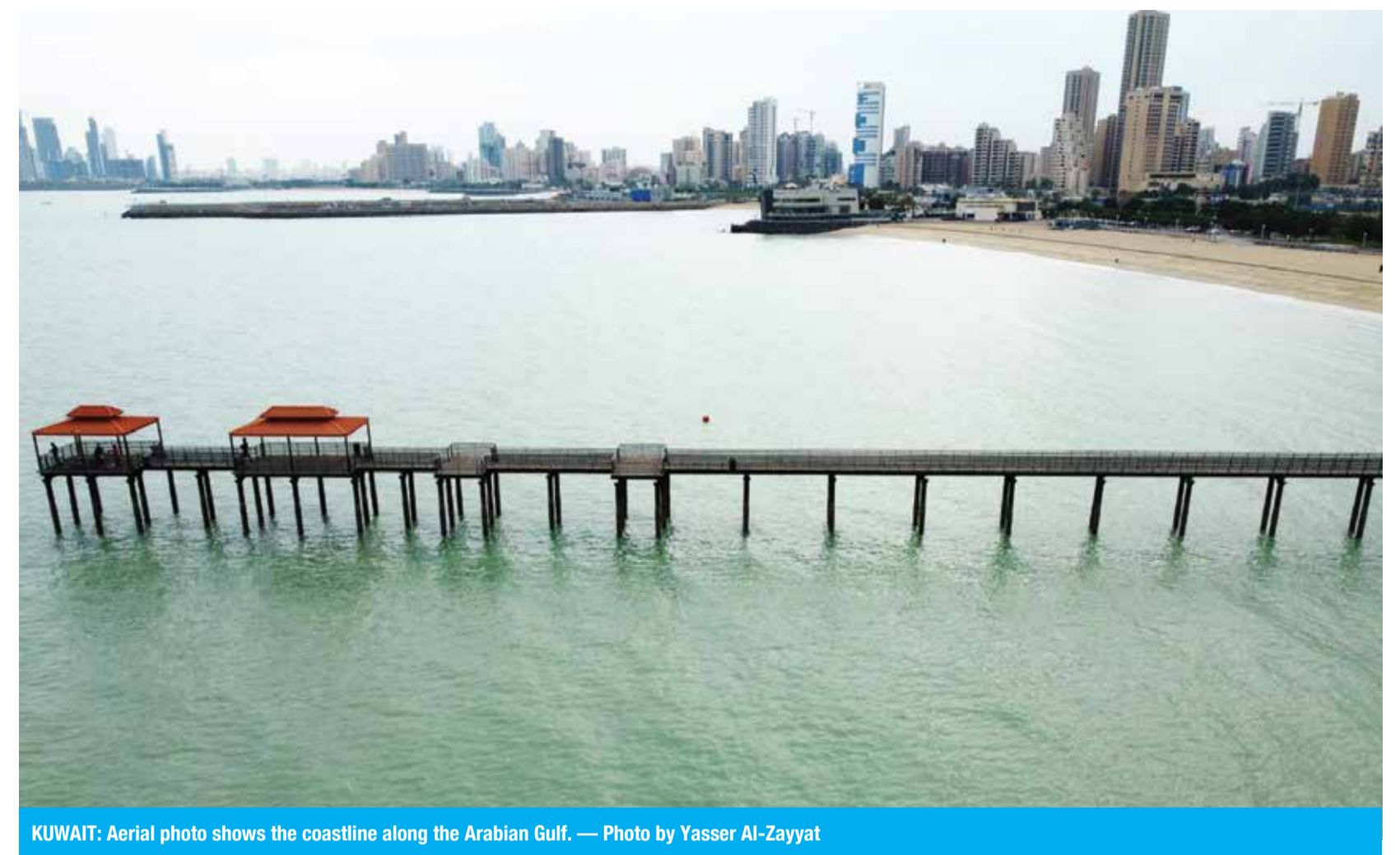
The Authority has also started preparing conditions and procedures that oblige contractors to grant workers some benefits, such as health insurance, annual travel tickets, and salary scales. These conditions will be submitted to the Council of Ministers for approval. According to official sources, the increase in national employment in government contracts is expected to provide at least 5,000 jobs for Kuwaitis next year. This can also reduce expatriate labor in these contracts. The sources reported that the Public Authority for Manpower is currently coordinating with the Ministry of Finance and the General Secretariat for Planning to start practical measures to increase Kuwaiti quotas in government contracts.

Kuwait's ambassador lays foundation stone of Educational complex

AMMAN: Kuwait Ambassador to Jordan Hamad Al-Merri laid the foundation stone of an educational complex donated by Kuwait in the Sahab area east of the Jordanian capital on Wednesday. The project, financed by Kuwaiti Abdullah Yosif Bodai, is part of a charity project affiliated with the Educational Evacuation Academy, and it is the academy's sixth project in Jordan. It is held with a Kuwaiti donation and under the supervision of Jasim Al-Yaseen.

Ambassador Al-Merri said, in a statement to KUNA, after the ceremony, "This project comes within the framework of a series of Kuwaiti charitable works in Jordan, due to the strong relations that bind the two countries." He added, "Kuwaiti charitable work continues in Jordan wherever needed, and its features appear in the Arab world and globally." Ambassador Al-Merri stressed the importance of the project in serving the educational process in Jordan, noting that the project constitutes a gesture of gratitude to Jordan and its people. — KUNA

Photo of the day



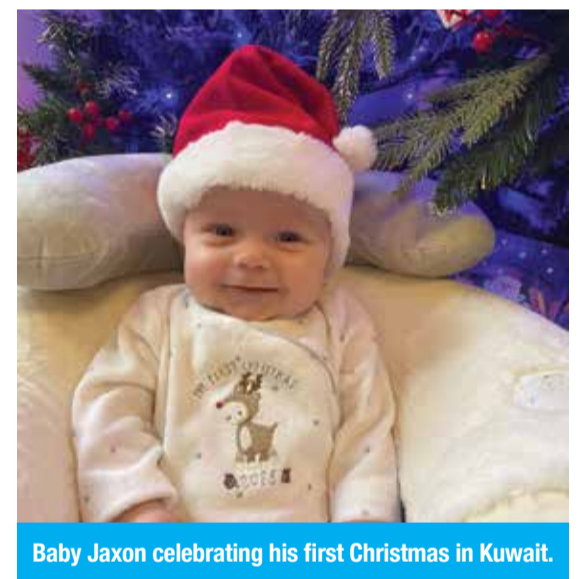
KUWAIT: Aerial photo shows the coastline along the Arabian Gulf. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

How Christians celebrate Xmas, New Year in Kuwait

'We usher in the New Year with prayers and thanksgiving'



KUWAIT: Worshippers attend Christmas service at the Catholic Co-Cathedral of the Holy Family in Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Baby Jaxon celebrating his first Christmas in Kuwait.



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By Ghadeer Ghloom & Chidi Emmanuel

KUWAIT: Christmas and the New Year have a long history and continue to be practiced by various Christian communities in the Middle East. In Kuwait, Christmas and the New Year are celebrated in unique and diverse ways. Celebrations vary depending on the Christian denomination, work schedule and environment. Kuwait Times explores some common ways people celebrate Christmas and the New Year.

Church services

There is a flurry of activities during this festive period. From Christmas Eve until the New Year, church services are an integral part of the celebrations for Christians in the Middle East. Many churches hold special liturgies, including midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ (PBUH). "Christmas and the New Year are very important days in the life of every good Christian. We celebrate the birth of Christ on Christmas Day and usher in the New Year with prayers and thanksgiving," Reginald Adu, an African expat, told Kuwait Times. "At home, we have a small indoor party for family members and close friends. This year we didn't have one because of the death of the Amir of Kuwait and the war in Gaza," he added.

Family gatherings

Like in many other parts of the world, Christmas and the New Year are festive periods for family gatherings and festive meals. Families and close friends come together to share traditional meals and exchange gifts. Helen, a dedicated expat who has called Kuwait home for the past decade, graciously opened up about her heartfelt Christmas celebration.

This particular year held profound significance for Helen and her beloved husband, as it marked their baby's first enchanting encounter with the festive season. The sheer joy and excitement of witnessing their little ones' inaugural Christmas infused the day with an extra touch of delight.

In the expat community, where families often find themselves miles apart, Christmas is a precious occasion shared in the warm embrace of close friends who have become a second family. As Helen stated: "Although we dearly miss our families, the tradition of celebrating with our dear friends in Kuwait has become something truly cherished. It's a time when we forge new bonds and strengthen the sense of camaraderie among fellow expatriates."

One of the highlights of their day was a delightful Christmas lunch at a leading hotel, where an elegant setting and a festive ambiance provided the perfect backdrop for a memorable meal. Laughter reverberated through the air as they shared joyful moments and celebrated in goofy cheer. But Helen revealed that, unfortunately, her husband found himself tied up with work commitments, leaving their Christmas cele-



Helen and her friends gather to celebrate Christmas.

bration bittersweet.

Nevertheless, she decided to surround herself with close friends, transforming what could have been a lonely evening into a harmonious gathering. "Even though my husband couldn't be with us for the evening, the time spent with cherished friends made the day whole. It truly emphasized the spirit of Christmas — the boundless joy found in togetherness."

As an expatriate, Helen epitomized the resilience and adaptability required when celebrating Christmas away from the comforts of home. The fusion of cherished traditions and the embrace of new friendships and cultural experiences transformed this Christmas in Kuwait into an enduring memory, one that will be fondly recalled in the years to come.

Sending money

During the Christmas season, spending and sending money are common activities as people purchase gifts, make donations and send greetings to their loved ones. "This often involves careful budgeting and planning ahead of time to ensure that thoughtful and meaningful gifts can be purchased within one's means. We normally send money to our family members and loved ones in our home country. We also cater for the poor and underprivileged ones around us. This year, I sent money to my parents, some church members and orphanages," said Leona Abina, an expat nurse. Overall, Christmas and New Year in Kuwait are times of joy, reflection and celebration for Christian communities, and they often blend religious observances with cultural traditions that are unique to each region.



Baby Jaxon in his Santa Clause costume on his inaugural Christmas.



Students force Rohingya refugees from temporary shelter in Indonesia

Police block DRC election protest

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GAZA: A Palestinian man uses his phone as he sits amid the rubble of destroyed buildings. — AFP

eSIMs help Gaza stay online

Despite unstable connection, journalists use technology to relay situation in Gaza to world

RAFAH: Power cuts have become a fact of life in war-torn Gaza. But thanks to embedded SIM cards, Palestinians can still access the internet and stay in touch with loved ones abroad. "Without them, we'd be cut off from the world," said Hani al-Shaer, a local journalist who depends on eSIM cards to do his live streams. "And no one would know what was happening in Gaza," he added, just as the besieged territory on Tuesday experienced the latest in a series of telecoms breakdowns since the conflict began.

The Zionist entity's relentless ground and air military campaign in Gaza has killed at least 21,000 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. Human Rights Watch has warned that phone and internet disruptions in Gaza could "provide cover for atrocities and breed impunity while further undermining humanitarian efforts and putting lives at risk".

Simple idea

Internet and telephone services that were cut on Tuesday were gradually being restored in central and southern areas of Gaza, the Palestinian telecommunications company Paltel said on X, formerly Twitter. The idea behind the eSIM is simple: they are a software version of the chips usually inserted into phones to connect to cellular networks and the internet. Embedded directly into a device, they can be activated using a QR code, which Gaza residents receive from family members living abroad. The recipients are then able to connect in roaming mode to a foreign network — often a Zionist one or sometimes Egyptian.

The eSIM has been a godsend, said Samar Labad. The 38-year-old fled her home in Gaza for the south, where tens of thousands of displaced Palestinians have been living in makeshift camps. Now in Rafah, she had lost contact with her family for over a week. But then her brother — who lives in Belgium — sent her an eSIM. "The connection is not stable, but it does the trick," she said. "At least we can stay in touch to reassure each other, even if intermittently."

She also has loved ones in Khan Yunis. "I find out how they're doing from someone who lives with them, whose phone is eSIM-compatible," she said. Service is only available in areas near the border with the Zionist entity. Otherwise, people have to climb onto a roof to catch a signal.

Search for victims

Ibrahim Mukhaimar, who owns a mobile phone store, said his main customers are journalists who

use eSIMs to provide the outside world with an accurate account of the situation in Gaza. He said they vitally communicate "that there is a lack of basic items necessary for survival" in the besieged territory. His eSIM customers also include "doctors and civil defense employees who are looking to learn the exact location of strikes in order to help people", Mukhaimar said. Employees of the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, also use them to organize aid convoys.

While the cards help offset telecom outages, internet access is required to activate them in the first place. The price varies from "15 to 100 dollars, depending on how long they're valid for", said video journalist Yasser Qudieh. He added that journalists with eSIMs end up serving as messengers for others. The other journalist, Shaer, said: "Many expats get in touch with us to follow the latest news from Gaza and get information regarding their families." — AFP

Displaced women in Gaza say they want lives back

GAZA: A relentless Zionist military campaign has upset the lives of most, if not all, residents of the Gaza Strip. AFP spoke to three Palestinian women who shared how the conflict has upended their lives.

Nour al-Wahidi, 24, medical intern

Wearing a stethoscope around her neck, Wahidi recalled spending 38 consecutive days treating patients in terrible conditions at Gaza's Al-Shifa hospital, which has been raided by Zionist forces. "I worked through moments of escalation these past two years, but everything about this war is different: the length, the death toll, the severity of injuries, the displacement," she said.

For a month now Wahidi has been sharing an apartment with 20 members of her extended family, having been displaced twice since the war broke out. The medical intern is working in the emergency ward of the Kuwaiti hospital in Rafah, in the besieged territory's south. "Every day, I come across suffering that I never thought I would see," she said.

Some of her relatives took shelter at a school run by the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, while others remained in Gaza. Wahidi has lost all contact with those who stayed behind in Gaza because the grid is often down and communications frequently cut. "Before, I was home with everything I needed. Now I'm in this strange place, without water or food," she said. "The situation is catastrophic."

She also warned that "there's been a rapid spread of disease". Still, she tries to make do by telling herself that others have it even worse. "After work, I can go home, I can cook and light a fire. I wash my hands when there's water," she said, counting her blessings. "We've had to consider water and food supplies, and how to charge our phones — things we never thought about before," she added. "No one deserves to live like this."

Sondos al-Bayed, 32, housewife

Bayed hails from Gaza but is now living in a tent outside the Kuwaiti hospital in Rafah. She shares the space with her journalist husband and three



RAFAH: Displaced Palestinian women and children sit in a tent in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 27, 2023. —AFP

children. "Our life has been turned upside down. It's been a total 180," she said. Her family has been forced to move multiple times since leaving Gaza. They first fled south towards the central city of Deir al-Balah. However, the homeowners who took them in soon asked them to leave. It was "out of fear that journalists would be targeted" by Zionist strikes, Bayed told AFP. "I cried so much... I didn't know what to do," she said.

They set off again for Khan Yunis, in the south, but their plans were thwarted once again. The Zionist army issued an evacuation order for those in the area, sending them further south near the border with Egypt. With what little food she can find, Bayed prepares meals for her children but they refuse to eat: "The food's bad and expired." Life has become "hard, like being separated from family, as are the memories", Bayed said. "We were happy before and had a stable life. We dreamt of building a bigger house. I want (that life) back."

Lynn Ruk, 17, student

Ruk lives in a makeshift camp in Rafah along with her parents, brother, four sisters and niece. "My life

used to be so boring, I'd complain. The war changed everything," she said. Her family left their home in Khan Yunis the day after the war erupted. "We took a photo of the house, in tears," Ruk said.

They briefly stayed with one of her sisters. When it became too dangerous there, they left for the city's Nasser hospital, before winding up in Rafah. "I thought we'd go home after a week. It's been more than 70 days now and we're still not back," she said.

The teenager said she has lost seven kilos (15 pounds) since the war began. She has fallen sick several times and was even taken to the emergency room after fainting. Today, her meals mainly consist of canned food, with only the occasional piece of bread. "I never thought my life would look like this ... Before the war, I showered every day," she said. "Now, if I'm lucky, I'll wash at the mosque once a week, at sinks reserved for performing one's ablutions — if there's any water," she added.

Ruk is afraid for the lives of her friends, and her own. She aspires to be a journalist and hopes to be able to travel abroad to make her dream come true. "I wish I could go back to the life I had before, the one I didn't like," she said. — AFP

Zionist strike on South Lebanon kills three people

BEIRUT: A Zionist strike in south Lebanon killed a Hezbollah fighter, the group said Wednesday, as state media reported two of his relatives were also killed and the Iran-backed movement launched rockets in retaliation. The border between Lebanon and the Zionist entity has seen escalating exchanges of fire, mainly between the Zionist army and Hamas ally Hezbollah since Oct 7.

"Enemy warplanes raided, before midnight (2200 GMT), a house ... in the center of the town of Bint Jbeil," around two kilometers (a little over a mile) from the border, killing a man, his brother and his wife, Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) said.

The NNA identified the dead as Ali Bazzi, his brother Ibrahim and his wife Shourouk Hammoud, and said another family member was wounded. Hezbollah later announced that Ali Bazzi was one of its fighters. A relative told AFP that Ibrahim Bazzi was an Australian citizen who had flown in for a visit about a week earlier. At the funeral procession in Bint Jbeil on Wednesday, an AFP photographer saw three coffins draped in Hezbollah flags. Hassan Fadlallah, a lawmaker from the Iran-backed group, told the ceremony that "no crime against civilians will pass without the enemy paying the price".

Hezbollah later Wednesday said it launched a barrage of 30 Katyusha rockets towards Kiryat Shmona in the northern Zionist entity "in response to the enemy's repeated crimes and its targeting of civilian houses in Bint Jbeil". Since the cross-border hostilities began, more than 150 people have been killed on the Lebanese side, most of them Hezbollah combatants but also more than 20 civilians, three of them journalists, according to an AFP tally. On the Zionist side, at least four civilians and nine soldiers have been killed, according to figures from the military.

Exchanges of fire have been largely confined to the border area, although the Zionist entity has conducted limited strikes deeper into Lebanese territory. Hezbollah said Wednesday it carried out a series of other attacks on Zionist troops and positions, including one on the contested Shebaa Farms involving "suicide drones", missiles and artillery. — AFP

International

Police block DRC election protest

Partial results show incumbent President Felix Tshisekedi well ahead in Dec 20 vote



KINSHASA, DR Congo: A woman runs with police officers as rocks are thrown during an opposition demonstration in Kinshasa on Dec 27, 2023. — AFP photos

KINSHASA, DR Congo: Police in the Democratic Republic of Congo's capital Kinshasa prevented protesters from assembling Wednesday, AFP reporters saw, after a demonstration against last week's elections was banned.

Leading opposition politicians in impoverished but mineral-rich DRC called for the protest after rejecting last week's vote, which was marred by severe delays and bureaucratic disarray. Congolese interior minister Peter Kazadi said Tuesday that the protest would be banned because it "aims to harm the electoral process".

But the opposition nevertheless urged supporters to gather near the national assembly and march to the headquarters of the country's electoral commission. Dozens of riot police were stationed in the

area on Wednesday, according to AFP reporters, preventing protests from taking place.

Officers fired canisters of tear gas at supporters of opposition politician Martin Fayulu, who gathered at his party's headquarters. The supporters hurled rocks at the police. Nearby, young protesters also set tires alight. Fayulu later said that at least 11 people had been injured.

Kinshasa's chief of police, General Blaise Kilimbalimba, said two officers had been injured. He added that there had been minors among the protesters — and that the protest organizers would be summoned for questioning.

Some 44 million people were registered to vote on Dec 20 in elections to choose a president, national and regional lawmakers and municipal councilors.



A Police officer throws a rock as opposition supporters run into an opposition leader Martin Fayulu's party house during the demonstration.

But the electoral commission struggled to get voting materials to polling booths on time in the huge and fragile country — roughly the size of continental western Europe — leaving some people unable to cast ballots.

'Gigantic organized mess'

Voting was officially extended by a day and even lasted until Christmas Day in some remote areas. The opposition claimed there was "total chaos" and denounced irregularities. The archbishop of Kinshasa likewise described the election as a "gigantic organized mess".

Election-related tensions are common in the DRC, which has a long history of authoritarian rule and violent government overthrow. Government spokes-

man Patrick Muyaya said on social media that the opposition must await the publication of provisional results and address complaints about the electoral process to the Constitutional Court.

Partial results released by the electoral commission show incumbent President Felix Tshisekedi well ahead, with 79 percent of the some six million ballots counted so far. The 60-year-old, who came to office in January 2019 after the country's first peaceful transfer of power, is running for a second five-year term.

Moise Katumbi, a former governor of the south-east Katanga region, got about 14 percent of the votes counted so far. He is followed by Fayulu, a former oil executive who claims he was the rightful winner of the 2018 election, with four percent. — AFP

Turkey parliament committee approves Sweden's NATO bid

ISTANBUL: A key committee in the Turkish parliament on Tuesday gave the greenlight for Sweden's NATO membership, clearing another hurdle in the Nordic country's accession process in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year.

Sweden's NATO bid had been stalled for months amid opposition from Turkey and Hungary and recently it was further complicated after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan linked it to Ankara's request for F-16 fighter jets from its ally the United States.

Sweden and Finland dropped decades of military non-alignment and sought to join the US-led defense organization after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Their bids won fast-track approval from all NATO members except Turkey and Hungary. Decisions within the alliance must be unanimous. The two ultimately

relented and Finland was accepted as NATO's 31st member in April.

Turkey and Hungary remain the only North Atlantic Treaty Organization members left to ratify Sweden's bid 19 months after it applied for membership. On Tuesday, the Turkish parliament's foreign affairs committee approved the measure.

"The protocol (on Sweden's NATO accession) passed the committee," opposition CHP party lawmaker Utku Cakirozer, a member of the foreign affairs committee, told AFP after the vote. The move paves the way for a vote by the full parliament, where Erdogan's ruling alliance holds the majority of seats. It was not immediately clear when it would be.

'Stronger'

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg hailed the parliament committee vote, and said he counted on Turkey and Hungary to

complete their ratifications "as soon as possible." "Sweden's membership will make NATO stronger," he said in a statement. Sweden's foreign minister said the next step was the vote in the Turkish parliament. "We look forward to becoming a member of NATO," Tobias Billstrom said on the website of the Swedish public television broadcaster SVT Nyheter.

Erdogan in July lifted his objections to Sweden's NATO membership after Stockholm cracked down on Kurdish groups that Ankara calls terrorists. NATO allies have piled pressure on Turkey, with France saying the credibility of the alliance was "at stake".

In December, Erdogan had linked Sweden's membership to the US Congress "simultaneously" agreeing to sell F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. He also said NATO allies including Canada should lift arms embargoes imposed on Ankara.

"Sweden's NATO membership and F-16 sales to Turkey will be handled in coordination to some extent... because unfortunately, neither country trusts the other," Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the Ankara office director of the US German Mar-



ANKARA: Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) Foreign Affairs Committee's Fuat Oktay (center) chairs a committee session at the TBMM in Ankara on Dec 26, 2023. — AFP

shall Fund think tank, told AFP.

Turkey's ageing air force has suffered from Ankara's expulsion from the US-led F-35 joint strike fighter program in 2019. This was in retaliation for Erdogan's decision to acquire an advanced Russian missile defence system that NATO views as

an operational security threat. US President Joe Biden's administration has repeatedly promised to move forward with the \$20-billion F-16 sale but lawmakers have blocked it over concerns about Turkey's alleged violations of human rights and long-running tensions with Greece. — AFP

Gaza martyrs top 21,100...

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In Rafah, hundreds turned up at the Abdul Salam Yassin water company carrying baskets, pulling handcarts and even pushing a wheelchair stacked with bottles to queue for clean water. "This was my father's cart," said Rafah resident Amir Al-Zahhar. "He was martyred during the war. He used it to transport and sell fish, and now we are using it to transport fresh water."

Elsewhere in Rafah, people split logs and stacked kindling as the lack of fuel forced them to burn wood for cooking and to keep warm. Internet and telephone services that were cut on Tuesday were gradually being restored in central and southern areas of Gaza, the Palestinian telecommunications company Paltel said on X, formerly Twitter.

Violence has also flared across the West Bank, with more than 310 Palestinians killed by Zionist troops or settlers since Oct 7, the health ministry there said. A Zionist operation in a refugee camp in the northern West Bank killed six people early Wednesday, it said, with the army saying it had struck the Nur Shams camp from the air. "Six mar-

tyrs killed by the occupation and some who were seriously wounded were transported to the Thabet Thabet government hospital in Tulkarem," the ministry said in a short statement.

The war has reverberated across the Middle East, drawing in armed groups backed by the Zionist entity's arch foe Iran in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. A Zionist air strike on a Lebanon border town killed a Hezbollah fighter, the group said Wednesday, with state media reporting two of his relatives were also killed. Hezbollah later Wednesday said it launched a barrage of 30 rockets towards the Zionist entity "in response to the enemy's repeated crimes".

In Syria, a Zionist strike Monday killed Iranian general Razi Moussavi, a senior commander in the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iran has vowed to avenge the death of Moussavi, whose body was due to be repatriated for burial after memorial prayers at the Shiite holy sites in Iraq on Wednesday.

Yemen's Houthi rebels have repeatedly fired at the Zionist entity and at passing cargo ships in the Red Sea in attacks in solidarity with Hamas. US military forces shot down more than a dozen Houthi attack drones and several missiles, the Pentagon said, reporting no casualties or damage. The Zionist military said Tuesday a fighter jet over the Red Sea had intercepted "a hostile aerial target that was on its way to (Zionist) territory". — AFP

daily massacres against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere, indicating that this was horrifically happening under the sight and hearing of the world.

He reiterated that the Arab countries have maintained the option of boycotting as a weapon against companies and international entities pleased with the Zionist crimes against the Palestinian people. During Thursday's Arab Parliament session in support of Palestine and the Gaza Strip, Asoumi affirmed that attendees would be exploring all avenues that would help highlight the Palestinian just cause and prevent further bloodshed against innocents.

Asoumi stressed the Arab Parliament stands with the Palestinians' aspiration for a future independent state with east Jerusalem as its capital, saying all efforts would be made towards achieving this goal. Scores of Arab lawmakers, including Kuwaiti MPs Lari and Hamdan Al-Azmi, attended the Palestine committee meeting. — KUNA



the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 27, 2023. — AFP

NY Times sues OpenAI, Microsoft...

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we and our peers reported, edited, and fact-checked it at high cost and with considerable expertise," a spokesperson for the Times said.

The Times said it attempted to seal a content agreement with OpenAI and Microsoft, but that the companies maintained that their technology was "transformative" and therefore did not need a commercial arrangement. The lawsuit said that content generated by ChatGPT and Copilot closely mimicked New York Times style and that the paper's content was given a privileged status in perfecting the chatbot technology. It also said that content that proved to be false was sourced incorrectly to The New York Times.

"There is nothing 'transformative' about using The

Times' content without payment to create products that substitute for The Times and steal audiences away from it," the lawsuit alleged. The emerging AI giants are facing a wave of lawsuits over their use of Internet content to build their AI systems that create content on simple prompts.

Last year, "Game of Thrones" author George RR Martin and other best-selling fiction writers filed a class-action lawsuit against OpenAI, accusing the startup of violating their copyrights to fuel ChatGPT. Universal and other music publishers have sued artificial intelligence company Anthropic in a US court for using copyrighted lyrics to train its AI systems and in generating answers to user queries.

US photo distributor Getty Images has accused Stability AI of profiting from its pictures and those of its partners in order to make visual AI that creates original images on simple demand. With lawsuits piling up, Microsoft and AI player Google have announced they would provide legal protection for customers sued for copyright infringement over content generated by its AI. — AFP

Kuwait standing with Gazans is...

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genocide against the people of the Gaza Strip and Palestine in general. The recent wave of the global community's sympathy and support of the Palestinian cause must reflect on the political scene, he indicated, expressing an outcry over the vetoes at the UN Security Council that prevent a ceasefire in Gaza.

President of the Arab Parliament Adel Al-Asoumi called on Wednesday to actively boycott companies that expressed support for the Zionist occupation's heinous military campaign against the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. During the Palestine committee meeting of the Arab Parliament, Asoumi said the Zionist war machine is committing

International

Students force Rohingya refugees from temporary shelter in Indonesia

Refugees seen in tears as students chant 'kick them out', demand their deportation



BANDA ACEH: University students demonstrate against the arrival of Rohingya refugees on Dec 27, 2023. — AFP photos



Rohingya refugees crowd into a vehicle for relocation to a nearby government building after demonstrating university students forced them out of their current government shelter.

JAKARTA: Hundreds of university students in Indonesia's westernmost province stormed a temporary shelter for more than a hundred Rohingya refugees on Wednesday, forcing them to leave in the latest rejection of the persecuted Myanmar minority.

More than 1,500 Rohingya refugees have arrived on the shores of Aceh province since mid-November in what the United Nations says is the biggest influx for eight years. Some of their boats have faced rejection by locals and in some cases have been returned to sea.

The students, many wearing jackets with different universities' insignias, entered a government function hall in the capital Banda Aceh where 137 Rohingya refugees were staying. The students demanded they be moved to a local immigration office so they could be deported, according to footage seen by AFP.

It showed students chanting "kick them out" and "reject Rohingyas in Aceh". The students were also seen kicking the Rohingyas' belongings. Some women and children were in tears while men who had been praying looked to the ground.

The protesters were also involved in a scuffle with police who were guarding the frightened refugees but officers ultimately permitted their removal by the students, according to an AFP journalist at the scene. The students burned tires and prepared trucks for the Rohingyas to be moved. Police helped them board before they were taken to another government office nearby, the AFP journalist observed. Banda Aceh police did not respond to an AFP request for comment.

The UN refugee agency said the incident left refugees shocked and trauma-

lized. "UNHCR remains deeply worried about the safety of refugees and calls on local law enforcement authorities for urgent action to ensure protection of all desperate individuals and humanitarian staff," it said in a statement. "The attack on refugees is not an isolated act but the result of a coordinated online campaign of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech against refugees."

Many Acehnese, who themselves have memories of decades of bloody conflict, are sympathetic to the plight of their fellow Muslims. But others say their patience

has been tested, claiming the Rohingyas consume scarce resources and occasionally come into conflict with locals.

"We protested because we don't agree with the Rohingyas who keep coming here," Kholilullah, a 23-year-old university student who goes by one name, told AFP. Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention and says it cannot be compelled to take in refugees from Myanmar, calling instead on neighboring countries to share the burden and resettle Rohingyas who arrive on its shores. — AFP

A migrant's odyssey from Venezuela to the United States

MATAMOROS, Mexico: Lying in the jungle with a gun pointed at him, Marcel Maldonado remembered his mother's warning about the dangers of migrating overland to the United States — and wondered if he'd get out alive.

Despite having a prosthetic leg, the 30-year-old Venezuelan had made it with his family as far as the notorious Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama. But when he got held up by criminals he was reminded why this is one of the world's most dangerous migration routes. "They'll never find my body here," he remembers thinking.

Maldonado had arrived in the remote region of dense rainforest and swamps days after leaving Venezuela on Sept 15 with his wife Andrea, 27, and adopted son Samuel, eight. It was one of the darkest moments in their nearly two-month odyssey through nine countries. More than a dozen AFP journalists in Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico and the United States followed Maldonado's journey, which he made by bus, boat or walking with the aid of a stick.

The data processing technician is one of 7.7 million Venezuelans — a quarter of the population according to the United Nations — who since 2014 have left their oil-rich country due to a deep political, economic and social crisis.

Over a decade, he saw his country's economic output shrink by 80 percent. Maldonado said he saw only "a life of poverty" ahead unless he left Venezuela in search of a better future for his wife and son. He also feared that he would be unable to replace the prosthesis that he has worn since losing his right leg in a road traffic accident in 2014. To pay for the journey, Maldonado sold some belongings. His father sold his car to help. Maldonado left behind a half-built house and some clothes that his mother keeps as a memento.

Tent, snake repellent

After arriving at the Venezuelan-Colombian border, the family bought supplies including a tent, a small stove, rubber boots and disinfectant that they hoped would repel snakes. Migrants — mostly Venezuelans but also Ecuadorians, Cubans, Haitians, Chinese, Afghans and Africans — exchanged tips on how to survive in the jungle.

Maldonado paid smugglers \$900 to cross the Gulf of Uraba off the coast of northern Colombia by boat and then travel by motorcycle to the entrance to the Darien Gap, an area of dense tropical jungle with no roads. From there, dozens of men and women advanced in single file along paths and riverbeds with their few belongings on their backs, some carrying children in their arms.

What Maldonado called the "craziness" began when migrants started to descend into Panama through a lawless zone rife with bandits. "The criminal gangs are hidden between the trees," he said. According to New York-based Human Rights Watch, organized crime groups like the Clan del Golfo — Colombia's main drug cartel — earn tens of millions of dollars from control of the Darien migration route.

'Gave them everything'

Things took a terrifying turn for the worse when a gunman appeared firing into the air, Maldonado said. "They threw us all to the ground. I was sure they were going to shoot us," he said. Instead, they were beaten with a machete. "I gave them everything. I'm not going to die for material things," Maldonado said. The criminals even "searched the women's private parts," he said. "It's horrible because you don't know what could happen."

Between January and October, at least 397 migrants — 97 percent of them women — were victims of sexual violence in the Darien jungle, according to medical aid group Doctors Without Borders. At one point Maldonado saw one of the assailants with his wife's hat and — with her nowhere in sight — feared the worst, before she returned



Venezuelan migrant Marcel Maldonado (front), his son Samuel Maldonado (center) and his wife Andrea Loreto (back) take a rest at the Paso Canoas shelter in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, on Sept 25, 2023. — AFP

from a nearby well with their child. "We hugged and cried for a long time," he said.

After eight hours the family was released with only their identity documents. By then Samuel had a fever and they had not eaten all day. It would be two and a half more days before they emerged from the Darien Gap. This year more than half a million migrants have followed the same route, according to the Panamanian government — around twice as many as in 2022.

'Guardian angels'

One last river marked the end of the jungle. Emaciated but triumphant, Maldonado managed to cross helped by one of his "guardian angels" — two fellow Venezuelans whom he met in Colombia. "Without them I wouldn't have made it," he said. "The rivers are strong."

In Panama, the family finally ate a hot meal and found somewhere safe to sleep before setting off again, with money sent by Maldonado's sister after selling her car. Using an AFP journalist's cellphone, Andrea told her mother-in-law back home about their time in the jungle. During the call, Andrea learned that a niece had lost her baby teeth.

In neighboring Costa Rica, the family slept on cardboard boxes in a bus station. "All this is to have a better future. In Venezuela, you survive just to eat," said Andrea, a former university employee. In Honduras and Guatemala, people helped Maldonado by buying candy that he sold on the street. At every step of the way, they encountered solidarity.

'Get ready for Mexico'

One day another migrant warned Maldonado: "If you think the jungle is bad, get ready for Mexico." And so it proved. "It's really the hardest thing," Maldonado said, recalling the high prices, exhausting walking and rampant extortion.

In southern Mexico, Maldonado said that he initially stayed in a government shelter but left because he felt like a "prisoner," preferring to sleep on the street with his wife and son. To avoid Mexican immigration agents, the family took refuge in the mountains.

Vegetation got in the way of Maldonado's prosthetic leg, making every step a struggle, he recalled. The family's arrival in Mexico City in early November coincided with the annual Day of the Dead celebrations, bringing a temporary respite as they took photos of colorful decorations and giant skulls.

Maldonado called his father so he could hear mariachi music. Then it was another bus ride to the northeastern city of Monterrey and from there on to Matamoros across the

border from Brownsville, Texas. Maldonado said that he was extorted multiple times along the way by Mexican security forces who threatened to deport him.

On each occasion he grew more anxious about running out of money — he needed \$60 to pay smugglers to cross the Rio Grande, the river separating Mexico and the United States. The family arrived in Matamoros at night with a sense of foreboding due to the presence of a powerful drug cartel in the city. Fear gave way to nostalgia only briefly when Maldonado ate a typical Venezuelan dish prepared by a fellow migrant.

Smugglers, air mattresses

Maldonado decided against scheduling an appointment with US authorities to seek asylum through a cellphone application — a process that can take months due to the huge numbers applying. In the year to October 2023, more than 2.4 million arrivals were recorded at the southern US border — a new record.

Maldonado knew that deportations of irregular migrants from Venezuela had resumed, and that US President Joe Biden's opponents were using migration to attack him ahead of the 2024 election. He decided to cross the river with people smugglers who told the family to bring only their IDs, money and the clothes on their backs.

"I was very afraid. They looked like bad people," he told AFP reporters, who were warned by a masked man to stop filming. At night, at the edge of the river, Maldonado's prosthesis sank into the mud and cold water came up to his hips. The people smugglers took the family across one by one on small air mattresses. "They were afraid that the prosthesis would burst the mattress," he said.

'What a joy'

On the other side, helped by his companions, he managed to climb over the barbed wire. By the time the headlights of a US patrol car lit up the area the family was already on US soil. "Here we are! What a joy!" Maldonado said in videos to his relatives back home.

It was Nov 4. The family had traveled around 4,300 kilometers (2,600 miles) and spent \$7,000 to reach the United States. Others have paid with their lives — in 2022 alone, more than 680 people died or disappeared trying to cross the US-Mexican border, according to the International Organization for Migration.

In Texas, Maldonado was given a DNA test by US authorities to register his identity and a cell phone to keep in contact. The family was given a residence permit valid until May 2026, when a judge is due to rule on their asylum application. "They don't deport families," Maldonado said, explaining why he was allowed to stay. — AFP

Indonesians decry conditions at plant where blast killed 18

JAKARTA: Hundreds of Indonesian workers protested Wednesday against conditions at a Chinese-funded nickel-processing plant where an explosion killed at least 18 people and injured dozens more over the weekend.

The accident occurred on Saturday morning as workers repaired a furnace at a plant owned by PT Indonesia Tsingshan Stainless Steel (ITSS) in the Morowali Industrial Park on Sulawesi island. Sulawesi is a hub for the mineral-rich country's production of nickel, a base metal used in electric vehicle batteries and stainless steel. China's growing investment in the sector has stoked unrest over pay and working conditions.

Images seen by AFP showed hundreds of workers taking part in the protest outside the complex. Demonstrators gave a list of 23 demands to management, according to a letter sent to police by unions representing the workers. The demands included that smelters be better maintained, health clinics be improved to deal with emergencies and Chinese workers be required to learn the Indonesian language. "No production is worth a life!" protesters shouted through loudspeakers, video footage of the demonstration showed.

Among those killed in the blast was Muhammad Taufik, a 40-year-old welder who left behind a wife and two children. "The family is grieving, he was the breadwinner," Taufik's cousin Parlin Hidayat told AFP, adding that ITSS had given the family compensation worth 600 million rupiah (\$30,625) after the accident. "They hope there will be no more incidents like this in the future, let him be the last victim."

Thirty people are being treated in hospital for their injuries after the blast, according to police. Dedy Kurniawan, a spokesperson for Morowali Industrial Park, told AFP that the company had "done what they (the protesters) demanded two days ago", without specifying which demands had been met. "We hope this demonstration will not continue after they hear our explanation," he said.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said Wednesday that eight Chinese nationals were among the dead, and that Beijing was "extremely saddened" by the accident. "I would like to emphasize that China has always placed high importance on safe production on overseas projects funded by Chinese capital," she said at a daily press briefing.

Tsingshan Holding Group, the world's biggest nickel producer and China's biggest stainless steelmaker, holds a majority stake in ITSS. ITSS is a tenant in the industrial park, which is also majority-owned by Tsingshan along with local partner Bintang Delapan. In January, two workers, one of whom was a Chinese national, were killed at a nickel smelting plant in the same industrial park after a riot broke out during a protest over safety conditions and pay. — AFP



BANGKUN: Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) workers protest against their working conditions outside the facility on Dec 27, 2023. — AFP

Business

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2023

Apple to appeal US watch ban

US government opts to not veto ruling on patent infringements

WASHINGTON: Apple said on Tuesday it will appeal a US ban on its latest smartwatch models after the Biden administration opted to not veto a ruling on patent infringements. The ban on Apple's latest smartwatch models came into effect Tuesday, with the Apple Watch Series 9 and Apple Watch Ultra 2 no longer available in stores or online.

The ban is the latest legal tussle involving big tech companies over valuable patents that has also seen Google battle in court against Sonos in a fight over speaker tech. The United States International Trade Commission (ITC) decided in October to ban the Apple Watch models over a patented technology for detecting blood-oxygen levels. The order stemmed from a complaint to the commission in mid-2021 by medical device maker Masimo Corp, which accused Apple of infringing on "light-based oximetry functionality." "After careful consultations, Ambassador (Katherine) Tai decided not to reverse the... determination and the ITC's decision became final on December 26, 2023," the office of the US Trade Representative said in a statement on Tuesday.

Though US President Joe Biden's office has authority to reverse import bans, such actions are only taken rarely. In a statement, Masimo said the confirmed ban "is a win for the integrity of the US patent system, and ultimately American consumers who will benefit from an ecosystem that rewards true innovation."

Apple contends that the ITC finding was in error and should be reversed, filing an appeal in a US federal court. But the company pulled the products from the online Apple Store on December 21, with retail locations ceasing sales December 24 — just ahead of the holiday.

Apple manufactures the vast majority of its products overseas, predominantly in China, giving the International Trade Commission jurisdiction over the matter.

Apple has been steadily ramping up fitness and health features with each generation of its Apple Watch, which dominates the smartwatch category. In September, Apple released the Apple Watch Series 9, touting increased performance along with features such as the ability to access and log health data. "We strongly disagree with the USITC decision and resulting exclusion order, and are taking all measures to return Apple Watch Series 9 and Apple Watch Ultra 2 to customers in the US as soon as possible," Apple said in a statement Tuesday.

At the time of the original decision, Apple said Masimo had "wrongly attempted to use the ITC to keep a potentially lifesaving product from millions of US consumers while making way for their own watch that copies Apple." In May, a trial of Masimo's allegations ended in a mistrial after jurors failed to reach a unanimous verdict. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: This illustration photo shows an Apple Watch 9 displaying the blood-oxygen level detection settings, in Los Angeles on December 26, 2023. -- AFP

Pakistan seeks to secure \$1bn for Bhasha Dam

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan is aggressively pursuing arrangements to secure \$1 billion promptly to progress towards achieving financial closure for the strategic Diamer Basha Dam project. Sources indicate that the country needs approximately \$3.5 billion for this purpose. During the recent visit of caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar to Kuwait, Pakistan and the Gulf state had signed an agreement to raise capital for the project.

Diamer Basha Dam is a multi-purpose hydro-power project which upon completion will provide a significant boost to the country's economy through generation of around 18 billion units annually of environmentally clean and affordable electricity and a live storage capacity of 6.4 MAF of water. Officials said the project is in its preliminary stages of construction and funds of around \$3.5 billion are required to achieve financial close, with a requirement of \$1 billion in the near future.

Sources said an agreement with Kuwait on investment cooperation would help to raise the capital for the project through equity participation in the Ghazi Barotha Hydropower Project (GBHPP). Pakistan has been struggling to raise funding for the strategic Diamer Basha dam since long.

But Pakistan requires immediate financing of \$1 billion in the near future to continue work on this dam. For decades, Pakistan had not been able to complete mega water projects like Diamer Basha. In addition to raising capital for the dam, Pakistan is also working on some other projects as well.



A view of the site of Diamer Basha Dam project at Chillas

During the visit of PM Kakar, Pakistan and the State of Kuwait signed different agreements for collaboration and investment in various sectors of the economy.

The caretaker minister had recently informed the Pakistan cabinet that Kuwait is a strategic partner of Pakistan and that there is tremendous potential for further strengthening economic relations between the two countries to the advantage of Pakistan. He elaborated that since Kuwait is a capital exporting country, Pakistan could benefit through Kuwaiti investment in many areas, especially hydropower, digital technology infrastructure, and climate change risk management. The cabinet was informed that after due delib-

erations between the two sides, seven non-binding agreements relating to expansion of water reservoirs, mining, protection and expansion of mangroves and investment projects in information technology and food security had matured for signing.

These agreements were also signed between Pakistan and Kuwait during the recent visit of the caretaker prime minister. These projects would be implemented at the federal level, and where clearance was required from the provincial governments for provincial projects, it would be done in due course. It was also informed that continuous monitoring of the projects would be carried out for their timely and efficient implementation. — Agencies

KIPCO sells 46% stake in Gulf Insurance Group

KUWAIT: Kuwait Projects Company (Holding) announced that it has completed the sale of its 46.32 percent stake in Gulf Insurance Group (GIG) to a Fairfax Financial Holdings Limited's group entity. The deal's net value came to KD 256.5 million (\$832 million), with KIPCO's net profit at KD 73 million (\$237 million). The price per share was set at KD 2 minus 54 fils distributed as dividend for 2022. The deal generated a double-digit internal rate of return (IRR) during the investment holding period.

Sheikha Dana Naser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, KIPCO's Group Chief Executive Officer, said: "KIPCO's transformative merger grew our portfolio, and we have since been looking at opportunities for exits and investments with the ultimate goal of growth and greater value-creation for our shareholders." The sale of GIG to our partners, Fairfax, is yet another example of the success of our long-term strategy of acquiring businesses, scaling them and then exiting when both the timing and the financial rewards are opportune."

Proceeds of the sale of KIPCO's stake in GIG will provide liquidity to further strengthen KIPCO's capital structure and reduce its leverage. It will also allow KIPCO to seek growth opportunities, both in sectors it already operates in, as well as new sectors and business opportunities that are aligned with the company's vision and strategy. — KUNA

US holiday sales growth jumped 3.1% y-o-y: Report

NEW YORK: Preliminary shopping data indicated that US holiday sales increased 3.1 percent compared with the year-ago period, a solid but unspectacular increase reflecting mixed sentiment on the economy. The figures, supplied by Mastercard SpendingPulse and released Tuesday, pointed to apparel and restaurants among stronger areas of spending in the period between November 1 and December 24, while electronics and jewelry experienced declines.

The Mastercard data puts the US holiday shopping performance in line with the forecast of the National Retail Federation, which had described consumers bolstered by a strong jobs market but buffeted by a lengthy period of inflation and the effects of higher borrowing rates.

The growth in this year's holiday sales is below 2022 holiday season sales increase of 5.3 percent and much below the 2021 figure of 14.1 percent, according to NRF data. "This holiday season, the consumer showed up, spending in a deliberate manner," said Michelle Meyer, chief economist at the Mastercard Economics Institute.

"The economic backdrop remains favorable with healthy job creation and easing inflation pressures, empowering consumers to seek the goods and experiences they value most."

The Mastercard data is not adjusted for inflation, which was estimated by the US Department of Commerce at 2.6 percent for November 2023 compared with the 2022 period. The sales growth, while "solid," represents a "relatively modest pace of growth," said retail analyst Neil Saunders of GlobalData. "Once inflation is factored in there is some underlying volume growth, but it is significantly lower than the headline number suggests," Saunders said in an email to AFP. — AFP

Global stocks climb after holiday break

NEW YORK: Global stocks climbed Wednesday as several more major markets returned from a Christmas holiday break, with traders optimistic that the US Federal Reserve will cut interest rates early next year. London led the way among major European stock markets as trading on its benchmark FTSE 100 index resumed for the first time since Friday. Hong Kong and Australia finished higher after returning from their own breaks.

Wall Street stocks advanced Tuesday on continued positive momentum, extending a banner stretch in light trading following the Christmas holiday. Equities were in positive territory the entire session as traders settled in for an expected "Santa Claus rally" in the historically strong period of the calendar.

Stocks often rise during this stretch, with market watchers pointing to the light news flow, tepid trading volume and festive atmosphere as drivers of market action. The Dow Jones Industrial Average advanced 0.4 percent to 37,545.33. The broad-based S&P 500 also gained 0.4 percent to 4,774.75, while the tech-rich Nasdaq Composite Index climbed 0.5 percent to 14,074.57.

US stocks have been on a tear

since late October as inflation has moderated, prompting the Federal Reserve to halt a streak of interest rate hikes and begin leaning towards expected rate cuts in 2024.

Yet a note from Charles Schwab pointed to increased geopolitical risk after US air strikes targeting pro-Iranian forces in Iraq added to tensions amid the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

Among individual companies, Manchester United jumped 3.5 percent after British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe reached a deal to buy a 25 percent stake in the team for about \$1.3 billion and vowed to return the club to the "top of world football." Apple slipped 0.3 percent after the Biden administration opted not to veto a ruling on patent infringements, a move that puts into effect a US import ban on some smart-watch models. The order stemmed from a complaint made to the International Trade Commission in mid-2021 accusing Apple of infringing on medical device maker Masimo Corp's "light-based oximetry functionality."

Drug company Bristol Myers Squibb fell 1.6 percent after reaching a deal to buy RayzeBio for \$4.1 billion, bolstering its oncology-related holdings. Shares of RayzeBio more than doubled. "Global stock markets seem to be headed for an end-of-year 'Santa rally' as traders and investors return to their desks after the Christmas break, gearing up for the final push into 2024," noted Walid Koudmani, chief market analyst at XTB trading group. "The ongoing optimism surrounding



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange in this file photo.

the prospect of central banks initiating interest rate reductions in 2024, with multiple cuts expected next year, continues to propel shares higher."

Market sentiment has been largely positive since the Fed's most recent monetary policy meeting, when it indicated the rate-hike cycle could be nearing its end as global inflation slows. "The prevailing sentiment suggests a 'risk-on' environment in US markets, with renewed optimism focused on anticipating swifter and earlier rate cuts," said Stephen Innes, managing partners at SPI Asset Management.

But Ipek Ozkardeskaya, senior an-

alyst at Swissquote Bank, warned that "the market optimism is overstretched" and that "the Fed will probably cut rates but not at the speed that's been currently priced in". Global markets were also positively affected by the so-called "Santa Claus rally", which has historically seen stocks tick higher—albeit at thinner volumes—during the end-of-year holiday period.

"Once the Santa high fades, the hangover will hit," Ozkardeskaya said. Elsewhere on Wednesday, oil markets reversed last week's gains, mainly owing to fears regarding the possible regional spread of the conflict between Zionist entity and Hamas. — AFP

Business

World economy to leave the worst behind and pick up growth in 2024

Global economy skirts inflation-driven recession in 2023

WASHINGTON: The world economy slowed but remained resilient skirting what many feared would be an inflation and commodity price-driven recession this year. Although growth is estimated to be even slower in 2024, the worst is perhaps over and headwinds are expected to ease, analysts claim. The consistently high interest rates are expected to come down, although inflation, trending down, is still not in the 2 percent target range of most central banks in the world, they said.

Many analysts expect the next major monetary policy move in 2024 from the US Federal Reserve will be a rate cut, although they remain divided on when the Fed is likely to slash its benchmark rate and by how many basis points the regulator will lower it.

While inflation and rates trending down will bode well for growth in the latter half of next year, risks remain that can hamper economic momentum. Geopolitical tensions, the health of the US and Chinese economies, volatility in oil prices, widening growth divergence, worryingly high global debt levels, and the mounting cost of climate are among the factors that will determine if the global economy has a soft landing next year. The entirety of this year was defined by muted growth, dotted with geopolitical shocks and an abrupt banking crisis that threatened to derail growth. The continuation of the sharpest monetary policy tightening in decades to subdue consumer prices also took the wind out of sails. The International Monetary Fund expects global economic growth at 3 percent this year, slower than the 3.5 percent expansion recorded in 2022, remaining below the historical world growth average, the Washington-based fund said in its World Economic Outlook in October. For next year, the IMF expects global gross domestic product to expand by 2.9 percent, while the World Bank estimates 2.4 percent growth and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development forecasts it at 2.7 percent.

Both the IMF and the World Bank anticipate growth to remain slow and uneven, especially in emerging and developing economies. "Looking at 2024, we anticipate uncertainty to persist, with sub-trend growth projected across the world's economies," State Street Global Advisor said in its 2024 Outlook report.

"While the path to a soft landing appears viable, with growth decelerating but not collapsing, the effects of monetary policy tightening are still working their way through the system." In addition, escalating geopolitical tensions and continuing macroeconomic headwinds will continue to test economies and 2024 will "likely be a year in flux with many factors pressuring the path to global recovery", State Street, one of the biggest global asset managers, said. Although the global economy will grow at a slower pace next year, it is unlikely to face a recession. "This time last year there were widespread fears of a recession that was expected to happen this year. Not only did that recession not happen, but we've ended up with above-potential GDP growth," Nora Szentivanyi, global economist at JP Morgan, said.

The global economy, as of the fourth quarter this year, is tracking 2.8 percent year-on-year growth. However, despite recent progress, "the path to a soft economic landing remains challenging", Michael Strobaek, chief investment officer at Swiss private bank Lombard Odier, said.

"The historical evidence argues against ruling out a recession, but we do not expect to see a severe US downturn this time." Among the main concerns next year is geopolitics outweighing economic risks in the wake of a flare-up in the Zionist entity-Gaza war or a



deterioration in the US-China relationship. "We think the bigger dangers in 2024 will be geopolitical, which have more potential to throw expectations off track," William Davies, global chief investment officer at asset manager Columbia Threadneedle Investments, said. "These pressures impact companies directly, as finding alternative energy supplies or building new supply chains will be costly."

The global economy, he said, "appears to be traveling on a path guided by low or even slowing growth, falling inflation and high interest rates". However, skeptics believe a deeper recession is possible due to lingering high interest rates.

US inflation eased in November but was higher than some market expectations, cooling any hopes that the Fed would cut interest rates early next year. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 0.1 percent last month. On an annual basis, inflation rose 3.1 percent, down from 3.2 percent in October.

Core CPI rose 4 percent annually, unchanged from October. The Fed left interest rates unchanged at its last policy meeting of the year. Interest rates are now at 5.4 percent, a 22-year high, up from close to zero in March last year. However, the central bank has indicated that it would cut interest rates more than once next year.

Oil market

Oil prices, which touched nearly \$140 a barrel following Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, have taken a beating this year, despite supply cuts made by the OPEC+ alliance and record crude demand from China, the world's second-largest economy. Brent prices are down nearly 8 percent since the start of the year.

Analysts blame the fall in prices on concerns of non-compliance by some producing countries and fears that the OPEC+ group would unwind its production cuts in the second quarter. On November 30, the group announced voluntary production cuts of 2.2 million barrels per day for the first quarter of 2024. "With market liquidity drying up as we approach the end of the year, prices are likely to stay volatile and further lows cannot be excluded," UBS strategist Giovanni Staunovo said in a research note.

Record production in the US and higher crude supply from Iran have eased concerns of a tight crude market in the fourth quarter. "We classify the year 2024 for the energy complex as one of balance with bearish skews," MUFG, Japan's largest lender, said in a research note.

However, global oil markets will remain supported by "tight" micro fundamentals, OPEC+ driven cuts and ef-



Tourists browse inside a souvenir shop at the Nanluoguxiang tourism area in Beijing.

fective hedging value against negative geopolitical supply shocks, the bank said. OPEC expects oil demand to expand by 2.2 million bpd next year, nearly double the International Energy Agency's estimate of a growth of 1.1 million bpd. Meanwhile, natural gas prices are expected to be stable next year on high European gas stocks and lower demand growth in the US, MUFG said.

Stock markets

This year so far has turned out to be a great year for equity investors after a dismal 2022. Developed market equities are up almost 20 percent year-to-date in total return terms. "That said, digging below the surface, the rally has been mainly driven by a few mega-cap technology stocks in the US," Mathieu Racheret, head of equity strategy research at Julius Baer, said. The so-called "Magnificent 7" - Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, Tesla - did the heavy lifting in equities this year, he said. "After the phenomenal outperformance, consensus has shifted towards expecting a mean reversion, ie the rest of the market catching up and outperforming the cohort in 2024," he said.

"We disagree with that notion and believe the outperformance is sustainable beyond 2023." However, despite a stellar year, investors will closely be watching geopolitics that can potentially derail the stocks rally next year.

"Another wild card is the US elections. It is hard to predict the effect, if any, it will have on the markets - and it is that very unpredictability that is the problem. Markets hate uncertainty," Mr Davies at Columbia Threadneedle Investments said. The UK may also go to the polls, with January 2025 the very latest Prime Minister Sunak can wait until he calls a ballot.

"Equities are likely to be supported by mid-single-digit earnings growth and rate cuts in the second half of 2024, but growth is slowing and valuations appear, on aggregate, demanding versus other asset classes," he said. "Equity markets can deliver positive - although very volatile - returns in the late stages of an economic cycle. Such a scenario would be consistent with a gradual rise in equity indices, but also with a quality bias given lingering uncertainty over the macro-economic backdrop." - Agencies



Most awaited HONOR X9b now available in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Following huge interest, global technology brand HONOR announced that the much-anticipated HONOR X9b 5G - the newest member of HONOR's acclaimed X Series family of phones - is now on general sale across Kuwait. The official announcement took place during an impressive launch event held at the Four Seasons Hotel Kuwait at Burj Alshaya in Kuwait. The event was attended by distinguished guests, including telecom operators, distributors, partners, esteemed media personnel, and prominent tech influencers.

"Although only unveiled in the Kuwait a few days ago, we have seen significant demand from consumers for the HONOR X9b 5G. This is testament to customer interest in its combination of durability inside and out, high performance, elegant design, exceptional display and photographic capabilities", said Frank, Country Manager of HONOR Device Kuwait. "More than just a smartphone, the HONOR X9b 5G is a statement of style and sophistication" he added.

HONOR's certified Ultra-bounce Anti-Drop Display technology - an industry first

In an industry first, the HONOR X9b 5G has been awarded Five Star Overall drop Resistance certification by SGS of Switzerland. This recognition is thanks to the HONOR Ultra-Bounce Anti-Drop Display incorporated in the phone for the first time, providing

all-round drop resistance for the screen as part of the 360° whole-device protection, helping the entire phone withstand drops onto any face or corner, even against hard surfaces like marble.

HONOR's Ultra-Bounce Anti-Drop Display combines innovative special materials used in the manufacture of the display, along with - for the first time - three layers of protection around the screen, frame and internal compartments, helping to absorb impact if the phone is dropped from up to 1.5m, and ensuring resilience and strength. The three-layer protective structure also makes the HONOR X9b 5G splash-resistant and capable of working even after being submerged in water for 15 seconds.

All-day battery life

The HONOR X9b 5G's durability extends to the battery, a long-lasting 5800mAh battery that enables day-long productivity, with the capability to power the device for up to 3 days from a single charge. Light, thin and large, the HONOR X9b 5G's battery retains a market-leading 80 percent of its capacity, even after 1000 charge cycles.

Upgraded hardware and software

The HONOR X9b 5G runs on the powerful Qualcomm Snapdragon 6 Gen 1 Mobile Platform, providing exceptional performance and able to handle the most intensive tasks with ease. On the software side, the HONOR X9b 5G comes with the advanced Android 13-based MagicOS 7.2 pre-installed, providing a more intelligent and convenient experience for users, through features such as HONOR Docs Suite and Magic Text.

Exceptional, human-centric display

The HONOR X9b 5G features an edgeless 6.78-inch

AMOLED Curved Display, providing ultra-clear 1.5K resolution and 1.07 billion colors, with a dynamic refresh rate of up to 120Hz, delivering smooth visuals that are sharp and full of detail whether you are playing fast-paced games, or just reading. To benefit today's always-on generation, who spend long hours on their smartphones, the HONOR X9b 5G also offers a number of professional eye protection features including 1920Hz PWM Dimming, Low Blue Light, Dynamic Dimming, and Circadian Night Display

Expert photograph quality

To deliver a superior photography experience, the HONOR X9b 5G features a meticulously-crafted triple camera system composed of a 108MP Lossless Capture Camera, a 5MP Ultra-Wide Camera, and a 2MP Macro Camera, enabling users to capture captivating images in incredible detail. The main camera is equipped with a high-performance motion capture engine and 3X zoom, for greater clarity and detail. The entire camera system is inspired by the intricate craftsmanship of luxury watches and jewelry.

Design, Pricing, and Availability

With a golden curvature, edgeless design and encased in sustainable vegan leather, the HONOR X9b 5G is sleek and modern, yet delicate and tactile too. Surprisingly light and thin, it weighs just 185g with a width of 7.98mm. Adding a splash of personality, HONOR's new generation of X Series phones comes in four trendy colors: Sunrise Orange, Emerald Green, and Midnight Black.

The HONOR X9b 5G is available now for purchase in the Kuwait at Best Al-Yousifi, Eureka Electronics, Lulu Hypermarket and Retail Shops at an exceptional price of KWD 109,000. Upon purchase, consumers will get free gift of HONOR TWS X5.

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

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank has announced that it will be officially closed on Sunday, Dec 31, 2023, during the New Year's holiday. The bank will resume normal operating hours at all branches on Tuesday, Jan 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 at 1804080. Customers can also continue to conduct their financial transactions easily and securely using the Burgan Bank mobile app or the online banking platform (online.burgan.com). 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.



Russia says redirected most oil exports to China, India

Oil exports to Europe will fall from 45% to 5%: Official

MOSCOW: Russia has redirected its oil exports from Europe to China and India, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said Wednesday, almost two years after Moscow was hit by Western sanctions over the Ukraine conflict.

After President Vladimir Putin sent troops to Ukraine in February 2022, Western countries hit Russia with a slew of sanctions including a European Union embargo on its seaborne oil deliveries.

"We previously supplied a total of 40 to 45 percent of oil and oil products to Europe," said Novak, who is in charge of energy policy. "This year, we expect the figure not to exceed four to five percent of total exports," Novak said in a televised interview. As it was losing much of its market share in Europe, Moscow pivoted to other buyers including China.

"China—whose share (of oil exports) has grown to 45-50 percent—and India have become our main partners in the current situation," Novak said. India, which previously received almost no shipment, has become a major buyer. "In two years the total share of supplies to India has increased to about 40 percent," Novak said. India has been able to snap up discounted crude from Russia before refining it and selling it to European customers, reports say.

While these sales are legal, critics say they amount to a backdoor route for Russian oil and undermine the impact of the sanctions. Russia has also had to find new markets for its natural gas exports as Moscow cut its exports to EU nations, which have



Alexander Novak

also looked for new suppliers.

In November, the United States sanctioned Arctic LNG-2 project, a massive liquefied natural gas project which is key to Moscow's drive to open a northern maritime route linking Asia and Europe.

But Novak said the project was going ahead regardless. "The Arctic LNG-2 plant is being constructed now, its first line has virtually started operating already," he said, adding shipments were expected in the first quarter of 2024. The project, which has an estimated cost of \$21 billion, aims to achieve a production capacity of 19.8 million tons of LNG a year, using three production lines.

The EU still imports sizeable amounts of Russian LNG. Overall despite multiplying sanctions in 2023, Novak said the Russian energy industry had successfully



Visitors at the Rosneft pavilion during the Russia International Exhibition Forum at the VDNKh exhibition center in Moscow.

held up. Novak said he expected Russian oil and gas revenues will amount to almost nine trillion rubles (\$98 billion) this year—a level similar to before the offensive in 2021. The oil and gas industry accounts for 27 percent of Russia's gross domestic product, according to Novak,

bringing in 57 percent of Russia's export revenues.

Novak said Russia was open to other buyers. "There are a lot of people who want to buy Russian oil. These are Latin American countries, African countries, and other countries of the Asia-Pacific region." — AFP

India's steel imports from China jump

NEW DELHI: China was the top exporter of finished steel to India between April and November, shipping 1.3 million metric tons of the alloy, up 48.2 percent from the same period a year earlier, according to reports. In the initial eight months of the fiscal year starting in April, India transitioned into a net importer of finished steel, witnessing a surge in shipments from China to the highest level in five years, as per provisional government data reviewed by Reuters on Wednesday.

China emerged as the leading exporter of finished steel to India from April to November, sending 1.3 million metric tons of the alloy, marking a 48.2 percent increase compared to the corresponding period the previous year. The world's top steel producer exported mostly hot-rolled and cold-rolled coil or sheets to India, followed by plates, and pipes.

The Indian steel industry has sought government intervention to safeguard against Chinese imports. During April-November, India imported a total of 4.3 million tons of finished steel, up 13.4 percent from a year earlier with shipments at a four-year high, data showed.

South Korea was the second-biggest exporter of finished steel to India over the period, shipping 1.3 million metric tons. India is the world's second-biggest crude steel producer with output standing at 94.1 million tons in the eight months, up 14.7 percent from a year earlier. Domestic consumption of finished steel was 87.1 million tons, up 14.9 percent at a five-year high. — Agencies

The scientific benefits of sleeping and how we can get better at it

KUWAIT: As much as the heart powers our body, the same could be said of sleep. It's as vital to us as the air we breathe and is the make-or-break habit that influences our lives and health. Unfortunately, as the world gets more modern and digital, we seem to neglect the importance of sleep and pick up unhealthy bedtime habits. One of the most common ones is scrolling on our screens right before falling asleep.

According to the World Economic Forum, almost 62 percent of adults all over the world are reporting a lack of quality sleep. Many are unaware of the major implications that sleep has on health, especially in the long term. Poor sleep can affect our heart, immune system, mental health, and more. Moreover, many don't have the proper tools to understand how they can sleep better. To bridge the gap and improve access to sleep management tools, some brands like Huawei have invested in sleep technology and introduced sleep monitoring features in their wearable devices.

Personalized solutions for everyone

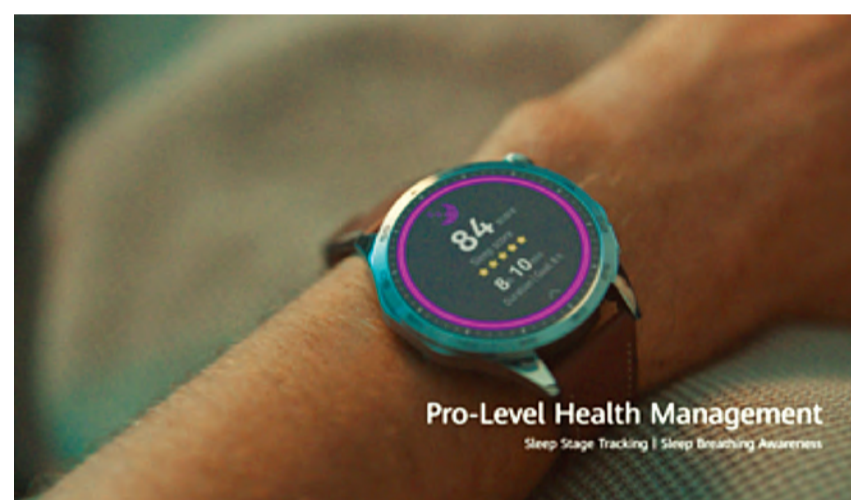
From the night-shift worker to the working parent, the way we sleep is as unique to us as our identities, which is also why experts struggle to figure out a one-size-fits-all solution to sleeping better. This means we need to understand our own sleep cycles and habits in a personalized way.

Smartwatches can help us with that, as they offer easy access to sleep monitoring technologies. Currently, many smartwatches in the market can detect the different phases of sleep (light sleep, REM sleep, deep sleep, etc.). Huawei's latest smartwatches go a step further, giving users the most customized sleep tracking experience possible.

Huawei's TruSleep 3.0 can detect micro-movements during sleep to more precisely identify the stage of sleep the user is in. If you wonder whether you toss and turn during sleep, or whether you get enough deep sleep to avoid daytime sleepiness, the watch can help you with that. Additionally, new smartwatches like the Huawei Watch GT 4 utilize the Huawei TruSeen 5.5+ advanced sensor to detect changes in heart rate during sleep, which means it takes a more comprehensive reading of your sleep cycle.

Tools for a good night's rest

Sleep doesn't have to be complicated or stressful. It should be a natural and relaxing activity that benefits our health and wellbeing. The Watch GT 4's sleep monitoring feature takes care of various aspects of the user's sleep, including the very moment of waking, connecting to other features like the Clock app, so that users can rest easy and not fret about oversleeping. Users can also set notifications that



Pro-Level Health Management
Sleep Stage Tracking | Sleep Breathing Awareness

will inform them when it's bedtime so that they'll be reminded to get sufficient rest without having to repeatedly check the clock or set alarms.

The sleep tracking algorithm is also comprehensive yet user-friendly. Instead of overwhelming you with a ton of data, the watch gives you a score on sleep quality and provides recommendations on how to improve your sleep habits. It intelligently does so by gathering your physiological data and assessing the steps needed to improve sleep.

How breathing influences sleep

Many conventional smartwatches today overlook the importance of breathing well — especially during sleep. Our breathing rate slows down when we fall asleep, and it can vary across the different stages of sleep. In some cases, we may experience

disruptions or irregularities in our breathing that can affect our overall wellbeing and sleep quality without us noticing.

Currently, one of the few smartwatches with the ability to measure breath irregularity is the Watch GT 4. It has a new feature called Sleep Breathing Awareness that helps monitor breathing during sleep, and rates it from Low to High. Although it is not a medical device, it can help you understand your respiratory health and sleep quality better, and alert you when it's time to seek professional help.

If you're looking for a solution to help you sleep better, wearable technology can be a great way to start learning and improving your sleep habits. And the Huawei WATCH Watch 4 has one of the most comprehensive sleep tracking technologies in the market now.



US again extends tariff exemptions on Chinese products

NEW YORK: The United States again extended tariff exemptions for hundreds of Chinese products once hit by punitive duties, US trade officials announced Tuesday.

The exemptions, which had previously been extended until December 31, will now be prolonged through May 31, 2024, the United States Trade Representative said in a news release.

"The extension will enable the orderly sunsetting of the exclusions," the USTR said, while noting there were cases where additional time could be granted to "enable shifts in sourcing to the United States or third countries." While the business group Americans for Free Trade welcomed that the extension would provide "economic relief for American businesses," it said it was "frustrated" at USTR's lack of notice, "making it difficult for businesses to plan."

The original sanctions stem from the ad-

ministration of former US President Donald Trump, which imposed tariffs on \$370 billion worth of Chinese products, citing unfair trade practices.

However, USTR established a process for requesting and granting exclusions from those measures. The extensions announced Tuesday pertain to 352 Chinese products once hit by punitive duties, plus another 77 COVID-related exclusions.

Tensions between the world's two biggest economies have soared in recent years as both sides clashed on issues ranging from human rights to export controls. Following a summit of US and Chinese presidents, Joe Biden and Xi Jinping in November, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo held talks with Chinese counterpart Wang Wentao and pledged more in-person talks in early 2024.

Washington says its export curbs, which aim at reducing China's access to advanced chips critical to the development of artificial intelligence tech and cutting-edge weapons, are a national security measure.

But Beijing has dismissed those concerns, with Xi telling Biden in November that such actions hurt China's "legitimate interests." — AFP

Gold Market Outlook 2024

Gleaming with potential, but shadows linger

The gold market experienced a turbulent journey in 2023, reaching unprecedented heights above \$2,100 before experiencing a dip and stabilizing around the \$2,050 level. Looking ahead, the future appears both promising and precarious.

Softening inflation: Recent data from the United States indicates a potential cooling of inflation, which could prompt the Federal Reserve to adopt a more gradual approach to interest rate hikes. This has the potential to weaken the US dollar, traditionally a headwind for gold, and reignite interest in this precious metal.

Geopolitical uncertainty: With ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, rising tensions in Taiwan, and instability in the Middle East, the world remains in a volatile state. Gold, being a classic safe-haven asset, thrives during such turbulent times as investors seek to safeguard their wealth.

Central bank buying: Despite a slight decrease from 2022, central banks continue to be net buyers of gold, demonstrating their unwavering confidence in its long-term value. This consistent demand acts as a solid foundation for the metal's price.

Recessionary concerns: The looming threat of a global recession could dampen investor appetite for riskier assets like gold.

Resurgence of the US dollar: Despite recent weakness, the US dollar may regain strength if economic data surprises positively or geopolitical tensions ease. Such a scenario would once again exert pressure on gold prices.

Profit-taking: Following a remarkable year, some investors may opt to capitalize on their gold holdings, leading to temporary price corrections. Overall, the gold market currently finds itself at a critical juncture. While several factors support a bullish outlook, significant risks persist. At this moment, we advise



approaching the market with cautious optimism.

Key factors to monitor:

Federal Reserve policy: The upcoming decision by the Fed regarding interest rates will have a significant impact on the dollar and, consequently, gold.

Inflation trend: If inflation continues to decrease, it would be favorable for gold, but if prices remain stubbornly high, it could pose challenges.

Geopolitical events: Heightening tensions may lead investors to seek refuge in gold, whereas peaceful resolutions could reduce demand for it.

Always remember, staying informed, understanding the risks and rewards, and diversifying your portfolio are key to navigating the ever-shifting gold market. This serves as a brief overview of the present gold market scenario. It is important to acknowledge that this is a complex and dynamic market, therefore conducting thorough research is advisable prior to making any investment choices.

Note: This article is written by Vikas Lakhwani, chief revenue officer, CPT Markets

Lifestyle

'Parasite' actor Lee Sun-kyun found dead

South Korean actor Lee Sun-kyun, best known globally for his role in the Oscar-winning film "Parasite", was found dead in Seoul on Wednesday, police said. The 48-year-old actor was found inside a vehicle parked on the street in the capital's mid-northern Seongbuk district, an official from the Seongbuk police station told AFP. South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported, citing police, that Lee had left a note that reads like a will. He had been under police investigation over his alleged use of marijuana and other drugs.

A series of entertainment industry events in South Korea were announced as cancelled on Wednesday in order to pay condolences to the late actor. Filmmaker Byun Young-joo, who collaborated with Lee on her 2012 thriller "Helpless", honored his memory by sharing a pitch-black image on her Instagram account. Actress Claudia Kim, also known as Soo Hyun, wrote on the social media platform that Lee's death was "a loss of great talent" for the industry. "Everyone deserves to be forgiven for their mistakes. Everyone deserves a second chance," she wrote.



Lee Sun-kyun

'Praiseworthy in "Parasite"'

Once celebrated for his wholesome image, local news outlets reported that the actor was being dropped from television and commercial projects following the scandal. A graduate of South Korea's prestigious Korea National University of Arts, Lee made his acting debut in 2001 in a television sitcom titled "Lovers". He later won acclaim for his performances in a variety of roles, including a charismatic chef and a genius neuroscientist who is incapable of empathy.

Lee received widespread critical acclaim for his performance in the 2018 TV drama series "My Mister", for his portrayal of a diligent architectural engineer. Globally, he is best known for his role as the wealthy and shallow patriarch in director Bong Joon-ho's 2019 Oscar-winning film "Parasite". He was also recognized for his performances in romance flicks, such as the 2007 TV drama "Coffee Prince" and the 2012 film "All About My Wife".

Lee made appearances in South Ko-

rea's internationally acclaimed filmmaker Hong Sang-soo's movies, such as "Our Sunhi" (2013) and "Ok's Movie" (2010). His latest released film, this year's horror flick "Sleep" — in which he played a husband whose sleepwalking eventually leads to terrifying circumstances — was well-received and featured in the Critics' Week section at the Cannes festival.

Devastated fans expressed their grief on social media, with one user writing on X: "I laughed and cried a lot while watching your acting. Thank you." Renowned Korean-American writer Min Jin Lee also expressed her condolences. "Lee was praiseworthy in 'Parasite' and exceptional in 'My Mister,'" she wrote on Instagram. "May he be remembered for his excellent work and creative gifts."

'Great disappointment'

Lee's reputation suffered a significant blow when South Korean authorities launched an investigation into his alleged drug use in October. He had been suspected of using illicit drugs at the residence of a hostess employed at a high-end bar in Seoul. According to Yonhap, the actor asserted that he was "tricked" by the hostess into consuming the drugs and was unaware of what they were. Lee had tested negative for drugs twice, during police investigations and in a lab test last month, the news agency reported. He had also lodged a complaint against two individuals, including the hostess, alleging that they had blackmailed him and extorted money from him.

From Dec 23 to 24, he attended his third police investigation session, which lasted 19 hours, Yonhap reported. He briefly spoke to reporters in late October before entering a police station in Incheon to meet with investigators. "I sincerely apologize for causing great disappointment to many people by being involved in such an unpleasant incident," he said at the time. "I feel sorry for my family, which is enduring such difficult pain at this moment. Once again, I sincerely apologize to everyone."

South Korea has extremely tough laws on illegal drugs, with Koreans who take drugs such as marijuana legally abroad risking prosecution upon returning to their home country. The Seongbuk police official said authorities believed his body had been taken to the Seoul National University Hospital. Lee is survived by his wife, actress Jeon Hye-jin and two sons. — AFP



Police investigate a car in which the body of Lee was found at a park in central Seoul on Dec 27, 2023.



This picture taken on Dec 23, 2023 shows South Korean actor Lee Sun-kyun arriving at a police station in Incheon for his police questioning over his alleged use of marijuana and other psychoactive drugs. — AFP photos

Paris Catacombs: Stuff of fascination and TV series

The Paris Catacombs, the massive underground ossuary which attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists a year, are once again the focus of a television series. Here are five things to know about the final resting place for several million Parisians, which are featured in "Berlin" which airs on "Netflix" from Friday, as they were before in "The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon" and "Lupin".

300 km of galleries

A vast underground labyrinth of narrow tunnels and chambers extends for nearly 300 km on the Left Bank of the River Seine, dozens of meters deep and in some places built on several levels. They were originally quarries, dating back to the 17th century, from where limestone was extracted to construct buildings in the capital, and gypsum to make plaster.

Skull and bones

About 100 km of these disused quarries were carefully stacked with bones taken from the city's overflow-

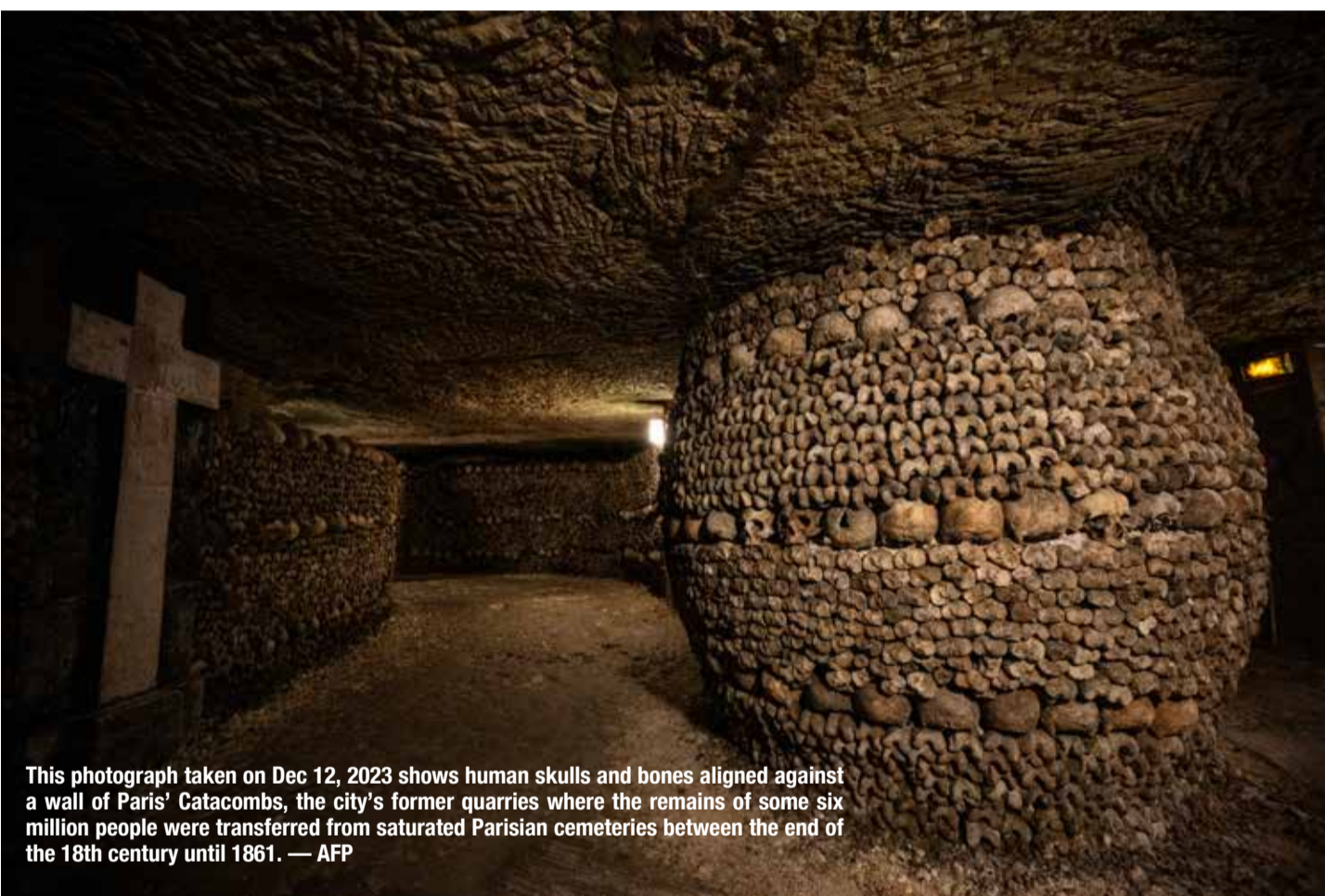
ing cemeteries from the end of the 18th century. The authorities considered the cemeteries, containing Parisians who died between the 10th and 18th centuries, a health hazard.

550,000 visitors a year

The catacombs are one of the City of Light's more macabre tourist attractions. In 1809 they were opened to the public by appointment, welcoming Napoleon III in 1860 and even a clandestine classical concert with musicians from the Paris Opera in 1897. Today they are open to all, and welcome 550,000 visitors a year over an area of 1,500 m. That's just a small part of the underground network, the rest being off-limits to visitors.

Cata-cops and cataphiles

The banned tunnels and chambers are regularly patrolled by police, known locally as "cataflics" (cata-cops). They come up against a dihard underworld of "cataphiles" who manage to sneak into the forbidden area via sewers, manholes



This photograph taken on Dec 12, 2023 shows human skulls and bones aligned against a wall of Paris' Catacombs, the city's former quarries where the remains of some six million people were transferred from saturated Parisian cemeteries between the end of the 18th century until 1861. — AFP

and metro stations, though they face a fine if caught. They include those who go underground to party or paint graffiti, or are "catasprints" who explore the network wearing headlamps. Devoted "cata-cleans" clean up after the parties.

Lost and stolen

Inexperienced visitors often lose their way: In 2017, two teenagers were found in a state of hypothermia, after being lost in the maze for more than three days. The same year intrepid robbers drilled

through a wall of the catacombs into a neighboring wine cellar and made off with more than 300 bottles of the best wines worth €250,000. — AFP

French actors denounce 'lynching' of Depardieu

Nearly 60 French actors and other prominent figures have denounced the "lynching" of disgraced film legend Gerard Depardieu, who is charged with rape and is facing a litany of other sexual assault claims. An open letter signed by British actress Charlotte Rampling, former French first lady and singer Carla Bruni, and Depardieu's former partner, actress Carole Bouquet, claims the star is the victim of a "torrent of hatred".

"Gerard Depardieu is probably the greatest of all actors," added the letter published in French newspaper Le Figaro late Monday, Christmas Day. Depardieu, who has made more than 200 films and television series, was charged with rape in 2020 and has been accused of sexual harassment and assault by more than a dozen women. Despite no court ruling against him, many have

rushed to distance themselves from the actor in recent days.

His supporters said: "We can no longer remain silent in the face of the lynching he is facing." The letter said Depardieu was being attacked "in defiance of a presumption of innocence from which he would have benefited, like everyone else, if he weren't the cinema giant he is." Depardieu — who turns 75 on Wednesday — called the signatories "courageous" and praised the letter. "I thought it was beautiful," he told broadcaster RTL by phone.

'Manhunt'

Depardieu admitted he had been shown the letter before its publication but insisted he had not asked for it. He also said that a number of figures refused to sign it. The actor faces fresh scrutiny over sexually explicit comments including one about a young girl riding a horse during a



In this photo taken on June 25, 2018, Depardieu waves as he arrives at the Town Hall in Brussels for a ceremony as part of the Brussels International Film Festival.



Depardieu receives a career achievement award at the El Gouna Film Festival in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of el Gouna on Oct 23, 2020.

2018 trip to North Korea that were broadcast for the first time in a documentary on national television this month.

"When people attack Gerard Depardieu in this way, they are attacking art," the letter said. "France owes him so much. Cinema and theatre cannot do without his unique and extraordinary personality," the celebrities said. "No-body can erase the indelible imprint of his work on our times."

Last week French President Emmanuel Macron said Depardieu had become the target of a "manhunt", while his family has denounced an "unprecedented conspiracy" against him. Rights activists condemned Macron's comments as an "insult" to all women who have suffered sexual violence. Politicians have also called Macron out, including former

French president Francois Hollande.

'No one above the law'

The letter, titled "Don't erase Gerard Depardieu", sparked a new wave of indignation. "Is rape part of the 'work' when it's produced by an artist?" Sandrine Rousseau, a French lawmaker and feminist, said on X (former Twitter). Laurent Boyet, founder of Les Papillons (Butterflies), a group that fights violence against children, said the letter was "indecent" and added that the organization was dropping one of the signatories, actor Pierre Richard, as its ambassador. "We are and always will be on the side of the victims," Boyet said.

Anne-Cecile Maiffert, head of the Women's Foundation, told AFP that "no one is above the law", while activist Em-

manuelle Dancourt, of the #MeTooMedias group, said she was "saddened" and "appalled" by the letter. But she also said she understood how Depardieu's friends felt they had to defend him. "The people who do this are our friends, our fathers, our husbands, our neighbors, our colleagues, people we know," she said on BFMTV.

Culture Minister Rima Abdul Malak has said the actor might be stripped of the Legion of Honor, the country's top award. Depardieu is no stranger to scandal, having made headlines by brawling, drunk driving and urinating in the aisle of a plane. He has praised Russian President Vladimir Putin and has a Russian passport. — AFP



French actor Gerard Depardieu looks on as he speaks with the daughter of French President Jacques Chirac and one of his Elysee communication's staff members at the University of Bucharest during an official speech of Chirac in Bucharest on Feb 22, 1997. — AFP photos

Saboteurs try to outfox hunters in UK countryside



An aerial picture shows foxhounds and riders during the Thurlow Fox Hunt near Newmarket in Suffolk on Nov 25, 2023. — AFP photos

Emerging from woods in a quiet corner of rural England, a small band of anti-foxhunting campaigners have just one goal: to confuse the pack of dogs chasing a fox and prevent its death. These “hunt saboteurs” regularly gate-crash meetings across the country in what has become a fierce clash of cultures. “Kermit to Animal, are you receiving?” crackles the radio from one old Toyota 4X4 to another, each with their own codename.

The field sport of foxhunting, in which a pack of hounds

monitoring activities. Today the saboteurs’ target is the Thurlow Hunt in rural Suffolk, eastern England.

Armed with maps on their phones and drones overhead, around 20 saboteurs exchange information over their radios about the position of the riders, taking care not to risk driving the fox back towards the pack. Spotting a saboteur, one rider — dressed in a traditional red huntsman’s jacket — looks unhappy and turns back. The barks of the dogs echo



A North London Hunt Saboteurs member films the activities of foxhounds and riders during the Thurlow Fox Hunt.



A member of the North London Hunt Saboteurs holds a bottle containing citronella spray to mask fox scent from foxhounds.



A rider jumps over a hedge during the Thurlow Fox Hunt.



Members of the North London Hunt Saboteurs observe participants of the Thurlow Fox Hunt.



A member of the North London Hunt Saboteurs uses a radio and ordnance survey map to locate participants of the Thurlow Fox Hunt.

chases and kills a fox accompanied by riders on horseback, was once an integral part of country life. But the use of dogs to hunt wild animals has been outlawed in England and Wales since 2004. Trail hunts, which allow packs of dogs to follow a route artificially laid with fox scent, are allowed. But critics say they are used as a cover for fox hunts to continue as before.

They say dogs still chase and kill live animals on these hunts, with organizers then claiming it was accidental. Hunters counter that they comply with the law and that it is the saboteurs who are illegally interfering with their

in the distance and hunt members including children on ponies gallop past. “We don’t want to lose sight of them,” says Angela Vasiliu of the North London Hunt Saboteurs.

‘Prolific’

The saboteurs try to distract the dogs with loud cries and by spraying lemongrass to confuse their sense of smell. If they fail to put them off and a fox is killed, at least they hope to gather evidence for prosecutions under the 2004 law. Video taken by the hunt saboteurs led to the



North London Hunt Saboteurs member Philip Walters uses a drone to locate participants of the Thurlow Fox Hunt.

conviction of one member of the Thurlow Hunt in 2019, with the footage showing hunt members and saboteurs fighting over a fox’s remains during the traditional Boxing Day hunt on Dec 26, 2017.

Despite the ban, hunt saboteurs like Philip Walters insist that foxes are still being illegally hunted. A senior police chief earlier this year said he believed unlawful foxhunting was “prolific” in the UK. Matt Longman, the national police spokesman on foxhunting, even urged police forces to work with “volunteers” monitoring hunts to learn how to gather the sort of evidence that leads to successful prosecutions.

The Thurlow Hunt association stresses that it only “conducts lawful trail hunting activities to comply with the Hunting Act and constantly assesses its procedures

to ensure best practice is carried out”. And it complains of harassment and false accusations by the saboteurs, calling them “animal rights extremists”. In Scotland, the devolved government in Edinburgh this year introduced a ban on trail hunting. The UK’s main opposition Labour party has pledged to follow suit in England and Wales if it wins the next general election.

Vegan sausage rolls

Clashes between hunt members and saboteurs can often turn ugly — with accusations from both sides. “Why, when hunt saboteur monitors turn up, are some hunts so violent if they haven’t got anything to hide?” asks Walters, also from the North London group, who says he has received death threats. “I’ve had dead rats sent to me in the post, I’ve had dead foxes left on my car’s windscreen,” he said.

According to Polly Portwin, campaign director at the Countryside Alliance, which works to protect rural traditions, around 25 hunts out of the 200 that are active are being targeted by saboteurs, who claim 600 members. Defenders of foxhunting say it is essential to control the number of foxes in the countryside and is more humane than shooting or poisoning.

After hours running through muddy woods, paths and fields, the saboteurs in Thurlow finally take a rest and restore their flagging energy levels with vegan sausage rolls and chocolate brownies. They say they saw six or seven foxes that day but are hopeful they fulfilled their mission — to make sure that no fox is killed — because they did not see any dog with traces of blood on it. — AFP



Foxhounds run amongst members of the North London Hunt Saboteurs during the Thurlow Fox Hunt.



Foxhounds and riders travel along a country lane.

Lifestyle

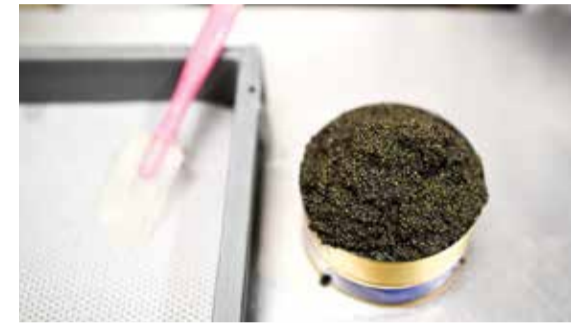
French caviar farms look forward to EU label of origin



Workers show sturgeons in a pond at the fish farm where sturgeons are bred for caviar production in Saint-Fort-sur-Gironde, southwestern France, on Dec 18, 2023. - AFP photos



Sturgeon eggs rinsed in the gonad before processing into caviar.



A box of caviar at the sturgeon caviar production workshop.



A monitor of an ultrasound scanner used to detect sturgeon maturity highlights the eggs in the fish (white dots on top).

At a French caviar factory last week, a worker used tiny pliers to carefully line up black sturgeon fish eggs against a ruler. "I'm measuring the eggs to be able to classify them. Above a certain size, they're premium," said Magdalena Puaud, wearing a hair net and face mask. The fish roe, once sorted and left to mature in small tins for several months, will be sold in France and abroad for €2,000-10,000 (\$2,200-11,000) a kilo.

Caviar was first introduced to France around a century ago by Russian aristocrats who had fled their home country after the 1917 revolution. The southwestern region of Aquitaine, which is naturally home to sturgeons, started to produce the delicacy in the 1920s and is today home to four caviar farms that make up 90 percent of all French production. After a decade of lobbying, Aquitaine's farms are looking forward to their caviar finally receiving an EU certificate of origin in the new year.

According to the European Union, "geographical indications" protect products against misuse or imitation of the registered name and guarantee their true origin to customers. "We have nothing to hide," said Laurent Dulau, the managing director of the biggest of Aquitaine's farms in Saint-Fort-sur-Gironde, which produces 20 tons of fish roe a year.

He and fellow producers hope the EU stamp of approval will allow them to stand out in a market nowadays dominated by China and awash with opaque labelling. "We're going to guarantee total traceability — origin, environmental responsibility and sustainability, and no genetically modified organisms or antibiotics," he said. Last week, in the runup to Christmas, French authorities seized and destroyed 17 kilos of caviar worth some 35,000 euros (\$38,000) for not following health and safety guidelines, including not identifying its country of origin.

'Quality, not quantity'

Near the sturgeon pools in Saint-Fort-sur-Gironde, employees fished out females and examined them one by one, a man rolling an ultrasound over their plump white bellies. "Caviar," he shouted when he saw semi-circles on his monitor, indicating the fish was ready to be sliced open. When the eggs were not yet big enough or too mature, the fish was sent shooting down a slide back into the water.

The label "validates the way we work," said fish production manager Nicolas Proust. Dulau said the certificate of origin would help French producers compete against huge quantities of cheap Chinese



Workers perform an ultrasound scan on a sturgeon to check its maturity.

caviar. "There are 600 tons of caviar produced in the world, and China alone produces 250 tons, while France produces just 50 tons," he said.

Francoise Boisseaud, who buys up French caviar and mostly sells it abroad, agreed the new EU guarantee was good news. "France is a small country," she said. "We are forced to bank on quality, not quantity. It's strategic." — AFP



A worker uses a ruler to measure sturgeon eggs before processing into caviar.



A worker fills in a box with caviar at a sturgeon caviar production workshop in Saint-Genis-de-Saintonge, southwestern France, on Dec 18, 2023.



Workers release a sturgeon after performing an ultrasound scan.



Rinsed and calibrated sturgeon eggs are seen before processing into caviar.

Sports

Australia take control of second Test as Pakistan flounder

Aamer Jamal spearhead Pakistan's charge with 3-64

MELBOURNE: Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon put Australia in the driving seat of the second Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Wednesday to leave Pakistan tottering at 194-6, still 124 runs behind on day two. At stumps, Mohammad Rizwan was on 29 and Aamer Jamal not out two after Cummins took the crucial wickets of Abdullah Shafique (62) and Babar Azam (one), then Agha Salman (five).

Lyon chipped in by removing Imam-ul-Haq (10) and Shan Masood (54), while Josh Hazlewood bowled Saud Shakeel for nine as Pakistan's dream of a first Test win in Australia since 1995 faded. "I thought we bowled decently before tea without too much reward. They obviously batted quite well," said skipper Cummins. "But it was good at the end there to get a few big wickets and it feels like we're well into their order now."

"I was actually really happy," he added of Australia's batting performance. "I thought our batters did a great job to get us to 300, it was hard work." The visitors claimed seven wickets in the morning session on a pitch offering seam and swing, restricting the hosts to 318.

Aamer Jamal spearheaded Pakistan's charge with 3-64 after Australia resumed on 187-3 after being sent into bat, with Marnus Labuschagne top-scoring on 63. Openers Haq and Shafique made a positive start, surviving a series of luf appeals.

But veteran spinner Lyon, fresh from taking his 500th wicket during the first Test in Perth, finally earned a reward when Haq edged to Labuschagne at slip. Undeterred, Pakistan upped the run rate after

tea with Shafique reaching his first Test 50 in Australia, and fifth overall, with a four off Mitchell Starc.

But his 90-run partnership with Masood was broken by Cummins, who showed sharp reflexes to stick out his left hand for a catch off his own bowling to end Shafique's stay. Fired up, he then clean bowled danger man Azam before Lyon returned to claim his second wicket when Masood miscued and Mitchell Marsh did well to hold a catch with the sun in his eyes.

Hazlewood took care of Shakeel before Cummins brought himself back and accounted for Salman, caught by wicketkeeper Alex Carey to leave Pakistan in trouble. "As a batting unit, it hurts," said Shafique. "But I hope we will recover from this partnership that is going on now."

Jamal strikes

Labuschagne had been a rock on day one, digging in for an overnight 44 off 120 balls. He padded up again alongside Travis Head on nine with the sun shining, smacking a boundary off Shaheen Shah Afridi in the opening over to signal Australia's intent.

The explosive Head drove Hasan Ali to the ropes off his first ball and followed it up with another in the same over to quickly get in the groove. But his flair cost him on 17, lashing at a wide Afridi delivery that took a thick edge and was well collected by Salman in the slips.

At the other end, Labuschagne kept plugging away to bring up his 17th Test half-century. Marsh was given out twice in successive balls during a fiery Ali over while on seven by West Indian umpire



MELBOURNE: Pakistan's batsman Shan Masood (L) plays a shot on the second day of the second cricket Test match between Australia and Pakistan at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne on December 27, 2023. — AFP

Joel Wilson. He reviewed both decisions—for lbw and caught behind—and survived.

But just as the match appeared to be slipping away from Pakistan, Jamal bagged the wicket of Labuschagne, who edged to Shafique at slip. Car-

ey and Starc quickly followed as Pakistan cashed in with a new ball, before Marsh holed out to Jamal off Mir Hamza on 41 and the tail folded. Australia won the first Test of the three-match series in Perth by 360 runs. — AFP

Jags quarterback Lawrence has shoulder sprain

MIAMI: Jacksonville quarterback Trevor Lawrence has a sprained right shoulder and is uncertain for the Jaguars' NFL game against the Carolina Panthers on Sunday, coach Doug Pederson said Tuesday. Obviously he's a little bit sore but doing better today than he did yesterday," Pederson told reporters on Tuesday as the AFC South-leading Jags prepared for Sunday's game.

"We'll see where he is at again tomorrow, may do a little something tomorrow but I would doubt that just because it's a little bit too soon, but we'll see as the week goes on." Lawrence was injured when he dived for a first down in the third quarter of the Jaguars' 30-12 loss at Tampa Bay, Jacksonville's fourth straight defeat.

Lawrence stayed in the game to finish the drive but was later subbed out for backup C.J. Beathard, who will start Sunday if Lawrence can't. As a precaution, Jacksonville signed quarterback Matt Barkley off the New York Giants' practice squad on Tuesday.

Barkley hasn't taken a snap in a game since 2020. Despite their slump, the 8-7 Jaguars are tied for the AFC South division lead with Indianapolis and Houston and Jacksonville hold the tiebreaker advantages over both teams.

Lawrence hadn't been cleared to play in last Sunday's game until the day before, when he cleared concussion protocol and was able to extend his streak of 48 straight starts. He had reported concussion symptoms after the Jags' loss to Baltimore. — AFP

Bangladesh claim historic victory over NZ in first T20

NAPIER: Bangladesh claimed an historic five-wicket win over New Zealand on Wednesday after their bowlers ran riot in the opening game of their three-match Twenty20 series on Wednesday in Napier. This was Bangladesh's first Twenty20 win on New Zealand soil, four days after also claiming a maiden away one-day international win over the Black Caps in Napier.

"I'm really excited and very proud of how we played," said Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto. Asked to bat by Shanto, New Zealand made a disastrous start losing three wickets before reaching 134 for nine after their 20 overs.

"Our bowlers learnt quickly in these conditions with the new ball," Shanto added. "We were really confident after we restricted them." The Black Caps bowlers gave home fans hope with the early wickets of Bangladesh opener Rony Talukdar and Shanto.

Veteran Litton Das partnered up with Soumya Sarkar, then Towhid Hridoy to steer Bangladesh to 96-4 after 13 overs. The visitors were wobbling at 97-5 as they lost wickets in quick succession after Afif Hossain was caught for one run off six balls. Das, who finished on 42 not out, survived two close calls as he battled cramp.

The on-field umpire gave him out lbw on Tim Southee's bowling, but the Bangladesh opener stayed at the crease when the review showed the ball would have sailed over the stumps. Ish Sodhi then caught Das at the boundary, but stepped onto the boundary rope to give away six runs. It fell to allrounder Mahedi Hasan, who finished 19 not out, to hit the winning runs in his partnership of 40 alongside Das with eight balls spare.

"Credit to Bangladesh, they bowled well," said



NAPIER: New Zealand's James Neesham plays a shot during the first Twenty20 cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh at McLean Park in Napier on December 27, 2023. — AFP

Mitchell Santner, who captained New Zealand with regular white ball skipper Kane Williamson rested. "We fought hard with the ball to make it interesting, but the powerplay took it away from us with the bat," Santner added. The second and third Twenty20 in Internationals will both be played at Mount Maunganui on Friday, then Sunday. Bangladesh, ranked ninth in Twenty20 international cricket, punched above their weight to floor third-ranked New Zealand.

Having dismissed the Black Caps for 98 in Saturday's third one-day international in losing the series 2-1, the Bangladesh bowlers picked up where they left off. Hasan bowled Tim Seifert in the opening over. Shoriful Islam was the pick of the Bangladesh

bowlers with 3-26, including having Finn Allen caught and Glenn Phillips trapped lbw in consecutive balls. Daryl Mitchell hit consecutive fours before falling for 14 to leave New Zealand 20-4. Mark Chapman hit 19 off as many balls before being caught with the score on 50-5.

Santner and James Neesham put on 41 before Sarkar made his second catch to dismiss Santner, having also caught Allen in the slips. Neesham fell two runs short of his 50, holing out at deep cover point, and Southee was caught on eight. Adam Milne hit a towering six off the final ball to finish 16 not out before Bangladesh's batters chipped away at New Zealand's tally. — AFP



CENTURION: South Africa's Dean Elgar reacts as he plays a shot during the second day of the first cricket Test match between South Africa and India at SuperSport Park in Centurion on December 27, 2023. — AFP

S Africa's Elgar hits attacking century against India

CENTURION: Dean Elgar hit a boundary-studded century as South Africa scored rapidly on the second day of the first Test against India at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Wednesday. Elgar made 115 not out in a South African total of 194 for three at tea after India were bowled out for 245.

KL Rahul scored 101 for India — his eighth Test century and his second in successive matches in Centurion. South Africa added 145 runs for the loss of two wickets in 33 overs in an afternoon session extended to make up for overs lost in a rain-hit first day. Elgar, 36, who has announced he will retire

from international cricket after the second Test in Cape Town next week, had to survive a challenging start against Indian new ball bowlers Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj.

But the left-handed opening batsman blossomed with some of the most fluent stroke play of his career when India surprisingly did not use the two strike bowlers immediately after lunch. Elgar reached his fifty off 79 balls with ten fours and his 14th Test century was made off 140 deliveries with nine more boundaries.

Elgar and Tony de Zorzi (28) put on 93 for the second wicket and new cap David Bedingham looked composed in making 32 not out in an unbeaten fourth wicket stand of 81. Rahul earlier was mainly responsible for India adding 37 runs to their overnight total of 208 for eight after rain delayed the start of play by 25 minutes. Rahul was last man out after a 137-ball innings which included 14 fours and four sixes. — AFP

Duo battle for lead as storms force eight out of Sydney-Hobart

SYDNEY: Two 100-foot supermaxis battled for the lead Wednesday in a storm-struck Sydney-Hobart race fleet reduced to 95 yachts after eight entrants pulled out of the punishing ocean event. In a gripping late-morning struggle, LawConnect edged less than one nautical mile ahead of the favourite Andoo Comanche after a "cat-and-mouse" chase, with the lead switching throughout the night.

The duo were left in a duel after Hong Kong-owned supermaxi SHK Scallywag, which had been in a three-way battle for the lead, became the first major casualty on Tuesday evening when it suffered a broken bowsprit.

"We are pretty close after we were neck and neck overnight," LawConnect captain Ty Oxley said in a racing update just a couple of hours before retaking the lead. "It's raining and there are squalls every-

where, clouds on the horizon," Oxley added, reporting winds of more than 30 knots, sometimes exceeding 40 knots, as the rivals sailed southwards across the Bass Strait towards the Tasmanian capital.

Andoo Comanche was first across the line last year and still holds the 2017 race record for the blue-water classic of one day, nine hours, 15 minutes and 24 seconds. LawConnect has been runner-up in the three previous editions of the race.

Lying third, 68 nautical miles behind LawConnect, was Alive (1as), a 66-foot yacht skippered by Duncan Hine in a close battle with the 72-foot URM Group, captained by Marcus Ashley-Jones.

Less than 24 hours after the 103-boat fleet left Sydney Harbour, eight yachts had withdrawn, most with equipment damage. Geoff Cropley, on the Hong Kong-owned 72-footer Antipodes, said the sailors had endured "lightning and thunder for hours".

"They had been 'hunkered down'," he added, with the weather slowly beginning to improve. "There is a little bit of blue sky. It's quite nice out here." First held in 1945, this year marks the 25th anniversary of a violent storm that tore into the 1998 race fleet, with wild winds whipping up mountainous seas in which six people died, five boats sank and 55 sailors were rescued. — AFP



SYDNEY: This handout image taken and received from Rolex on December 26, 2023 shows yachts competing at the start of the annual Sydney to Hobart yacht race on Boxing Day on Sydney Harbour. — AFP

Sports

Russian swim star Kolesnikov 'not sad' to miss Paris Olympics

'The dream of an Olympic gold medal remains'

SAINT PETERSBURG: Russian swimming star Kliment Kolesnikov is all about winning Olympic medals—but not at all costs. The world record holder in the men's 50m backstroke has vowed to sit out the Paris Games over the "unacceptable" conditions imposed on Russian competitors due to the assault on Ukraine.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) said this month athletes from Russia and its ally Belarus would be able to compete in Paris as neutrals, outside of team events and as long as they did not actively support the campaign in Ukraine.

"At this time, under the current conditions, it's unacceptable for me" to take part in the 2024 Games, Kolesnikov told AFP in an interview on the sidelines of a recent swimming competition in Saint Petersburg.

"The dream of an Olympic gold medal remains, but I'm not sad about not being able to go," said the 23-year-old, who won bronze in the 100m freestyle and silver in the 100m backstroke at the 2020 Tokyo Games.

The IOC says there are currently only 11 athletes—eight Russians and three Belarusians—who have qualified for the Olympics that meet the above criteria. Around 60 Ukrainians have qualified. Moscow has denounced the "discriminatory" conditions but has not yet decided whether it would recommend that its athletes go to Paris or instead call on them to stay home.

'Black sheep'

Kolesnikov, who at 20 was crowned European

champion in the 100m freestyle in 2021, has his mind made up about the Paris Games. "I decided that for me personally, it would not be possible to participate in the Olympic Games under these conditions," he said, explaining that he did not want to be a "black sheep" among the other athletes.

"The other guys are taking part, competing like nothing ever happened. Meanwhile we won't have the right to a delegation... nor a flag nor hymn," he added. While the athlete spoke to AFP, young swimmers gathered around him to ask for autographs. "I've always prepared for the Olympic Games," he said, calling it the "coolest" event for any sportsman.

"Of course, I'd like to go. Of course, I'd like to win Olympic gold. But considering the current situation, I'd run the risk of coming home with the medal only to see it taken away (by the IOC)," he added.

New world records

While waiting for the situation to change, Kolesnikov said he wanted to focus on setting "new world records". The number of tournaments organised in Russia has increased significantly ever since Russian athletes were banned from international competition following the assault on Ukraine in February 2022.

"This whole time that we've been competing at home, the guys have been improving and breaking records... And me too," said Kolesnikov, who in July reclaimed his world record in the 50m backstroke in 23.55sec.

"We swim and we remain in competition with athletes from other countries through our results," he



SAINT PETERSBURG: Russian swimmer Kliment Kolesnikov takes part in the "Vladimir Salnikov Cup" international swimming competition in Saint Petersburg. The world record holder in the men's 50m backstroke has vowed to sit out the Paris Games over the "unacceptable" conditions imposed on Russian competitors due to the assault on Ukraine. — AFP

added. Although for now Kolesnikov does not intend to participate in next year's Paris Games, he is open to a change of plans. "If the conditions (of the IOC)

change" and if Russian authorities decide that "we must go win medals on behalf of the fatherland" then "of course I will go," he added. — AFP

Cody Gakpo backs forwards to fill in for absent Salah

LONDON: Liverpool's Cody Gakpo believes his side have the forward firepower to cope without Mohamed Salah when the Egypt star departs for the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations. Darwin Nunez ended a run of 12 games without a goal, while Diogo Jota came off the bench to score after a month out injured in a 2-0 win over Burnley on Tuesday which took Liverpool to the top of the Premier League table.

Salah has one more Liverpool game—at home to Newcastle on Sunday—before he departs for the African Nations Cup and the 16-goal winger is set to be away from Anfield on international duty for up to a month.

That makes Nunez and Jota's goals against Burnley all the more timely, with Gakpo having scored seven himself so far this season. "For every attacking player who didn't score for a few games, it's always nice to get back on the scoresheet and Darwin did it with a very good goal," said Gakpo.

"For Diogo as well. When you are injured and you come back and score that's always nice and good for the confidence. So really happy. "Mo is gone after the Newcastle game so we need the goals. Of course, I think I can contribute even more."

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk added: "It's always important for the guys up front to score goals. I am delighted for Darwin, Diogo, it's the same story. It's good to see the boys back on the scoresheet. "I also want to say that Cody was outstanding, in the first half especially. It's good to see. Everyone has to keep pushing each other. That's the only way we can get better," the Netherlands defender explained.



Mohamed Salah

"Others have to step up anyway. We have to deal with losing Mo and we have the players up front who can make the difference. Let's see how we deal with it." Liverpool are now two points ahead of Arsenal, although the Gunners will return to the summit with victory at home to London rivals West Ham on Thursday.

"The table is not looking in a bad place but we have to take it one game at a time, don't let our heads go everywhere all over the place, just stay focused and keep doing what we are doing now and even improve more," said Gakpo. The 24-year-old Dutch

attacker has never before experienced English football's packed Christmas and New Year schedule, with Gakpo enjoying himself as matches come thick and fast. "It's the first time I played with this intensity—a lot of games in a few days - and it's nice as if you play a good game you can play again and if you play a not-so-good game, you can make it good in the next game as it's coming nice and quick," he said.

"Everybody wants the three points—also the opponents—so you have to work really hard every game and you have to be able to win games different ways." — AFP

Man Utd must consult INEOS over transfers, Ten Hag's future

LONDON: Manchester United must consult with INEOS over any January transfer window deals and the future of manager Erik ten Hag prior to the Premier League ratifying its agreement to take a 25 percent stake in the club.

The English football giants announced on Christmas Eve it had reached an agreement with chemicals company INEOS and its chairman Jim Ratcliffe, a boyhood Red Devils fan, which will give the firm responsibility for football operations at Old Trafford once the regulatory approval procedure is completed.

This procedure is set to take four to six weeks and run beyond the finish of the January trans-

fer window. But, with the Premier League club's shares traded on the New York Stock Exchange, the United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filing related to the deal published late Tuesday contains a provision guaranteeing INEOS will be consulted on football matters while regulatory authorities complete their checks.

United must liaise with INEOS over "appointing, dismissing or accepting the resignation of any director of football or first team manager of the company" as well as entering into or continuing any talks concerning the purchase or sale of any player.

The SEC filing also allows the US-based Glazer family, who remain the majority owners of United to force a full sale if they received an offer for their shares which Ratcliffe was unwilling to match, although the British billionaire still has first refusal on the purchase of those shares.

INEOS director of sport Dave Brailsford, best known for his work in cycling, was in the crowd at Old Trafford on Tuesday as United came from

2-0 down to defeat high-flying Aston Villa as they moved up to sixth in the Premier League.

Ratcliffe, who tried to buy Chelsea last year, grew up in the Manchester region. The 71-year-old's group has extensive involvement in sport, owning French Ligue 1 club Nice and Swiss side Lausanne-Sport, as well as the INEOS Grenadiers cycling team.

The Glazers bought the club for £790 million (\$1.47 billion at the time) in 2005, loading the 20-time English champions with debt. Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani and Ratcliffe made offers in the region of £5 billion for a complete takeover, but that fell short of the Glazer family's valuation and the Qatari banker withdrew his bid for a 100 percent purchase in October.

United have not been crowned Premier League champions since Alex Ferguson's final season in charge in 2013 and have already been knocked out of this term's League Cup and the Champions League. — AFP

Morsy salvages draw for Ipswich at Leicester

LONDON: Sam Morsy's deflected stoppage-time shot gave second-placed Ipswich a 1-1 draw at home to English Championship leaders Leicester on Tuesday. Morsy's effort from the edge of the penalty area struck Ricardo Pereira and then hit the head of Jannik Vestergaard to leave Foxes goalkeeper Mads Hermansen stranded.

Leicester had led for most of the match at Portman Road thanks to Stephy Mavididi's strike from just inside the penalty area in the 24th minute. Ipswich manager Kieran McKenna told Sky Sports: "The goal comes from a fortunate deflection but we deserved it for the performance."

Leicester remained six points clear at the summit of English football's second tier as they bid to return to the lucrative Premier League. Ipswich, thrashed 4-0 by Leeds on Saturday, ended the day five points ahead of Southampton, who moved up to third following a 5-0 rout of Swansea featuring two goals from Ryan Fraser.

Joe Aribu put the Saints ahead and Samuel Edozie doubled their lead just three minutes into the second half before substitute Fraser found the top corner. The midfielder scored his second and Southampton's fourth in the 87th minute before Che Adams rounded off a dominant display by the south coast side.

Victory meant Southampton leapfrogged Leeds into third place following the Yorkshire club's 2-1 loss to Preston. Leeds goalkeeper Illan Meslier was shown a straight red card early in the second half following a clash with Ben Whiteman.

Alan Browne opened the scoring for Preston soon afterwards before Pascal Struijk equalised from the penalty spot. But Liam Millar's goal a minute from full time settled the match in favour of hosts Preston.

West Bromwich Albion returned to winning ways with a 1-0 victory over 10-man Norwich. Borja Sainz was sent off for the Canaries following two yellow cards collected within three minutes, with Brandon Thomas-Asante scoring the only goal of the game five minutes into the second half.

The Baggies are fifth and are three points ahead of Sunderland, who secured a first win under new manager Michael Beale thanks to a 1-0 victory over Hull achieved with a goal by Jack Clarke. Bristol City were left eyeing a play-off place after a convincing 4-1 win away to Watford.

Tatsuhiko Sakamoto scored twice as Coventry beat Sheffield Wednesday 2-0. But there was trouble after the final whistle when a clash between Liam Kitching and Bambo Diaby led to the pair being sent off. — AFP

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

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Liverpool go top as Nunez strikes, Hojlund caps Man Utd fightback

Nunez's eighth goal this season was his first for 12 games



BURNLEY: Liverpool's Dutch defender #04 Virgil van Dijk (R) vies with Burnley's South African striker #17 Lyle Foster (C) during the English Premier League football match between Burnley and Liverpool at Turf Moor in Burnley, north-west England. — AFP

LONDON: Liverpool climbed to the top of the Premier League as Darwin Nunez ended his goal drought to inspire a 2-0 win against Burnley, while Rasmus Hojlund broke his own barren run to cap Manchester United's thrilling fightback to beat Aston Villa 3-2 on Tuesday.

Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool took an early lead through Nunez at Turf Moor and held on despite wasting a host of chances. Nunez's eighth goal this season was his first for 12 games since he netted against Bournemouth in the League Cup on November 1. Diogo Jota, back from a month's injury absence, wrapped up the victory late on to leave Liverpool two points above second placed Arsenal, who have a game in hand. Arsenal can regain top spot with a victory at home to West Ham on Thursday.

After successive draws with Manchester United and Arsenal prior to Christmas, this was an essential victory for Liverpool's title ambitions. On Liverpool being in pole position, Klopp said: "That's nice. It will

probably change and that's no problem. It was not perfect but we are where we are."

At Old Trafford, United were in danger of another damaging defeat when goals from John McGinn and Leander Dendoncker put Villa in control by half-time at Old Trafford. Erik ten Hag's team were booed off at the interval but they staged a much-needed revival, sparked by Alejandro Garnacho scoring their first goal in seven hours and twenty minutes. Garnacho struck again to equalise before Hojlund finally scored his first Premier League goal, in his 15th appearance, with eight minutes left. Hojlund's cathartic strike ended United's four-match winless run in all competitions and lifted them to sixth in the Premier League.

"At half-time I said to the team, 'keep believing'. The atmosphere changed a lot from the first half to the second. If we play our best we can beat anyone," Ten Hag said. United's victory came in front of INEOS director of sport Dave Brailsford, who was in the directors box in the first sign of British billionaire

Jim Ratcliffe's involvement after buying a 25 percent stake on Christmas Eve.

Two games without a win have dented Villa's unexpected title challenge. Unai Emery's men remain third, three points behind Liverpool after their first defeat in 11 matches in all competitions.

Racism row

Chris Wood's hat-trick against his old club Newcastle gave Nuno Espirito Santo his first victory as Nottingham Forest boss, a 3-1 success at St James' Park. Wood left Newcastle to join Forest in June, but had scored only four times for his new club. Alexander Isak's first half penalty put Newcastle ahead before New Zealand striker Wood equalised late in the first half. Wood struck twice more in the second half to hand 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. Luton boss Rob Edwards said South Yorkshire Police are investigating an alleged racist comment towards Carlton Morris in his side's 3-2 win at fellow strugglers Sheffield United. Morris complained of a comment made from a United fan late in the second half, which left him "pretty angry", and the police have spoken to him. "There was an alleged racist comment, the police are dealing with that, they have spoken to Carlton and got his take on it," Edwards said.

Fulham boss Marco Silva insisted his goalkeeper Bernd Leno "touched" but "didn't push" a ball boy during the Cottagers' 3-0 defeat at Bournemouth. The second-half incident occurred when Leno went to collect the ball from the youngster's outstretched hand before using his own hand to make deliberate contact with the shoulder of the boy, who appeared to take a step back for balance. "Have you seen him pushing? I didn't see this. Yes, he apologised. I spoke with Bernd about it," Silva said. — AFP

Nadal, Osaka in Australia comebacks, Novak eyes more glory

SYDNEY: Rafael Nadal returns from a "winding, tortuous" injury journey in Brisbane this week, while fellow superstar Novak Djokovic kickstarts his bid for an unprecedented 11th Australian Open title at Perth. It appeared last season that the veterans, with 46 Grand Slam crowns between them, may never share a competitive court again.

But the prospect is back in play with Spain's Nadal recovering from hip surgeries that sidelined him for almost a year. He begins what is set to be a farewell season at the Brisbane International from December 31-January 7 alongside Andy Murray and world number eight Holger Rune.

Top-ranked Djokovic has opted for the mixed teams United Cup in Perth and Sydney, starting Fri-

day, as have fellow top 10 players Stefanos Tsitsipas, Alexander Zverev and Taylor Fritz. Barring last-minute setbacks, Nadal and Djokovic will then grace the courts of Melbourne Park for the Australian Open from January 14, perhaps for the last time together.

The 22-time Grand Slam tournament winner Nadal has not played since a second-round loss to American Mackenzie McDonald at the Australian Open this year, leading to what coach Carlos Moya said was "a winding, tortuous road, with many curves".

Now 37, Nadal said he expects "nothing" from himself this time around. "I have internalised what I have had throughout my life, which is demand myself the maximum," he said in announcing his return. "Right now what I really hope is to be able not to do that, to accept things are going to be very difficult at the beginning and give myself the necessary time."

Since being sidelined, Nadal has been overtaken in the total number of Grand Slam tournaments won by his Serbian arch-rival, who is targeting an all-time record 25th major title in Melbourne. The 36-year-old Djokovic won three Grand Slams in 2023, but ended the season with two losses to burgeoning

floor for the most part of the night," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "When we do that and trust that, things go our way usually." The Thunder connected on better than 60 percent of their shots from the field and, despite a size disadvantage, were dominant defensively, harrying the Timberwolves into 24 turnovers.

Anthony Edwards led Minnesota with 25 points. Mike Conley added 17 and Karl-Anthony Towns scored 16. It was another dismal night in Detroit, where the Pistons' 118-112 loss to the Brooklyn Nets saw them set a single-season record for consecutive defeats. "Nobody wants something like this attached to them," said Pistons coach Monty Williams, whose team hasn't won since October 28.

Detroit, an iconic franchise that won NBA titles in 1989, 1990 and 2004, surpassed the 26-game losing streaks of the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers



Novak Djokovic

Italian Jannik Sinner at the Davis Cup.

Spanish world number two Carlos Alcaraz also notched a sensational win over Djokovic in the Wimbledon final. The fourth-ranked Sinner gets his season under way at the Kooyong Classic exhibition event in Melbourne, while Alcaraz has nothing currently scheduled before the Australian Open. — AFP

and the 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers. They're closing in on the longest losing streak ever, the 28-game slide of the 76ers that spanned the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Detroit's Cade Cunningham scored 41 points, but once again the Pistons squandered a strong start with too many mistakes. Detroit still had their chances late, taking a 97-92 lead early in the fourth quarter only for Brooklyn—led by 24 points from Cameron Johnson and 21 from Mikal Bridges—to respond with a 13-0 scoring run.

As the final moments ticked off, fans at Little Caesars Arena were once again chanting "Sell the team!" "It weighs on us every day," Cunningham said. "We need to continue to lean on each other and continue to push each other and hold each other accountable more than ever now," he said. — AFP

Finals of Arab Masters Tennis tournament today

KUWAIT: The third Arab Masters Tennis Tournament will be conclude today with the final match at 5:00 pm at Khalifa International Tennis Complex in Doha, Qatar.

Chairman of the Board of Arab Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Sabah said, the tournament that is being held for the third consecutive year achieved a huge success in this edition due to the co-operation and facilities given by Qatar Tennis Federation. He thanked the Chairman of QTF Nasser Al-Khulaifi and secretary Tareq Zainal and board members who employed all efforts and removed obstacles to ensure the success of this Arab event.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber expressed pleasure for meeting the Arab tennis players for the third time, and said he was proud for them being able to join the list of ranked ATP players, adding that "The Arab Masters Tournament was born in Kuwait and will continue to develop in the coming years". He said ATF will do its best to take the game into new heights, adding that the masters tournament is the best chance for players to be ready for Davis Cup. He lauded the high competition level between players, and expected the final match between the semi-final winners to be exciting and highly competitive. The first semi final will be between Syria's Mohammad Hazem and Egypt's Mohammad Safwat and the second match between Lebanon's Hadi Habeeb with Tunis's Mohammad Douqaz.

Thunder upset Timberwolves

LOS ANGELES: The Oklahoma City Thunder, fueled by 34 points from Shai Gilgeous-Alexander knocked off Western Conference leaders Minnesota 129-106 on Tuesday as Detroit's 27th defeat saddled them with an unwelcome piece of NBA history.

The Thunder underscoring their status as Western Conference contenders with a convincing home win over the Timberwolves. Jalen Williams scored 21 points, rookie Chet Holmgren and Lu Dort added 20 apiece and Oklahoma City made 18 three-pointers in a game they led by as many as 25 points.

"I think we played together on both ends of the