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# Fireworks, firepower light up skies as world welcomes 2024

## Amir wishes everyone a New Year full of peace, prosperity and good health

**NEW YORK/KUWAIT:** Fireworks lit up skies across the world to welcome 2024, but airstrikes marred the year's earliest hours in Gaza and Ukraine, and a major earthquake hit Japan triggering tsunami warnings. HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Sunday exchanged cables of congratulations and best wishes with leaders of Arab and friendly countries on the advent of 2024. HH the Amir wished all world countries and peoples a happy New Year with full of security, peace, stability and prosperity, as well as good health and wellness.



HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

Many around the world may wish to shake off high living costs, global tumult and extreme weather in 2024, which heralds elections for half the planet's population of more than eight million. Yet with the new year barely started there were already ominous signs. The Zionist entity hit targets in the heavily populated Gaza Strip, where the United Nations says 85 percent of people have fled their homes, killing at least 24 people, according to officials in the besieged Palestinian territory.

"record" number of Russian drones – 90 – on New Year's Eve, after a week of intense Russian bombardment and one of the biggest single attacks in the two-year war. Russia reported more Ukrainian drone strikes on its Belgorod region near the countries' common border.

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DUBAI: Fireworks light up the sky by the landmark Burj Khalifa skyscraper, the world's tallest building, at midnight on New Year's Eve on Jan 1, 2024. — AFP (See Page 11)

## US strikes kill 10 Houthis attacking ship in Red Sea

**HODEIDA:** US Navy helicopters fired on Iran-backed Houthi rebels attempting to board a cargo ship off Yemen Sunday, the military said, with the rebels reporting 10 fighters dead or missing. The clash in the Red Sea marked a deadly escalation since the United States set up a multinational naval task force in early December to protect the vital shipping lane against attacks by the Houthis, who control the Yemeni capital Sanaa and much of the country's Red Sea coast.

The rebels — who say they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians in the Zionist-Hamas war in Gaza — have repeatedly fired drones and missiles at passing ships in the seaway through which 12 percent of global trade passes. US Central Command said the navy had responded to a distress call from the Maersk Hangzhou, a Danish-owned container ship that reported coming under attack for a second time in 24 hours while transiting the Red Sea.

The vessel had earlier been targeted with two anti-ship ballistic missiles. One was shot down by the US military and the other hit the Maersk Hangzhou. The Houthis had then fired on US helicopters, which "returned fire in self-defense", sinking three of four small boats that had come within 20 m of the ship, according to the CENTCOM statement. It said the crews of the three vessels were killed while the fourth boat fled the area.

Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree confirmed in a statement on X that 10 members of the

Continued on Page 6

## Zionists to wage genocide in Gaza throughout 2024

**GAZA:** The Zionist entity warned the Gaza war will continue throughout 2024 as unrelenting strikes killed dozens in the Palestinian territory and Hamas fired a rocket barrage at the stroke of midnight. Zionist military spokesman Daniel Hagari said that some of the 300,000 army reservists would get a break from the war, in order to prepare for the "prolonged fighting" ahead. The army "must plan ahead, understanding that we will be required for additional tasks and warfare throughout this year," Hagari said as the conflict raged on.

Heavy artillery fire again pounded

Hamas-run Gaza, killing at least 24 people, health ministry officials there said, with attacks reported across the length of the territory. In the besieged Gaza Strip, where the UN says 85 percent of the population has been displaced, 20-year-old Hamdan Abu Arab said he hoped "2024 will be better". "We used to go out and enjoy our time on the last day of the year," he recalled. "But this New Year's Eve, there are only missiles and the remains of people."

According to the health ministry, 15 dead bodies from the same family were recovered Monday from the rubble of a bombed house in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip. "It's the worst year of our lives. They have killed our sons," Sami Hamouda, 64, told AFP. "Every new day is like the previous one: Bombings, death and mass killings." Hamas marked the start of the year by

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## Major Japan quake triggers tsunami waves

**TOKYO:** Tsunami waves over a meter high hit central Japan on Monday after a huge earthquake that damaged homes, set off a major fire and prompted authorities to urge people to run to higher ground. Media reports said two people were feared dead after the 7.5-magnitude quake struck Ishikawa prefecture on the Sea of Japan side of the main island of Honshu at 4:10 pm (0710 GMT), according to the US Geological Survey (USGS).

Japanese authorities put the magnitude at 7.6 and said that it was one of more than 50 quakes of 3.2 magnitude or more to rock the region on the New Year's Day holiday — when families get together and visit shrines — over several hours. Television channels interrupted normal services with special program-

ming including of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida urging people in danger areas to "evacuate as soon as possible" to higher ground.

"We realize your home, your belongings are all precious to you, but your lives are important above everything else! Run to the highest ground possible," an alarmed presenter on broadcaster NHK told viewers. Waves at least 1.2 m high hit the Wajima port and a series of smaller tsunamis were reported elsewhere, including as far away as the northern island of Hokkaido. The Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) initially issued a "large tsunami" warning, meaning waves of up to five meters.

But no further major incidents were reported and the JMA later downgraded its warning to tsunamis of up to three meters. The US Pacific Tsunami Warning Center also said around four hours after the major quake that the tsunami danger had "largely passed". Russia also issued a tsunami alert for Sakhalin island and Vladivostok in its far east. North Korea reportedly fol-



GAZA: The sun rises above rubble of houses destroyed by Zionist bombardment in the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip on Jan 1, 2024. — AFP



WAJIMA, Japan: People stand next to large cracks in the pavement after evacuating into a street on Jan 1, 2024 after a major earthquake struck the Noto region in Ishikawa prefecture. — AFP

lowed suit. The JMA warned local residents of possible further quakes during the coming week or so, particularly within the next two to three days.

The government said it was still assessing the extent of damage and whether there had been any casualties from the quake, which shook

apartments in the capital Tokyo some 300 km away. Images on social media showed cars and houses in Ishikawa shaking violently and terrified people cowering in shops and train stations. Houses collapsed and huge cracks appeared in roads.

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# Social Affairs Minister lauds efforts of Kuwaiti charities

## Arab Parliament urges opening of humanitarian corridors in Gaza



650 food parcels distributed to Palestinian families in the West Bank city of Nablus. — KUNA photos



KUWAIT: A handout photo released by the Kuwaiti news agency KUNA shows humanitarian aid and an ambulance loaded into a military aircraft at the Kuwait International Airport.

KUWAIT: Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of State for Women and Children's Affairs Sheikh Fares Al-Sabah has praised the efforts of charities inside and outside of Kuwait. This came in a press release commemorating the honoring of a number of charities with the attendance of multiple top officials in fields of charitable and humanitarian work. Al-Sabah stressed the importance of automation and digitalization in charitable work, which contributed to achieving the ministry and charities' goals, adding that the ministry played a huge role in supporting charity work by solving their problems and easing their difficulties.

The Social Development Assistant Secretary at the Ministry, Khaled Al-Ajmi, said in a similar statement that this honoring comes to shed light on the role of the charities with certificates of conformity and their efforts. Chief of Al-Eslah Society (Islamic Society for Social Reform), Dr Khaled Al-Matkhour, praised the role of the ministry toward humanitarian and charitable work, adding that the ministry reflects Kuwait's work in the fields on an international level.

### Aid campaign

Backed by the Secretariat of Kuwait Awqaf Public Foundation, Al-Tadamon (solidarity), a Palestinian charity, distributed 650 food parcels to Palestinian families in the West Bank city of Nablus. The food assistance, supervised by the Kuwait Society for Relief, cost more than \$31,000; it is part of an aid project launched by Al-Tadamon on December 13 in Nablus governorate, the charity said in a press release on Saturday.

The project covered the needs of as many vulnerable people as possible, particularly those who were affected by the onslaught of occupation forces on Gaza and the West Bank, the statement noted. The chairman of the charity, Alaa Maqboul, noted that there are a large number of families who are still in constant need of aid as they have lost their lives due to the current aggression in Gaza. Appreciating Kuwait's supportive stance towards the Palestinian people, Maqboul thanked the Awqaf Public Foundation and KSR for funding and supervising the aid project.

### 'End Gaza genocide'

In another development, the Arab

Parliament (AP) called for halting "the genocide" in the Gaza Strip immediately and opening safe humanitarian corridors to the Gazans via a UN mechanism. In the final communiqué of a session on "backing Palestine and Gaza," held upon Kuwait's request, the AP renewed its rejection of the forced displacement of Palestinian people from their homes in all forms, urging action to return those internally displaced.

The conferees slammed international silence and the failure of the UN Security Council to issue a ceasefire resolution in the Strip. They condemned support by the countries, which frequently advocate human rights, for the Zionist occupation forces' crimes, termed "genocide," against Palestinian people. The legislature referred to its international and regional actions to halt the war on Gaza via several parallel paths, including ongoing communication with the international and regional parliamentary unions.

It called on Arab and Islamic countries to necessarily stop exporting oil and gas to the countries that back the Zionist entity in its continued crimes against Palestinians. The AP called on the UN to hold a special session titled "Union for Peace"

in line with the organization's laws and resolution 277 on an immediate ceasefire and to provide protection to Palestinians, according to the communiqué.

It underlined the importance of empowering the Human Rights Council to probe the crimes of the Zionist occupation committed against Palestinian people, calling on the International Criminal Court to carry out its duty through a special committee under the supervision of the Court's Prosecutor. The AP called on all relevant parties in the international system to "stop pirating the funds of the Palestinian people" by the occupation authorities, asking the Arab countries to help Palestinian people in line with the financial network through the government of Palestine amid difficult circumstances that require Arab solidarity, it noted.

The conferees underlined the need to strengthen the role and status of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its various frameworks as "the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," calling on all factions to join the organization in accordance with its regulations and commitments to unite all Palestinians.

They affirmed the necessity of ad-

hering to the Arab Peace Initiative by stopping normalization with the occupying entity until the political rights of the Palestinian people are recognized. Additionally, they also called for freezing all relations with this entity and withdrawing ambassadors from Zionist entity, urging the launch of the legal committee stemming from the Arab Islamic Summit to collect the decisions related to the ongoing violations against the Palestinian people and prepare a legal case with the relevant competent authorities.

The AP affirmed its support for the Palestinian people and their cause, which is "the first central issue of the Arab nation" on official and popular levels. It expressed appreciation to the Palestinian people for their steadfastness and struggle to defend their land, stressing the need for all international parties to assume their responsibilities to achieve security, peace, and stability in the Middle East region. It called for every effort to ensure that the Palestinian people obtain their legitimate and inalienable rights to return, freedom, self-determination, and the establishment of their independent state on the lines of June 4, 1967, with Jerusalem as its capital. — KUNA



## Kuwait's envoy to Chile presents his credentials

WASHINGTON: Kuwaiti Ambassador to Chile Ziad A-Anbaei presented his credentials to President of Chile Gabriel Boric in the capital Santiago. In a statement received by KUNA, the Kuwait Embassy

said the Ambassador conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to President Boric. Al-Anbaei said he was eager to continue enhancing the two countries' relations that were forged over 60 years ago. He quoted the president of Chile as saying that he would seek to further promote relations with all world countries and to create more economic bonds for the common interest of everyone. — KUNA

## Awakened generation: Role of social media

By Zainab Al-Mashoor

KUWAIT: The Palestinian-Zionist conflict has brought light to the youths about the crucial incidents outspreading through mass media. In the past, children were not exposed to bitter news or sensitive images, as parents safeguarded their children from an anxious-inducing environment. With the unveiling of media concerning the unceasing conflicts, children worldwide have been awakened to the notion of instability and hazardousness—watching children's deaths, parents crying, body parts being amputated, and the voices of agony no longer being censored.

Moatasem said, "the ones who walk in Gaza should walk barefoot or purified, as the bodies of the martyrs are spread on the streets, below the buildings, and above the ground; some are buried while others can't be found." Watching the news every day and expecting a ceasefire with no peace

has been noxious for every person emotionally involved.

The fear, the pain, the death, the survival, and especially their faith have held lifestyle-questioning considerations for each of us. Enjoying the luxury of eating, sleeping, shopping, etc is no more compelling as it was, and practicing them stricken our conscience, while the best we could do is pray for them and help with the boycotts.

A feeling of gratitude towards the reports, the press, and the individuals who aren't certain about their own lives, implementing their best to deliver updates around them through social media. He acknowledged that his son is familiar with the ongoing events taking place and would rather approach a discussion with him while he acquires the information through the mass media and the environment in which he is engaged.

Mohanad (Moatasem's 9-year-old son) expressed, "lands have been occupied for the past decades, with the destruction of houses, mosques, churches, and hospitals. Helpless women, children, and people have been killed." A war is when two countries have the need to go against each other. However, this is not a war; this is an attack against the helpless people.

Having access to TV, mobile phones, ra-

dio, newspapers, or even being surrounded by people with common interests has helped many people get acquainted with countless pieces of information on the ongoing conflicts as well as the companies and products boycotted and find alternatives. Marwan, 12 years old, spoke of his awareness of the Zionists taking over Palestine illegally in 1948 and their attacks on Gaza with the excuse of defending themselves from Hamas, but targeting hospitals and children instead.

Marwan got these information through the videos that he saw while watching YouTube. Noora (Marwan's mother) spoke on how watching the viral videos spread through social media platforms is heartbreaking: "Watching thousands of children being killed, parents losing their children, or a child being the only survivor in the family, individuals losing their families, hard earnings, and houses is painful to imagine."

She implied that the least parents could do is educate themselves and their children, as they are already exposed to the news through social media. Hence, social media has played a great role in delivering a world with an awakened generation that educates the youth with worldwide information.

## NCCAL mourns Dr Al-Zaid

KUWAIT: The general secretariat of the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters (NCCAL) mourned the late writer Dr Naji Al-Zaid, who passed away on Monday. In a statement, the General Secretariat conveyed the condolences of the Minister of Information, the Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, the chairman of the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters, Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, and the leaders and employees of the council to the families of the deceased and their loved ones, asking the Almighty to bless them. The late Al-Zaid was one of the most prominent men in the Kuwaiti and Arab cultural scene



Dr Naji Al-Zaid

during his work as a member of the Faculty of Medicine at Kuwait University and his membership in the editorial board for many years. — KUNA



RAMALLAH: Palestinians protest in solidarity with Gaza in Ramallah, in the occupied West Bank, on January 1, 2024. — AFP

Local

# Ineffective transportation system 'a roadblock on path to development'

## Kuwait Public transportation, a train to nowhere

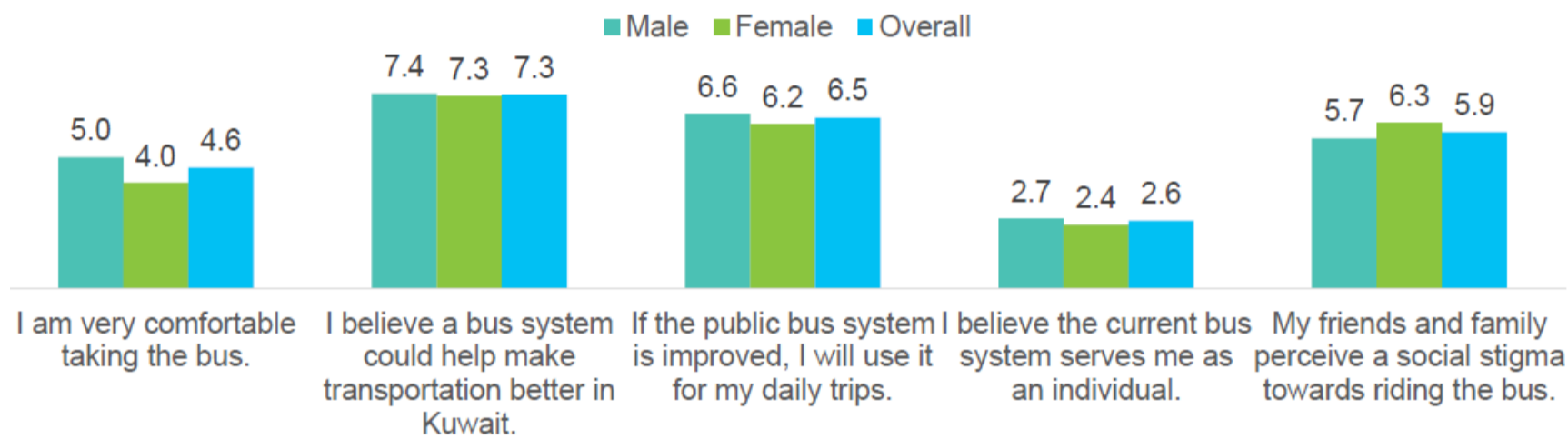


Jassim Al-Awadhi



NBK Bus stop built by Kuwait Commute.

Rate the following statements on a scale of 1 - 10



Survey by Kuwait Commute and Service Hero.



Poorly maintained bus-stop.

By Mohsina Mohammed

KUWAIT: "A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It is where even the rich use public transportation" -Enrique Penalosa, ex-Mayor of Bogota. Effective public transportation (PT) is crucial for a country's development. Its numerous benefits include reduced infrastructure costs, positive environmental impact, congestion reduction, time and money savings, increased productivity, economic benefits, fuel efficiency, improved mobility, and an equitable transportation system. In the last few decades, propositions and efforts from government organizations to strengthen Kuwait's PT have been minimal, and progression remains stagnant.

Since 1978, the government has proposed only two large-scale projects, the Kuwait Metro Rail (2008) and the Gulf Railway Project (2009), which has had little, to no development and is on hold. Studies have shown that metro and rapid transit systems are the most efficient and sustainable means for transporting many people in and around the city. To have a fully operational, functional and future-proof metro, Kuwait needs to solidify the existing foundation that is falling apart due to the inefficiency of public buses.

Amid a PT crisis, Kuwait Commute emerges a social initiative that is bringing awareness to Kuwait's PT system and current traffic situation. Jassim Al-Awadhi founded the initiative to implement a feasible and executable solution to improve Kuwait's rapidly escalating traffic issues. They proactively create awareness and advocate for safe, convenient, eco-friendly and inclusive PT to become the preferred choice for daily commutes. Also, they engage with stakeholders, including the Kuwaiti Municipality

Planning Department, the Public Authority for Roads and Transportation, National Assembly members, neighborhood leaders, and business people to help their initiative. By creating awareness and being a medium for clear communication between the people and the government, initiatives like Kuwait Commute are catalysts in developing Kuwait's public transportation.

A research analysis by the initiative revealed that only 2 percent of the total population uses public transport, making up 15 percent of all transportation in Kuwait. In an interview with Kuwait Times, Awadhi stated, "Public transport in Kuwait is not comfortable, it's not attractive to use, and it does not provide safety, and that is why no one is using it." According to Awadhi, a bus stop is the gateway for people to use public buses, and they need to be accessible, safe, clean, and convenient, which is the basis of their design. The current state of bus stops in Kuwait hinders users from considering taking the bus due to a lack of maintenance and strategic planning. Speaking to Kuwait Times, Oliana, 22, said, "Given the weather conditions, walking 20-30 minutes and waiting at bus stops with no proper seating or shade is exhausting." Considering the bus stop



Kuwait Metro Rail project plan

issue, Kuwait Commute successfully built two bus stops, highlighting safety and comfort.

One of the main factors for the government's apathy and neglect towards the development of Kuwait's public buses is the lack of public lobbying for its betterment, especially from the citizens. As a result of cultural and societal norms, there is an undeniable stigma associated with using PT, and it is seen as a service used by second-class residents. Ahmed, a Kuwaiti man who took a survey by Kuwait Commute in partnership with Service Hero, stated, "I think public transportation in Kuwait is dedicated to blue-collar expatriates. To enhance public transportation, all this needs extra efforts by the government." Awadhi attributes this stigma to the unsafe, uncomfortable, poorly maintained and low-quality service the current

PT provides. He believes that the stigma will dissipate following the improvement of PT. Kuwait Commute received recurring feedback from officials that said residents would not use PT as Kuwait lacks PT culture. However, the survey above revealed that out of the 2,178 respondents, 78 percent had used PT abroad, 63 percent would use PT for their daily commute if it is improved in Kuwait, and 73 percent believe an efficient bus system could help make transportation in Kuwait easier.

From 2006 until 2016, the number of private cars increased by 65 percent and for the same period, paved roads increased by only 28 percent. Additionally, about

80 percent of the streets in Kuwait are occupied by private cars, which is the reason for congestion. Awadhi concurred that building more roads to solve the traffic is no longer viable as it is only a temporary fix, not a permanent solution. Uzair, 28, commutes to work with his car daily, said to Kuwait Times, "The reformation of Kuwait's public transportation is pivotal in decreasing the everyday traffic." Oliana added, "Moreover, with the increasing restrictions around acquiring driver's licenses, public transportation has become an essential part of a commuter's daily life."

Due to the lack of a central regulator and privatization of buses, bus operators are forced to run high-density routes to turn a profit, which deprives low-density areas of PT and congestion in densely populated areas. It also becomes a significant source of misinformation about bus and PT policies. Awadhi suggests, "This is resolved by having one government agency that has all the necessary authority and responsibilities which will enable it to plan, execute, and manage the PT system in which the private sector can assist in operations."

He added, "The Kuwait Metro Rail is 180/200 km long, and Kuwait has +8,000 km of roads. You must provide a feeder service, a network that helps users reach the metro." And since buses offer affordability, flexibility, and easy integration with other systems, they are a 'stepping stone' to not only different modes of public transportation but also to the overall development of Kuwait.

authorities in Kuwait, in addition to certificates of scientific experience subsequent to the academic qualification obtained from outside the country which must be documented by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The CSC confirmed that the aforementioned controls are observed in all cases of hiring the expertise of employees for the first time while addressing the Civil Service in each case separately. However, the CSC excluded Bedoons from these controls if they meet the conditions of the Central Agency for Addressing the Status of Illegal Residents.

On the other hand, sources confirmed that about 90 percent of expatriates residing in Kuwait do not meet the conditions of employment to work in the Ministry of Education in the required scientific disciplines needed by the ministry. This is the reason why the Civil Service Commission has brought forth the

new regulations in the education sector and not all those expats who show teacher as their profession in his/her residency permit may not be qualified to teach in the country.

The ministry has made very limited local appointments this year as a result of this new condition that disqualifies most of the applicants. "Most teachers enter the country under other names, but they have degrees from recognized universities and have experiences that qualify them to work in education," they said. The sources pointed out that the Ministry of Education needs to coordinate with the Civil Service Commission to avoid such a situation if it needs teachers that it cannot provide particularly after the current events in Gaza which could negatively affect hiring of Palestinian teachers in disciplines that still have acute shortage.

## CSC stipulates rules for hiring expat teachers

KUWAIT: The Civil Service Commission (CSC) informed the Ministry of Education about the new regulations for appointing expatriate teachers in disciplines in which the Kuwaiti talent is not immediately available. This includes a "very good" certification in addition to the minimum academic qualification of the teacher as a prerequisite for hiring expatriate teachers.

The CSC said academic qualification must be taken as a basis for hiring expat teachers by the compe-

In my view

## New year, new beginnings



**Dr Khalid A Al-Saleh**

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A year has passed, or perhaps a new opportunity has emerged? Just a day ago, the world welcomed a new year according to the Gregorian calendar, universally adopted by most countries. Termed Anno Domini, its years commence with the birth of Christ (PBUH). This calendar was crafted by the young Armenian Monk Dionysius Exiguus, who passed away in 544 AD in the Byzantine Empire. The tradition of celebrating the New Year is ancient, dating back 4,000 years to the city of Babylon. Despite the absence of a written calendar, Babylonians marked the New Year's onset around the end of March with the arrival of spring.

Oddly, celebrating the New Year implies the forfeiture of one year from our lives. Yet, people worldwide revel in the arrival of the year with happiness and joy, highlighting the paradox of celebrating a loss. This paradox may stem from humanity's inclination towards new beginnings, overshadowing any sorrow for losses. To underscore the significance of fresh starts, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania introduced the term "fresh start effect" in November 2013. This term refers to the motivational impact of notable time landmarks, such as the New Year, inspiring renewed ambition and hope for seemingly abandoned plans.

In three studies, researchers observed this phenomenon across a diverse group of individuals. The first study analyzed Google search engine archives, revealing an 82 percent surge in searches for the word "diet" immediately after New Year's Eve. The second study examined gym registration files, uncovering a substantial increase in subscriptions at the year's commencement and subsequent weeks. The third study focused on resolutions made to achieve goals, discovering that most resolutions are formulated at the start of the New Year.

Thus, the New Year symbolizes a fresh beginning, particularly for young individuals like you. It instills a renewed sense of hope, prompting a desire for self-improvement and growth – the essence of the New Year. This noble meaning stands in stark contrast to corruption and deviations that only amplify losses. Embrace this new opportunity to forget past failures and frustrations, utilizing it as a catalyst for success and personal development. As the door to a new hope opened yesterday, seize the chance to rejuvenate your life, making the most of it while fostering optimism and good manners – the tools of success.

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# KFF urges desert-goers to take safety precautions

## 'Turn off generators before sleeping'



KUWAIT: People hang out at a winter camp in Kuwait's desert, some 120 km Northwest of Kuwait City in this file photo. — KUNA photos



Brigadier Mohammad Al-Ghareeb

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) called on desert-goers to take safety measures during the camping season. In a statement to KUNA, the Force's head of public relations and media, Brigadier Mohammad Al-Ghareeb, said that it is necessary to take lit coal out of the tent and turn off generators before sleeping to avoid fire or suffocation by carbon monoxide. He also called on people to avoid any cracks or holes in the ground, since they can shelter insects, rodents, and poisonous reptiles.

Moreover, he underlined the need to keep the camping site clean and without dry

grass that could easily catch fire. Al-Ghareeb said that desert-goers must refrain from using exposed wires to avoid electric shocks and should also keep gas cylinders out of the kitchen tent. Meanwhile, he called for setting tents opposite the wind direction to avoid flying waste, choosing a higher floor for the camp site to avoid landslides during rain, and leaving a space of no less than six meters between each tent to prevent fire from spreading should it break out. The Brigadier added that in case of any emergency, people should immediately call the emergency hotline (112). — KUNA



## PAAET pursues steps toward development

KUWAIT: The General Director of the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Dr Hassan Mohammed Al-Fajam, has affirmed the approach toward further development with new specializations and programs and meeting the needs of the labor market. On PAAET's 41st anniversary, Dr Al-Fajam said in a press release that the curricula and programs have been updated and new ones have been set up to meet market requirements.

Enrollment in PAAET's colleges and academies has substantially increased, he said, revealing that the number of graduates in 2022-2023 reached 12,197, bringing the number of graduates since the authority's establishment to more than 60,000. PAAET executes various tasks in the academic and social service sectors, holding conventions and activities intended to enhance scientific and cultural cooperation among researchers and academics.

Moreover, it regularly hosts elite specialists and scientists from various countries. Over the past months, PAAET management crafted the new general strategy, envisaging objectives toward further development, Dr Alfajam said, adding that the recent visible evolution was due to multiple agreements that had been worked out with various institutions in the country, including one agreement with the Gulf University for Science and Technology last February and another one between PAAET's Higher Institute of Telecommunication and Navigation and Kuwait Oil Company in March.

He also mentioned an agreement with the Arab Planning Institute in June and an accord with the division of education and training in the Minister of Interior in September, in addition to many other accords. PAAET was founded when the late Amir, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, issued a decree in this respect on December 28, 1982, with the aim of boosting national social and economic development. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Thousands of migrating birds travel across Kuwait's coastline to reach their winter home. — KUNA photos



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## Migrating birds settle on an abandoned ship

KUWAIT: Every winter, thousands of migrating birds travel across Kuwait's coastline to reach their winter home. However, Omar Al-Said, a member of the Kuwait Environmental Lens team, has seen something different this year. On an abandoned

ship near Usheirej, a flock of Loha birds settled, creating an aesthetically stunning scene.

Omar told KUNA that thousands of Loha birds migrate to Kuwait during the winter months due to the country's suitable environment, from Um Al-Namel Island to Al-Judailiyat Bay, Jahra, and Sulabikhat. Unexpectedly, Omar discovered that the birds had been preserved on the same ship for six years after tracking and snapping pictures at the same location. Omar also described the seabirds' capacity to live in groups, dive to a depth of 45 meters and catch fish. — KUNA

## Bridge between worlds

By Dana Al-Qattan

KUWAIT: The literary world comes with many friends and foes, wounds, healing, and the familiar and unfamiliar. Fiction helps humans grapple with the uncertainty of their own lives. It's a place to be and belong. The Kuwait Times newspaper has gone through many generational changes, with local and international news it offered a continuum of knowledge about current affairs for English speaking citizens/residents. Many different communities of different ages exist in Kuwait, but not many of them understand each other.

There is an importance in reading fiction (whether it be novels, short stories, or comic books). Reading fiction teaches us empathy and continually improves it through the emotional struggles or difficult situations that the characters face. It is the chance to get out of our bodies and lives and intrinsically live another, getting an insight on many different lives on a deeper level. It also improves one's creativity, vocabulary, and widens our perspectives of the world, as well as teaches us critical thinking and offers paths to improve our lives.

Sitting in a small coffee shop reading, Fatemah Al-Matrouk, 24 years old, when asked if she reads a newspaper answered no, but she does follow Kuwait Times on Instagram. Al-Matrouk is an avid reader of fiction and said she would read the news more if eventually there was a fiction section added (acting as a stress reliever): "That is why I don't like reading the news, lots of bad stuff happening." Which is why adding a fiction section can mend and allow those two parts to exist, as surely Fatemah is not the only one who feels this way.

Reem Ali, 27, and Carolina Roeles, 19, were in an excitable conversation as they were asked why they believe reading fiction is important. Reem, who has been a reader her entire life, believes that fiction "teaches you morals in an indirect way", and Carolina believes: "It helps you escape reality, especially when you are reading the news."



Not many people are readers of fiction, it is quite rare to see a book in hand, so having quick access to a fiction section can really bridge that gap. Now will a fiction section in the newspaper take away its "seriousness"? Carolina had a quick reply to that: "I think adding a fiction section attracts more people, especially this generation nobody really reads the news anymore, the fiction section will make them more interested and then they'll be seeing what's going on."

Adding a fiction (or literary) section to the Kuwait Times newspaper has many societal benefits. It would represent local writers, allowing them to have a voice, and exposure. Nourah Al-Saleh, being an artist and writer herself, said that having a fiction or artistic section "allows local artists and creators to represent the artistic side of Kuwaiti culture." It will offer the creative youth of Kuwait an opportunity to show their work and feel accepted and understood.



Russian women demand return of their men from Ukraine front

## Tshisekedi re-elected DRC president in landslide victory

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COPENHAGEN: Queen Margrethe II of Denmark gives a New Year's speech from Christian IX's Palace, Amalienborg Castle, in Copenhagen, Denmark, on Dec 31, 2023, announcing her upcoming abdication.



In this photo taken on Oct 15, 2023, Denmark's Queen Margrethe receives Prince Vincent, Crown Prince Frederik, Prince Christian, Princess Josephine and Crown Princess Mary. — AFP photos

# Danish monarch announces surprise abdication on live TV

## Queen Margrethe II steps down after reigning for 52 years

COPENHAGEN: Denmark's popular Queen Margrethe II, Europe's longest-serving monarch, said Sunday that she would abdicate on Jan 14 and pass the baton to her son Crown Prince Frederik. Margrethe, 83, has reigned for 52 years and has been Europe's only reigning queen after the death of Britain's Elizabeth II. She has been hailed for subtly modernizing Danish royalty in her half-century on the throne.

She made the surprise announcement during her traditional New Year's Eve speech broadcast on Danish television, citing her age and health issues. "In two weeks' time I have been Queen of Denmark for 52 years," she said. That length of time would take its time on anyone, she added. "One cannot undertake as much as one managed in the past... On 14th January, 2024 — 52 years after I succeeded my beloved father — I will step down as Queen of Denmark. I will hand over the throne to my son Crown Prince Frederik."

The chain-smoking queen has repeatedly said she would never abdicate, but back surgery she underwent in February "gave cause to thoughts about the future — whether now would be an appropriate time to pass on the responsibility to the next generation". The queen, known for her artistic talents, has been hugely popular in Denmark.

"She has managed to be a queen who has united the Danish nation in a time of large changes: globalization, the appearance of the multicultural state, economic crises in the 1970s, 1980s and again in 2008 to 2015, and the pandemic," historian Lars Hovebakke Sorensen told AFP. "The basis of her popularity is that the queen is absolutely non-political," he said.

With sparkling blue eyes and a broad smile, she is known for her relaxed and playful side, as well as for her involvement in Denmark's cultural scene. A painter as well as a costume and set designer, she has worked with the Royal Danish Ballet and Royal

Danish Theatre on numerous occasions. She studied at Cambridge and the Sorbonne in Paris, and is fluent in English, French, German and Swedish.

She has also translated plays, including Simone de Beauvoir's "All Men Are Mortal" with her French-born husband under a pseudonym. But it is primarily her paintings and drawings that have caught the public's eye. She has illustrated several books, including a Danish 2002 edition of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings", and her paintings have been exhibited in museums and galleries in Denmark and abroad.

Crown Prince Frederik, 55, is meanwhile the embodiment of the country's relaxed, liberal monarchy. Passionate about the environment, he has discreetly imposed himself in the shadow of his mother, championing Denmark and its drive to find solutions to the climate crisis. "When the time comes, I will guide the ship," he said in a speech celebrating his mother's half century on the throne. "I will follow you, as you followed your father" in leading the thousand-year-

old institution, Prince Frederik added.

He met his wife Mary Donaldson, an Australian lawyer, at a Sydney bar during the 2000 Olympic Games. They have tried to give their four children as normal an upbringing as possible, sending them mainly to state schools. Their eldest, Prince Christian, who recently turned 18, was the first Danish royal to go to daycare.

Frederik and Mary are "modern, woke, lovers of pop music, modern art and sports," said historian Sebastian Olden-Jorgensen, adding that they would represent a careful transition to the times. Frederik has said that he sees himself complementing his mother, a polymath who is an accomplished writer and artist. "You paint, I exercise. You dig for buried objects from the past, I buried my head in order not to be recognized during my time in the armed forces. You are a master of words. I am sometimes at a loss for them," he joked during the queen's jubilee celebrations. — AFP

## Zionist minister calls for settlers returning to Gaza

JERUSALEM: Far-right Zionist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich this week called for the return of Jewish settlers to the Gaza Strip after the war and said its Palestinian population should be encouraged to emigrate.

The Zionist entity launched a relentless military campaign in Gaza, which has killed nearly 22,000 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.

"To have security we must control the territory," Smotrich told the entity's Army Radio in response to a question about the prospect of re-establishing settlements in Gaza. "In order to control the territory militarily for a long time, we need a civilian presence."

The Zionist entity unilaterally withdrew the last of its troops and settlers in 2005, ending a presence inside Gaza that began in 1967 but maintaining near complete control over the territory's borders. All settlements on occupied Palestinian land are regarded as illegal under international law, regardless of whether they were approved by the Zionist entity. Smotrich, head of the ultranationalist Reli-



RAFAH: Displaced Palestinian children stand next to a mural painting by artist Amal Abo in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on Dec 31, 2023. — AFP

gious Zionist party that is part of the ruling coalition, also said the entity should "encourage" the territory's approximately 2.4 million Palestinians to relocate to other countries.

"If we act in a strategically correct way and encourage emigration, if there are 100,000 or 200,000 Arabs in Gaza and not two million, the whole discourse of the day after (the war) will be completely different," he said. "We will help rehabilitate these refugees in other countries in a good and humane

manner with the cooperation of the international community and Arab countries around us."

Hamas condemned Smotrich's comments as a "vile mockery and a war crime". Gazans "will stand firm and steadfast in the face of all attempts to displace them from their land and homes", the group said in a statement. The Zionist government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not officially suggested plans to evict Gazans or to send Jewish settlers back to the territory since the war broke out. — AFP

## More than 4,360 dead in Syria war in 2023: Monitor

BEIRUT: More than 4,360 people, including combatants and civilians, were killed in Syria's civil war in 2023, in the thirteenth year since fighting began, a war monitor said on Sunday. The figure was an increase on 2022, when 3,825 people were killed.

That was the lowest annual death toll since the conflict began in 2011 with the government's brutal crackdown on peaceful pro-democracy protests, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. This year's count included 1,889 civilians, 241 of them women and 307 children, according to the United Kingdom-based Observatory, which has a broad network of sources inside Syria.

Syrian government forces accounted for almost 900 of the dead this year, with other fighters including from the Kurdish-led and US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, pro-Iran groups, Islamist factions, Islamic State group jihadists and foreign combatants accounting for the rest.

Over the years, the country's conflict spiraled dramatically. It pulled in foreign armies, militias and jihadists, killed more than 500,000 people, displaced millions and ravaged the country's infrastructure and industry. With Iranian and Russian support, Damascus has clawed back much of the territory it lost earlier in the conflict, although large parts of the country's north remain outside government control. Front lines have mostly quietened in recent years and annual death tolls dropped to lower levels. — AFP

## Five elections to shape global order in 2024

PARIS: Could Donald Trump make a comeback? Will anyone in Russia challenge Vladimir Putin? With half the world heading to the polls in 2024, and some 30 countries electing a president, here are five key elections to watch:

### Trump-Biden rematch

On Nov 5, tens of millions of Americans will choose a president in a contest which could keep incumbent Joe Biden in power until the age of 86. Poll after poll shows that a majority of voters think the gaffe-prone Democrat is

too old to be commander-in-chief, despite his likely rival, ex-president Donald Trump making similar slip-ups at 77.

Disinformation looks set to be a feature of the campaign, a hangover from the last foul-tempered contest which ended with Trump supporters storming the US Capitol to try to halt the certification of Biden's victory. Trump goes into the Republican party nomination contest the clear favorite, despite multiple criminal trials hanging over him.

Biden's campaign suffered another blow after the Republican-led House of Representatives voted in December to open a formal impeachment inquiry into whether he profited unduly from his son's foreign business deals while he was vice-president under Barack Obama.

### Putin eyes six more years

A newly-confident Russian Presi-

dent Vladimir Putin, energized by his troops' success in holding their positions in Ukraine two years into the war, is hoping to extend his 24-year rule by another six years in March elections. On Dec 8 he announced he is running for a fifth term, which would keep him in power until 2030.

In 2020 he had the constitution amended to allow him to theoretically stay in power until 2036, which could potentially see him rule for longer than Joseph Stalin. With the war in Ukraine used to lock up or silence dissenters and opponents, there is little chance of anyone standing in his way. His long-time nemesis Alexei Navalny is serving a 19-year jail sentence.

### Modi's great power play

Nearly one billion Indians will be called on to vote in April-May when the world's most populous nation goes

to the polls in an election in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his nationalist BJP party are seeking a third term.

Modi's political career and success have been based on support from India's one-billion-plus Hindus and, critics say, stoking enmity toward the country's large Muslim minority. Despite a crackdown on civil liberties on his watch, he goes into the vote the clear favorite, with his supporters crediting him with boosting his country's standing on the global stage.

### EU test for populists

The world's largest transnational poll in June will see more than 400 million people eligible to vote in the European Parliament election. The vote will be a test of support for right-wing populists, who have the wind in their sails after the victory of Geert Wilders'

anti-Islam, anti-EU PVV Freedom Party in November's Dutch elections and last year's win for Giorgia Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy. Brussels can take heart however from Poland, where former European Council president Donald Tusk has returned to power on a solidly pro-EU platform.

### First Mexican woman president

A leftist former mayor of the capital and a businesswoman with Indigenous roots are both vying to make history in Mexico in June by becoming the first woman president of a country with a tradition of machismo. Former Mexico City mayor Claudia Sheinbaum is running on behalf of outgoing President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's Morena party. Her outspoken opponent Xochitl Galvez has been selected to represent an opposition coalition, the Broad Front for Mexico. — AFP

## International

# Tshisekedi re-elected DRC president in landslide victory

## Opposition candidates reject 'sham' election, call for re-run

KINSHASA: DR Congo's President Felix Tshisekedi has won a second term in office with a landslide victory, according to provisional results announced Sunday, in a vote opposition leaders have dismissed as a "sham".

Provisional results from the single-round presidential ballot, declared by the country's electoral commission Ceni, showed that Tshisekedi had won 73 percent of the vote. Turnout was 43 percent. The president, flanked by his wife Denise and his mother, appeared on a balcony at his campaign headquarters in the capital Kinshasa to address supporters who braved the rain to hear him speak.

"I have been re-elected president of all Congolese," Tshisekedi, dressed in a white shirt and cap, told cheering supporters. "It's in this spirit of openness that I will exercise this second mandate." Moïse Katumbi — a wealthy businessman, football club owner and former provincial governor — was the runner-up with about 18 percent.

The Democratic Republic of Congo's Constitutional Court is expected to confirm the provisional results on Jan 10. Tshisekedi, 60, first came to power in January 2019 after a disputed election that many observers said he had in fact lost.

Martin Fayulu — who says he was robbed of the last presidential election in 2018 — also contested this year's poll but in the end won about five percent of the votes. The 20 remaining candidates, including Denis Mukwege, who won a Nobel Peace Prize for his work with female victims of wartime sexual violence, were hovering around one percent or less.

Nine opposition candidates — Mukwege, Fayulu and Katumbi — signed a declaration on Sun-

day rejecting what they termed a "sham" election and called for a re-run. Fayulu told reporters in Kinshasa the results "are a masquerade. This must not be accepted".

Tresor Kibangula, a political analyst at the Ebuteli research institute who spoke to AFP before the full provisional results were released, said Tshisekedi's vote tally "is way beyond all expectations". "His dynamic campaign worked" but his scores in some regions "raise questions about the impact of the irregularities that were observed".

### 'Numerous irregularities'

More than 40 million people out of the 100 million inhabitants of the huge country were registered to vote on December 20 for president, as well as for national and regional lawmakers and municipal councilors.

Voting was officially extended by a day to account for problems, and continued for days afterwards in remote areas, according to observers. One Catholic-Protestant observation mission said it "documented numerous cases of irregularities susceptible to have affected the integrity of the vote".

The United States called for peaceful and transparent resolution of any election disputes after Tshisekedi was declared the winner. "Any election disputes should be resolved peacefully and in accordance with Congolese electoral law," a State Department spokesperson said on Sunday.

About 15 embassies have called for "restraint" in the poor but mineral-rich country where post-election tensions have been common. Authorities say they have taken steps to prevent unrest, especially in

an expert on the Danish royal family. He only "gained confidence in his mid-20s," she told AFP.

### Lonely and tormented

A lonely and tormented teenager, Frederik resented his parents for neglecting him as they fulfilled their royal obligations. He sought solace in fast cars and fast living, and was considered a spoiled party prince in the early 1990s.

But that view began to change after he graduated from Aarhus University in 1995, the first Danish royal to complete a university education. His time at college included a stint at Harvard in the United States, where he was enrolled under the pseudonym Frederik Henriksen.

The fake surname was a nod to his father, French diplomat Henri de Monpezat who became Prince Consort Henrik when he married Margrethe. But Frederik — who speaks English, French and German — really began to mature into his role during his time training in the three branches of Denmark's military.

The prince served in the navy's Frogmen Corps — where he was nicknamed "Pingo" (Penguin) — one of only four of the 300 recruits to pass all of the tests in 1995. In 2000, he took part in a four-month, 3,500-kilometre (2,175-mile) ski expedition across Greenland.

conflicts around the globe, including the people of Sudan and the "martyred Rohingya" of Myanmar. "At the end of a year, have the courage to ask how many lives have been torn apart in armed conflicts, how many deaths?" the 87-year-old pontiff said. 2023 was the hottest year since records began in 1880 and saw a spate of climate-fueled disasters across the world.

It also saw the worst conflict in the Middle East in years. With once-bustling Gaza City neighborhoods reduced to rubble, there were few places in the Palestinian territory left to mark the new year — and fewer loved ones to celebrate with. "It was a black year full of tragedies," said 37-year-old Abed Akkawi, who fled the city with his wife and children to a UN shelter in southern Gaza. "God willing this war will end, the new year will be a better one, and we will be able to return to our homes and rebuild them, or even live in a tent on the rubble," he told AFP.

Some in Putin's Russia were also weary of conflict, this time in Ukraine. "I would like the war to end, a new president and a return to normal life," said 55-year-old theatre decorator Zoya Karpova. In Denmark, popular Queen Margrethe II, Europe's longest-serving monarch, chose her New Year's Eve address to announce her coming abdication in favor of her son.

Pivotal elections are scheduled in 2024, including in Russia, Britain, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa and Venezuela. The United States promises global consequences. Democrat Joe Biden, 81, and Republican Donald Trump, 77, appear set for a November rerun of their 2020 presidential contest.

Biden marked the new year by proclaiming optimism for the US economy. He has at times appeared to show his age and even supporters worry about the toll of another bruising four years in office. There are at least as many concerns about a Trump return. He faces prosecution on several counts, and 2024 could determine whether the bombastic self-proclaimed billionaire goes to the Oval Office or jail. — Agencies

about two dozen attacks by Houthis on international shipping in the past six weeks. The cargo ship, en route from Singapore to Egypt's Port Suez, had issued an earlier distress call after it was struck by the Houthi missile.

CENTCOM said that assault was the 23rd illegal attack by the Houthis on international shipping since Nov 19. The vessel appeared to be undamaged and "was able to continue its transit north", Maersk said. The cargo ship was then fired on by four Houthi rebel vessels that attempted to board the vessel, according to the company, one of the world's largest shipping firms. "In light of the incident — and to allow time to investigate the details of the incident and assess the security situation further — it has been decided to delay all transits through the area for the next 48 hours," it added. — AFP



KINSHASA, DR Congo: President Felix Tshisekedi (second right) with his spouse Denise Nyakero greet supporters after the announcement of the election results at the headquarters of his electoral campaign on Dec 31, 2023. — AFP

the mining areas of the southeast that are Katumbi's stronghold. They also stress that any electoral disputes must be presented to the Constitutional Court. But opposition leaders say they have no confidence

in the court or Ceni, which they argue is subservient to the government. Security was tighter in Kinshasa on Sunday, according to AFP reporters, as well as in the southeastern city of Lubumbashi. — AFP

## Frederik, Denmark's 'woke' and popular future king

COPENHAGEN: A rebellious teen turned "woke" family man, Denmark's future king Crown Prince Frederik is the embodiment of the country's relaxed, liberal monarchy. Passionate about the environment, he has discreetly imposed himself in the shadow of his hugely popular mother, Queen Margrethe II, championing Denmark and its drive to find solutions to the climate crisis. "When the time comes, I will guide the ship," he said in a speech celebrating his chain-smoking mother's half century on the throne in 2022.

"I will follow you, as you followed your father" in leading the thousand-year-old institution, Prince Frederik added. But this measured assurance is a far cry from his younger self. "He was not strictly speaking a rebel, but as a child and young man, he was very uncomfortable with the media attention and the knowledge that he was going to be king," said Gitte Redder,

### Complementing the queen

His daredevil side has landed him in hospital after sledding and scooter accidents, but his popularity has soared, boosted by the Royal Run, annual fun runs across Denmark he began in 2018. "He is a sportsman, he attends concerts and football matches, which makes him even more accessible than his mother," royal expert Redder said.

"I don't want to lock myself in a fortress. I want to be myself, a human being," he once said, insisting he would stick to that even after taking the throne. He met his wife Mary Donaldson, an Australian lawyer, in a Sydney bar during the 2000 Olympic Games.

They have tried to give their four children as normal an upbringing as possible, sending them mainly to state schools. Their eldest, Prince Christian, who recently turned 18, was the first Danish royal to go to daycare.

The couple have gradually taken on many royal duties in recent years as the queen entered her eighties, "but very slowly and depending on the queen's health", said historian Sebastian Olden-Jorgensen.

The couple are "modern, woke, lovers of pop music, modern art and sports," he added. They "do not represent a potential revolution compared to the queen", but a careful transition adapting to the times, he said.



COPENHAGEN: In this photo taken on Oct 3, 2023 in Copenhagen, Denmark's Queen Margrethe and Crown Prince Frederik look on during the opening of the Danish parliament. — AFP

Frederik has said that he sees himself complementing his mother, a polymath who is an accomplished writer and artist. "You paint, I exercise. You dig for buried objects from the past, I buried my head in order not to be recognized during my time in the armed forces. You are a master of words. I am sometimes at a loss for them," he joked during the queen's jubilee celebrations. — AFP

## Fireworks, firepower light...

### Continued from Page 1

In his New Year's message, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Russian forces would feel the "wrath" of his country's weapons in 2024. His Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, did not mention Ukraine in his traditional address but vowed on New Year's Day to intensify attacks on military targets in Ukraine. Jan 1 has been declared a day of mourning for the dead in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.

In central Japan, a huge earthquake early on the New Year's Day holiday damaged homes, set off a major fire, closed highways and prompted authorities to urge people to run to higher ground. Tsunami waves over a meter high crashed into the coast after the 7.6-magnitude quake, and more, up to five meters high, were possible within 300 km of the epicenter, US and Japanese weather agencies said.

Hours earlier in Sydney, the self-proclaimed "New Year's capital of the world", more than a million partygoers had packed the harbor to cheer in the new year. In New York City, thousands watched the annual dropping of a giant illuminated ball in Times Square. Revelers danced in the streets in Greece and bathed in the nude in southern France. In Italy, New Year fireworks killed one person and injured 274, police said.

A dozen police officers were hurt in clashes in the German capital, Berlin, and more than 230 people were arrested. On Rio's Copacabana beach, a three-dimensional fireworks show was accompanied by a live orchestra. "Today we have positive thoughts so that we have a wonderful 2024, in which we make our dreams come true and with health," Francielle Marinho, 39, told AFP, her feet in the sand.

In Rome, Pope Francis prayed for the victims of

## US strikes kill 10 Houthis attacking...

### Continued from Page 1

group's naval forces were "killed or missing" in the US strike. Saree said the Maersk was attacked as part of the rebels' campaign to stop the Zionists or Zionist-bound vessels from transiting the Red Sea. "Yemen's naval forces once again remind all countries of our advice not to be drawn into American plans aimed at sparking a conflict in the Red Sea", saying the Houthis are determined to confront "any aggression against our country and our people".

Maersk suspended the passage of its vessels through the Red Sea for 48 hours after the latest of

## Zionists to wage genocide in Gaza...

### Continued from Page 1

firing a rocket barrage at the Zionist entity in what it called a "response to the massacres of civilians". AFP journalists in Tel Aviv witnessed missile defense systems intercept rockets overhead as some revelers ran for cover. "My heart was pounding," said one, Gabriel Zemelman, 26, shortly after the rocket fire. "It's terrifying."

The Zionist entity has vowed to destroy Hamas and launched a punishing offensive that has reduced vast areas of Gaza to a ruined wasteland and killed at least 21,978 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. The Zionist army says 172 soldiers have been killed inside Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned on Saturday that the fighting would last "many months until Hamas is eliminated and the hostages are returned". Since the Zionist entity imposed a siege at the outset of the war, Gazans have been facing dire shortages of food, water, fuel and medicine — eased only by aid trucks, about 120 of which entered on Sunday. "We are exhausted... We were displaced five times during this war," said 29-year-old Bassam Hana. "We hope things improve in 2024 and that we live just like any other human being. Currently, we live like animals."

## Major Japan quake triggers...

### Continued from Page 1

"I have never experienced anything like this before, it was scary. I went out right away but the ground was shaking," an elderly man told broadcaster NHK. "We are in a horrible situation. Please come and help us. My town is in a horrible situation," said one person in a video shared on X, formerly Twitter, showing several badly damaged houses.

Government spokesman Yoshimasa Hayashi said that there were reports that six people were in the rubble of collapsed buildings, but gave no further details. Police said they were looking into reports that two people were without vital signs in Nanao city following the quake. Television channels showed a major fire in Wajima that engulfed a row of houses, with people being evacuated in the dark, some with blankets and others carrying babies. "There is a large fire. We cannot immediately tell how many houses are affected by it," a firefighter with the Wajima Fire Department told AFP.

Fire engines struggled to reach the scene due to damaged roads and other obstacles, he said.

The department was swamped with calls, with "numerous" reports of people injured and trapped inside

One Palestinian man, Bilal Emad Abu Haykal, recounted how, weeks ago, Zionist tanks rolled up outside his home in northern Gaza's Beit Lahia. He was told to head south but was then stopped on the road by soldiers, who took the men's clothes ahead of questioning them, he said, recounting that "we stayed on the road without any food or water". "When they took us, the buildings here were still standing. But when we came back at night, we found the houses in ruins or on fire. All was turned into ruins or destroyed. I didn't even recognize the streets of Beit Lahia — destruction that I cannot describe."

International mediators have continued efforts toward a new pause in fighting. A Hamas delegation from Qatar visited Cairo on Friday to discuss an Egyptian three-phase plan proposing renewable ceasefires, a staggered release of hostages for Palestinian prisoners, and ultimately an end to the war, sources close to Hamas said. Their allies Islamic Jihad said on Saturday that Palestinian factions were evaluating the proposal and would give a response "within days".

The war in Gaza has raised fears of a broader regional conflict, with hostilities flaring with mostly Iran-backed militant groups in nearby countries who say they are acting in support of Hamas. The Zionist army said Sunday night it had intercepted two "hostile aircraft" flying from Syria towards the Zionist entity. Earlier it had reported launches toward the Zionist entity from Lebanon, where it has fought the Hezbollah militant group. — AFP

collapsed buildings, he added. Around 33,500 households around the epicenter, in Toyama, Ishikawa and Niigata prefectures, were without power, local utilities said. Many houses collapsed in the city of Suzu, reports said.

Several major highways were closed around the epicenter, Japan's road operator said, and Shinkansen bullet train services from Tokyo were also suspended. Flights and mobile phone coverage were reportedly disrupted while many convenience stores were shut. Defense Minister Minoru Kihara said 1,000 military personnel were preparing to go to the region, while 8,500 others were on standby. Around 20 military aircraft were dispatched to survey the damage.

Japan experiences hundreds of earthquakes every year and the vast majority cause no damage. The country has strict construction regulations intended to ensure buildings can withstand strong earthquakes and routinely holds emergency drills to prepare for a major jolt. But the country is haunted by the memory of a massive 9.0-magnitude undersea quake off northeastern Japan in March 2011, which triggered a tsunami that left around 18,500 people dead or missing.

The 2011 tsunami also sent three reactors into meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant, causing Japan's worst post-war disaster and the most serious nuclear accident since Chernobyl. Japan's nuclear authority said on Monday there were no abnormalities reported at the Shika nuclear power plant in Ishikawa or at other plants after the latest quake. — AFP

## International

# Russian women demand return of their men from Ukraine front

**'We're not being heard by our government ... nobody is listening to us'**

**MOSCOW:** It started with a morning knock on the door just days into Russia's mobilization drive in September 2022. Maria Semyonova's boyfriend was handed his draft papers while she was still waking up.

After getting six weeks of training, he has been fighting in Ukraine ever since. "I remember that day like it was yesterday," said the 26-year-old Moscow resident, her body stiffening at the memory. "I was just shaking," Maria said.

Unable to focus, she took a week off work and eventually resigned from her job. As the second anniversary of the Ukraine conflict looms, the female relatives of Russia's mobilized men are becoming more and more outspoken in calling for their loved ones to come home. Their pickets and impassioned appeals have gained traction on social media and the sensitive issue is becoming a difficult one for the authorities to ignore entirely or deal with heavily-handedly.

Semyonova has written multiple appeals to President Vladimir Putin and other officials — all to no avail. One day in December, wrapped up in a white scarf, she laid white carnations at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the walls of the Kremlin in an act of protest together with 10 other women. "I love him. I can't just abandon him," she said. When he came back for his first leave, she found her boyfriend "tougher" than usual. On his second leave, he was drunk half the time and was having nightmares about the campaign.

## 'Nobody is listening'

Various social media groups for the relatives of mobilized soldiers have sprung up in recent months. One of them, a Telegram channel called "The Way Home", has over 38,000 followers. Their activism is largely ignored by state media but is a sensitive issue for the Kremlin which is keen to project an image of national unity around Putin ahead of his inevitable re-election in a vote in March.

"We're not being heard by our government, by our television stations, nobody is listening to us," said Alexandra, a 34-year-old cook living in the Murmansk region in the far north of Russia. "But I can't not do this," said the 34-year-old pregnant mother of two, who moved to Russia from eastern Ukraine with her husband, a miner, in 2018. He was mobilized in Oct 2022 — shortly after Putin announced a partial mobilization that led to angry protests and a wave of emigration of young men.

## 'Everything collapsed'

More than 300,000 men were called up in the end and there is still no indication of when they might return as the conflict grinds on. The salary for mobilized men of around 200,000 rubles (2,000 euros) a month is high for Russia — at least outside the capital.

But the families say a lot of the money goes on extra kit to supplement what the army provides them with and there are extra childcare costs to factor in. The burden is difficult for many women. Antonina, 41, said she had to leave her job and started going to a therapist after her partner was called up.

She has gained 25 kilos (55 pounds), she said. "I try not to watch the news because I know where he is ... I just wait for his calls," she said.

She said her partner, who is suffering from a peptic ulcer, is being sent out on assaults with other sick and injured men even though they should not be fighting. Nevertheless, Antonina and other women said they were opposed to a second wave of mobilization even if that was the only way for their loved ones to come back. "I don't want anyone else to go through what I'm going through," she said.

"The Way Home" has now published a manifesto declaring mobilization illegal since Russia has not officially declared war and is conducting what it officially refers to as a "special military operation". While none of the three women that



**MOSCOW:** Maria Semyonova, who is married to a man fighting in Ukraine, poses in front of a huge Z letter, a tactical insignia of Russian troops in Ukraine. — AFP

AFP spoke to said they had faced any legal consequences due to their activism, they know they are treading a thin line in a country where dissent over the conflict is increasingly punished. "I'm scared my husband will be killed for what I'm doing. I'm scared my children will be sent to an orphanage, that I'll be imprisoned," said Alexandra, who is expecting their third child in March.

## 'A terrible mistake'

AFP has withheld details about the women and their partners because of their concerns

about possible repercussions. They all said they had received violent rhetoric online — from both supporters and opponents of Russia's campaign in Ukraine.

Alexandra said that in the place where she lives "I am alone in my struggle" and many friends have turned against her. But she said she had no intention of giving up. "I just want this nightmare to end. People should not kill each other. 'We have made a terrible mistake. Our whole country has and I really want people to realize that and for there to be peace.'" — AFP

## Taleban balk at special envoy plan passed by UNSC

**KABUL:** Afghanistan's Taleban authorities on Saturday criticized the UN Security Council's plan for a special envoy to promote gender and human rights in the country as "unnecessary". The Taleban government is not officially recognized by any country or world body, and the United Nations refers to the administration as the "Taleban de facto authorities".

Many are torn over engaging with Kabul's rulers in a bid to roll back their controls on women and girls, or freezing them out until they make

concessions such as reopening educational opportunities for females.

On Friday, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution calling for the appointment of a special envoy for Afghanistan to increase engagement with the country and its Taleban leaders. But foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi said a new envoy "is unnecessary as Afghanistan is not a conflict zone and is ruled by a central government that is able to secure its national interests".

In a post on social media site X, he said the Taleban government welcomes "more robust and enhanced engagement" with the UN, but special envoys "have complicated situations further via imposition of external solutions".

"The approach of the government of Afghanistan will ultimately be guided by the unaltered religious beliefs, cultural values and national interests

of the people of Afghanistan," he said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Since the Taleban surged back to power in August 2021, Kabul's new rulers have insisted on their right to impose harsh social controls in accordance with their austere interpretation of Islam. They have rejected appeals to obey international law as undue meddling in their domestic affairs.

Teenage girls have been banned from attending most secondary schools and women from universities, prompting global outrage and protests in some Afghan cities. Late in 2022, women were prohibited from entering parks, funfairs, gyms and public baths.

The UN resolution followed an independent assessment report issued in November calling for greater engagement with Afghanistan. It was adopted after 13 members of the Security Council voted in favor, while Russia and China abstained. — AFP

## Law reform offers hope for women's rights in Morocco

**RABAT:** Two decades after a landmark but limited revision of Morocco's family law marked a breakthrough for women, activists hope new reforms will defy Islamist objections and provide greater equality. The reform of the legal code was ordered directly by King Mohammed VI, who is expected to have the final say in any disputes over the new law.

A committee tasked with drafting the changes was formed in September and includes the justice minister as well as judicial and religious figures. By the end of November, the committee had already received proposals from more than 1,000 civil organizations, as well as political parties and official institutions.

Women's rights advocates in the North African country have given a hopeful welcome to the plans. Latifa Bouchoua, a member of the Federation of Women's Rights Leagues (FLDF), said she wanted "a deeper reform (than the last) adapted to the aspirations of new generations who believe in rights and freedoms". Activists are demanding equality in inheritance, child custody, and a total ban on child marriage — none of which they say are guaranteed under the current family code.

### Child marriages

The most recent reform took place in 2004 and was heralded as a breakthrough at the time. However, campaigners say the changes still failed to provide women with their full rights. That code gave women joint responsibility for their families, which had previously been granted only to men, and imposed restrictions on unilateral divorce by men, polygamy and underage marriage.

However, the reforms fell short of preventing "injustice, discrimination, and legal violence, whether in the text or in its application," said Samira Muheya, president of the FLDF. In the summer of 2022, King Mohammed said in a speech Morocco needed to "address the deficiencies and negative aspects noted from experience" of the family code.

Under current legislation, women are entitled only to half of what men inherit, in line with strict interpretations of the Koran. Polygamy remains legal, although it requires men to have the written consent of their first wife. Only 0.3 percent of marriages across Morocco in 2022 were polygamous, according to officials. In a divorce, men receive custody of their children by default, while those mothers who do gain custody of their children lose it immediately if they remarry.

The key demand made by activists is an end to child marriage. While the legal age for marriage was raised from 15 to 18 in 2004, the authorities continue to issue exemptions for underage girls to marry. A study by the public prosecutor's office found that 85 percent of all requests to marry an underage girl submitted between 2011 and 2018 were approved. Atifa Timjerdine, vice-president of the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women, told AFP that the issue "embodies ... the discrimination of the law and raises great concerns".

### Islamist objections

Supporters of women's rights said that gender inequality in Morocco covered much more than family issues alone. Writer Ahmed Assid said the forthcoming reform should go beyond household rules and aim to "change the patriarchal system" as a whole, which he said was "responsible, for example, for widespread unemployment among women, even as girls represent around two thirds of baccalaureate winners each year". — AFP

## Kosovars begin visa-free travel in Schengen zone

**PRISTINA, Kosovo:** A long-awaited European Union's visa liberalization scheme allowing Kosovo nationals to travel to Europe's borderless zone without a visa came into force on Monday with the first travelers hailing it as a great relief.

The new regime, which entered into force at midnight (2300 GMT Sunday), enables Kosovars into the passport-free Schengen zone without a visa for periods of up to 90 days in any 180-day period. The reform is perceived in Pristina as another step towards full recognition and a boost for the ambition of the country that proclaimed independence in 2008 to join the European Union.

"This is a great relief ... feels good," businessman Rushit Sopi told AFP before boarding a Pristina-Vienna flight. He was among 20 winners of a quiz organized by the government within a public awareness campaign over the scheme.

The 48-year-old owner of a company manufacturing doors and windows flies almost regularly to the EU for business. "Each visa cost me 300 euros (\$331). When I last changed my passport, I calculated that the EU visas alone in it cost me 2,500 euros."

European embassies in Pristina, notably those exposed to strong pressure to issue visas, such as the German consulate, had prepared for no visa D-Day. German ambassador Jorn Rohde himself issued the last visas to Kosovars a few days ago stressing that the visa era was "finally closing". He also invited locals

to visit his country for this summer's Euro football championship.

### 'Second-class citizens'

Kosovars had awaited January 1 with great enthusiasm perceiving it as a "historic day" as their country moves closer to the EU, local surveys showed. But they also blamed both Brussels and Pristina for such a long delay in lifting the visa regime.

Kosovo, population 1.8 million, was the last of the six countries in the Western Balkans to receive the waiver. "Until now, Europe has treated us as second-class citizens," said engineer Agim Gosalci, 61. "Our politicians are also responsible for such a long wait because one of the conditions for visa liberalization was the fight against corruption and organized crime," translator Adelina Kasolli, 33, said. With average wages at slightly above 400 euro and youth unemployment over 20 percent Kosovo ranks among Europe's poorest countries.

### Emigration fears

For the past two months the government in Pristina has been conducting a campaign urging people not to misuse the freedom of travel by looking for jobs in the EU. Prime Minister Albin Kurti led the campaign himself travelling throughout the country to explain the new regime benefits. "This day is important. A great injustice is being removed and a great right is being gained," he told the quiz winners at Pristina airport before they flew to Vienna.



**PRISTINA:** Travelers wait in line for check-in at the Pristina International Airport on Jan 1, 2024. — AFP Photos

The prime minister urged Kosovars "to respect the criteria, and wherever we travel, let's not forget that our home is Kosovo." His deputy in charge of European integration, Besnik Bislimi, warned against the possible abuse of the regime which could lead to EU restrictive measures that would "harm the entire country".

Many also fear that it could also result in even greater labor force shortages. Around 18 percent of private sector employees will quit their jobs and try to emigrate this year, according to the Pristina-based Riinvest institute. Sopi's business could also feel the impact but on Monday he was focused more on Vienna where he was taking his wife who had never travelled to an EU country. "The decision (to lift visas) is more than welcome," said his wife Valdete. "We have family in Germany and Switzerland and it was time to visit them." — AFP



**PRISTINA:** A woman holds her tote bag reading "Visa Liberalization for Kosovo #WithoutVisa" at Pristina's International Airport, on Jan 1, 2024.

## Bulgaria, Romania to join Schengen area by air, sea

**BRUSSELS:** Romania and Bulgaria will be partially integrated into the Schengen area of free movement in March 2024, the European Council announced on Saturday. Romania and Bulgaria, both members

of the EU bloc since 2007, were rejected at the end of 2022 from the vast Schengen zone, within which more than 400 million people can travel freely without internal border controls.

Their applications were initially vetoed by Austria, which had for years said it had to host a disproportionate number of undocumented immigrants as a result of poorly protected external Schengen borders.

On Saturday, the 27 EU member states agreed unanimously to lift controls at the two countries' air and sea borders as of March 31, according to a state-

ment from the European Council. Discussions over opening the land borders will continue next year.

The European Commission welcomed the two countries' partial Schengen inclusion, which comes after 12 years of negotiations. "An enlarged Schengen area will make the EU stronger as a Union, internally and on the global stage," it said in a statement.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called it a "historic moment". "Today is a day of great pride for Bulgaria and Romania," she said in a post on social media. "They both deserve it. They will make Schengen even stronger." — AFP

## Business

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2, 2024

# Markets eye uncertainty ahead after blowout 2023 for US stocks

## Political dysfunction could weigh on markets in 2024



NEW YORK: People walk through the Financial District by the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) on the last day of trading for the year on December 29, 2023 in New York City. — AFP

**NEW YORK:** As Wall Street closed the books Friday on a surprisingly strong 2023, the focus is shifting to the US presidential election and other risks confronting equities in 2024. Major indices faltered in Friday's final session of the year, but the declines were minimal compared with the winnings amassed over the last 12 months. "This has been a great stock market year," said David Kotok, chief investment officer of Cumberland Advisors. Propelled by so-called "Magnificent Seven" stocks, the Nasdaq led the major US indices with a gain of 43 percent.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average tacked on 14 percent while the broad-based S&P 500 jumped 24 percent. The surge—which was mirrored by double-digit gains on leading Asian and European bourses—has surprised leading market watchers who had bet on a recession in 2023 given the Federal Reserve's aggressive interest rate increases to counter inflation. "We started the year fearful be-

cause there were concrete signs of recession," said Maris Ogg of Tower Bridge Advisors. "You end the year with complete euphoria."

Many of the gains accumulated since late October as market watchers cheered moderating inflation and a still-strong US labor market as indicating the US economy could avoid a recession. The Federal Reserve's December forecast of three interest rate cuts in 2024 "poured more fuel in the market's fire," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare. The market also benefited from emergency measures engineered by the Fed and other US bank regulators following the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank in March.

Steps such as guaranteeing all deposits of SVB and two other banks that ended up failing contained the crisis, avoiding a broad economic impact. The market has also cheered advances in artificial intelligence in the belief that the technology will further boost productivity and growth. Bullish-

ness over AI helped produce the outsized gains for the "Magnificent Seven" stocks: Amazon, Apple, Google parent Alphabet, Meta Platforms, Microsoft, Nvidia and Tesla.

Among international markets, Tokyo's benchmark Nikkei index finished surged more than 28 percent in 2023, its best performance in a decade. Frankfurt registered a yearly gain of 20.3 percent and Paris 16.5 percent, having recently hit record heights.

London, however, gained less than four percent in 2023, with analysts pointing to fears interest rates could stay high due to inflation.

### Political 'uncertainty premium'

For now, US investors are broadly confident of the inflation outlook. "The market clearly closed out 2023 on a very hopeful note," said O'Hare. Stocks could have further upside if the job market stays strong, O'Hare said. However, stocks could suffer

if the economic picture deteriorates or if the Fed backs away from interest rate cuts, he said. Analysts are currently estimating healthy 2024 earnings growth of 12 percent. But given higher labor costs 2024 could prove a "difficult" year for earnings, said Ogg, who also pointed to lofty equity valuations as a potential drag.

Then there is politics. While investors likely already have the 2024 presidential election somewhere on their radar, the time frame was too distant to affect trading in recent months.

"The uncertainty premium of political dysfunction in the US is very high and not measurable," said Kotok, who noted the unpopularity of President Joe Biden and his likely challenger, former president Donald Trump. "The country is faced with a Biden Trump rematch that it doesn't want," Kotok said. Biden's approval rating was 39 percent at the end of 2023, according to Gallup. — AFP

## Bangladesh sentences Nobel winner Yunus in labor law case

**DHAKA:** Nobel peace laureate Muhammad Yunus was convicted on Monday of violating Bangladesh's labor laws in a case decried by his supporters as politically motivated. Yunus, 83, is credited with lifting millions out of poverty with his pioneering micro-finance bank but has earned the enmity of longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has accused him of "sucking blood" from the poor.

Hasina has made several scathing verbal attacks against the internationally respected 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner, who was once seen as a political rival.

Yunus and three colleagues from Grameen Telecom, one of the firms he founded, were accused of violating labor laws when they failed to create a workers' welfare fund in the company. A labor court in the capital Dhaka convicted and sentenced them to "six months' simple imprisonment", lead prosecutor Khurshid Alam Khan told AFP, adding that all four were immediately granted bail pending appeals. All four deny the charges. Dozens of people staged a small rally in support of Yunus outside the court.

"I have been punished for a crime that I haven't committed," Yunus told reporters after the hearing. "If you want to call it justice, you can." Yunus is facing more than 100 other charges over labor law violations and alleged graft. He told reporters after one of the hearings last month that he had not profited from any of the more than 50 social business firms he had set up in Bangladesh.

"They were not for my personal benefit," Yunus said at the time. Another of his lawyers, Khaja Tanvir, told AFP that the case was "meritless, false and ill-motivated". "The sole aim of the case is to harass and humiliate him in front of the world," Tanvir said.

### 'Travesty of justice'

Irene Khan, a former Amnesty chief now working as a UN special rapporteur who was present at



DHAKA: Bangladeshi Nobel peace laureate Muhammad Yunus (center) leaves a court in Dhaka on January 1, 2024. — AFP

Monday's verdict, told AFP the conviction was "a travesty of justice". "A social activist and Nobel laureate who brought honor and pride to the country is being persecuted on frivolous grounds," she said. In August, 160 global figures, including former US president Barack Obama and ex-UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, published a joint letter denouncing "continuous judicial harassment" of Yunus.

The signatories, including more than 100 of his fellow Nobel laureates, said they feared for "his safety and freedom". Critics accuse Bangladeshi courts of rubber-stamping decisions made by Hasina's government, which is all but certain to win another term in power next week at elections boycotted by the opposition. Her administration has been increasingly firm in its crackdown on political dissent, and Yunus's popularity among the Bangladeshi public has for years earmarked him as a potential rival.

Amnesty International accused the government of "weaponizing labor laws" when Yunus went to trial in September and called for an immediate end to his "harassment". Criminal proceedings against Yunus were "a form of political retaliation for his work and dissent", it said. — AFP

## Chinese appetite for Australian barley is back

**SYDNEY:** Three years after steep Chinese tariffs halted imports of Australian barley as tensions between the two countries ratcheted higher, the grain is once again flowing freely. Barley is not only used to brew beer but to feed pigs, and China was Australia's leading market, taking 50 percent of its barley exports.

China has imported 314,000 tons of Australian barley worth 139 million Australian dollars (around \$94 million) since the government scrapped its 80.5 percent tariffs in August, the Australian government said in early December, citing official Chinese data.

The resumption of trade is a welcome relief for Australian farmers, who saw a nearly one billion Australian-dollar market evaporate in 2020. "In the two months following the market's re-opening, Marketing and Trading shipped two vessels of barley to China," said the CBH Group, a cooperative of over 3,500 Western Australian grain farmers, in its annual report.

Tensions between the countries began to mount in 2018 when Australia excluded the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from its 5G network. Then in 2020, Australia called for an international investigation into the origins of COVID-19 -- an action China saw as politically motivated since it emanated from a close partner of the United States. In response, Beijing slapped high tariffs on key Australian exports, including barley, beef and wine, while halting its coal imports.

A slowdown in China's economic growth has spurred Beijing to rekindle its relationships with its trading partners. Meanwhile, Australia sought out and found new markets to offload its harvests—it is the world's third-largest producer of the grassy grain. "It caused us to pivot, so we found new markets, like Mexico. We managed to have tariffs lowered, which were previously in excess of 100 percent," Sean Cole, the acting general manager of the GrainGrowers trade association, told AFP.

"With China gone, Australia was really forced to go back to more traditional customers in the feed market,

mainly the Middle East and Saudi Arabia, where we've been for over 20 years," he added. Between June 2022 and June 2023, Saudi Arabia became the leading importer of Australian barley, according to data from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES).

Lyndon Mickel farms a 6,000-hectare plot of land near Beaumont in the southwest part of Australia. The latest harvest of his fields of various grains and peas was the 23rd of his career, but it has taken time to bounce back from the Chinese tariffs. "We've had a reduction in price, but we've been fortunate we've had two very good years in that time crop-wise," he said, "so what we've lost in price, we've gained in tonnage anyway." But those boom years—producing over 14 million tons of barley in the last two harvests—are over.

As El Nino—the cyclical weather phenomenon responsible for higher global temperatures—returns to the Pacific, ABARES predicts barley production will drop by 24 percent to 10.8 million tons for the 2023-24 harvest. The reopening of the Chinese market could not have come at a better time, said Sean Cole. "A lot of our barley is classified as feed, but it is still suitable for beer manufacturing in China," he said, "they use slightly different processes, and essentially it means we can get a premium for more of our feed barley." — AFP



LHASA: A harvester operates in a highland barley field in Rasog Township of Gyangze County, Xigaze, southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region.



## Business

# Xi hails 'resilient' economy in bullish New Year speech

## China's factory activity decline deepens



BEIJING: China's factory activity decline deepened in December, official data showed Sunday.

BEIJING: President Xi Jinping said Sunday the Chinese economy had grown "more resilient and dynamic" in 2023, despite financial figures continuing to disappoint as the post-COVID recovery stalls.

He also promised in a bullish New Year's address to the nation that China would "surely be reunified"—a reference to the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its own and has pledged to seize. Xi has endured a challenging 2023 at the helm of the world's second-largest economy, with his administration struggling to sustain an economic rebound since rapidly dumping its onerous zero-COVID policy a year ago.

But Xi said on state broadcaster CCTV the economy had "weathered the storm" and become "more resilient and dynamic than before", hailing the promotion of "high-quality development" and emerging industries such as electric vehicles, lithium batteries and solar panels. He said next year "we must... consolidate and enhance the positive trend of economic recovery, and achieve long-term economic stability".

Yet he also acknowledged some hardship, saying "some companies are facing operating pressure (and) some people are encountering difficulties in employment and living conditions".

"All of these things concern me greatly," he said. "Our goal is both ambitious and yet very simple. In the end, it is to help people live better lives."

Record youth unemployment and a persistent debt crisis in the crucial property sector have hemmed in China's growth this year. Official figures released on Sunday showed a decline in nationwide factory activity deepened in December, the third straight month of contraction.

Analysts have said Beijing may struggle to achieve its stated annual growth target of around five percent, the lowest such ambition in years.

Xi briefly mentioned Taiwan, weeks before the democratic island heads to the polls on January 13. Beijing has escalated its pressure campaign against Taiwan this year and tensions are high, with independence-leaning candidate Lai Ching-te leading opinion polls. Xi declared in his Sunday speech "the motherland will surely be reunified". "Compatriots on both sides of the (Taiwan) Strait should be bound by a common sense of purpose to share in the glory of national rejuvenation," he said.

Xi has said China would never rule out the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control. Taipei officials have repeatedly raised concerns about election



BEIJING: People have their dinner at a restaurant as a screen broadcasts China's President Xi Jinping while delivering his New Year's speech in Beijing on December 31, 2023. — AFP photos

interference and misinformation, claims dismissed by Beijing as "hype". Xi sent new year greetings to Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier Sunday in which he hailed strengthening ties with Moscow in 2023, according to an official foreign ministry readout. The two longtime allies have drawn closer in recent years even as Western countries have turned their backs on Russia over its invasion of neighboring Ukraine.

Xi said "the material and public opinion foundation of our relationship has become stronger", according to CCTV. "In the face of changes unseen in a century and a turbulent regional and international situation, China-Russia relations have maintained healthy and stable development and moved steadily in the right direction," Xi said. "Under our joint leadership, political mutual trust between the two sides has further deepened, strategic coordination has drawn closer, and mutually beneficial cooperation has continued to achieve new results," he was quoted as saying.

Meanwhile, China's factory activity decline deepened in December, official data showed Sunday, as Beijing rounded off a year marked by its stuttering economic recovery from the pandemic. The official manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) --

a key measure of factory output—stood at 49.0 in December, below the 50-point mark separating expansion from contraction, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

The reading signalled a further slump from November's figure of 49.4 and represented the third straight month of contraction. "In December... the level of vitality in the manufacturing sector somewhat declined," the NBS said in an official readout. But the recovery has stumbled amid weak consumer and business confidence, an entrenched housing crisis and record youth unemployment, while a global slowdown has weighed on demand for Chinese goods. In recent months, Beijing has announced a slew of targeted measures as well as a sizeable issuance of sovereign bonds to boost infrastructure spending and rev up economic activity.

But the results so far have been mixed, with the PMI only edging into positive territory once in the past nine months. There have been some signs of life, with the world's second-largest economy growing at a better-than-expected 4.9 percent in the third quarter. But Beijing still faces a tough task to achieve its stated annual growth target of around five percent, itself the lowest such aim in years. — AFP

## World Bank report

## Is the great inflation scare over? The case for cautious optimism

WASHINGTON: The great inflation scare of the post-pandemic era has been driven by a series of adverse shocks over the past four years. After collapsing at the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, global inflation started to pick up later in the year as demand bounced back, supply bottlenecks tightened, and oil prices rebounded. Inflation rose further following the Russian invasion of Ukraine as oil and food prices jumped and renewed supply disruptions emerged, said a report issued by the World Bank.

Since July 2022, however, global inflation has been declining steadily. Professional forecasts, financial market-based inflation expectations, consumer surveys, and model-based estimates all point in the same direction: in the coming months, global inflation has nowhere to go but down. Embracing this consensus, financial markets now expect major central banks to cut interest rates in the first half of next year. So, is the great inflation scare over?

Messages from the major central banks last week suggest divergent answers. The United States Federal Reserve signaled a possible shift in its policy stance, aligning its interest-rate trajectory closer to market expectations. But the European Central Bank and the Bank of England stuck to their earlier positions, noting that a pivot in their policy stance would be possible only if credible evidence of a sustained decline in inflation emerges. There are reasons for optimism. Many factors should push global inflation down further in the coming months. But caution will remain in order until that happens. A few risks persist that could delay the decline in inflation or reignite price pressures, the report says.

## Reasons for optimism

All fundamental drivers of inflation suggest that global inflation should decline in the coming months: Global demand is easing, supply disruptions are fading, and commodity prices are moderating while monetary policies remain restrictive. Inflation is highly synchronized across countries, implying that these factors will likely drive down inflation around the world.

## Vietnam economy slows down in 2023

HANOI: Vietnam's economy grew by 5.05 percent in 2023, falling short of a government target of 6.50 percent, according to official figures published on Friday. The communist country's GDP stood at \$426 billion, with growth down from eight percent last year, according to the official General Statistics Office (GSO).



• Global demand is expected to moderate next year amid tight financial conditions, weak global trade, and limited fiscal support. Global demand-related factors account for nearly 30 percent of the variation in inflation. As global activity slows, the impact of these demand-related factors on inflation will become smaller.

• Easing global supply pressures are also expected to contribute to the fall in worldwide inflation. These pressures have recently receded to historic lows because of the broad-based weakness in goods trade and the fading of pandemic-era supply disruptions. Despite still-tight labor markets, job openings have gradually declined, and wage growth has been generally moderating in the United States and some other advanced economies.

• After dropping 17 percent this year, oil prices are expected to continue to fall in 2024 as subdued global growth reduces demand pressures. Oil prices play a critical role in driving global headline inflation, as post-pandemic developments have clearly shown. Indeed, oil price movements account for about 40 percent of the fluctuations in inflation.

• Monetary policy will remain restrictive in major economies to ensure inflation returns to central bank targets. Despite the recent decline in inflation, all three major central banks have reiterated their intention to maintain high policy interest rates until they see convincing evidence of disappearing price pressures, although the United States Federal Reserve did signal the possibility of rate cuts in 2024. The implication is that even if central banks start cutting policy rates, they will keep them high enough to push down price pressures. The lagged and ongoing effects of elevated real interest rates are set to keep global activity weak, thereby further moderating inflationary forces in the coming months.

## Reasons for caution

Yet there are at least two key reasons to be cautious about the future pace of disinflation: the potential for an inflationary shock stemming from geopo-

litical tensions as well as continuing pressures that have kept core inflation high. Central banks still need to worry about whether they can lower inflation to their target ranges without triggering a sharp downturn in activity.

Exports from the manufacturing powerhouse were down by 4.4 percent, thanks partly to headwinds caused by "strategic competition among big countries" and conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, the GSO said.

Vietnam earned \$355.5 billion from exports in 2023, it said. "The GDP growth of Vietnam did not match the country's potential," said Tran Thi Ha My, Head of Research at Rong Viet Stocks Company.

The Asian Development Bank had predicted 5.8 percent growth for Vietnam's year-end

litical tensions as well as continuing pressures that have kept core inflation high. Central banks still need to worry about whether they can lower inflation to their target ranges without triggering a sharp downturn in activity.

• The decline in global core inflation has been smaller than that of headline inflation over the past 14 months. Sustained price pressures in services driven by strong demand limited the decrease in core inflation. Going forward, core price inflation must continue to decline to convince central banks that inflationary pressures have been brought firmly under control. This will likely require further moderation in demand, particularly for services, along with weakening labor markets.

• Geopolitical tensions have been a serious inflationary force for decades. The latest conflict in the Middle East—on the heels of disruptions caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine—could be another major driver of inflation by destabilizing global energy markets. Although the impact has been limited so far, an escalation of the conflict could sharply increase oil prices as the region accounts for nearly 30 percent of global oil production. When oil prices go up by 10 percent, global inflation increases by 0.35 percentage points within a year. Such an increase in oil prices could also affect core inflation, if there are large second-round effects on wages and broader production costs and inflation expectations shift higher.

Although inflation has been coming down worldwide over the past year, it remains above target in two-thirds of the inflation-targeting countries. Professional forecasters predict that inflation will remain above target in more than two-fifths of these countries next year. Inflation has declined in many developing economies over the past two years, but it remains at double-digit levels in more than one-fifth of these economies.

Central banks are unlikely to sharply cut interest rates until they are convinced inflation is firmly on a path back to the target ranges. This means monetary policy will continue to be restrictive. Possible disruptions in global energy markets and supply chains could prolong the quandary currently faced by many central banks: how to lower inflation to target ranges while engineering a soft landing.

The recent decline in inflation is a welcome sign, but it's too soon to break out the champagne. There are still risks that could slow the decline in inflation—or push it higher. Because inflation tends to be globally synchronized, an inflation resurgence in advanced economies could hurt developing economies as well, the report added.

figure, "mainly due to weak external demand". Vietnam's economy surged out of the pandemic, but has slowed since then. More than 217,000 businesses had newly entered or returned to the market this year, up by 4.5 percent year-on-year, according to the GSO.

Average monthly income had increased to around \$288, nearly seven percent higher than last year, according to the GSO. "Growth will recover in 2024... thanks to improvements in exports, investment, consumption and the real estate markets," My said. —AFP

## Argentina formally rejects BRICS membership

BUENOS AIRES: Argentine President Javier Milei has sent letters to BRICS leaders to formalize his decision to reject an invitation to join the grouping of major emerging economies, the presidency said. The bloc -- made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa -- in August announced it was admitting six new members in a bid to counter the Western-led global order. The membership of Argentina, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates was due to take effect from January 1, 2024.

The letters signed by Milei and published by several media houses said Argentina's membership was "not considered appropriate at this time." The libertarian outsider Milei took office this month after his resounding defeat of Argentina's traditional political parties, and he had vowed on the campaign trail not to join BRICS.

In his letters he said his foreign policy "differs in many aspects from that of the previous government. In this sense, some decisions made by the previous administration will be reviewed." During his election campaign, Milei said "our geopolitical alignment is with the United States and the Zionist entity. We are not going to ally with communists." Despite vowing to cut ties with major trading partners China and Brazil, he has



taken a more conciliatory tone since coming to office.

Meanwhile, Argentina's main labor union on Thursday called for a general strike over President Javier Milei's reforms aimed at liberalizing the country's economy. Hector Daer, the general secretary of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), said the strike on January 24 was in protest against a decree and package of bills announced by Milei, which "go against all of society" and give the president "all public power." The libertarian Milei took office on December 10 and has taken steps to fulfill his campaign promise to slash public spending and shake up an economy crumbling under annual inflation of 160 percent.

Congress is sitting in extraordinary session this week to consider a package of bills issued to give effect to a mega-decree he unveiled last week. The decree can be overturned if it is rejected by both houses of Congress. Otherwise it comes into force on Friday. The decree would change or scrap more than 350 economic regulations in a country accustomed to heavy government intervention in the market. — AFP

## Business

# NBK announces partnership with X-cite for NBK KWT Visa Infinite credit cardholders



KUWAIT: Officials of National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) and X-cite by Alghanim Electronics after signing the partnership deal.



Exchanging the documents.

**KUWAIT:** Seeking to enhance customer banking experience with top-notch offers and rewards, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) has announced an exclusive partnership with X-cite by Alghanim Electronics, subsidiary of Alghanim Industries (Kutayba Alghanim Group), to provide NBK KWT Visa Infinite credit cardholders with exclusive offers that meet their expectations.

Under this partnership, cardholders will get 10 percent NBK KWT Points when using their NBK KWT Visa Infinite credit card to shop at X-cite in-store, online or through the app, as well as 2 percent instant discount on selected products, effective from Jan 1, 2024.

Speaking on this partnership, Mohammed Al-Othman, CEO of Consumer and Digital Banking Group said, "As we approach the beginning of the new year, we aim to provide our customers with exclusive offers tailored to meet their different needs and categories. This comes within our continuous endeavors to keep pace with their changing needs and evolving expectations."

"NBK maintains solid relationships with leading institutions across different sectors, which we leverage to enhance customer banking experience by delivering top-notch offers, discounts and benefits for unmatched banking experience" he added. "Service excellence and top-notch customer ex-

**Al-Othman: We aim to leverage this partnership to offer customers unmatched banking experience**

perience are instrumental parts of NBK's culture. We depend on the extensive experience gained over long decades to understand customers' needs, evaluate their goals, and even exceed their expectations, he noted.

On his part, Hussam Ibrahim, Senior Vice President at X-cite, mentioned, "We consider our partnership with National Bank of Kuwait as a strategic and innovative step in the world of e-commerce and banking arenas. This partnership is not just a commercial alliance, but rather a bridge linking cutting-edge technology and top-notch banking services, reflecting our mutual dedication to create an impeccable customer experience."

"Through this cooperation, we seek to create an interactive system that allows NBK KWT Visa Infinite credit cardholders to avail exceptional offers and exclusive technological benefits that resonate with their dynamic lifestyle. We believe that this partnership will strengthen our position as a leading tech company and enable us to provide innovative solutions that go beyond our customers' expectations," he added.

**The most popular credit card in Kuwait**

NBK KWT Visa Infinite credit card is the most popular credit card in Kuwait, as it offers customers a unique lifestyle with exceptional rewards, benefits and offers tailored to meet customers' needs and expectations, and cash back up to KD 1,000 in NBK KWT Points every month.

The card combines an exclusive package of exceptional rewards with a design inspiring national pride, making it a card like no other, and gives customers the flexibility to choose the way they want to earn rewards based on their lifestyle; either the "Spends Tier" or "Merchant Category" option.

When choosing the "Merchant Category", customers can earn NBK KWT Points on all payments made using NBK KWT Visa Infinite credit card at the selected categories, with 10 percent on dining and telecom, 5 percent on fitness and beauty and 3 percent on clothing, grocery and education.

Meanwhile, when choosing the "Spends Tier" earning option, based on their monthly spends, with up to 5 percent on digital payments, up to 5 percent on international POS and up to 3 percent on all other spends. The earned



NBK KWT points can be redeemed through NBK Online or Mobile Banking whether as cashback directly to the card, travel booking at more than 800 airlines and 150,000 hotels, e-vouchers from over 190 merchants, or points exchange with most preferred airlines.

NBK Visa credit cards offer the best payment method for the convenience and benefits they provide to customers, especially when using them in shopping including NBK rewards program as well as purchase protection and extended warranty.

## Singapore economy grows 1.2% in 2023: PM Lee

**SINGAPORE:** Singapore's economy avoided a recession and expanded 1.2 percent in 2023, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Sunday, warning however that geopolitical risks will weigh on next year's growth. The affluent city-state's economic performance is often seen as a barometer of the global environment because of its reliance on international trade. "We made 1.2 percent growth this year, avoiding a recession," Lee said in his New Year's message. For next year, growth is projected to come in at 1.0-3.0 percent "but much will depend on the external environment," he added, pointing to the continuing war in Ukraine and the Zionist entity's conflict with Hamas.

The economy has been hurt by softer global demand for its exports, with the return of air travel after the COVID-19 pandemic boosting domestic growth. "For some years to come, we must expect the external environment to be less favorable to our security and prosperity. Geopolitical uncertainties will continue weighing on the global economy," he said. "In our own region, there are tensions and risks over rival claims in the South China Sea, and because of the cross-Strait situation. These can affect confidence in the region, and hence our growth." Maritime tensions have risen recently in the sea after China and the Philippines traded blame for a series of incidents in the area, including a collision between their vessels. Lee also cited climate change as another challenge for the low-lying island-state. — AFP

## Muhammad Yunus: Bangladesh's banker to the poor

**DHAKA:** Jailed Nobel-winning microfinance pioneer Muhammad Yunus is celebrated around the world for helping millions of people out of poverty, but at home in Bangladesh he has a powerful enemy. The 83-year-old, known as the "banker to the poorest of the poor", was awarded the Peace Prize in 2006 for his work loaning small cash sums to rural women, allowing them to invest in farm tools or business equipment and boost their earnings.

Grameen Bank, the microfinance lender he founded, was lauded for helping unleash breakneck economic growth in Bangladesh, and its work has since been copied by scores of developing countries.

"Human beings are not born to suffer the misery of hunger and poverty," Yunus said during his Nobel lecture, daring his audience to imagine a world where deprivation was confined to history museums.

But his public profile in Bangladesh has earned him the hostility of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who once accused him of "sucking blood" from the poor. On Monday he and three colleagues from one of the companies he founded were sentenced to jail terms of six months—but immediately bailed

pending appeal—by a Dhaka labor court which found they had illegally failed to create a workers' welfare fund.

All four had denied the charges and the case has been criticized as politically motivated by watchdogs including Amnesty International. Yunus still faces more than 100 other charges on alleged graft and labor law violations. Hasina's administration has been increasingly cracked down on political dissent, and Yunus's popularity has for years earmarked him as a potential rival.

The year after winning the Nobel Prize, Yunus announced plans to set up his own "Citizen Power" party to end Bangladesh's confrontational political culture, which has been punctuated by instability and periods of military rule. He abandoned those ambitions within months, but the enmity aroused by his challenge to the ruling elite has persisted.

Since Hasina returned to power in 2008, Yunus has been hit with a series of criminal cases and a smear campaign by a state-led Islamic agency that accuses him of promoting homosexuality.

The government unceremoniously forced him out of Grameen Bank in 2011 — a decision fought by Yunus but upheld by Bangladesh's top court.

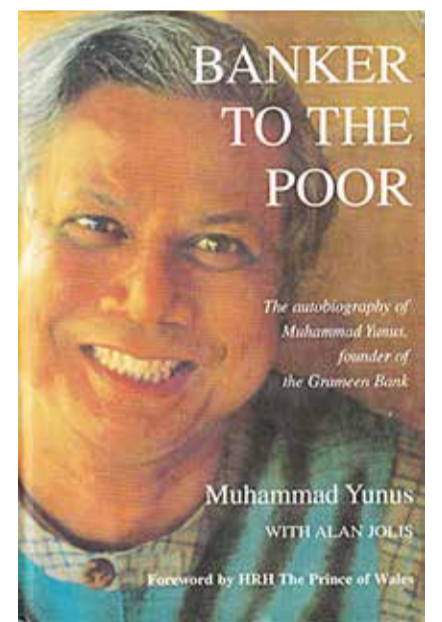
A telecom firm he chairs was hit with a graft probe in 2022 over accusations it had embezzled employee funds—claims that critics say are politically motivated. Hasina also blamed Yunus for the World Bank's decision to cancel funding for a bridge near the capital Dhaka after the project was embroiled in a bribery scandal.

The bridge finally opened in 2022 after years of construction delays, and at its opening ceremony, Hasina said Yunus should be "dipped in the river" for jeopardizing its completion. Yunus has adamantly denied influencing the World Bank's decision and his office has described the claims as "purely imaginary".

Yunus was born into a well-to-do family—his father was a successful goldsmith—in the coastal city of Chittagong in 1940. He credits his mother, who offered help to anyone in need who knocked on their door, as his biggest influence. Yunus won a Fulbright scholarship to study in the United States and returned soon after Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistan in a brutal 1971 war.

When he returned, he was chosen to head Chittagong University's economics department, but the young country was struggling through a severe famine and he felt compelled to take practical action.

"Poverty was all around me, and I could not turn away from it," he said in 2006. "I found it difficult to teach elegant theories of economics in the



university classroom... I wanted to do something immediate to help people around me." After years of experimenting with ways to provide credit for people too poor to qualify for traditional bank loans, he founded Grameen Bank in 1983.

The institution now has more than nine million clients on its books, according to its most recent annual report (2020), and over 97 percent of its borrowers are women. Yunus has won numerous high honors for his life's work, including a US Presidential Medal of Freedom awarded by Barack Obama. — AFP

## Guinea's economy struggles after fuel depot fire

**CONAKRY, Guinea:** Almost two weeks after a huge fire in Guinea's main fuel depot brought death and destruction, anger is growing as the economy is reeling, with inflation rising, petrol rationed and no trucks moving merchandise.

It took nine days for the blaze to be fully extinguished after a blast rocked the state oil company's main depot on December 18 in the capital Conakry, where 24 people died and another 454 were injured.

But Guinea will likely feel the aftereffects for the foreseeable future. The west African nation remains one of the least developed countries in the world despite being rich in minerals, including gold and bauxite.

At Conakry's main market, Madina, most stores are closed. Merchandise trucks sit idled at the foot of buildings. Traffic has also come to a standstill at the port of Conakry, near the epicenter of the fire.

The streets of the capital have fewer vehicles than usual—except for the massive lines at petrol stations. With little fuel available, fishermen stay close to the coast where there are fewer fish to catch. The government—led since September 2021 by a military junta that deposed the country's first democratically-elected president—announced on Saturday that petrol distribution would resume.

But fuel is rationed, limited to 25 liters per ve-

hicle, and five liters per motorcycle and three-wheeled tuk-tuk. The use of jerrycans was banned to prevent a black market from emerging. "There is suffering," said Mamadou Yaya Bah, a tuk-tuk taxi driver who sat for hours waiting for his turn at a service station in Conakry.

He said his fares have tripled or quadrupled due to the rationing. Taxi drivers are not venturing out of the capital. "We are never sure to find fuel in the interior of the country," said taxi driver Mamadou Saliou Balde.

Goods are not reaching areas outside of the capital, either, where roads are constantly in bad shape. Alpha Kabine Doumbouya, a trader who has three delivery trucks and five taxis in Kankan, 600 kilometres east of Conakry, said all of the vehicles have stopped service.

"If Conakry coughs, the rest of the country catches a cold," he said.

"The drivers are out of work. We are getting by here at my wife's restaurant while waiting for better days," he said. A customs officer at Guinea's border with Sierra Leone told AFP that the vehicles that used to go and get goods in Conakry are no longer coming. "No fuel, no security, too much hassle," he said on condition of anonymity.

Neighboring countries are helping out. Sierra Leone has given Guinea permission to use its depots to store its petroleum products. On Wednesday, Ivory Coast said it would deliver 50 million litres of petrol a month to Guinea.

The crisis is expected to cut economic growth by 0.7 percentage points this year, according to the National Statistics Institute. Transport costs have jumped by 60 percent nationally, said Guinean economist Tidiane Barry. Public finances will also take a hit as revenue from the ener-



CONAKRY: Fire rages at the Guinea's state oil company's main depot following a blast on Dec 18 in the capital Conakry.

gy and transport sectors fall, Barry said. Inflation is expected to top 10 percent in December, and more than 15 percent in Conakry alone, the economist added.

At the Taouyah market, Hawa Toure's grocery bag was empty. "I have nothing to put in my bag because prices at the market have suddenly become so high," she said. Vegetable seller Aminata Camara was falling asleep in his stall. "I'm still waiting for the first customer,"

he said. "I don't know what Guinea did to god to deserve this punishment."

Barry said the disaster is a "tipping point" for Guinea as it has exposed the vulnerabilities of its economy, including its reliance on oil. But it is also a chance to rethink Guinea's economic strategy.

"Investing in safe infrastructure, diversifying the economy and strengthening regional cooperation are key steps towards sustainable and resilient economic development," Barry said. — AFP

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2, 2024

## World ushers in 2024



Fireworks explode over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Sydney Opera House during New Year's Eve celebrations in Sydney on Jan 1, 2024. — AFP photos

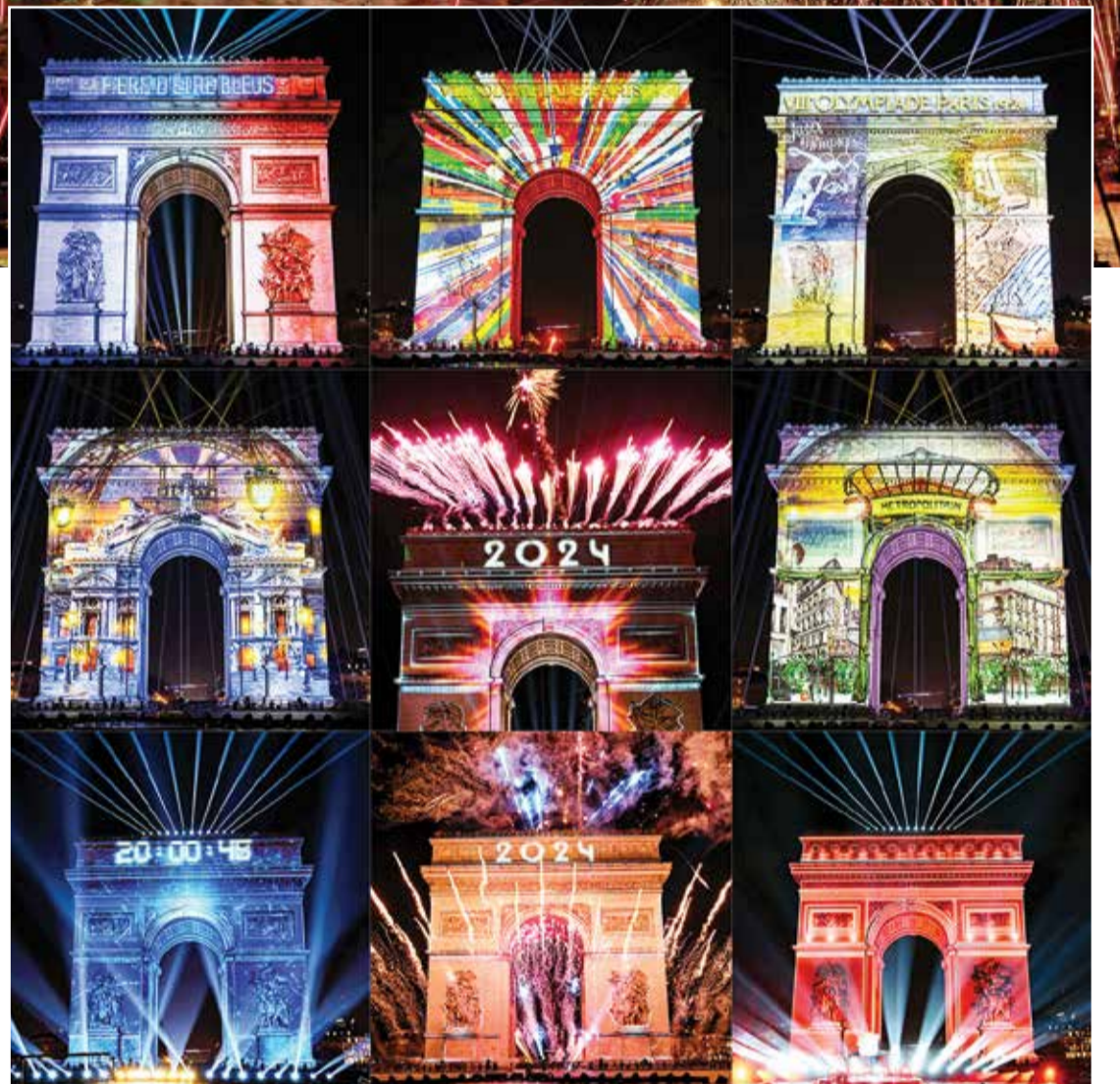
**F**ireworks illuminated skies over Paris, Rio and Sydney to celebrate the entry to 2024, while rockets and strikes marked the year's earliest hours in Gaza and Ukraine. Much of the world's population — now more than eight billion — is hoping to shake off high living costs and global tumult in 2024, which will bring elections concerning half the world's population and the Paris Olympics. — AFP



A woman poses for a photo in front of a 2024 luminous sign before a countdown event to celebrate the New Year in central Seoul.



Revelers take part in celebrations during the 2024 New Year's Eve Ball drop in Times Square in New York City.



This combination of pictures shows the Arc de Triomphe illuminated for the New Year celebrations in Paris.



Fireworks light up the sky by the landmark Burj al-Arab luxury hotel tower in Dubai.



Youth and students take part in celebrations to welcome the new year at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang.



A couple release a lantern as people fire fireworks to mark the arrival of the New Year at a beach in Sihanoukville, the coastal capital of Cambodia's Preah Sihanouk province.



Fireworks explode over Victoria Harbour to celebrate the New Year in Hong Kong.



Fireworks explode around the London Eye and Big Ben at the Palace of Westminster in central London.

## Lifestyle

# West Bank theatre raided by Zionists vows to resume resistance



A bench is seen at the entrance of the Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee Camp.



A man walks down the stairs in the stage area at the Freedom Theatre.



Ahmad Tobasi, artistic director of the Freedom Theatre, poses for a picture in front of a red X spray painted over a Star of David left by Zionist soldiers during a recent raid, on the screen of the cinema in the Jenin refugee Camp on Dec 23, 2023. — AFP photos

The Palestinian Freedom Theatre in the occupied West Bank welcomed actors back at the weekend, just over a fortnight after a Zionist raid on the center sparked an international outcry. Its artistic director Ahmed Tobasi told AFP the theatre in Jenin refugee camp had become a symbol of Palestinian resistance against the Zionist entity's occupation of the West Bank.

He said troops broke into and vandalized the small cultural center earlier last month during a wider raid on Jenin, leaving behind a trail of damage and Stars of David graffitied across the walls. The theatre said soldiers also arrested several employees in their homes. Tobasi, who said he was among those detained, is now back at work and determined to keep the center open. "For me, this is resistance," the 39-year-old said as he gave AFP a tour of the theatre, which was set up in 2006.

Soon after the raid on Dec 13 a Freedom Theatre appeal for the release of its staff won international support, with demonstrations in the streets of New York and Paris and playwrights, actors and directors from Britain to Mexico expressing their support. Since its founding, the unassuming performance space has become symbolic for Palestinians and their supporters, with its actors touring the world staging plays.

Staff said they believed Zionist soldiers had gone out of their way to target the theatre. The Zionist army described the wider raid on Jenin, which Palestinian health authorities say killed 11 people, as designed to combat "terrorists" in the camp. "This is a theatre – there are no weapons or terrorists here," Tobasi said. While the raid targeted a number of buildings in the camp, Tobasi said that to reach the theatre troops would have need-

ed to turn off the main road and walk around 20 m towards its entrance.

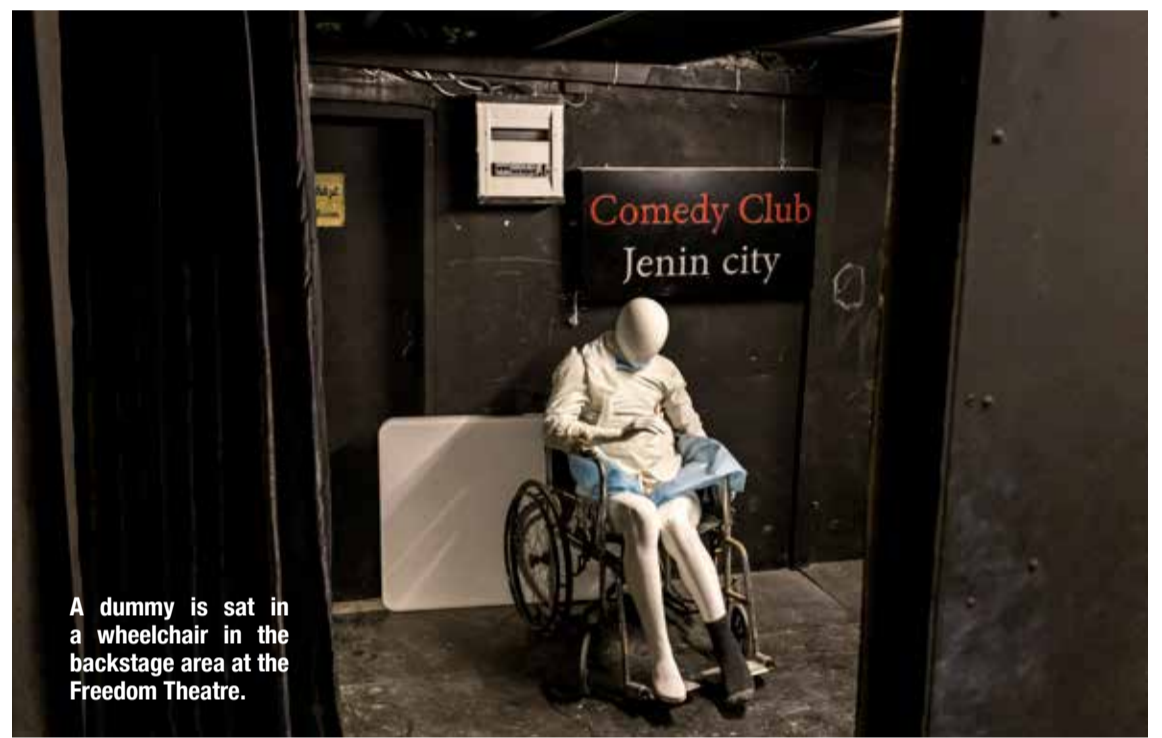
Another staff member, Ranin Odeh, said the center was singled out for its reputation as "a place of resistance through art." "I felt so angry to see (Zionist) soldiers inside. The theatre is like my home. They want to kill everything – not just people, but ideas too," said the 31-year-old, who runs the theatre's youth program. Staff spent several days clearing up and plan to stage their first big event, an end-of-year workshop for young actors, on Sunday. The army has not responded to AFP's request for comment.

#### Door-to-door arrests

At the scene, Tobasi led AFP journalists past broken locks, splintered doorframes and smashed black and white photos. "What kind of behavior is this from soldiers?" he said, standing next to a red Star of David sprayed across a projector screen. The theatre posted an image on social media which appears to show troops and a military vehicle just outside the building.

Soldiers went door to door arresting members of staff from their homes, the Freedom Theatre said in a series of online statements, adding they were among more than 100 Palestinians detained in Jenin. Drama graduate Jamal Abu Joas was released after more than a week in detention, while producer and manager Mustafa Sheta remains in custody, said Tobasi, who was still shaken from his own ordeal. - AFP

Tobasi said he was blindfolded, had his hands cuffed behind his back and was held for more than 12 hours at the Salam checkpoint west of Jenin. He accused army



A dummy is sat in a wheelchair in the backstage area at the Freedom Theatre.

reservists of beating him.

Violence in the West Bank – captured by the Zionist entity during the 1967 Six-Day War and occupied ever since – has surged following Oct 7. Zionist forces and settlers have killed at least 314 people in the territory,

Palestinian health officials say. Jenin's refugee camp, a stronghold for Palestinian armed groups, is regularly targeted by the Zionist entity in deadly raids. The Palestinian health ministry says many of those killed have been civilians. — AFP

## Lebanon targets UNESCO register for pioneering TV archive

For decades, Tele Liban has been a mainstay of Lebanese living rooms. Now the country is seeking UNESCO recognition for the archives of its pioneering Arab broadcaster. Lebanon's Information Minister Ziad Makary told AFP that Beirut would apply to have the full archives of Tele Liban added to the UN cultural body's Memory of the World Register, which UNESCO says "aims to prevent the irrevocable loss of documentary heritage".



Alfred Akar, director of archives at Tele Liban, speaks during an interview at his office in Beirut.

Tele Liban was "the first television (network) to be established in the Arab world on a state level", Makary said, adding that Lebanon had the region's "oldest audiovisual archive". The collection includes footage that dates back "to World War II and the 1940s", although Tele Liban was only established the following decade, the minister said from his Beirut office.



An employee walks between shelves at the archives department of the Lebanon TV station Tele Liban in Beirut, on Dec 29, 2023. — AFP photos

Were it to join the register, it would sit alongside hundreds of other entries, spanning print, audiovisual, digital and other heritage from across the globe. The only television channel in Lebanon until 1985, the broadcaster's archive is brimming with years of history, politics and culture not only from Lebanon but across the Arab world, during tumultuous decades in the region.

It counts more than 50,000 hours of recordings, from interviews and news programs to music concerts, including of Egypt's revered 20th-Century singer Umm Kalthoum and French diva Dalida. The collection captured Lebanon's "cultural and political life" and was unique in the country, Alfred Akar, Tele Liban's head of archives, told AFP. In multi-confessional Lebanon, there is nostalgia for the now cash-strapped Tele Liban's "golden age" during the 1960s and 70s, when it featured prominent personalities on its programs, from entertainment and comedy to drama.

As sectarian tensions peaked and the country plunged into the grueling 1975-1990 civil war, Tele Liban became



An employee shows a tape at the archives department of Tele Liban.

a witness to the country's divisions and suffering. Makary noted the need to preserve history, pointing to "the archive's importance in the collective memory and (its) cultural impact on the region".

#### 'Treasure'

If successful, its entry on the UNESCO register would have great symbolic importance and put Lebanon's "media heritage on the world map", Makary said. The aim is to include not only Tele Liban's archive but also that of the public radio and the National News Agency, Makary said, adding that work on the official submission would begin next month.

Lebanon already counts two entries on the Memory of the World Register – commemorative stelae spanning more than three millennia at a site north of Beirut, and the Phoenician alphabet, which the UN body's website describes as "the prototype for all alphabets in the world".

In 2010, work began on modernizing the Tele Liban



Lebanon's Information Minister Ziad Makary speaks during the interview.

archive and transferring it to updated equipment despite little financial support, in a country where dysfunctional public services have now been swallowed by a crushing four-year economic crisis. The digitization process remained ongoing, said Akar. — AFP

## Legal battles loom as first Mickey Mouse copyright ends

Almost a century after his big-screen debut, Mickey Mouse entered the public domain Monday, opening the floodgates to potential remakes, spin-offs, adaptations... and legal battles with Disney. The copyright on "Steamboat Willie" – a short, black-and-white 1928 animation that first introduced audiences to the mischievous rodent who would become emblematic of American pop culture – expired after 95 years, on January 1, under US law.

The date has loomed large on the calendars of everyone from filmmakers, fans and intellectual property lawyers to Disney executives, who in the past helped lobby to change law to prolong US copyright terms. "This is a deeply symbolic, highly anticipated moment," said Jennifer Jenkins, director of the Duke Center for the Study of the Public Domain.

Anyone is now free to copy, share, reuse and adapt "Steamboat Willie" and "Plane Crazy" – another 1928 Disney animation – and the early versions of the characters that appear within them, including Mickey and Minnie. A vital ca-



The original 1928 script for Disney's "Steamboat Willie," the first cartoon to star Mickey Mouse, is displayed during a media tour of the Walt Disney Archives on June 20, 2023 at the Disney Studio lot in Burbank, California. — AFP photos

veat is that later versions of the characters, like those in 1940 film "Fantasia," are not in the public domain, and cannot be copied without a visit from Disney's lawyers.

But artists would be free, for instance, to create a "climate change awareness version" of "Steamboat Willie" in which Mickey's ship runs aground on a dry riverbed, or a feminist retelling where Minnie takes the wheel, said Jenkins. That



Mickey Mouse animations announce the entrance to the Walt Disney Archives.

would echo imaginative re-uses of other characters whose copyrights recently expired such as Sherlock Holmes and Winnie-the-Pooh.

#### 'Legal skirmishes'

But it will not be plain sailing. In a statement to AFP, Disney said it would "continue to protect our rights in the more modern versions of Mickey Mouse and other works that remain subject to copyright." Indeed, the version of Mickey in "Steamboat Willie" is a spindly, roguish creature

who would not be recognizable to many younger viewers. "What's in the public domain is kind of a frightful little black-and-white animal," said Justin Hughes, a professor at Loyola Law School.

He added: "The Mickey Mouse that is most familiar to current generations of Americans will remain under copyright protection. 'I wouldn't be surprised if we see some legal skirmishes, and I wouldn't be surprised if we see Disney out there educating people on that point.' Cease-and-desist letters could be sent to artists producing "high-budget fan art" if they use elements from later Mickey cartoons, such as red shorts and white gloves, he predicted.

Additionally, while the copyright has expired, the trademark has not. Copyrights prevent the unlicensed copying of the creative work itself, for example books, films and characters. They expire after a set time. Trademarks guard the source of a work, preventing anyone else from making a product that could mislead consumers into thinking it came from the original author. They can be renewed indefinitely.

Disney said it will "work to safeguard against consumer confusion caused by unauthorized uses of Mickey and our other iconic characters." The company has even added a clip from "Steamboat Willie" to the opening sequence of every Walt Disney Animation Studios film. "They were very smart folks at Disney – they realized that the best thing to do was to establish that iconic sequence of Steamboat Willie as a trademark," said Hughes. —AFP

## Lifestyle

## Britain's Big Ben marks 100 years of New Year 'bongs'

London's Big Ben on Sunday marks the 100th anniversary of its "bongs" to ring in the New Year being broadcast live across the world. Ever since New Year's Eve 1923 when BBC engineer A G Dryland clambered onto a roof opposite the British parliament to record the strikes, live transmission has become an annual tradition.

The unmistakable sound of the "nation's timepiece" has long occupied a special place in national life. The bongs are heard twice daily – at 6pm and midnight and three times on Sunday – on BBC radio, and at the start of the nightly News at Ten on commercial channel ITV. Such is their importance that even during the recently-ended five-year restoration program when they were largely silenced, important exceptions were made.

As well as New Year, Big Ben also continued to mark Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday when the nation remembers its war dead. Big Ben also rang out to mark Britain's departure from the European Union in 2021 and the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022. After a week of testing, normal service finally resumed last November. While the rest of London was enjoying New Year's Eve, clock mechanic Andrew Strangeway was at the top of the 96-m Elizabeth Tower. The tower houses the clock and its five bells, including the largest one from which Big Ben takes its nickname.

## 'Fractions of a second'

Along with the two other members

of the in-house timekeeping team, the 37-year-old will be making last minute checks to make sure the clock will be "within fractions of a second of being correct." Although the chances of a mishap on the big night are tiny, Strangeway said the clock did suffer a disaster during the 1970s when it stopped due to metal fatigue. "I think the chances of anything going seriously wrong are small. Our main worry on things like New Year is – is it going to go off and is it going to be on time," he said.

Completed in 1859, the structure was known as the Clock Tower before being renamed the Elizabeth Tower in 2012 to honor the late queen's Diamond Jubilee. In the years before the renovation, parliament's timekeepers would benchmark the Great Clock's time against the telephone speaking clock. Now, it is calibrated by GPS via Britain's National Physical Laboratory.

But the method to adjust the clock's timing mechanism remains old-fashioned: Old pennies are added or removed from weights attached to two giant coiled springs, to make or lose a second. "It's a fantastic job," Strangeway told AFP, adding that even when he was out and about in London he would frequently look for Big Ben and think "yes it's still running." He said he was very excited that he would be "right next to the bells... at that moment when everyone is looking at that clock for the start of the New Year". — AFP



Balloons, one in the colors of the Union flag, are pictured near the Big Ben at the Palace of Westminster in central London on March 6, 2023. — AFP

## 'Wonka' back atop N America box office in a weak film year

Fantasy musical "Wonka" bounced back to the top of the North American box office this New Year's weekend as an otherwise pallid film year came to an end, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. The Warner Bros film took in an estimated \$24 million for the three-day weekend in the US and Canada, and \$31.8 million when New Year's Day is included. It has passed the \$140 million mark domestically and taken in \$244 million globally.

That strong showing came at the end of an off year for Hollywood, with numbers roughly 20 percent below the three-year pre-pandemic average, said analyst David A Gross. Audience tastes are starting to change, he said, from universe-saving action films to stories closer to home. Close to home – at least if you live near a chocolate factory – was family-friendly "Wonka", with Timothee Chalamet as a younger version of Roald Dahl's famous chocolatier. Hugh Grant has an unforgettable turn as a grouchy, green-haired, gnome-like Oompa Loompa.

Last weekend's leader, Warner Bros' "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom," took on a bit of water, slipping to second at \$19.5 million for three days (\$26.3 million for four). Jason Momoa again plays the sea-dwelling superhero, this time joining with his half-brother and former foe to fight turmoil and climate change. In third was Illumination and Universal's animated comedy "Migration" about the adventures of a family of mallard ducks as they fly from New England to Jamaica. It earned \$17.2 million for three days (\$23 million for four).

Completing a strong weekend for Warner Bros was the new musical version of "The Color Purple", in fourth spot at \$13 million (\$17.7 million). Based on the Alice Walker novel that became a beloved movie, "Purple" follows the struggles and

triumphs of Celie, a young black woman



in rural Georgia in the early 20th century. One-time "American Idol" winner Fantasia Barrino-Taylor plays Celie – a role played by Whoopi Goldberg in the 1985 film – with backing from Danielle Brooks, H.E.R. and Colman Domingo.

And in fifth was Sony rom-com "Anyone But You," at \$9 million (\$11.5 million). Sydney Sweeney and Glen Powell star in the tale, oh-so-loosely based on Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," that takes the two from instant connection to crossed signals to the scheming of friends to a lot of splashing in Sydney Harbour before ultimately ... but nay, the rest is silence.

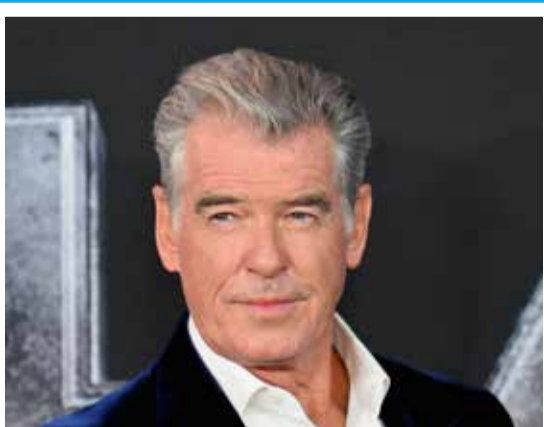
Rounding out the top 10 were: "Boys in the Boat" (\$8.3 million for three days; \$11 million for four); "The Iron Claw" (\$5 million; \$6.9 million); "Ferrari" (\$4.1 million; \$5.2 million); "Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes" (\$2.9 million; \$4 million); "The Boy and the Heron" (\$2.5 million; \$3.4 million). — AFP

## Pierce Brosnan in hot water after Yellowstone walk

Former James Bond actor Pierce Brosnan is in hot water with Yellowstone Park authorities after straying off the beaten path in a geothermal area of the famed national wilderness. The Irish heartthrob and on-screen superspy was strolling through the sprawling national park on Nov 1 when he was given a ticket for "foot travel in a thermal area," the Los Angeles Times reported, saying it had seen a copy of the citation.

Visitors to the 9,000-sq km park are warned to stay on specially designated boardwalks and trails to avoid the danger of slipping through a thin crust of ground and into the scalding waters below. But it seems the former "Remington Steele" series leading man was not playing by the rules, and fell afoul of a park ranger. "Foot travel in all thermal areas and within the Yellowstone Canyon between the Upper Falls and Inspiration Point must be confined to boardwalks or trails that are maintained for such travel and are marked by official signs," regulations say. There was no immediate comment from Brosnan or his representatives.

Last year rangers found a bit of a human foot in one of the hot springs, where temperatures reach around 60 Celsius. The body part was believed to have come from someone who slipped into the Abyss Pool a few



Pierce Brosnan

months earlier. In 2016 a young man died after coming off a boardwalk and falling into a hot spring at the Norris Geyser Basin.

Millions of people travel every year to Yellowstone, America's first national park, which covers portions of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana. It is home to thousands of geothermal features – hot springs, mudpots, steam vents and about half the world's active geysers, including Old Faithful. The park was the inspiration for Jellystone Park, the home of beloved cartoon favorite Yogi Bear – an affable but permanently hungry character whose chief preoccupation was stealing picnic baskets and outwitting a park ranger. — AFP

## 'Full Monty' star Tom Wilkinson dies aged 75

Two-time Oscar-nominated actor Tom Wilkinson, who starred in "The Full Monty", a film about a group of unemployed steel workers who launch new careers as strippers, died on Saturday aged 75. The British actor's death was confirmed in a statement released by his agent on behalf of his family. "It is with great sadness that the family of Tom Wilkinson announce that he died suddenly at home on December 30. His wife and family were with him."

Among his numerous accolades was an Academy Award nomination for "In the Bedroom" in 2001, and another for a supporting role in "Michael Clayton" in 2007. He most recently reunited with his "Full Monty" co-stars Robert Carlyle and Mark Addy in a Disney+ series of the same name. The original 1997 smash hit about an unlikely group of men stripping won an Oscar for best original musical or comedy score and was nominated in three others categories, including best picture and best director.

Wilkinson played Gerald Cooper, an ex-foreman who was recruited to help the unemployed men dance. The actor also took home a Best Supporting Actor Bafta for the role. Carlyle paid tribute to his co-star, calling him a "real titan of an actor, one of the greats of not only his, but of any generation." Wilkinson, who was born in Leeds to a family of farmers, studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and racked up more than 130 film and TV credits, including "Batman Begins", "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" and "Shakespeare in Love".

While working on the British mini-series "First Among Equals" in 1986, he met actress Diana Hardcastle, who he married in 1988. The couple had two daughters. American actor George Clooney, who played alongside Wilkinson in "Michael Clayton", told Variety: "Tom made every project better. He was the epitome of elegance and he will be dearly missed by all of us."

"Peaky Blinders" actor Aneurin Barnard, who starred opposite Wilkinson in the 2018 black comedy "Dead in a Week (Or Your Money Back)", said he was sad to hear of his co-star's passing. "One of our wonderful legends that we say goodbye to. Bye for now Tom x," he wrote on social media. Wilkinson won a 2009 Golden Globe and 2008 Emmy for his role as American political figure Benjamin Franklin in the HBO series "John Adams", playing opposite Paul Giamatti.

A noted character actor, he also netted roles in a BBC adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel "Martin Chuzzlewit"; the 1995 adaptation of Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility"; the 2014 Wes Anderson comedy drama "The Grand Budapest Hotel"; and 2011 ensemble comedy "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel". In 2005, Wilkinson was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to drama. — AFP



Tom Wilkinson

## 'Rude and inappropriate': Marceau remembers Depardieu

Sophie Marceau, one of France's best-loved actresses, said in an interview published Thursday that film icon Gerard Depardieu, accused of rape, was "rude and inappropriate" when they worked together, and targeted women with low-level jobs on set, not the stars. Marceau, whose career started in France and internationally with "La Boum" (The Party) in 1980 when she was 13, has since starred in dozens of films and directed a few more.

The actor gained added international fame for her role in the 1995 film Braveheart and for playing a villain in the 1999 James Bond action movie The World Is Not Enough. She worked with Depardieu on the set of "Police" in 1985, a film noir involving a jaded policeman and a mysterious woman. Depardieu's attitude was "rude and inappropriate," she told Thursday's edition of Paris Match weekly magazine. "He didn't target great actresses, he went more for low-level assistants," she said. "Vulgarity and provocation have always been his trademark," Marceau said. "Everybody loved him for it," Marceau observed, but said she publicly denounced his behavior which she found "unbearable," already at the time.

## 'A nuisance'

But "many people turned on me, trying to make it look like I was being a nuisance," she said. 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. The

actor, who turned 75 on Wednesday, has faced fresh scrutiny over sexually explicit comments including one about a young girl riding a horse during a 2018 trip to North Korea that were broadcast for the first time in a documentary on national television this month.

The footage caused condemnation from feminist groups and across the political spectrum. But President Emmanuel Macron came to Depardieu's defense last month, claiming the actor was the target of "a manhunt". Macron said he felt "huge admiration" for Depardieu, whom he called "an immense actor".

The remarks caused a fresh round of outrage. Generation.s Feministe, a feminist collective, said they were "an insult" to all women who had suffered sexual violence. The president's remarks were "not just scandalous but also dangerous," added Maelle Noir of the Nous Toutes association. Former president Francois Hollande said he was "not proud of Gerard Depardieu" after seeing the footage. On Monday, nearly 60 actors and artists denounced what they said was "the lynching" of Depardieu in an open letter in conservative daily Le Figaro. The letter, signed by British actor Charlotte Rampling, former French first lady and singer Carla Bruni, and Depardieu's former partner, actor Carole Bouquet, claims the star is the victim of a "torrent of hatred" and "probably the greatest of all actors".

Depardieu himself praised the letter – most signatories are his contemporaries, many his friends – calling it "beautiful". But Laurent Boyet,

founder of Les Papillons (Butterflies), a group that fights violence against children, said the letter was "indecent". On Wednesday, Isabelle Carre – a French actor with dozens of films to her name – denounced a culture in France in which even young girls are sexualized.

In an op-ed piece in Elle magazine she said that she had been the object of unwanted sexual attention since she was 11. "All I wanted was to grow up in peace," she said. In a reference to Depardieu, Carre said: "Isn't it astounding that it took 50 years to point out to an actor that his behavior towards female assistants, dressers and co-actors is not acceptable?" Depardieu has created a number of other scandals over the years, including by public brawling, drunk driving and urinating in the cabin of a commercial aircraft.

In 2012, he moved to Belgium to save on taxes, a decision the French prime minister at the time, Jean-Marc Ayrault, labelled "pathetic". In response to the gibe, Depardieu took Russian nationality and posted pictures of himself and President Vladimir Putin. But last year, he denounced what he said were Putin's "crazy, unacceptable excesses" in the Ukraine war.

A Belgian municipality recently stripped Depardieu of the title of honorary citizen, several days after the Canadian province of Quebec revoked its top honor over his "scandalous" comments about women. There have been demonstrations against Depardieu in France, and the Paris wax museum, Musee Grevin, has removed Depardieu's statue from its collection. — AFP

## Paula Abdul sues 'American Idol' producer

Grammy-award-winning artist and US television star Paula Abdul has accused a producer on the singing contest show "American Idol" of sexual assault, according to a California lawsuit. Abdul, whose 1988 album "Forever Your Girl" was the most successful debut in history at the time, accused Nigel Lythgoe, a producer on "Idol" and a judge on "So You Think You Can Dance," of sexually assaulting her twice, the complaint filed Friday showed.

Lythgoe, who is English, has denied the accusations, according to media reports. In the suit, the 61-year-old singer said she was harassed by Lythgoe and other executives on "American Idol", where she was a judge from 2002-2009. It alleged she was discriminated against in terms of pay, and that "she was the target of constant taunts, bullying, humiliation, and harassment from several executives, agents, employees" of the show.

The most serious accusations are against Lythgoe, 74. Early in Idol's run, the lawsuit stated, Abdul and Lythgoe were on the road for the show's auditions when he attacked her in a hotel elevator, groping her. The second assault came after Abdul agreed to appear as a judge on "So You Think You Can Dance" in 2015, and went to dinner at Lythgoe's house, where he allegedly "attempted to kiss her while proclaiming that the two would make an excellent 'power couple'." "For years,



TV personalities Paula Abdul and Nigel Lythgoe attend the 2013 amfAR Inspiration Gala Los Angeles at Milk Studios on Dec 12, 2013 in Los Angeles. — AFP

Abdul has remained silent about the sexual assaults and harassment she experienced on account of Lythgoe due to fear of speaking out against one of the most well-known producers of television competition shows who could easily break her career as a television personality and of being ostracized and blackballed by an industry that had a pattern of protecting powerful men and silencing survivors of sexual assault and harassment," the complaint stated. Her contracts also barred her from discussing anything "derogatory", it said.

Lythgoe told NPR that he was "shocked and saddened" by the accusations, which he denied. The allegations by Abdul, whose other hit songs include "Opposites Attract", "Straight Up", "Cold Hearted" and "Rush Rush", are the latest in a string of high-profile lawsuits filed ahead of Sunday's expiration of part of California's Sexual Abuse and Cover Up Accountability Act. A similar law in New York led to several high-profile cases, including against hip-hop mogul Sean "Diddy" Combs, in November. — AFP

## Sports

# Novak Djokovic sparks Serbia celebration in the midnight hour

## Britain beat Australia to open their tournament account

PERTH: Novak Djokovic got the party started for 2024 as he sealed a 2-1 win for Serbia over China near the stroke of midnight on Sunday at the United Cup in Perth. The world number one kicked off the new season by teaming up in mixed doubles with compatriot and longtime friend Olga Danilovic to hold off Zheng Qinwen and ATP number 58 Zhang Zhizhen for a 6-4, 1-6, 10-6 victory.

Glancing at his watch after his on-court interview, Djokovic then implored the house DJ to fill in for five minutes before leading the RAC stadium crowd in a rousing countdown to the midnight hour. "Thanks to the fans for staying this late," the winner of 24 Grand Slams said.

"We're glad you decided to spend this special night with us." The Serbs were playing their first match at the competition while China now stand 1-1. Djokovic won his earlier singles over Zhang 6-3, 6-2 while Danilovic went down 6-4, 6-2 to her Chinese opponent Zheng, the WTA's 2023 Most Improved Player who has risen to be world number 15.

The 22-year-old Danilovic could not praise her celebrated teammate enough. "This was number one on my bucket list - to play with Novak and to win, I'm so

happy. "This was an incredible match, I gave my all and I'm glad to finish 2023 like this, it could not be better. "I've looked up to Novak from the first moment I touched a racquet."

### Defending champions USA win

Jessica Pegula and Taylor Fritz had to fight through a deciding doubles match to conclude a 2-1 defeat of Britain on Sunday for the United States to stay in title contention at the United Cup. The defending champions, who won the trophy last January over Italy, earned a 1-6, 7-6 (7/5), 10-7 mixed doubles win to claim victory in Perth after the sides split the singles.

"We have a team energy from last year here, we don't want to take a loss and let it die," said Fritz, who was broken twice in the opening set. World number five Pegula added: "To get a win in this fashion after such a long day (on court) brings back a lot of memories."

"It was a big win today, especially after losing such a tough singles match." Britain, who beat Australia to open their tournament account, took a 1-0 lead when Pegula crashed 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to Katie Boulter in the singles.

It was Boulter's first win over a top-five player on her seventh attempt after she bounced back from a set and double-break down. Pegula's 10th-ranked teammate Fritz kept the tie alive despite a thigh strain he blamed on over-training, defeating Cameron Norrie 7-6 (5), 6-4.

"I strained something but got through it," said Fritz. "Cam and I have played so many times (14). It's always a battle, always close." In Sydney, Leylah Fernandez led Canada to a fighting victory over Chile with the former US Open finalist winning her singles rubber and then backing up in a decisive mixed doubles.

The 35th-ranked Fernandez got Canada off to a perfect start, cruising past Chile's Daniela Seguel 6-2, 6-3 in 73 minutes. With Canadian number one Felix Auger-Aliassime sitting out the men's singles, 314th-ranked Steven Diez stepped up but was toppled by world number 19 Nicolas Jarry 7-5, 6-4.

It set up a deciding mixed doubles, with Fernandez teaming with Diez to battle past Seguel and Tomas Barrios Vera 7-5, 4-6, 10-8. "I'm extremely happy with the way I played," said Fernandez, who was part of the Canadian team that won the Billie Jean King Cup



PERTH: Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return against China's Zhang Zhizhen during their men's singles match at the United Cup tennis tournament in Perth. — AFP

for the first time this year.

The 21-year-old broke five times in her singles clash against a player in her first WTA Tour-level singles match in nearly

two years, using the serve-and-volley tactic well. "First match of the season so had some nerves, but happy with the way I was able to handle it," she said. — AFP



KUWAIT: Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber (2nd left) and Tariq Zainal with winner Mohammad Douqas and Mohammad Hazem.

## Tunisian Douqas wins 3rd Arab Tennis Masters

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The third Arab Tennis Masters Tournament concluded with Tunisian Mohammad Aziz Douqas winning after beating Syria's Mohammad Hazem in two sets 6-4, 6-2 in final match in Qatar's Khalifa International Tennis complex. Chairman of the Board of the Arab Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Sabah, International Tennis Federation Vice President Salma Mouelhi Guizani, Qatar Tennis Federation Secretary General Tariq Zainal, ATF Secretary Dr Abdallah Abdelaziz, Vice President of African Federation Aziz Laaraf, Egypt Tennis Federation Secretary General Eng

Waleed Sami, President of Jordan's Tennis Seniors Club Eng Ahmad Al-Qaddoumi and several other officials were in attendance of the final match.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber was highly pleased with the tournament's technical, organizational and media success saying "the success surpassed expectations due to the fruitful cooperation and continued coordination with Qatar Tennis Federation which has all its efforts and facilities to present this tournament in this brilliant and professional fashion."

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber described the Arab Masters tournament as "A brotherly and entertaining gathering, adding that this event will continue every year". He thanked QTF President Nasser Al-Khulaifi and secretary Tariq Zainal and Board members who gave all support for the tournament.

ATF President Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber congratulated the winners of top place and lauded the high level players displayed at all stages, adding that it deserves the name "Masters because of such great level".

that, and winning it in India, I think that's a massive achievement.

"So I'll make that decision today, to retire from those forms, which does allow me to go and play some other (Twenty20) leagues around the world and sort of get the one-day team moving forward a little bit. "I know there's a Champions Trophy coming up," he added. "If I'm playing decent cricket in two years' time and I'm around and they need someone, I'm going to be available." The Champions Trophy has not been played since 2017, but is set to be resurrected in 2025 in Pakistan. Traditionally 50-over cricket, reports have said there is a push underway to make it T20.

Warner leaves ODIs after 161 matches, smashing 6,932 runs at an average of 45.30, with 22 centuries. Among Australians, only Ricky Ponting with 30 has scored more one-day tons. He will continue to be available in the T20 format, with the 2024 World Cup in the Caribbean and United States a target. Warner's decision to depart one-dayers means Australia will need a new opener for their three-match series against the West Indies in February, which follows a two-Test series in Adelaide and Brisbane.

### Vital role

Ahead of his ODI announcement, Cricket Australia chief Nick Hockley paid tribute to Warner's "amazing Test career". "We are all extremely grateful for his immense contribution to this form of the game," he said in a statement.

"David's wonderful attacking style not only played a vital role in many Australian victories, it also enthralled and entertained fans across the world and drew many to Test cricket." A larger-than-life character, Warner was described by Australia coach Andrew McDonald over the weekend as "probably our greatest ever three-format player".

But he will forever be remembered for the role he played in the notorious ball-tampering scandal of 2018 in South Africa. Along with skipper Steve Smith, he was banned for a year for his part in the third Test debacle in Cape Town that saw Cameron Bancroft use sandpaper to scuff the ball before a crude attempt to conceal the evidence down his trousers. — AFP



SYDNEY: (L-R) Australia's David Warner, Nathan Lyon and Usman Khawaja talk before a team photo ahead of the third Test match between Australia and Pakistan at the Sydney Cricket Ground in Sydney on January 1, 2024. — AFP

## Dominant Swiatek sends Poland into United Cup q-finals

PERTH: An irrepressible Iga Swiatek unleashed on Spain Monday as Poland booked a 2-1 win to move into the quarter-finals of the United Cup. The world number one showed no mercy to Sara Sorribes Tormo in a 6-2, 6-1 singles victory before teaming with Hubert Hurkacz to clinch the tie with a 6-0, 6-0 mixed doubles thrashing in just 53 minutes.

Hurkacz was ambushed in the day's opening singles, losing 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 to Alejandro Davidovich Fokina. The top-seeded Poles finished Group A play with a perfect 2-0 record and await a last-eight opponent.

Swiatek, who has lost only seven games in two singles matches to start her countdown to the Australian Open, said playing mixed doubles was good experience. "It's lessons for the future and great practice," the 22-year-old said. "I hardly ever play mixed. You use different skills, it's about feeling the geometry of the court."

Hurkacz credited his teammate with doing most of the hard yards. "She carried me throughout the whole match, in every game she was making amazing shots," the world number nine said. In Sydney, a sharp Casper Ruud won his second straight singles

match before backing up in the mixed doubles to steer Norway past Croatia.

World number 24 Donna Vekic ground past unheralded Malene Helgo 7-5, 3-6, 6-3 to give the Croats a winning start to the Group F tie. But three-time Grand Slam finalist Ruud swept past Borna Coric 6-4, 6-1 in just 89 minutes to level proceedings, then partnered with Ulrikke Eikeri to beat Vekic and Ivan Dodig 6-2, 3-6, 10-7.

It was a much-needed win for Norway, who lost to the Netherlands at the weekend. "I'm motivated for the new year, I'm fresh and I'm ready," said world number 11 Ruud. "Another great singles match. I'm very happy to start the new year that way." The win followed a similarly dominant 6-3, 6-4 victory over Dutchman Tallon Griekspoor on Saturday.

Ruud has dropped serve just once through the two matches, and was not broken on Monday. He also won 12 of 13 net approaches and said he had been working hard to improve his volleys. "I'll never be the guy who is all over the net, but I'm trying to come into the court a little more," he said.

Vekic needed two hours and 49 minutes to battle past Helgo, who played far better than her ranking of 539 suggested. "She's a really good player and her ranking doesn't do her justice," said Vekic, a quarter-finalist at the Australian Open last year. "Finally my serve showed up in the third set, which made it easier." The Alexander Zverev-led Germany meet France in Group D later Monday in Sydney, while the defending champions United States face Australia in Perth. — AFP



PERTH: Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return against Spain's Sara Sorribes Tormo during their women's singles match at the United Cup tennis tournament in Perth on January 1, 2024. — AFP

## Naomi Osaka wins comeback match at Brisbane

BRISBANE: Former world number one and new mother Naomi Osaka said on Monday she was proud to have won her first match back after a long break, admitting she had been "super nervous". The 26-year-old was on court at the Brisbane International for an hour and 47 minutes before finally seeing off gallant German Tamara Korpatsch 6-3, 7-6 (11/9) on Pat Rafter Arena.

"I was super nervous, but I was excited to be out there," said Osaka, a four-time Grand Slam champion who stepped away from tennis in September 2022, citing mental health concerns. "I think it's better to have harder matches early because it will train me for what's to come."

"I know all the opponents I play aren't easy anyway, so it would be very 'out there' for me to think my first match would be a 6-1, 6-1 win. "Looking back on the match now, honestly I'm very proud of myself. I feel like I played at a pretty good level."

After giving birth to a baby girl in July, Osaka rediscovered her love of the game and decided to return for the 2024 season. It looked like she had never been away when she broke Korpatsch to love in the opening game then broke once more to take the first set relatively comfortably.

But it was a different story in the second set as

Korpatsch lifted and Osaka began to feel the pressure. Korpatsch broke Osaka's serve to start the second set and although the Japanese star broke straight back, she was no longer as settled against the tenacious German.

Osaka did break once more and was serving for the match at 5-4, but she was broken again and it went to a tiebreak, where both players had their chances. Osaka squandered two match points and Korpatsch two set points before Osaka prevailed on her third opportunity with a powerful forehand down the line.

She said court-side that motherhood had changed her outlook on the game, and she had felt too isolated from fans and fellow players previously. "The last couple of years that I played before I had my daughter I didn't return as much love as I was given," she said. "So I really feel like that's what I want to do in this chapter. I just really appreciate people coming out and cheering for me. "I would say she's (her daughter) helped me grow up so much so quickly," Osaka added.

"Off the court I'm more aware of people and I appreciate them a lot more, even my opponents and everything." In the men's draw, world number eight and top seed Holger Rune came from a set down to defeat Australian Max Purcell. The big serving Purcell took the opening set against a rusty looking Rune, but the Dane became increasingly assured as the match wore on and took charge to win 4-6, 6-4, 6-2. Second seed Grigor Dimitrov was also recovered from losing the first set to defeat former world number one Andy Murray 4-6, 7-5, 6-2. Earlier, Russia's Roman Safiullin ousted third seeded American Ben Shelton 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3 in a match lasting over two-and-a-half hours. — AFP

## Sports

# Japan call on Mitoma to help erase Asian Cup 'frustration'

## Japan warm up for Asian Cup with 5-0 win over Thailand

**TOKYO:** Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma was named in Japan's Asian Cup squad on Monday despite an ankle injury, as coach Hajime Moriyasu looks to erase the "frustration" of their 2019 final defeat. Brighton coach Roberto De Zerbi said last week that Mitoma would be out for up to six weeks after hurting his ankle in a 1-1 draw with Crystal Palace on December 21.

But Moriyasu still included the player in his 26-man squad for the Asian Cup in Qatar, which kicks off on January 12. "Given his current injury situation, I don't know if he will be ready to play in the first game or not," Moriyasu said of the 26-year-old. "But I have been told by the national team medical staff and his club medical staff that I will be able to use him early in the tournament when he comes back from injury."

Japan warmed up for the Asian Cup with a 5-0 friendly win over Thailand in Tokyo in front of a New Year's Day crowd of over 60,000. They have won the Asian Cup a record four times but they lost 3-1 to Qatar in the final of the 2019 tournament in the United Arab Emirates.

Moriyasu said his "fundamental approach hasn't changed" over the past five years but he is determined to lift the trophy this time. "One thing that hasn't changed from the last time is that we will take each game as it comes and prepare as best we can, as we always do," he said.

"The thing that has changed is that we have frustration from not winning the last time," Moriyasu named Liverpool midfielder Wataru Endo and Arsenal defender Takehiro Tomiyasu in his Asian Cup squad, along with Real Sociedad attacking midfielder Takefusa Kubo.

Celtic's Daizen Maeda and Reo Hatate made the cut but club-mate Kyogo Furuhashi, who scored against Rangers on Saturday, was not selected. Lazio's Daichi Kamada was left out, as was midfielder Ao Tanaka, who scored Japan's opener against Thailand.

### 'Fierce competition'

Only 14 players were retained from Japan's squad for the 2022 World Cup, where they beat Germany and Spain before losing on penalties to Croatia in the last 16. "If you look at the overall level of Japanese football, there are more players playing at a high level," said Moriyasu.

"There is fierce competition for places and that means there is a high level of candidates for the national team," Moriyasu fielded an inexperienced lineup missing several overseas-based players against a Thailand side that is also heading to the Asian Cup.

Tanaka broke the deadlock five minutes into the second half before goals from Keito Nakamura, Takumu Kawamura, Takumi Minamino and a Thailand own goal gave the hosts a comfortable win.



**TOKYO:** Thailand's Suphanan Bureerat ( R ) slides to block a shot by Japan's Junya Ito (2nd L) during the New Year's Day international football friendly match between Japan and Thailand at the National Stadium in Tokyo on January 1, 2024. — AFP

Moriyasu said his players had been proactive in attacking the opposition but urged them to keep improving. "In order to win at the Asian Cup and to beat the very best teams in the world, we have to be

logged in defence and get better at winning the ball back from them," he said. Japan have been drawn in Group D at the Asian Cup and will face Indonesia, Iraq and Vietnam in the first round. — AFP

## Kuwait shooters outstanding in 2023 Asian tourney

**KUWAIT:** Kuwaiti shooters made record results in the annual qualification competitions of the Asian Shooting Confederation (ASC) in 2023, said Chairperson of the Kuwait Shooting Club Duaij Al-Otaibi. Al-Otaibi said in a statement to KUNA on Monday that the Olympic shooter Abdullah Al-Turqi came first in the skeet competition, beating contestants

from all over the Asian continent and his Kuwaiti peer, Talal Al-Turqi, came second in the same category. The Kuwaiti shooters' beating of their Asian contestants, considered the top at the international level, was due to achievements they had made throughout the past year, namely in the latest Asian games held in China, he said, affirming their resolve to manifest the best performance as Kuwaiti champions at such major sports events abroad. He re-affirmed that the Kuwaiti shooters would make additional good results in the coming years, thanked all supporters of the sport over the past years and expressed gratitude, in particular, to the political leadership, led by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — AFP



**Kuwaiti shooter Abdullah Al-Turqi**

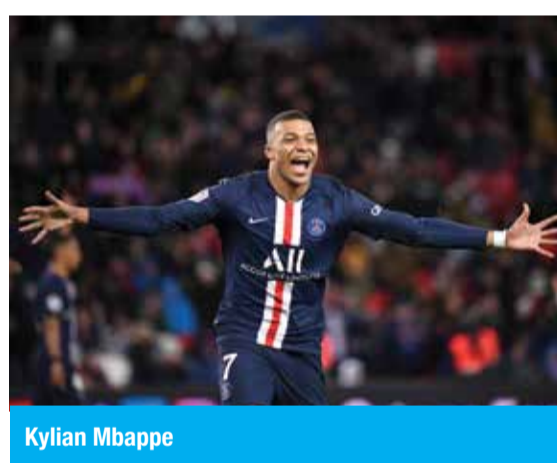
## Kylian Mbappe's future to dominate transfer window

**PARIS:** The future of Kylian Mbappe and his protracted courtship by Real Madrid is expected to be the key theme of the transfer window that opens in Europe on Monday. Arsenal's search for a proven goalscorer to spearhead their challenge for a first Premier League title since 2004 could also loom large.

Manchester City, meanwhile, are widely expected to let Kalvin Phillips leave the club, ending a disappointing stay for the former Leeds midfielder who has failed to make his mark at the world champions. Much attention though will again focus on Mbappe, Paris Saint-Germain's lethal finisher and the man who a year ago scored a hat-trick for France in the World Cup final only to finish on the losing side.

Real Madrid are again the main suitor for the 25-year-old whose contract at PSG expires in June—will the 14-time European champions finally get a commitment from the player they have been pursuing for years?

It is far from certain though as Mbappe triggers an extraordinary reaction in France, illustrated when President Emmanuel Macron intervened to persuade him to stay at PSG in June 2022 when a move to Real seemed almost cut and dried. Real are not sitting on their hands though. Endrick, the latest Brazilian starlet, will join the club from Palmeiras when he turns 18



**Kylian Mbappe**

in July 2024 for a fee reported to be 72 million euros.

### Toney to the Gunners?

Arsenal's lack of a goalscoring edge could lead them to plunge into the market. For weeks, their rumoured target has been Ivan Toney, the Brentford forward whose ban for over 200 breaches of the Football Association's gambling rules ends in mid-January.

However, Brentford's decline in form which has seen them drop to within four points of the relegation places could persuade the club to hang onto 27-year-old Toney, even in the face of a big offer from the Gunners.

Kalvin Phillips was riding high when the midfielder joined City on the back of England's run to the Euro 2022 final, but he has played barely a handful of

or blocking it", he said. "We will have to make the choice of a stronger, more sovereign Europe in the light of the legacy of Jacques Delors." Macron was speaking at the end of a troubled year in which his government forced through deeply unpopular pensions reforms and faced summer riots over the police killing of youths.

More recently, the government passed a controversial immigration bill with the backing of the far right, creating divisions within its own ranks. And Macron himself came under fire earlier this month for comments he made supporting film icon Gerard Depardieu, who is charged with rape and facing a litany of sexual assault claims.

He has also faced criticism for his handling of the crisis in the Middle East that followed Hamas's October 7 attack on Zionist entity and the subsequent Zionist entity response. France would not forget the hostages held by Hamas, he said Sunday, or the 41

games for the club and Pep Guardiola has admitted the move never worked out.

Juventus have reportedly been keen to sign Phillips, who is desperate to force himself into England's plans for Euro 2024, but reports from Italy say the club are cooling on the idea. A move to Newcastle looks a more realistic possibility as the Magpies look to bolster a squad seriously depleted by injuries and the 10-month ban handed down to Italian midfielder Sandro Tonali, also for gambling.

Eddie Howe's men have slumped down the Premier League table in recent weeks and the Saudi-owned club look badly in need of reinforcements if they are to qualify for next season's Champions League. Serhou Guirassy, the prolific Guinea international who has scored 17 Bundesliga goals so far this season for Stuttgart, has also been linked with a move to Tyneside.

Newcastle could also turn to their connections in the Saudi Pro League. They are allowed to sign players on loan from sides also controlled by their Saudi owners, after a vote by Premier League clubs on a temporary ban on related-party loans failed to receive the required support.

However, one target, Ruben Neves, said in early December he would not accept a move to Newcastle because his family was happy in Saudi Arabia. Liverpool forward Roberto Firmino also headed to the Saudi league in the summer, but is reportedly unsettled at Al Ahli. The Brazilian, 32, could now be heading to their rivals Al Ettifaq, the club coached by former Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard, although Premier League strugglers Sheffield United are also said to be interested in his services. — AFP



**Emmanuel Macron**

French citizens killed during their attack. But his call last week for a lasting ceasefire in Gaza during a phone call with the Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has so far fallen on deaf ears. — AFP

## France prepares to host Olympics

**PARIS:** French President Emmanuel Macron called for unity in the country in his New Year's Eve address Sunday as it prepares for the 2024 Olympic Games, after a difficult year for his government. Speaking from the gardens of the Elysee Palace, with the flags of the Olympic nations behind him, he promised a civic and economic "rearmament" for the country.

And evoking the memory of former European Union leader Jacques Delors, who died on Wednesday, he said voters would have a decisive choice to make in June's European elections. They would have choose between "continuing Europe

## PGA works to extend 'active, productive' Saudi merger talks

**WASHINGTON:** The PGA Tour worked Sunday to extend a deadline into 2024 for finalizing a merger agreement with Saudi Arabian investors, tour commissioner Jay Monahan calling talks "active and productive."

The update to players in a memo from Monahan came hours ahead of the year-end deadline to approve a framework agreement merging the PGA Tour, DP World Tour and Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) that finances the upstart LIV Golf League.

An update on the PGA Tour website regarding talks said the memo, which reportedly was obtained by The Golf Channel and ESPN, addressed efforts to extend the deadline into 2024. Monahan said in his memo, according to the Golf Channel, that the PGA Tour will "continue our active and productive conversations with PIF and the DP World Tour."

"While we had initially set a deadline of December 31, 2023, to reach an agreement, we are working to extend our negotiations into next year based on the progress we have made to date," Monahan also said the PGA Tour had made "meaningful progress" in separate negotiations to have Strategic Sports Group (SSG) become a tour minority investor.

Monahan's memo said the goal remains to have PIF, the DP World Tour and SSG become minority co-investors in PGA Tour Enterprises in 2024.

"These partnerships will allow us to unify, innovate and invest in the game for the benefit of the players, fans and sponsors," Monahan said.

ESPN reported the SSG would invest \$3 billion into the new entity, which would be financed to more than \$7 billion if the PIF investment were also included in any deal. The PGA Tour has been negotiating with PIF since June with a stated December 31 deadline on final details of a merger agreement, the announcement of which stunned PGA Tour players and led to players demanding and getting greater input in final approval of the deal.

Spain's Jon Rahm, the reigning Masters champion, jumped from the PGA Tour to LIV Golf in early December, serving notice that the Saudi-backed series and its plans for a 2024 campaign could pull even more talent from the PGA Tour as it did in 2022 for its inaugural season. — AFP

## Ravens crush Miami to take AFC top seed

**WASHINGTON:** The Baltimore Ravens secured the AFC top seed for the NFL playoffs in emphatic fashion on Sunday, crushing the Miami Dolphins 56-19 with Lamar Jackson throwing five touchdowns. The San Francisco 49ers, meanwhile, will have the NFC top seed—and the home field playoff advantage that comes with it—after winning 27-10 at Washington.

Jackson is the frontrunner to win the league's Most Valuable Player award and he hugely boosted his chances with an outstanding display against a Miami team that had hopes of topping the conference. The Ravens quarterback threw for 321 yards on 18 of 21 passing, averaging 15.3 yards per pass while picking apart Miami's defense.

"I don't know if I've seen a more impressive performance in a game," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said of Jackson's effort. After the Dolphins, who are also in the playoffs, had opened the scoring with Cedric Wilson collecting an eight-yard pass from Tua Tagovailoa, Jackson found Justice Hill with a 20-yard touchdown pass wide right.

The Ravens took a 14-10 lead on a Gus Edwards one-yard touchdown run and reached halftime with a 28-13 advantage after Jackson threw touchdown passes for 75 yards to Zay Flowers and 35 yards to Isaiah Likely.

Jackson found Likely again for a seven-yard score in the third quarter and although De'Von Achane's touchdown early in the fourth gave the Miami hope, the Ravens pulled away from there. Patrick Ricard caught a four-yard pass from Jackson before Melvin Gordon ran in from three yards and reserve Tyler Huntley found Charlie Kolar with a 19-yard touchdown pass. Miami can take the AFC East division title by beating Buffalo next Sunday.

### Purdy bounces back

The Ravens had picked off 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy four times in winning last week but he bounced back as San Francisco took a top seed at Washington. Purdy threw for 230 yards and two touchdowns on 22-of-28 passing with no interceptions. He has set a club record for single season passing yards, overtaking Jeff Garcia's mark of 4,279.

The Niners extended a 13-10 halftime lead on Elijah Mitchell's two-yard touchdown run and Purdy found Brandon Aiyuk with a 17-yard touchdown pass in the fourth quarter. The 49ers sealed the NFC top seed when the Philadelphia Eagles were shock losers 35-31 at home to Arizona (4-12).

James Conner's two-yard touchdown run with 32 seconds remaining claimed the upset for Arizona, opening the door for Dallas to edge Philadelphia for the NFC East title. The Cowboys can win the division with a victory at Washington next week.

Defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City reached the playoffs, winning the AFC West for the eighth successive season with a gritty 25-17 victory over Cincinnati. The only second-half points were from the boot of Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker, who scored six field goals, four of them after the break.

The Bengals were eliminated from playoff contention and the Denver Broncos missed the playoffs for an eighth straight year despite a 16-9 win over the Los Angeles Chargers. The Pittsburgh Steelers kept their playoff hopes alive with a 30-23 win over the Seattle Seahawks with running back Najee Harris scoring two touchdowns and rushing for a season-best 122 yards.

The Seahawks need to beat Arizona next Sunday and hope other games fall their way next week. Seattle's loss clinched a playoff berth for the Los Angeles Rams (9-7) after their 26-25 win at the New York Giants. The fight for the NFC South title will go down to the wire after the New Orleans Saints beat Tampa Bay 23-13. Atlanta's hopes were dented with a 37-17 loss to the Chicago Bears while the Buffalo Bills enter their AFC East decider with Miami off a 27-21 win over New England.

Green Bay reached the brink of an NFC playoff berth with a 33-10 victory at Minnesota and can claim a spot with a home win next week over Chicago. The Bears clinched the top pick in the 2024 NFL Draft when Carolina lost 26-0 at Jacksonville. — AFP



LONDON: Bournemouth's Ukrainian defender #27 Illia Zabarnyi (L) vies with Tottenham Hotspur's Brazilian striker #09 Richarlison during the English Premier League football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Bournemouth at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London. — AFP

## Arsenal falter once more at Fulham

### Fifth-placed Spurs are just three points off the top

LONDON: Arsenal's Premier League title challenge suffered another blow in a 2-1 defeat at Fulham on Sunday, as Tottenham beat Bournemouth 3-1 to close in on their north London rivals. The Gunners' high hopes of a first league title in 20 years have been rocked by two damaging defeats in four days.

Mikel Arteta was looking for a response after losing 2-0 at home to West Ham on Thursday but was left angered by what he described as his side's "worst performance of the season". Arsenal remain in fourth, two points behind leaders Liverpool and level on 40 points with Manchester City, but having played a game more than both their title rivals.

"If we play like today we will be nowhere near. Today was a really difficult day to swallow," said Arteta on his side's title aspirations. "It's a really sad day today because we didn't deserve to win the game." Arsenal had started brightly at Craven Cottage as Bukayo Saka pounced to tap home his first goal in six games after Bernd Leno parried Gabriel Martinelli's initial effort.

But the visitors failed to build on their early advantage and Fulham hit back to snap a three-game losing run in the Premier League without even scoring a goal. Raul

Jimenez was badly missed during his three-game ban for a red card at Newcastle and the Mexican kickstarted the Fulham fightback with his fourth goal in as many games.

Former Arsenal winger William sent Tom Cairney free down the left and his dangerous low cross was swept home by Jimenez at the back post. Fulham were the better side in the second half and they got their reward just before the hour mark.

Arsenal failed to clear a corner and the ball broke kindly for Bobby De Cordova-Reid to smash home from close range. Only a fine save from David Raya to deny Cairney and the crossbar from Andreas Pereira's free-kick prevented Arsenal from suffering further punishment in the pouring rain in west London. But enough damage may have been done to their title chances over the past week.

#### Son's parting gift

Arteta's men could even be outside the top four by the time they are next in league action in three weeks' time as Tottenham closed to within a point of the Champions League places. Ange Postecoglou's men shrugged off a mounting injury crisis to inflict

Bournemouth's first defeat in eight games.

Fifth-placed Spurs are just three points off the top with the table tantalisingly poised heading into 2024. "We're three points off the top so if that is the difference between having a great season and where we are, I'll take it," said Postecoglou.

"When you're trying to build something you will undoubtedly come up against some challenges. I am seeing progress." Pape Sarr's precise finish into the bottom corner opened the scoring after just nine minutes.

But the Senegalese midfielder left the field in tears midway through the first half with an injury that puts his participation in the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations in doubt. Bournemouth will feel they should have been level before the break as the in-form Dominic Solanke hit the bar amid a flurry of chances.

Instead, the visitors were picked off in the second half. Son Heung-min is also set to depart for a few weeks to lead South Korea at the Asian Cup. The Spurs captain signed off in style with a thumping finish from a narrow angle before Richarlison made it 3-0. Alex Scott pulled a goal back six minutes from time, but it was too little, too late for the Cherries, who remain in 12th. — AFP



Benjamin Kiplagat

## Ugandan athlete 'stabbed to death' in Kenya

NAIROBI: Ugandan athlete Benjamin Kiplagat has been found dead in Kenya, police said Sunday, with local media reporting he had been stabbed to death. The Kenyan-born Kiplagat, 34, had represented Uganda internationally in the 3,000m steeplechase, including at several Olympic Games and World Championships.

His body was found in a car on Saturday night on the outskirts of the Rift Valley town of Eldoret, which is home to many athletes who train in the high-altitude area. "An investigation has been launched and officers are on the ground pursuing leads," local police commander Stephen Okal told reporters in Eldoret.

He said Kiplagat's body had a deep knife wound to his neck, suggesting he was stabbed. Uganda's Daily Monitor and other media outlets in Kenya said he had been stabbed to death. "World Athletics is shocked and saddened to hear of the passing of Benjamin Kiplagat," the global athletics governing body said in a statement on X, formerly Twitter.

"We send our deepest condolences to his friends, family, teammates and fellow athletes. Our thoughts are with them all at this difficult time." Peter Ogwang, state minister for sports in Uganda, expressed similar sentiments on X. "I send my deepest condolences to his family, Ugandans, and the entire East Africa for the loss of such a budding athlete who has on several occasions represented us on the international scene," he said. Media reports said Kiplagat had been training in the Eldoret area before going to Uganda to take part in athletics competitions. — AFP

## Celtics rout Spurs for sixth win in a row

WASHINGTON: Jayson Tatum scored 25 points and Jaylen Brown added 24 to lead the NBA-best Boston Celtics over San Antonio 134-101 on Sunday, stretching their win streak to six games. Kristaps Porzingis added 14 points and a game-high nine rebounds for the Celtics, who improved to 26-6.

Boston also got 17 points from Derrick White, who spent five seasons with San Antonio before joining the Celtics in a 2022 trade. He heard chants of "White's an All-Star" from the Celtics fans. "I've got a lot of respect for the fans here, great memories here," White said. "I'm just thankful."

Boston outscored the Spurs 40-23 in the third quarter to pull away for good. "Just had that mindset of third quarter is important and coming out ready to go," White said. "We finished the first half well and kept it going from there."

Tatum made 10-of-17 shots from the floor, 5-of-10 from 3-point range, while Brown went 9-of-13 from the floor, hitting both 3-point attempts, and 4-of-6 from the free throw line. French 19-year-old rookie star center Victor Wembanyama, the 7-foot-4 (2.24m) top pick of the 2023 NBA Draft, scored 21 points and grabbed seven rebounds for the host Spurs, who fell to 5-27. Zion Williamson and Brandon Ingram

each scored 26 points and the host New Orleans Pelicans avenged an In-Season Tournament (IST) semi-final loss by ripping the Los Angeles Lakers 129-109. Ingram also contributed eight assists, five rebounds, three steals and two blocked shots while Williamson added six assists and four rebounds for the Pelicans, who improved to 19-14 with all five starters scoring in double figures.

A day after his 39th birthday, LeBron James led the Lakers with 34 points while adding eight assists and five rebounds. Anthony Davis netted 20 points with 10 rebounds for the Lakers, who humbled the Pelicans 133-89 on their way to the IST crown earlier this month. Japan's Rui Hachimura was sidelined by a calf injury after starting for the Lakers, playing only eight minutes.

#### Thunder win streak at 4

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored a game-high 24 points to lead Oklahoma City over visiting Brooklyn 124-108 for a fourth consecutive triumph. The Canadian guard hit 7-of-15 from the floor and all nine free throws to pace five starters scoring in double figures for the Thunder, who at 22-9 pulled two games back of Western Conference leader Minnesota. Phoenix's Kevin Durant scored 31 points



SAN ANTONIO: Payton Pritchard #11 of the Boston Celtics drives on Tre Jones #33 of the San Antonio Spurs in the second half at Frost Bank Center on December 31, 2023 in San Antonio, Texas. — AFP

while Bradley Beal added 25 and Devin Booker had 21 to spark the host Suns over Orlando 112-107. The Magic, paced by Paolo Banchero's 28 points, used a 21-8 rally in the third quarter to erase a Suns lead, but shot only 3-for-13 in the final 7:30 to fall.

"They made us work a little bit harder than we wanted to but that's what we need right now," Beal said after his highest-scoring game since arriving in a deal with Washington. "I'm just trying to figure out my way with the guys. I'm not here to step on any toes but at the same

time I'm here for a reason. I've got to be aggressive. I've got to be me. I came out tonight being aggressive and thankfully we got a great win out of it.

"We've got to be better on defense, got to clean that up, but we've got some good mojo, some good juices going into the new year." Trae Young scored 40 points and passed off 13 assists to spark Atlanta's 130-126 triumph at Washington. The Wizards (6-26) had 38 points from Kyle Kuzma in a losing cause. Dejounte Murray had 32 for the Hawks (13-19). — AFP