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2 'Life is beautiful': Living with vision impairment in Kuwait



5 Tears, defiance in Palestinian village of slain Hamas deputy



8 Zain Kuwait achieves 10 Gbps speed in successful 5.5G trial



16 Djokovic wrist injury dooms Serbia to Australia defeat



103 KILLED IN IRAN BLASTS

Twin explosions strike near grave of Soleimani • Raisi slams 'heinous' crime



KERMAN, Iran: People disperse near the site where two explosions in quick succession struck a crowd marking the anniversary of the 2020 killing of General Qasem Soleimani, near the Saheb Al-Zaman Mosque in this southern Iranian city on Jan 3, 2024. — AFP

TEHRAN: Twin bomb blasts killed at least 103 people in Iran on Wednesday, ripping through a crowd commemorating Revolutionary Guards general Qasem Soleimani four years after his death in a US strike, state media reported. The two explosions — unclaimed but labelled a "terrorist attack" by state media and regional authorities — came amid high Middle East tensions over the Zionist-Hamas war in Gaza and the killing of a Hamas senior leader in Lebanon on Tuesday.

The blasts, about 15 minutes apart, struck near the Martyrs Cemetery at the Saheb Al-Zaman Mosque in Kerman, Soleimani's southern hometown, as supporters gathered to mark his killing in a 2020 US drone strike in Baghdad. "The number of people killed rose to 103 following the deaths of people injured during the terrorist explosions," said the official IRNA news agency, while state television reported 211 wounded, some in critical condition.

Among those killed were three paramedics who rushed to the scene after the first explosion, said Iran's Red Crescent. IRNA said the first explosion took place around 700 m from Soleimani's grave while the other was around one kilometer away. President Ebrahim Raisi condemned the "heinous" crime as the Islamic Republic of Iran declared Thursday a national day of mourning.

Tasnim news agency, quoting what it called informed sources, said "two bags carrying bombs went off" and "the perpetrators... apparently detonated the bombs by remote control". Online footage showed

panicked crowds scrambling to flee as security personnel cordoned off the area. State television showed bloodied victims lying on the ground and ambulances and rescue personnel racing to help them.

"We were walking towards the cemetery when a car suddenly stopped behind us and a waste bin containing a bomb exploded," an eyewitness was quoted saying by the ISNA news agency. "We only heard the explosion and saw people falling." By nightfall, crowds returned back the Martyrs Cemetery in Kerman chanting: "Death to (the Zionist entity)" and "Death to America".

In Tehran, thousands gathered at the Grand Molla Mosque to pay tribute to Soleimani. "We condemn today's bitter terrorist incident... I hope the perpetrators of the crime will be identified and punished for their actions," Soleimani's daughter, Zeinab, said. Soleimani headed the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, overseeing military operations across the Middle East.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences over Wednesday's twin blasts. "The killing of peaceful people visiting the cemetery is shocking in its cruelty and cynicism," Putin wrote to Raisi and supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iraq — where some 3,000 people gathered in Baghdad Tuesday to commemorate Soleimani — condemned the attack in Iran and offered any help needed "to alleviate the impact of this cowardly criminal act".

Continued on Page 6

Foreign ministry launches consular contact center



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah launches an integrated consular communication center on Jan 3, 2024. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The ministry of foreign affairs launched on Wednesday an integrated consular communication center, offering contact services and direct help for Kuwaiti citizens in Kuwait and abroad. The center offers urgent and immediate consular services, replying to all inquiries, especially in emergency cases. The center is the main point of contact for answering any inquiry regarding the services being offered for students studying abroad and receiving calls and questions on a 24-hour basis as well as during public holidays.

The center is reachable through the hotline number 159 in Kuwait and 00965159 abroad. The back-up number is 0096522225504. The new service has been launched in line with the foreign ministry's strategy for ensuring the provision of best services and helping Kuwaiti citizens, along with expanding and improving all services. — KUNA

Gaza tensions spike after blasts, killing

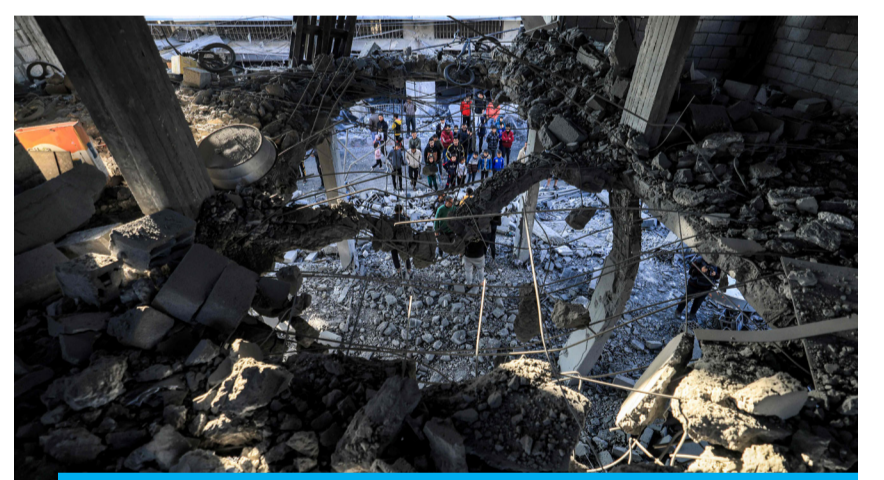
GAZA: Fears that the Zionist entity's war in Gaza could spiral across the Middle East grew Wednesday after a drone strike killed a Hamas senior leader in Lebanon and twin explosions ripped through an Iranian crowd, claiming at least 103 lives. The blasts — which were not claimed by any actor but labelled a "terrorist attack" on state-run TV — came with regional tensions running high a day after Hamas number two Saleh Al-Aruri was killed

in a Beirut drone strike that was widely blamed on the Zionist entity.

Zionist army spokesman Daniel Hagari said, following Tuesday's unclaimed Beirut attack, that the military was in a "very high state of readiness in all arenas" and "highly prepared for any scenario". The Zionist entity and Iran have long been bitter enemies, and violence involving Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen has spiked amid the Gaza war. Lebanon's Iran-backed armed group Hezbollah has meanwhile vowed retaliation against its Zionist foe, which it blamed for the drone strike in its stronghold of southern Beirut.

Hezbollah vowed the killing of Aruri and six other Hamas operatives

Continued on Page 6



GAZA: People inspect the rubble of a building where the displaced Palestinian Jabalieh family were sheltering after it was hit by Zionist bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Jan 3, 2024. — AFP

Prices hiked as Houthis claim Red Sea attack

DUBAI: Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the latest attack Wednesday on a merchant ship in the Red Sea, as the vessel's operator sharply raised prices between Asia and Europe. The Iran-backed rebels, who have launched more than 20 attacks on merchant ships in recent weeks, said they attacked

the Malta-flagged freighter believing it was headed for occupied Palestinian territory. The ship was not hit.

The Houthis, who control much of impoverished Yemen and have been fighting a civil war since 2014, say they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians because of the Zionist entity's war on Hamas. "The naval forces of the Yemeni armed forces carried out an operation targeting the ship CMA CGM TAGE which was travelling towards the ports of occupied Palestine," said a Houthi statement published on X, formerly Twitter.

The Houthi attacks, centered on the Red Sea's Bab al-Mandeb southern chokepoint, have disrupted shipping in a waterway that carries about 12 percent of global trade. After the latest attack, French opera-

tor CMA CGM announced a big hike in prices, with a 40-foot container between Asia and the western Mediterranean doubling from \$3,000 to \$6,000.

Italian-Swiss company MSC has also raised prices as ships are diverted around southern Africa rather than traverse the Red Sea, which is linked to the Mediterranean by the Suez Canal. On Tuesday, Danish shipping giant Maersk extended a suspension of services through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, south of Yemen, "until further notice".

The Houthis fired two anti-ship ballistic missiles toward merchant ships near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait late on Tuesday, the US military said earlier.

Continued on Page 6

Harvard president resigns after rows

NEW YORK: The president of Harvard University resigned Tuesday after coming under ferocious attack over plagiarism accusations and her response to anti-Semitism on campus amid the Zionist-Hamas conflict. Claudine Gay was criticized in recent months after reports surfaced alleging that she did not properly cite scholarly sources. The most recent accusations came Tuesday, published anonymously in a conservative online outlet.

Gay was also engulfed by scandal after she declined to say unequivocally whether calling for genocide of Jews would violate Harvard's code of

conduct, during testimony to Congress alongside the heads of MIT and the University of Pennsylvania last month. Gay, who made history as the first black person to be president of the powerhouse university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said in her resignation letter that she'd been subjected to personal threats and "racial animus".

Her downfall comes after the university's governing Harvard Corporation had initially backed her after the public relations disaster of the congressional testimony. But the body did criticize the university's



Claudine Gay

initial response to the Hamas Oct 7 attacks. The Zionist entity's offensive has reduced much of Gaza to rubble and killed at least 22,313 people, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's health ministry.

More than 70 lawmakers, including two Democrats, demanded her resignation, while a number of high-profile Harvard alumni and donors also called for her departure. Still, more than 700 Harvard faculty members had signed a letter supporting Gay and her job had appeared to be safe. The resignation, first reported by the student-run newspaper the Harvard Crimson, was confirmed shortly after by Gay herself.

"It is with a heavy heart but a deep love for Harvard that I write to share that I will be stepping down as president," Gay said in a statement. Gay also wrote that she had faced threats to her safety and "racial animus" in the wake of the furor over

Continued on Page 6



Living with vision impairment

On World Braille Day, members of Kuwait Blind Association share their personal stories



Women engage in art activity.



Fahad Al-Enezi uses a Braille typewriter.



Members of the association play dominoes.



Hassan Bohan plays table tennis.



Shamayel Al-Mulla

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: In an increasingly visual world, where humans solely rely on sight to experience the beauty of it, it's hard to imagine how someone can still enjoy life without seeing it. Under the roof of Kuwait Blind Association, more than 1,000 members are registered with different passions, talents and stories, who lead their lives as normally as any sighted person.

"Since we are all blind here, we can strongly relate to each other, as we share common worries, hopes and realities," said Fahad Al-Enezi, Head of Public Relations at Kuwait Blind Association. Early in his childhood, Enezi realized there was something different about him from other kids, as he wondered why he was the only one among them facing trouble walking and tripping over objects. That's when he asked his parents and was told he has had a vi-

sual impairment since birth. Ever since, he's been advised to learn to memorize places and count his steps.

Through focusing on his imagination and using all his other senses, he could easily navigate his world and connect with his surroundings. For instance, he mentioned that just by listening to the sound of waves and immersing his body into the layers of water, he can easily craft a scenery in his mind of how the blue sea looks like. Even while sleeping, he relies on sounds to construct his dreams, unlike sighted people who see actual visual images in their dreams.

This doesn't align with people's misconceptions that blind people have a stronger sense of hearing than others — it's just that they are more focused on using this sense to perceive the world, Enezi noted. "I am grateful that losing sight didn't affect me in any negative way. I see life as a very beautiful place,

and I feel very optimistic about it," said Shamayel Al-Mulla, member of Kuwait Blind Association.

Until the age of four, Mulla could normally see lights and colors. But with the Iraqi invasion in Kuwait and the spread of toxic gases and air pollution, she started losing her eyesight gradually. "They discovered that I cannot see in grade two, when I stopped seeing the blackboard at school. I kept asking them to either get the board closer to me or bring me eyeglasses," she recalled.

At first, it was difficult for Mulla and her family to cope with this unexpected situation. But by time, it didn't stop her from leading the life she wanted. "I am now even better than sighted people. I have reached faraway places, finished school and university, and then became a professional runner and archer. I am still waiting to achieve more and more," Mulla said.

In her daily life, she handles all her tasks completely independently, yet she doesn't mind asking for help or guidance whenever she needs it. For instance, when visiting an exhibition, she casually asks anyone around her to describe the paintings for her. "Sometimes I tell someone, 'I don't see dear, please hand me things to feel them.'" Usually people feel awkward or uncomfortable, but she's used to this, as her blindness has become part of her identity. "I am blind. This is who I am. If you want to accept me for who I am, then this is me," Mulla said confidently.

"Don't let any disability stand as an obstacle in your way," said Hassan Bohan, a member of Kuwait Blind Association. Bohan was partially blind from birth, but over the years, his disability got worse. As an athlete, he first lacked self-confidence, as he doubted his potential and abilities. But by time, he proved how he was able to overcome any challenges, as he thrived

and won multiple championships in China, Italy and Jordan, where he competed in football and running games.

Bohan still has a lot to prove to the world, and a lot more people he aims to inspire. "I wasn't sure if a blind person can make achievements or not. But with persistence and determination, I became sure that there's nothing that can ever stop me from reaching my goals," said Bohan.

Enezi said about Kuwait Blind Association: "We are living a completely normal life here, everything from friendships to entertainment to cooperation exists." He noted how this place provides a chance for everyone to develop their skills and follow their passion in different fields, such as education, culture, sports and recreation. The organization's main purpose is to fulfill the needs of blind by making them feel as an integral part of the society, he asserted.



A man reading a Braille book.



Artworks created by visually impaired women.



Restaurants in Kuwait: Have they taken over?

By Arwa Al-Sahli

KUWAIT: Italian, Lebanese, Japanese, Mexican—the number of cuisines available in the nation of Kuwait are endless. On every street corner and shopping mall, it is an impossibility to not be able to find a restaurant decorated in bright, vibrant colors and fluorescent lights. However, one must ask: Is it too much? Have food-based businesses taken over our country, both economically and culturally?

When speaking with the population, it was found that most, regardless of age, believed that there are indeed a staggering number of restaurants. Mohamed Akram, aged 22, expressed shock at how near his previous workplace, "there was a row of burger joints, all tasting the same". Whether all these restaurants share similar 'tastes' and similar interior designs was up for debate. Most youths and teenagers believed that these restaurants differed from each other, while older adults felt indifferent to the topic as

a whole, many citing that they did not eat at restaurants and mostly consume food made in their own home.

It is apparent that 'trendy', Kuwaiti-owned restaurant's success comes from the demand of activities to partake in a small country, and the convenience of being able to find food wherever you are. Yousef Khalid Al-Othman, aged 18, explained that the food business is the "driving force of Kuwait" and is "the first thing you think to do with friends".

Another youth, Yara, aged 19, stated that "it is more frequent that you will want something as convenient as food quickly." Furthermore, those who regularly eat at restaurants agreed that online influencers and advertisements speaking of new restaurants would persuade them to visit and order from them, showing that the success of such businesses comes from a distinct visual 'look and feel'.

Although some believe that there are "too many" restaurants in Kuwait, there are some positives that appear with such an amount. The food industry brings much economic prosperity to Kuwait, bringing in almost one hundred million Kuwaiti Dinars in 2022 according to Statista, and offers many people living in Kuwait not only job experience, but also experience in entrepreneurship and owning a business. Such experience is beneficial to young adults, as it allows them to be able to learn the intricate of being a business owner and can give them knowledge that can last a lifetime.

However, there are certainly some negatives to mention

as well. The rise of the restaurant industry can be linked to the high and rising rates of obesity and diabetes in Kuwait. Currently, Kuwait is the most obese country in the world, with 39.7 percent of the population being classified as obese, and 24.9 percent of the population being diagnosed with diabetes, both according to data provided by the World Health Organization (WHO). With most popular restaurants in Kuwait serving fast food, such as burgers, it is not unlikely to assume that there is a connection between the number of restaurants in Kuwait to the number of diabetics. Additionally, parts of the population expressed an annoyance about how many of these restaurants served similar menu items, expressing that the market feels "oversaturated" and "boring".

In conclusion, no one can deny that there are an astonishing number of restaurants and food-based businesses in Kuwait. It is something that cannot be categorized as simply 'good' or simply 'bad', as each person living in Kuwait sees this topic differently. Some are annoyed, seeing clones and clones of ideas along the street, wishing for a reduction. Others welcome this prevalence, excited to spend time with loved ones eating beloved food. Whatever one's own opinion is, one thing remains to be: The cuisines of the world—American, Korean, Indian, and more—will always be readily available to the population of Kuwait, wherever one may be.



KUWAIT: Kuwaitis walk as others sit on cafe terraces inside the Avenues Mall, the country's largest shopping centre. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Local

Expats bear the biggest climate change burden

Hot summers threatening workers' health

By Anoud Al-Sabah

KUWAIT: Kuwait is characterized by a harsh, hyper-arid, and hot environment. While the heat is common among desert Gulf countries such as Kuwait, the climate has contributed to the deterioration of the situation in the country. Hot summers in Kuwait are recording uncharted extreme heat, threatening the workers' health. Migrant workers are the most affected. Kuwait's population is mainly migrant workers who take risky jobs such as construction and hospitality that are mainly outdoors and are a health hazard.

The extreme temperatures expose the migrants to an increased mortality risk, heat-related illnesses, and traumatic injury. The public acknowledges that climate change, mainly characterized by the increasing heat, challenges their health and working conditions, migrants in particular. However, they also view that other things such as education, corruption, and surviving the harsh economic time are more dire.

Despite the public acknowledgment that climate change is a significant challenge for Kuwait, a contradiction in public opinion exists as people show reluctance towards taking real action even as migrant workers, who comprise the country's larger population and workforce, shoulder the significant burden of climate change and associated health risks.

In Kuwait, migrants comprise most of the working population and are the most adversely affected by climate change. According to Al-Ahmad, two-thirds of Kuwait's population are migrant workers who are

mainly from Arab and South and East-Asian countries. They work in hazardous occupations and spend extended periods outdoors in the extreme heat. Although some laws aim to protect migrants from the harsh effects of climate change, the actual impact of these acts is not entirely promising.

For instance, Al-Ahmad explained that in 2015, Kuwait banned employees from working in open outdoor spaces from 11:00 to 16:00 hours between June and August, the summer months in Kuwait. However, despite the ban on these working hours, migrant workers continue to be exposed to extreme heat conditions with inadequate protective measures.

An interview with migrant workers conducted when researching for this article revealed that migrant workers face harsh socioeconomic conditions that compel them to continue working in the harsh heat even when they should not be doing so. Farooq, a gas station attendant, explained that he is pushed to continue working in the heat as he supports his family back home. He stated "It's something you must deal with. This is how we support our families back home so when I remember this, I'm pushed to keep going"

Similarly, Rajish, a co-op worker, noted that the heat caused significant health problems. He stated speaking to Kuwait times, "its caused me a lot of problems with my health but this is my job so I have to learn how to do my best even when the heat is strong."

The public opinion paradox explains climate change in Kuwait concerns why migrants will continue to shoulder

the immense burden of associated effects. According to Abufalgha, citizens of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries acknowledge that climate change is a problem that needs to be addressed by the government.

In Kuwait, more than half of the population supports that the government should take initiatives to address the public climate change issue as it is a health hazard. However, when these citizens are asked about the action that the government of Kuwait should take towards improving their livelihoods, they do not prioritize climate change.

Al-Najjar notes that in a survey conducted among Kuwait people regarding what they thought the government should prioritize to enhance their economy, 19% focused on improving education, while 18% thought that emphasis should be on creating jobs. Further, 15% of the population noted that more government investment should increase wages and reduce inflation.

Notably, there was no significant voice in addressing climate change. The excessive focus on improving the socioeconomic aspects of the citizens' lives explains why the lives of migrants in Kuwait will continue to be affected by the hazards of climate change. The socioeconomic problems that people face in Kuwait, particularly migrants, are significantly more dire, and they would rather risk their health in the extreme heat to sustain their livelihood and that of their families.

Various other factors are associated with the public opinion paradox and why migrants in Kuwait will continue to bear the significant burden of climate change. Limited



KUWAIT: Workers shelter from the sun under a tree in this file photo. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

knowledge among the public, particularly the migrants, concerning climate change and its effects makes them even more vulnerable. Al-Ahmad notes that the migrants have limited knowledge of recognizing climate change hazards such as heat exhaustion. Besides having limited knowledge of the effects of extreme heat on their health, most have limited knowledge of climate change and associated environmental effects.

Al-Najjar explains that when people in Kuwait are told to identify the most significant environmental challenges, they classify air quality, pollution of drinking water, and insecticides as the primary challenges. Only a few identified climate changes. Notably, the situation proves that Kuwait residents cannot identify climate change as a contrib-

utor to their environmental issues, indicating limited knowledge on the matter. More awareness should be raised concerning climate change and its effects so the public can focus on the issue.

Kuwait is a hot country whose conditions have been worsened by climate change, thus making the lives of working migrants in the country more challenging. Despite the migrants acknowledging that the heat harms them, the concern is not a priority. Their socioeconomic status and limited knowledge concerning climate change and its effects on the environment and their health create a public opinion paradox. More education on climate change and its effects must be imparted to the Kuwaiti public to increase their awareness of their situation.

Deputy FM receives Ukraine Ambassador



KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Wednesday received Ukraine Ambassador to Kuwait Dr Oleksandr Balanutsa. The two sides discussed bilateral relations and ways to bolster them. — KUNA



Commander of the Egyptian Navy meets his Kuwaiti counterparts. — KUNA photos

Kuwait Navy delegation inspects Egyptian naval units in Alexandria

CAIRO: A delegation of the Kuwaiti Navy on Tuesday inspected Egyptian naval units that have recently joined the Egyptian fleet in the coastal city of Alexandria, spokesperson of the Egyptian Armed Forces Colonel Gharib Abdel-Hafez Gharib said in a press release. The Kuwaiti delegation also examined the cadets' facilities at the naval academy in Alexandria, he said, adding that the Kuwaiti personnel headed by Commander of the Kuwaiti Navy Commodore Hazzaa Al-Alati met with the Commander of the Egyptian Navy, Vice Admiral Ashraf Atwa Megahed. The Kuwaiti military delegation also examined the Arsenal of Alexandria and the shipyard, he said, noting that the visit is in line with the efforts to bolster cooperation and exchange expertise between the Kuwaiti and Egyptian navies. — KUNA



Kuwaiti delegation tours Egyptian Navy sites.



Officials explore expanding Nuwaisib port

KUWAIT: The Director General of Kuwait Municipality, Saud Al-Dabbous, confirmed on Wednesday the provision of support and harnessing the possibilities of expanding the Nuwaisib border port project. In a press statement on the sidelines of a joint meeting with the assistant undersecretary for financial affairs and support services at the Ministry of Interior,

Sheikh Hamoud Mubarak Al-Sabah, Al-Dabbous stressed the importance of joint cooperation to provide solutions to achieve hopes and ambitions in the completion of service projects.

He pointed out that during the meeting, the two sides discussed enhancing joint cooperation between Kuwait Municipality and the Ministry of Interior on the development of border areas, including the expansion of two million square meters in the Al-Nuwaisib border center so as to increase the operational capacity with international logistics standards, facilitating the passage of personnel and the movement of goods. — KUNA

Arab Parliament rejects violations against Somalia

CAIRO: The Arab Parliament affirmed its absolute rejection of any attempted violations against Somalia's sovereignty, stressing that Somalia's security and stability are integral parts of Arab national security. In a statement, the Parliament urged Ethiopia to abide by good neighborliness rules, respect the sovereignty of countries, and not interfere in their internal affairs to best serve the region's stability.

The parliament supports Somalia's legal measures to maintain its unity and

national sovereignty on all its land. It affirmed its full solidarity with the Somali government's decision to reject a memo signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland. The memo is considered invalid, unacceptable, and tantamount to an explicit breach of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial sanctity, the Arab League said in a statement.

The Arab organization also slammed the deal as a bid to meddle in fragile internal conditions in Somalia and capitalize on the stalemate of the conciliation negotiations among the Somali parties. It warned that this move would foment the spread of radicalism in the nation. The Arab League's stand came on the heels of a deal between Somaliland, a breakaway region in Somalia, and Ethiopia to grant the latter access to the Red Sea. — KUNA



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Namaa distributes food baskets, water in Kenya

KUWAIT: The Social Reform Society (Namaa Charity) distributed food baskets and drilled wells in specific areas of Kenya in response to the difficult humanitarian situation faced by many families in the country. As part of the relief trips organized in cooperation with a number of volunteers, more than 200 food baskets were distributed, each for a family of five for a month, in addition to digging several wells in remote areas.

Mohammed Al-Kharraz, Project Management Supervisor at Namaa Charity and General Supervisor of the Volunteer Trip, said: "In light of the great humanitarian challenges facing Kenya, we have provided urgent assistance to the most needy families." Al-Kharraz stressed that the campaign serves thousands of families facing difficult humanitarian conditions, especially in light of the bad weather conditions that resulted in the loss of 160 lives and the displacement of more than 500,000 others as a result of heavy rains and floods.

20,000 students registered in MoE charity fund

KUWAIT: The charity funding project to help needy students in the Ministry of Education ended with the registration of about 20,000 students (bedoons and expatriates). These names will be reviewed to ensure their conditions and their needs. The Ministry of Education received applications from people who needed the fund. Registration ended last month and was in two stages. The first stage was for stateless students, and the second was for expatriates.

The sources said that the competent charitable fund committee began preparing the names of students who failed to pay their fees. The sources indicated that the disbursement mechanism will not be open but is subject to a specific budget for the fund (worth up to five million dinars). The charitable fund was established first to follow up on the needs of stateless students in cooperation with the Central Agency to address the situation of illegal residents, and it was expanded so as to assist international students who are in dire need.

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: Lightning strikes Al-Hamra tower (right) and Liberation tower (left) in Kuwait City during a thunder storm on January 2, 2024. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait stresses Arab cooperation amid Gaza war, regional escalation

Defense minister demands immediate ceasefire



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah address delegations from the Arab member states during a summit. — AFP



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah stressed that challenges and opportunities in global economic and social developments require more determination to strengthen joint Arab action due to its great importance as one of the pillars supporting

Arab developmental issues. In his opening speech as head of the conference, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad welcomed the participating delegations from the Arab member states, stressing that the institute is considered "the most important institution of joint development work," pointing to the institute's keenness to provide its services and development efforts in line with regional and international economic developments.

In his opening speech, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad welcomed the participating delegations from the Arab member states, stressing that the institute is considered "the most important institution of joint development work," pointing to the institute's keenness to provide its services and development efforts in line with regional and international economic developments.

"Today we are entering a new phase full of challenges and opportunities in global economic and social developments," he said. "It requires more determination to strengthen joint Arab action because of its great importance as one of the pillars of the development of various institutions supporting Arab issues."

He explained that the Arab Planning Institute was able to keep pace with development changes and challenges in the countries of the region at a time when the general performance indicators during 2022-2023 showed the achievement of the institute's desired goals, indicating: "The institute's plan included 215 training activities, including 153 in-person programs at its headquarters in Kuwait and 62 virtual programs, as well as its efforts in implementing a number of qualitative consulting studies."

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad stressed the support of Kuwait (the headquarters country) for all the activities of the Institute and its keenness on the success of its development programs, believing in supporting joint Arab action. He recalled the Zionist aggression on Gaza, praying that the anguish of people in Palestine would ease. "We demand an immediate ceasefire. We are only part of this nation, and we support any Arab move that leads to the Palestinian people taking their full legitimate rights and leads to peace in its most comprehensive form."

For his part, the Director of the Arab Planning Institute, Abdullah Al-Shami, stressed the institute's keenness to ensure that its continuous efforts are linked to the development planning process and the multiple dimensions of economic, social, and environmental development in a way that serves Arab development and helps face various development challenges.

Al-Shami stressed the institute's keenness in its plan for this year to enhance support for development planning institutions and bodies in the Arab countries, build Arab capacities, publish studies, provide advisory services, and apply research in support of Arab plans, in addition to focusing on developing analytical and practical skills in the fields of planning and economic management.

"The Arab Planning Institute takes into account the economic and social consequences of successive global shocks in line with the requirements and development needs in the Arab countries and promotes joint Arab action," he added. He indicated that the meeting discusses what has been achieved in the various activities of the institute during the year 2022-2023, which is the third year of the institute's ninth strategy for the years 2020-2025, explaining that these activities were implemented as contained in the annual work plan adopted by the Council at its meeting held in Egypt in June 2022.

He stated that the Board of Trustees reviewed and approved the final account of the Arab Planning Institute as it is in the fiscal year ending on December 31, 2023. "The meeting discussed the achievements of various activities of the institute during the year 2022-2023, which is the third year of the institute's ninth strategy for the years 2020-2025," explaining that these activities were implemented as contained in the annual work plan adopted by the Council at its meeting held in Egypt in June 2022.

For his part, the head of the Institute of National Planning in Egypt, Dr Ashraf El-Araby, said that the meeting of the Board of Trustees held today focused on several items, the most important of which is the follow-up of what has been achieved during the past year, which witnessed a large number of activities.

Araby added that the institute launched its development report two months ago in Dubai, and its main topic was climate change and its impact on the Arab region, stressing that the dimension related to climate change is a key axis within the work plan of the Arab Planning Institute in addition to the economic and social dimensions.

He pointed out that the training programs, studies, and economic consultations launched by the institute during the past year helped significantly in formulating the Arab vision towards climate change, pointing out that "the development report was published within the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Convention in Abu Dhabi (COP28) to emphasize the Arab vision in the field of combating the effects of global warming." — KUNA



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Soup, sympathy at Japan quake shelters

Kyiv residents lose homes to missiles

Page 6

Page 7



ARURA, Palestine: Aisha, mother of Saleh Al-Aruri, sits holding a picture of him at their family house in Arura, north of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, on Jan 3, 2024. — AFP photos



Relatives of Saleh Al-Aruri hang the green flags of Hamas near the family house in Arura.

Tears, defiance over slain Hamas deputy

'He asked for martyrdom and he got it,' says Saleh Al-Aruri's mother

ARURA, Palestine: Palestinian mourners broke into sobs as they huddled around defiant family members of slain Hamas deputy Saleh Al-Aruri in his village in the occupied West Bank Wednesday, a day after his death in Lebanon. Aruri, exiled from his village Arura since he was released from a Zionist jail in 2010, was killed in a drone strike on a southern Beirut suburb that Lebanese officials said was carried out by the Zionist entity.

Holding a photograph of her son framed in gold, Aisha Al-Aruri, 81, said she struck a note of defiance when weeping village women informed her of his death. "I told them: 'Why are you crying? Do not cry. Bring a box of sweets and distribute them to the people,'" she told AFP, placing her son's picture in her lap. "He asked for martyrdom," she said. "And he got it."

Accused by the Zionist entity of masterminding numerous attacks against the country, Aruri was elected in 2017 as deputy head of Hamas's political

bureau, officially becoming the Islamist movement's number two. The Zionist entity has not claimed responsibility for his killing.

But Aruri, based in Lebanon, was in its cross-hairs following Oct 7, when Hamas men from Gaza launched a deadly attack on Zionist communities and military bases bordering the strip. The attack resulted in the death of some 1,140 people dead, according to an AFP tally based on official Zionist figures. Hamas also seized around 250 hostages, according to the Zionist entity.

Unanswered calls

After the attack, the Zionist entity began a relentless bombardment and ground offensive on Gaza that has killed at least 22,313 people, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's health ministry. Dalal Al-Aruri, sister of Aruri, told AFP she was questioned by Zionist intelligence after she met him in person in Saudi Arabia last summer.

She last spoke to him for a few minutes on the morning of Oct 7. "He told me: 'I am fine,'" she said, adding that he informed her that Hamas had launched a raid on southern areas under Zionist control. Dalal said she was unable to reach his phone after news of his killing emerged on Tuesday, confirming her fears.

The village of Arura, replete with olive orchards and verdant terraced farms, plunged into mourning as news of his killing spread. Amid a general strike in the occupied West Bank, shops were shut in the village of some 5,000 people. News television crews were largely the only sign of life on its deserted streets. Aruri had not set foot in the village in more than a decade. After spending almost 20 years in the Zionist prisons, he was freed in 2010 on condition that he go into exile.

'Shock, anger, tears'

His mother said Aruri got married after being released from prison and she encouraged him to re-

main in exile rather than run the risk of being arrested again. After the Oct 7 attacks, Zionist forces raided his village and demolished his empty multi-story house, which is close to his mother's home.

Outside the destroyed house, Zionist troops hung a banner that read: "This was the house of Saleh Al-Aruri and has become the headquarters of Abu Al-Nimer"—an alias for the Zionist intelligence officer responsible for the area, according to village residents.

An image of the banner, seen by witnesses including his nephew Majed Sulaiman, was widely circulated on social media. Village residents said they tore down the banner after the troops left. Days after the Oct 7 attacks, Zionist forces detained some members of Aruri's family in a raid. "We feel shock, anger, tears," Sulaiman, 28, told AFP, referring to news of Aruri's killing. "We feel every emotion," he said, standing in front of the rubble of his uncle's demolished home. — AFP

Zionist settlers want to return to Gaza after war

JERUSALEM: "A house on the beach is not a dream!" The advertising slogan by a Zionist settlement developer is music to the ears of former Gaza settlers yearning to return to the Palestinian territory after the war. Nearly two decades after Zionist settlers pulled out of Gaza, the real estate developer Harey Zahav sparked controversy when it posted the slogan on social media in mid-December as the Zionist entity wages a military offensive against the territory's Hamas rulers.

"This campaign expresses a desire to return (to Gaza) but we have no projects in development," said Zeev Epstein, the owner of the company, which is notorious for constructing wildcat settler outposts in the occupied West Bank without Zionist government authorization. All settlements on occupied Palestinian land are regarded as illegal under international law, regardless of whether they were approved by the Zionist entity. Epstein made the comment to Zionist Channel 13 television as pro-Palestine supporters expressed outrage over what they saw as a proposal to build beachfront homes over the bombed-out ruins of Gaza.

The Zionist entity unilaterally withdrew the last of its troops and 8,000 settlers on Sept 11, 2005, ending its presence in Gaza, which began in 1967, but maintaining near complete control over the territory's borders.



GAZA: This picture shows a view of buildings destroyed by Zionist bombardment in the central Gaza Strip from a position across the border in the Zionist entity on Jan 3, 2024. — AFP

Despite its withdrawal, the Zionist entity imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the territory and is still regarded internationally as an occupying power in the Gaza Strip.

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. Coalition lawmaker Zvika Foghel told public radio last month that the entity must "take control over the territory north of the Gaza River and establish new Jewish settlement".

For Hannah Picard, a 66-year-old French-Zionist who lived for 16 years in the heart of the Gaza Strip, "it's obvious that we are going to go back". The ongo-

ing war in Gaza, she said, was a prelude to her return. "Deep down, we dream of going back, because it's our home," Picard said in an interview in her three-bedroom apartment in Jerusalem, which she described as her "temporary home". Her former seaside home in central Gaza, she said, was akin to "living in paradise".

Oded Mizrahi, who works at Jerusalem's Gush Katif Museum — named after a bloc of Zionist settlements in the Gaza Strip — was convinced that returning to the territory would soon be possible. "We don't know exactly how but ... everyone understands that Hamas cannot stay there," he told AFP. "We have no other choice but to govern" Gaza, he said. — AFP

Abdi and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who signed deal. Ethiopia and Somalia have a history of stormy relations and territorial feuds, fighting two wars in the late 20th century.

Somaliland's Bihi had said in a statement that in exchange for the sea access, Ethiopia would "formally recognize" Somaliland. But the Ethiopian government has not confirmed this assertion. It said in a statement the deal "includes provisions for the Ethiopian government to make an in-depth assessment towards taking a position regarding the efforts of Somaliland to gain recognition".

But it said that despite Somaliland not having full recognition, it has nevertheless signed agreements with various countries, including on port development. "Yet there has been no murmur or complaint when this materialized," it added. "No party or country will be affected by this MOU. There is no broken trust nor is there any laws that have been transgressed." — AFP

past, but the Arab League and Egypt said they backed Somalia's stance.

East African regional grouping IGAD voiced its "deep concern" about the developments, while the European Union insisted Somalia's sovereignty should be respected. Mogadishu has vowed to defend its territory "by any legal means" and called for urgent meetings of the UN Security Council and the African Union to discuss Ethiopia's "aggression".

In a Mogadishu stadium, hundreds of people, mainly students, joined a demonstration, waving banners declaring "Our sea is not for sale and we will not allow to lose an inch of our land". "These people feel that their unity has been violated," Mogadishu mayor Yusuf Hussein Jimalehe told the rally. "They feel that part of their land is to be looted and they have gathered here to reject that aggressive ambition."

The demonstrators chanted slogans against Somaliland president Muse Bihi

South Beirut stunned after deadly strike in residential area

BEIRUT: A large hole is gaping in a three-storey building and debris litters the street amid charred cars in south Beirut where a strike blamed on the Zionist entity killed the deputy leader of Palestinian militant group Hamas. The day after loud blasts ripped through the district from the drone attack that killed Saleh Al-Aruri, armed men of Hezbollah were standing guard in the mainly Shiite Muslim area that is their stronghold.

Locals said they were surprised to learn that their busy street in the Lebanese capital housed the secretive Hamas bureau in a non-descript building next to a pharmacy and a sweets shop. The Zionist entity has not claimed the deadly attack but Hamas and Lebanese officials have no doubt it was the Zionist entity who killed Aruri and six Hamas operatives.

Although associated with Hezbollah, Beirut's southern suburbs are also an overcrowded residential area packed with civilians, shops and restaurants. "No one knew that there was a Hamas office here," said Ahmed, 40, who works in the nearby sweets shop. "I heard three explosions, at first I thought it was thunder," he told AFP in disbelief.

Shopkeepers were sweeping glass shards off the road near the impact site on Hadi Nasrallah street, named after Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah's late son, who was killed in fighting with the Zionist entity in 1997. The Lebanese army cordoned off the perimeter and Hezbollah militants dressed in black civilian clothing kept watch nearby. "Three (Zionist) drone strikes targeted the building," said a Hezbollah official who requested anonymity citing security concerns.

Rescuers affiliated with Hezbollah rummaged through the remains of cars damaged or charred by the strikes, in an empty lot facing the building. "I was at the dentist's, a few meters away," said resident Mohammad Burji, 46, who lambasted the Zionist entity for striking "in the middle of a residential area". Beirut's southern suburbs have "been caught in the past in a war of annihilation, just like Gaza," he said, referring to the Zionist attack on Lebanon in 2006. Local police captain Ali Farran said residents who have lived through the 2006 war "are now expecting the worst", adding that the predominantly Shiite Muslim area is home to 800,000 people. — AFP

Ethiopia defends Somaliland deal as Somalis protest

NAIROBI: Ethiopia insisted on Wednesday that its controversial deal with the breakaway region of Somaliland broke no laws after Somalia accused its neighbor of a blatant attack on its sovereignty. The agreement, signed in Addis Ababa on Monday, has raised concerns about the stability of the turbulent Horn of Africa region.

Hundreds of people joined a demonstration in Mogadishu to denounce the pact that gives Ethiopia, one of the biggest landlocked countries in the world, long-sought access to the Red Sea. Addis Ababa defended the agreement, saying other countries had done deals with Somaliland in the

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International

Kyiv residents lose homes to missiles

Frustration, pleas for protection from Ukraine's allies mount after latest Russian attack

KYIV: Mariya Kadurina wrapped a quilt around her four-year-old son as he sat in front of their still-smoking block of flats in Kyiv after a Russian missile attack Tuesday. Kyiv's residents were woken Tuesday by sirens and explosions as Russia fired a deadly barrage of missiles at Ukrainian cities, leading Ukraine's defense minister to accuse Moscow of "deliberately" targeting residential areas.

"We live — we used to live — here," the 29-year-old said, her eyes looking wild and her lips bleeding. "That's it. We don't have anything," Kadurina is a taxi driver, and her car was also destroyed in the attack.

The long grey Soviet-era block on Kudryashova Street near Kyiv's central rail station was hit and set on fire during the morning's heavy attacks on the capital. Two people were killed and 49 others were wounded. Hours later, smoke still poured from several flats, there was a smell of burning, and shattered glass littered the pavement opposite. Exhausted firefighters were working to extinguish smoldering blackened remains of flats. Behind the building was a crater, suggesting a downed missile fell but exploded on impact.

Ukraine claimed to have shot down most of the missiles Russia fired in its latest assault, but buildings were hit by debris and some missiles may have gotten through. The building's residents, some bandaged, were standing around or warming themselves along with a cat and some dogs in a heated tent set up by the Polish Red Cross.

Kadurina said that she was getting her son ready for kindergarten in her third-floor flat when she heard the explosions. "I lay down on top of him. I got a bit cut up by the shrapnel but the child didn't

thank God." People said that the force of the blast had jammed the doors of the building so those trying to flee had to wait for rescuers to let them out. Kadurina had just a few plastic bags with her and some sweets, which she said was all she had time to grab.

Their possessions were not just smashed by the explosions but also flooded when firefighters sprayed water on upper floors. "Everything is floating in the flat now," she said, as helpers came to take her and her son to a heated waiting place on the cold grey morning.

'Give us shells'

Another resident, 79-year-old Galina Solovyova, wore a bandage wrapped around her face after hitting her head during the explosion. "It's a real horror to be left without anything," she said, being helped by her 27-year-old grandson and her daughter, who lived with her on the 7th floor.

But she chuckled as she described crawling through the rubble and being unable to find any warm trousers for her grandson, who towered above her, finally giving him a pair of her own. "What should I do, cry? We'll probably cry later," she said. "But even then, it's unlikely. We'll hold on."

The city authorities said the Russian attacks had hit infrastructure and for the first time this winter caused power, water and gas cuts in several districts. The strikes came after a long period of relative calm boosted confidence in the air defense's ability to protect the capital.

Valentyna Gerda smoked, standing opposite the block. Her flat was on the first floor so it was less damaged, she said, but the windows were



KYIV: Firefighters work in a multi-storey residential building destroyed by a missile attack in central Kyiv, on Jan 2, 2024. — AFP

blown out and the locks on the doors no longer work. Her neighbors suffered worse, the 53-year-old said: "I saw an elderly lady. She was in such a bad condition. My neighbor on the fifth floor has wounds to her face. Another neighbor has wounds to her arm and stomach." "This is what they (the Russians) are doing to us," she said, becoming tearful and struggling to

speak. "It's very painful," said Gerda, who sells toys and bicycles for a living. There was also anger that the city's air defenses had not preserved their homes, as well as pleas for Ukraine to get more help from its partners. "There's no protection," said Gerda. "I wish they would at least give us some shells, at least something, at least some protection for the sky." — AFP

With China tensions rising, US revives WWII-era airfield

WASHINGTON: In the middle of the Pacific ocean, an abandoned US airfield once key to dropping the nuclear bomb on Japan — and nearly lost to history amid encroaching forest — is being revived. But as the Americans hack away at the jungle overgrowth at Tinian island airfield and other old, World War II-era bases across the region, it won't be with Japan on their mind.

Rather, it's Beijing's growing influence in the Pacific that is spurring the recovery of a slew of abandoned runways on the 40 square-mile (100 square-kilometer) speck of land that makes up Tinian, part of the US territory of the Northern Mariana Islands. "Rehabilitation of World War II-era airfields has provided Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) a rapidly executable avenue to enhance infrastructure in the region," a spokesperson told AFP.

Though the statement mentioned a "sense of urgency" enabling PACAF to "enhance ... warfighting capability and improve deterrent posture alongside Allies and partners," it did not mention China directly. But Washington's plans for what officials have described as "an extensive" facility on Tinian comes amid a serious military pivot to the Pacific in recent years — and as China builds its own new bases in the region, including in disputed waters.

"The most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security is the (People's Republic of China's) coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and

the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences," the Department of Defense's 2022 planning document, called the National Defense Strategy, reads. Tinian's old military airfield "has extensive pavement underneath the overgrown jungle. We'll be clearing that jungle out between now and summertime," Air Force General Kenneth Wilsbach recently told Japanese outlet Nikkei Asia. Meanwhile, military projects for "fuel and airfield development" at the island's nearby civilian airport are already underway, according to the PACAF spokesman.

Back to the future

If little known now, the airfield at Tinian was perhaps the most important — and the busiest — in the world in 1945, as its six hastily built runways played host to US B-29 bombers carrying out missions against Japan, some 1,500 miles (2,300 kilometers) away. Including, on August 6 and August 9 of that year, the planes that dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "Little Boy" and "Fat Man," as the weapons were known, killed around 200,000 people.

In the last three years, money annually allocated to Indo-Pacific military construction costs has doubled, from \$1.8 billion in 2020 to just shy of \$3.6 billion in 2023, according to a recent report from the Congressional Research Service (CRS). It's part of a Pentagon strategy to open a range of flexible military bases, able to operate outside of the larger, longstanding installations in Japan, South Korea and the American island territory of Guam.

On Tinian, initial work started near the civilian airport in February 2022, before extending toward the World War II airfield on the north of the island. Within two years, tarmac rehabilitation and the construction of fuel tanks are set to be completed, at a budget of at least \$162 million, part of contingen-



This January 10, 2022 satellite image released on December 28, 2023 by Maxar Technologies shows the Tinian airfield in the Mariana Islands. — AFP

cy plans in the event "access to Andersen Air Force Base or other western Pacific locations is limited or denied," according to Air Force financial documents reviewed by AFP.

Across multiple projects at Tinian, the total cost is unclear, "due to differing timelines and requirements, and the fact that not all work is being executed by the US Air Force," the PACAF spokesperson said.

No 'super bases'

Tinian isn't the only World War II-era base being revamped: new defense appropriations also include money for construction at Basa Air Base in the Philippines, "along with ongoing projects" at the Royal Australian Air Force's Darwin and Tindal bases, ac-

ording to the PACAF spokesperson.

"A lot of our strategy there is taking many of the World War II airfields that frankly are overgrown by the jungle, and there's still concrete or asphalt underneath," Wilsbach said in a September speech. "We're not making super bases anywhere. We're looking for a place to get some fuel and some weapons, maybe get a bite to eat and take a nap and then get airborne again."

Satellite images already show the extent of the work underway, including a new tarmac built just north of the civilian airport. Not far off, satellite images show other military developments — from China, which has created artificial islets among the diplomatically contested Spratly Islands, used to host its own air bases. — AFP

103 KILLED IN IRAN BLASTS...

Continued from Page 1

The European Union demanded on Wednesday that the perpetrators of the twin blasts be brought to justice. "The EU condemns in the strongest terms today's bombing in the city of Kerman in Iran. The EU expresses its solidarity with the Iranian people. This act of terror has exacted a shocking toll of civilian deaths and injuries," an EU foreign affairs spokesperson said in a statement. "Our thoughts now are with the victims and their families. Perpetrators must be held accountable."

The blasts came a day after Hamas number two Saleh Al-Aruri — an Iran ally — was killed in a strike, which Lebanese officials blamed on the Zionist entity, on a southern Beirut suburb that is a stronghold of Iran-backed armed group Hezbollah. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the Iran bombings, the country's deadliest since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Iran has long fought a shadow war of killings and sabotage with archenemy the Zionist entity and also

battled various jihadist and other militant groups. In September, the Fars news agency reported that a key "operative" affiliated with the Islamic State group, in charge of carrying out "terrorist operations" in Iran, had been arrested in Kerman. In July, Iran's intelligence ministry said it had disbanded a network which it said was "linked to (the Zionist entity's) spy organization" and which had been plotting "terrorist operations" across Iran including in Kerman, according to IRNA. It said the alleged plots included "planning an explosion at the grave" of Soleimani as well targeting other public gatherings.

Iran has suffered previous attacks and bombings that claimed scores of lives, some claimed by groups that Tehran has classified as "terrorist" organizations. In 2019, a suicide car bombing of a Guards bus killed 27 troops in southeastern Iran. It was later claimed by Jaish al-Adl, a jihadist group formed in 2012.

Soleimani, whom Khamenei years ago declared a "living martyr", was widely regarded as a hero in Iran for his role in defeating IS in both Iraq and Syria. Long seen as a deadly adversary by the United States and its allies, Soleimani was one of the most important powerbrokers across the region, setting Iran's political and military agenda in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. — AFP

The House Republican who challenged Gay out during her testimony with the question about whether free speech extended to calling for genocide of Jews celebrated the latest academic's downfall. "Harvard knows that this long overdue forced resignation of the antisemitic plagiarist president is just the beginning of what will be the greatest scandal of any college or university in history," said Representative Elise Stefanik.

Former student and multimillion-dollar donor Bill Ackman claimed in a letter to Harvard's governing boards that "President Gay's failures have led to billions of dollars of cancelled, paused, and withdrawn donations to the university". Gay, 53, was born in New York to Haitian immigrants and is a professor of political science who in July became the first black president of 368-year-old Harvard. "Leadership failure and denial of anti-Semitism have a price. Hope glorious Harvard University learns from this dismal conduct," wrote new Zionist Foreign Minister Israel Katz in response to Gay's departure. — AFP

Prices hiked as Houthis claim...

Continued from Page 1

United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations had initially reported explosions near a cargo ship sailing between the coasts of Eritrea and Yemen. "Master reports no damage to the vessel and crew are reported safe at present," the agency, run by Britain's Royal Navy, said in a brief message.

None of the commercial ships nearby reported any damage, the US Central Command said, add-

Gaza tensions spike after...

Continued from Page 1

would not go unpunished and labelled it "a serious assault on Lebanon... and a dangerous development". The powerful group's leader Hassan Nasrallah, who has lived in hiding for years, delivered a televised address on Wednesday evening.

Amid the almost three-month-old war, the Zionist entity has traded almost daily cross-border fire with Hezbollah, an ally of Hamas, while so far avoiding a full-scale war. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian condemned the "cowardly" Beirut strike and said it proved that the Zionist entity "has not achieved any of its goals after weeks of war crimes, genocide and destruction in Gaza and the West Bank of Palestine, despite the direct support of the White House".

The Zionist entity has launched a relentless offensive that has reduced vast swathes of Gaza to rubble and claimed over 22,300 lives. Most of its 2.4 million people have been displaced and forced south, where many now live in crowded shelters and tents.

The Zionist army again bombed Gaza targets overnight, including in the southern city of Rafah where eyewitnesses said survivors flocked to Al-Najjar Hospital to mourn the dead, including a child. The Zionist entity has labelled Hamas' Gaza leader Yahya Sinwar a "dead man walking" and vowed to also kill other commanders of the Islamist movement.

The head of Mossad, David Barnea, said the Zionist entity's spy agency "is committed to settling the

score with the murderers" who carried out the Oct 7 attack and with Hamas' leadership. "It will take time, just like after the Munich massacre, but we will lay our hands on them wherever they will be," he said, referring to the 1972 attack on Zionist Olympic athletes in Germany by the Palestinian militant group Black September.

In the Zionist-occupied West Bank — the Palestinian territory where Aruri was born, and which has seen an upsurge in violence since Oct 7 — the Palestinian Authority called a general strike to mourn his death. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh also condemned the killing and warned of its "risks and consequences".

More Zionist strikes on Tuesday struck a building of the Palestinian Red Crescent in the southern city of Khan Yunis, killing five people, the organization said. The head of the UN World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, deplored the strikes as "unconscionable". — AFP



BEIRUT: People watch a televised speech of Lebanon's Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah on Jan 3, 2024. — AFP

Harvard president resigns after...

Continued from Page 1

her handling of claims of mounting anti-Semitism on campus. The university's governing Harvard Corporation said that Gay had "shown remarkable resilience in the face of deeply personal and sustained attacks". "While some of this has played out in the public domain, much of it has taken the form of repugnant and in some cases racist vitriol directed at her through disgraceful emails and phone calls. We condemn such attacks."

In the United States, the anti-Semitism on campus controversy came amid a rise in attacks and violent rhetoric targeting Jews and Muslims, including at universities, since the Zionist-Hamas war erupted. The president of another elite Ivy League institution, the University of Pennsylvania, had already been forced to resign.

International

Soup, sympathy at Japan quake shelters

Death toll rises to at least 73 as thousands of households left without water or power

ANAMIZU, Japan: Seeking food, company and a safe roof over their heads, people from all walks of life were sheltering at community halls after a major earthquake levelled their homes in central Japan. At one hall in the town of Anamizu, residents huddled together on makeshift beds made of cardboard boxes, warming themselves by stoves and rehashing the New Year's Day catastrophe that killed at least 73 people and left tens of thousands without power or running water.

"I want to go back home soon, but I have no idea what the road situation is now, and neither do people who manage the facility here," said Nobuo Takahata, 68, who was visiting from the neighboring region of Toyama when the quake hit. Takahata was with his family, having weathered a harrowing night in their car before arriving at the shelter.

But others were by themselves, gazing ruefully out windows or perusing local newspapers featuring giant pictures of collapsed buildings and raging fires. A whiteboard detailed what rationed items were available, including water, powdered milk, onigiri rice balls, blankets and women's sanitary products. Soup, with a warning for those with food allergies, was also available, as were steamed buns for locals braving the cold in long queues outside.

'The big one'

Takahata was driving when the quake began. "The first shake was rather small so I pulled over. After a short while, I began driving again when the big one hit," he told AFP. He was able to safely stop the car, but the road was split open by the quake. "If I had been less lucky, I could've fallen into that hole in the road and died," he said.

Unable to return home, he had to spend the first night after the disaster in a car with his pregnant wife

and daughter, turning the engine on and off to keep warm. Since they were visiting from out of town, they had no supplies and had to share a single bottle of water between them.

We "took sips of it together to survive", he said, adding that running the heater in the car for warmth made them thirsty. At another shelter in the city of Nanao, 75-year-old Yoko Demura explained that her home had been reduced to rubble. "I can never go back there. It's unlivable now. It makes me sad and I will miss it. I never expected to lose our home like this, but there is nothing we can do," she said.

Roads blocked

All around the Noto Peninsula on the Sea of Japan coast, buildings have been flattened and roads hit by landslides and fallen trees. Cellphone coverage was patchy. In the city of Wajima, a huge fire laid waste to several hundred structures and a seven-storey building toppled over.

In Suzu, tsunami waves spilled fishing boats on the shore. Heavy rain pounded the region on Wednesday, making conditions more treacherous and raising the risk of additional landslides even as aftershocks continued. Sirens blared as emergency vehicles tried to get to those in need.

"My house itself didn't crumble down, but inside, everything fell over. It's a mess," Yuko Okuda, 30, told AFP at another shelter in Anamizu that in normal times is a municipal office. "The cold and the lack of food are my biggest concerns now," Okuda said, adding that her four-year-old son was allergic to eggs so could not eat the food rations provided. "So he's basically subsisting on snacks we had brought from home. Of course I eventually hope to return to our home but for now, what I want is to make my life here just a bit more livable."



ANAMIZU: A man walks past a collapsed house in Anamizu Town, Ishikawa prefecture on Jan 3, 2024, after a major 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck the region. — AFP

There were "almost no houses standing" in one town in the Suzu area, said municipal mayor Masuhiro Izumiya. "About 90 percent of the houses (in that area) are completely or almost completely destroyed ... the situation is really catastrophic," he said, according to broadcaster TBS.

The regional government confirmed 73 people are dead and nearly 400 injured, but the toll is expected to rise. More than 33,400 people were in

shelters, and at least 200 buildings had collapsed. Around 30,000 households were still without power in Ishikawa prefecture, the local utility said, and over 110,000 households left without running water.

"Our lifelines have been cut off," said Yuko Okuda, 30, from an evacuation center in Anamizu. "Electricity, water and gas — everything. And as aftershocks keep happening, our house could collapse at any time," she told AFP. — AFP

Temperatures hit -40°C in Sweden, coldest in 25 years

STOCKHOLM: Sweden on Wednesday recorded its coldest January night in 25 years, with a reading of minus 43.6 degrees Celsius in the far north as a cold snap hit the Nordics. "To put that into perspective, that is the lowest January temperature in Sweden since 1999," Mattias Lind, meteorologist at Sweden's national weather agency SMHI, told AFP.

In January 1999, a temperature of minus 49 degrees Celsius (minus 56.2 Fahrenheit) was recorded in Sweden, which tied the record set in 1951. Lind said that Wednesday's measurement was made at the Kvikjokk-Arrenjarka station in Sweden's far north. "It is the lowest temperature that has been recorded in this specific spot since measurements began" in 1888, he said. Several other stations recorded temperatures of below minus 40C in Sweden's north.

While residents of the region are used to seeing freezing temperatures, the recent cold snap has forced local bus operators to suspend services, and train operator Vy said Tuesday that it had cancelled all trains north of the city of Umea for several days. Trains were also disrupted in neighboring Finland, where a seasonal record of minus 38.7 Celsius was recorded Tuesday evening in the northern Lapland region.



KIRUNA, Sweden: Snow and frost cover a road and the landscape in the village of Vittangi in Kiruna municipality in the north of Sweden. — AFP

Several instances of frozen or burst water pipes were also reported, and Finnish broadcaster YLE said around 300 people in the city of Tampere were left without running water on Tuesday. The cold front is expected to move south over the next few days, with the Finnish capital Helsinki already seeing temperatures falling to minus 15 degrees Celsius on Wednesday.

But despite colder temperatures being expected tomorrow, some of the capital's residents were unfazed by the prospect. "I'm really loving it. It's a mindset thing I guess," Katja, a woman in Helsinki,

told AFP on Wednesday. "It's all about the clothing," she said, wearing a thick black winter jacket with the hood pulled over her head.

"Yeah, just a lot of clothes and the attitude — Like it's going to be cold but it's beautiful," her friend Nita agreed as snow fell. The extreme cold is also expected to hit Norway towards the end of the week, with temperatures in Oslo potentially falling to minus 27C this weekend, according to the national weather service. Heavy snowfall has already impacted the south of the country with school closures and cancelled flights. — AFP

Ticket to Nicaragua: Migrants seek safer shortcut to US

PANAMA CITY: Nicaragua has become a hot spot for migrants from around the world seeking to avoid a brutal trek through the Darien Gap jungle — including the 303 Indians whose plane was grounded last week in France on their way to the Central American nation.

Migrants from South American and Caribbean countries, Africa and Asia, have long had to brave the lawless, virtually impassable rainforest that straddles Panama and Colombia, in a bid to reach the United States. However, analysts say that the government of Nicaragua's iron-fisted President Daniel Ortega, a longtime nemesis of the United States, has deliberately made it easier for migrants to bypass the Darien by flying straight to his country before heading north overland.

Manuel Orozco, a migration expert at the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue, told AFP that Ortega's government was facilitating "the business of a network of international air services" so that migrants "can reach the border with Mexico and the United States faster."

"We collected data from more than 500 charter flights," said Orozco, adding that between April and June, airport authorities had hired "private companies located in Dubai to train officials in the international handling of paperwork for these types of flights."

An Airbus A340 was detained last week at a Paris airport after an anonymous tip-off that it was carrying potential victims of human trafficking. After it was established that the passengers were traveling of their own free will, most of them were flown back to India on Monday. Indian police said the passengers had paid tens of thousands of dollars to agents to help them reach the southern border of the United States.

'Premeditated'

Orozco said that the Nicaraguan government, which has remained mum on the matter, benefits from the cost of visas or tourist cards — depending on the nationality of the arriving passenger — as well as landing taxes. He said Nicaragua "conceived" this new air route "in a premeditated manner faced with the opportunity to worsen the migration crisis to the United States and, in the process, make money."

Liliana Bakayoko, a lawyer for the Romanian airline operating the flight, told AFP that Nicaragua had approved the passenger list before the plane departed. All foreigners need to get prior approval from immigration authorities to enter the country.

From the capital Managua, migrants travel to Honduras and Guatemala, then to Mexico to the southern border with the United States, paying thousands of dollars to smugglers. This allows them to avoid the Darien Gap, where on top of the dangers of the thick jungle, rivers, and wild animals, they are preyed upon by criminal gangs and face sexual violence.

Panamanian authorities say over half a million people have made it through the jungle in 2023 — double the amount the previous year. Most of those braving the Darien Gap are Venezuelans fleeing economic misery, but there are also Ecuadorians, Haitians, Cubans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Afghans and Africans from Cameroon or Burkina Faso.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has said the "most significant trend has been the shift by Cuban migrants and those coming from African nations who are increasingly choosing air routes to reach Central America, sidestepping the Darien to continue their northbound trip."

Honduras migration statistics show a five-fold increase in arrivals from countries like Guinea, China, Senegal, India, Afghanistan and Angola, who cross into the country from Nicaragua. Orozco said that Nicaragua has also become a "springboard" for Cubans and Haitians taking charter flights since visa requirements for those countries were scrapped in 2021. Others take regular commercial flights to El Salvador, which in October imposed an airport transit fee of \$1,130 on Africans and Indians. — AFP

Jihadists kill 15 in Nigeria New Year attacks

KANO, Nigeria: Jihadists have killed at least 15 people in New Year's Day attacks on two villages near the town of Chibok in northeast Nigeria's Borno State, three residents told AFP on Wednesday. Jihadist fighters in trucks fitted with machine guns and on motorcycles stormed into Gatamarwa and Tsiha villages on Monday, killing residents and burning homes after looting food supplies, the residents said. "The death toll from the attacks on the two villages stands at 15," Manasseh Allen, head of Chibok Area Development Association (CADA), told AFP.

It was not clear which group was behind the attacks but both Boko Haram and rival Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) carry out raids in the area. The attackers, dressed as soldiers, drove into Gatamarwa, opening fire on residents, including a group of mourners returning from a funeral, Allen said. "They (jihadists) killed 12 people in Gatamarwa and three others in Tsiha," said Allen.

Two other residents gave similar accounts. "Apart from the killings, the insurgents carted away food supplies and set fire to homes in the two villages," said Ayuba Alamsan, a Chibok community leader, who gave the same toll.

The militants kidnapped a young woman in the attack on Tsiha, another resident Samson Bulus said, also giving the same toll. Borno State police spokesman Nahum Daso confirmed the attack but declined to provide details or a toll.

Chibok hit global headlines in 2014 when Boko Haram jihadists abducted more than 200 schoolgirls from their boarding school. Troops were stationed in Chibok after the mass kidnapping, but deadly Boko Haram raids continue in the area.

ISWAP, which split from Boko Haram in 2016, seized Sambisa forest from its rivals in 2021 and continues to attack villages on the fringes of the forest. More than 40,000 people have been killed and around two million displaced from their homes in 14 years of conflict. The violence spilled into neighboring Niger, Chad and Cameroon, prompting a regional military coalition to fight the jihadist groups. — AFP



TOKYO: An official looks at the wreckage of a Japan coast guard plane on the tarmac at Tokyo International Airport the morning after the plane crash. — AFP

Prompt evacuation, not luck, saved lives in Japan plane crash

TOKYO: After landing, smoke filled the cabin and flames licked the windows, but the Japan Airlines crew got all 367 passengers safely off the aircraft in an orderly fashion — and just in time. Babies and children screamed and panic-stricken passengers begged to be let off, footage from the scene on Tuesday at Tokyo's Haneda Airport showed. "Honestly, I thought we wouldn't survive. So I texted my family and friends to say that my plane is burning, right now," a woman told broadcaster NHK.

After arriving from Hokkaido in the north, the Japan Airlines Airbus collided with a coast guard plane and caught fire as it sped down the runway. It careened to a halt after the front landing gear failed, but all 379 passengers and crew managed to escape down two emergency slides before the plane was engulfed in flames. The smaller coast guard vessel was heading to deliver aid to earthquake-hit central Japan. Five of the six personnel died.

Those on board JAL's Airbus liner feared that could have been their fate. "It felt like we abruptly hit something. Then the fire started, like, 'bang!'" a male passenger told broadcaster TBS. "The smell of smoke was in the air, and the doors were not open-

ing. So I think everyone panicked," a woman told reporters at the airport. Eight children were on board the passenger plane. In one video clip, a young voice can be heard shouting: "Please let us out. Please. Please open it. Just open it. Oh, God."

'Evacuating promptly'

The plane landed at 5:46 pm (0846 GMT) and everyone was off just under 20 minutes later, Japan Airlines told a briefing on Tuesday night. Aviation experts said it was a carefully rehearsed and executed evacuation that stopped the plane from turning into a death trap. "Passengers seemed to have followed instructions in a textbook manner," Terence Fan, an airline industry expert from Singapore Management University told AFP, with others praising those on board for leaving their cabin bags behind. "This is exactly what evacuation policies are designed for — the airframe itself is not meant to survive the blaze, ultimately," David Kaminski-Morrow, air transport editor at aviation news website FlightGlobal said: "I wouldn't personally call the successful evacuation of the JAL flight a 'lucky escape', although the passengers might believe so."

Instead, he added, an efficient evacuation showed "what can be achieved by evacuating promptly and efficiently". Passenger William Manzione told Sky News that "everything was really quick". "When I saw the inflatable slide, I understood this was bad. I took my son ... Then I turned around and saw the airplane with the nose completely smashed and the flames all over the back," he said. — AFP

Business

THURSDAY, JANUARY 4, 2024

Zain Kuwait achieves 10 Gbps speed in successful 5.5G trial

First to reach this significant milestone in Kuwait's ICT market

- Company also succeeds in testing Ultra-Reliable Low Latency Communication (URLLC)
- 5.5G features blazing-fast speeds and higher efficiency to meet growing demand of cloud computing, AI, big data, and more
- Achievement solidifies Zain's leadership position, goes in line with its digitization efforts for 'New Kuwait' vision

KUWAIT: In yet another impressive achievement that reaffirms its leadership position in the local ICT industry, Zain announces that it has achieved speeds of 10 Gigabits per second after completing a 5.5G technology trial on its network, becoming the first operator to reach this significant milestone in Kuwait's telecom market. The company also succeeded in testing Ultra-Reliable Low Latency Communication (URLLC), a key 5.5G feature. The announcement was made after the successful completion of a 5.5G trial on Zain's network with global partner Huawei, and under supervision and in collaboration with the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA). Zain has invested early in upgrading and enhancing its network's infrastructure to prepare for the shift towards the 5.5G era, which brings limitless opportunities and opens up new horizons for businesses and consumers alike. In addition, the achievement serves as a testament to Zain's leadership position and goes in line with its digitization efforts for the 'New Kuwait' vision.

5.5G, which features blazing-fast speeds and higher efficiency levels, combined with Ultra-Reliable Low Latency Communication (URLLC), which brings reduced latency and ultra-reliable connections, will meet the ever-growing demand of cloud computing, AI, big data, immersive AR/VR experiences, autonomous vehicles, and more. These fast growing technologies and more rely on higher, more stable speeds, and are increasingly adopted by businesses and government agencies.

Zain has recently showcased its network's readiness for the rollout of 5G New Calling (5GNC), an emerging 5G network capability that paves the way for a new era of voice and video calling and will rely on the capabilities of 5.5G. Zain participated in the

GSMA's New Calling Summit in Paris to demonstrate these capabilities and successful trial of the service, becoming the only operator from the region to be hosted by the industry body to showcase 5GNC to the global telecom community.

Recently, Zain received several prestigious recognitions for its 5G leadership, most importantly three major awards from Ookla Speedtest: 'Fastest 5G Network', 'Best 5G Video Experience', and 'Fastest Internet'. The company was also presented with the 'Outstanding 5G Business Development' award during SAMENA Council's Leadership & Excellence (LEAD) Awards. These accolades recognized Zain's excellence in empowering and accelerating business development using the most advanced 5G applications. In 2019, Zain led the



market as the first operator to launch 5G services commercially, setting a precedent in the local and regional telecom industries. Since then, more successes have followed in adapting 5G technologies to overhaul the digital journeys of customers. Zain continues to invest in its 5G infrastructure heavily, achieving the highest speeds and best operational efficiency levels over its networks. The telecom company seeks to meet the increasing demand for data, while exploring new ecosystems and revenue streams made possible by technology innovation, with the goal of serving the needs of consumers, businesses, and government agencies.



Zain HQ building

Turkey's inflation rate nears 65%

ISTANBUL: Turkey's annual inflation rate approached 65 percent in December, reaching a new high for 2023 and putting the country on course to meet an expected peak of 70-75 percent in May. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's new team of market-friendly economists expects inflation to start falling from near record highs within four months.

The rate reached a decades-long high of 85 percent in October of 2022 and then fell off before resuming a steady climb. Turkey's official annual inflation rate ticked up to 64.77 in December, from 61.98 percent in November. But the month-on-month pace of increases of 2.93 percent was the smallest of the past six months.

"The underlying inflation trend improved slightly, and inflation expectations stabilized in the last months," said Bartosz Sawicki, a market analyst at the Conotuxia investment house.

Liam Peach of Capital Economics said the latest figure "will generally comfort the central bank". Analysts blame Erdogan—who has called high interest rates "the mother and father of all evil"—for setting off the inflation spiral by forcing the nominally independent central bank to start slashing borrowing costs in 2021. He reversed course after winning a difficult re-election in May of last



ISTANBUL: People shop at vegetable market in Istanbul. Turkey's annual inflation rate approached 65 percent in December, reaching a new high for 2023.

year, appointing well-respected economist Mehmet Simsek as finance minister and former Wall Street executive Hafize Gaye Erkan in charge of the central bank. The central bank has since lifted Turkey's benchmark interest rate to 42.5 percent

and issuing its financial reports, according to the new system, provides accurate and comprehensive financial information that supports decision-making. "It also enables performance evaluation, setting targets and accountability, objectivity, and other benefits that improve the capabilities of the entity and the system in all financial and economic fields," he said.

Al-Furaih also highlighted the most prominent achievements of the transformation which includes issuing more than 190 opening balance lists for the year 2022, equivalent to 95 percent of the target in the number of lists, and more than 180 transitional financial lists for the same year, which constitutes 90 percent of the target.

In addition to the number of known assets with the greatest value reaching more than two million assets, in addition to the kingdom's selection for international representation within the "International Accounting Standards Board" in the public sector and in the work teams associated with it.

Al-Furaih underlined that the transformation achievements that have been made are a first step that will be followed by inevitable steps to confirm the sus-

tainability of business on an accrual basis and enhance the gains achieved. Deputy Minister of Finance for Financial Affairs and Accounts Hamad Al-Kanhal said that the shift to the accrual basis is one of the Vision 2030 initiatives, which is a strategic national project that achieves many goals and benefits, and constitutes the appropriate basis for building financial information that supports the official in decision-making.

He pointed out that the Accounting Merit Pioneers program is one of the transformation management tools that was launched at the Merit Center to support and create competitiveness among government agencies with the aim of stimulating and accelerating the transformation work in these entities and achieving them with the appropriate quality and time.

Abdullah Al-Mahathal, head of the Accounting Enlightenment Center, confirmed that the meeting comes within the process of change of management and culminates in the progress achieved by government agencies in the program of transformation to accrual-based accounting at all levels. He noted the necessity of business sustainability to preserve the gains that were achieved in the past. — Agencies

Global stocks mostly retreat

LONDON: Asian and European stock markets mostly fell Wednesday as traders took cash off the table after a blockbuster end to 2023, with eyes now on the release this week of US Federal Reserve minutes and jobs data.

Oil prices declined after spiking Tuesday on supply concerns linked to simmering tensions between Iran and the United States in the Red Sea. The dollar rose against the euro and yen as dealers awaited fresh clues on the Fed's interest-rate outlook in the upcoming minutes from its final monetary policy meeting of 2023. "Messaging from the central bank seemed a touch confused at the end of 2023 as it initially implied rate cuts in 2024 before such talk was dampened," noted AJ Bell investment director Russ Mould.

The "minutes may provide some clarity," he added. Equities surged late last year on expectations the US central bank would slash interest rates in 2024 as inflation cools. However, analysts have warned of an excessive rally and that investors should prepare for a pullback, with tech titans such as Apple and Amazon likely to take a hit.

"The market may have gotten ahead of itself about (rate) cuts," said City Index analyst Fiona Cincotta. On Wall Street Tuesday, the Nasdaq slumped 1.6 percent and the S&P 500 was also in the red, though the Dow rose slightly. The negative mood continued in Asia Wednesday, where Hong Kong, Sydney, Seoul and Taipei were among the biggest losers.

Shanghai edged higher and Tokyo was shut for a Japanese holiday. In Europe, Paris sank more than one percent while London and Frankfurt each shed about half a percent. The year "has kicked off with risk retrenchment", said Vishnu Varathan at Mizuho Bank. "Whether this is a durable purge from excessive exuberance or merely profit-taking is unclear."

The Fed's post-meeting statement in December had indicated three interest rate cuts this year, though some market participants are tipping far more. Friday sees the release of the closely watched US non-farm payrolls data. —AFP

Saudi to open first financial center with unified policies

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's Chairman of the Steering Committee at the Ministry of Finance Abdul Aziz Al-Furaih said on Tuesday that the kingdom is poised to open the first financial center based on an integrated system of unified and harmonized standards and policies at the national level. This is considered a major step that would bolster the efficiency of the government's financial and accounting performance, he said.

Al-Furaih made the remarks while opening the Leadership Forum for the Transformation to Accrual Accounting organized by the ministry of finance in Riyadh on Tuesday. He said that switching to the accrual basis of accounting in its form and subject matter provides benefits and returns that exceed the time and effort invested. He indicated that converting the entity

Business

Assets of SWFs in GCC reached \$4.1 trillion in 2023: Global SWF

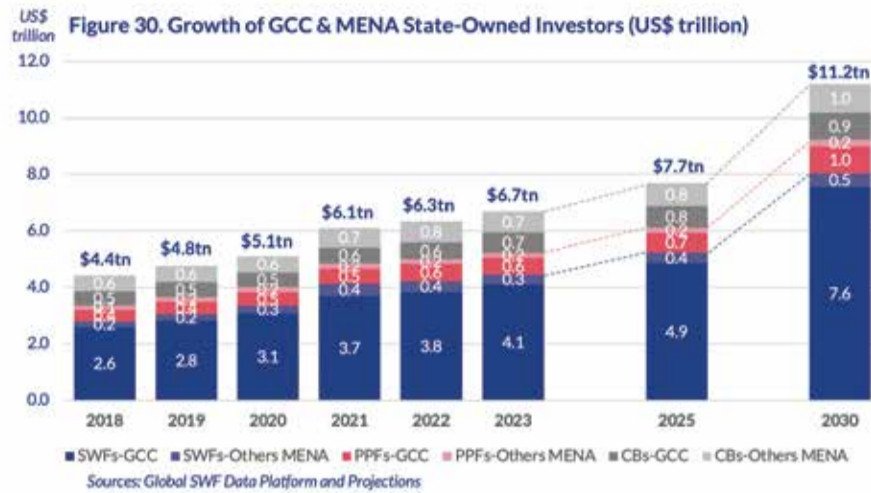
Economic diversification could push Gulf growth to +3.6%, +3.7% in 2024, 2025 respectively

KUWAIT: The assets under management (AUM) of SWFs in the Gulf region reached a historical peak of \$4.1 trillion in 2023 and the transaction value, even if slightly lower than in 2022, amounted \$82.3 billion, led by the so-called "Oil Five" (ADIA, Mubadala, ADQ, PIF, QIA), the annual report released by Global SWF said. By 2030, the group of 19 Gulf SWFs could reach \$7.6 trillion in assets, and if added the pension funds and central banks in the broader MENA region, that figure could balloon to \$11.2 trillion, the report added.

One of the key consistent themes of the year when it comes to sovereign capital has been the prominence of investors from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). One obvious reason is the sustained high level of oil prices: Gulf SWFs have reaped the rewards of the fiscal windfalls and recovered quicker than others from the 2022 financial markets debacle. The other reason is the maturity of the investment landscape, with a wide range of players entering domestic and global markets with a level of sophistication never seen before. This has fueled economic diversification, which is expected to push GCC's growth to +3.6 percent and +3.7 percent in 2024 and 2025, respectively, according to the World Bank.

The SWF industry in the GCC is anchored by its three largest players that are well over 50 years-old: Kuwait's KIA (1953), Abu Dhabi's ADIA (1967) and Saudi Arabia's PIF (1971). However, there is no shortage of capital beyond them, and there are always new funds and developments that keep things interesting. The inflow of foreign investors working in the region has accelerated, and managers and advisors fly in from around the world every year to attend conferences and meetings, notably between the months of October and March.

Historically, ADIA was the only proper sovereign investor, since its early inception in London in 1967. In 1984, ADIA created a joint venture with ADNOC, which they called IPIC, to pursue acquisitions overseas – a new kind of strategic fund. This was followed by Mubadala (exchange), which aimed at attracting know-how to the Emirates. And, in 2007, ADIA stripped off its domestic investments into ADIC, which was also financially-driven. Four



very different SWFs that co-existed for years until the consolidation of 2016-2018.

Fast-forward to today, and ADQ has emerged as another, very active and versatile strategic investor. But the principle remains the same – different SWFs to cover all bases without, theoretically, overlapping with each other, and different accountability and reporting lines. Elsewhere in the Gulf, the Abu Dhabi approach is followed by Dubai, which lacks an ADIA-like fund because of its more limited oil reserves but has various strategic funds; and by Bahrain, which runs separately the FGR (future fund) and Mumtalakat (strategic fund).

The second approach is the one seen in Saudi Arabia, in which the government consolidates all investment and strategic efforts, and its vision, into a single umbrella, in this case, the Public Investment Fund (PIF).

PIF was actually born in 1971 and is the Gulf's oldest SWF in its present form and name. However, it was conceived as a development fund that would only support Saudi companies, while the central bank SAMA ran the country's de-facto SWF with its portfolio of foreign holdings. That all changed in 2015, when PIF was transferred under the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA).

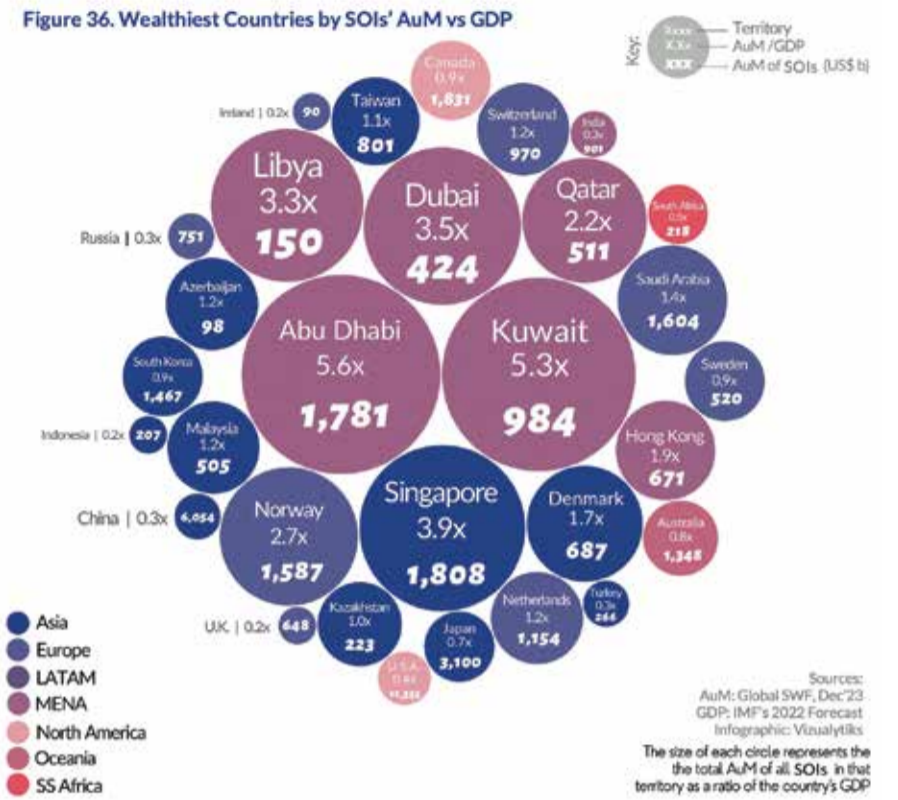
In the past eight years, PIF has become one of the world's most active (the most active in 2023) SWFs both at home and overseas, and is a key enabler of the country's Vision 2030 and transformation. Further, its leaders have no problems

in announcing grand plans for the SWF, in using it in its name to buy football clubs or golf leagues, and in sharing its finances publicly given its fundraising efforts, in a rather refreshing fashion.

In 2017, Riyadh set up a second fund, NDF, that would support PIF's push for Vision 2030, but with a much more domestic and low profile, so many analysts still consider PIF the only "pure SWF" in the Kingdom. Elsewhere in the Gulf, the Saudi approach is followed by Qatar, which consolidates all its efforts under QIA; Kuwait, which does the same with KIA and its entities; and Oman, which merged its two funds into OIA in 2020.

Saudi Arabia is developing a range of national champions to advance Vision 2030. PIF has established subsidiaries ranging from agriculture to finance, from industry to infrastructure. Central to the PIF-led development program is its multi-billion giga-projects, which all have an element of tourism: NEOM, including the Line, Oxagon, Sindalah and Trojena; Red Sea Global, Qiddiya, Roshn and Diriyah. At present, their value is not capitalized, but when they are completed by 2030, they should boost the fund's AUM by tens of billions. The fund also operates several subsidiaries including Sanabil, TAQNA, Jada Fund of Funds, and STC Ventures that are building their own impressive portfolios, and a 17 percent stake in Prince Alwaleed's Kingdom Holding.

Other Gulf states have looked to consolidating state-owned assets ahead of



BYD: Chinese giant that has overtaken Tesla on sales

BEIJING: China's BYD has overtaken US electric vehicle giant Tesla as the world's leading EV deliverer, according to recent sales figures. Here's what you need to know about the Chinese electric vehicle firm with global ambitions.

Known as "Biyadi" in Chinese—or by the English slogan "Build Your Dreams"—BYD was founded in 1995 in the southern industrial hub of Shenzhen. It initially specialized in the design and manufacture of batteries before moving into the automotive sector in 2003.

Close government cooperation in Shenzhen—where the public bus fleet has already fully transitioned to electric models—gave it an important boost. "They were thinking about this way before any country was even considering trying to clean or electrify their public transportation fleets," Tu Le, managing director of Sino Auto Insights, told AFP.

"I think that's paid off currently with how competitive (BYD) are in the global passenger vehicle EV space." Last year BYD became the first manufacturer to pass the five million milestone in new energy production, crowning itself "the world's leading manufacturer of new energy vehicles".

Many foreign automotive giants—including Tesla, BMW, Mercedes and Audi—depend on BYD for their batteries. The firm has long benefited from generous subsidies from Beijing for electric vehicles—support that has angered other governments. Beijing has spearheaded a targeted industrial strategy to boost its EV sector, pouring vast state funds into domestic firms as well as research and development.

Between 2014 and the end of 2022, the Chinese government said it had spent more than 200 billion yuan (\$28 billion) on subsidies and tax breaks for EV purchases alone. The approach has given Chinese firms a critical edge in the race to provide cheaper, more fuel-efficient EVs over leading US automakers, which have not always enjoyed such state largesse.



SUZHOU: This file photo taken on September 11, 2023 shows BYD electric cars waiting to be loaded on a ship stacked at the international container terminal of Taicang Port at Suzhou Port, in China's eastern Jiangsu Province. — AFP

Demand for electric vehicles has soared in recent years in China, which is the world's biggest emitter of polluting greenhouse gasses.

BYD, whose investors include US investment titan Warren Buffett, wants electric and hybrid vehicles to lead its sales by 2035. That push saw it announce sales of 526,409 all-electric cars in the fourth quarter of 2023 -- surpassing Tesla's 484,507 in the same period.

That has been helped by the fact BYD's electric vehicles are cheaper, with its cars selling for less than \$30,000 on average, while Tesla's go for north of \$40,000, according to financial magazine Barron's.

It also sold more than 400,000 plug-in hybrid electric vehicles in the fourth quarter. But despite its dominant position in the Chinese market, a number of growing domestic brands, including XPeng, Nio and Geely, are nipping at its heels. XPeng said a total of 141,601 vehicles were delivered in 2023, while Nio reached 160,038 -- both up from the year before.

Under intense pressure to outdo each other, China's automakers are engaging in a price war, espe-

cially with consumer spending slowing as the country's post-pandemic recovery stutters.

BYD ceased production of gasoline-powered vehicles in 2022 and now focuses exclusively on hybrid and electric models. It launched a European offensive in 2022 at the Paris Motor Show.

Last month, it said it would build a new EV plant in Hungary—in a move described by the country's foreign minister as "one of the largest investments in the history of the Hungarian economy".

That builds on its existing operations in the central European nation, including an electric bus factory. It has said it hopes the factory will "accelerate the entry of new energy passenger vehicles into the European market" as well as deepen its global footprint. But not everyone is happy with BYD's westward expansion.

Last year, the European Union launched an investigation into Chinese subsidies for its EV sector, saying that Chinese state support has squeezed its own firms in local markets and threatening to impose tariffs in retaliation. — AFP

"Robust regional economic growth particularly in Asia's large emerging markets - should offset headwinds from slowing growth in China, weak global demand and high interest rates, helping to support performance across sectors in APAC in 2024," Fitch Ratings Senior Director Duncan Innes-Ker said. Fitch said headwinds from slower Chinese growth, weak global demand and higher interest burdens following the rise in interest rates over 2022-23 will weigh on performance for many sectors. But the bulk of Fitch's APAC sector outlooks for 2024 remain neutral. "Sino-US tensions have eased recently, but we expect relations to remain challenging, which will lead companies to pursue further supply-chain diversification to limit exposure to geopolitical risks," Fitch said. — Agencies

Bitcoin continues to consolidate above 45,000 level

By Samer Hasn

LONDON: Bitcoin is trying to hold the \$45,000 level after it failed to close yesterday. While sideways movements dominate trading on Wednesday morning, Bitcoin's moves come as investor sentiment continues to be positive, which comes from hope that the SEC will approve the launch of Bitcoin spot ETFs in the coming days.

It seems that these hopes have been strengthened as analysts adhere to their expectations about the possibility of the authority approving many asset managers' requests at once on Jan 10. Bloomberg analysts maintained a 90 percent probability that the SEC would approve these applications on that date. While they did not raise this probability further, with the possibility remains that the authority may take more time to make its decision, according to what analysts told Cointelegraph.

This sentiment was also reflected in more noticeable liquidations of short positions in the crypto market and Bitcoin in particular. About \$90 million were liquidated from short positions for various cryptocurrencies on Tuesday and the same amount for long positions as well, according to data provided by CoinGlass. As for Bitcoin, it received the largest portion of these liquidations, with more than \$48 million in short positions. These liquidations are the largest since Dec 5.

At the same time, about 20 million buying positions were liquidated, coinciding with Bitcoin exceeding the level of \$45,000. In contrast for this positive sentiment, there is increasing talk about the possibility of "sell the news" if the SEC approves the launch of spot Bitcoin ETFs, especially with the strong gains that cryptocurrencies have witnessed since hope about this increased months ago.

We may actually see the phenomenon of selling the news if approval is confirmed, which may hinder the gains of cryptocurrencies to some extent. However, I believe that this may happen for a limited time and magnitude, before the true market fundamentals are reflected in prices. The most prominent of these fundamentals may include the significantly increased demand for Bitcoin by asset managers, which is estimated at more than \$100 billion. On the other hand, the continued uncertainty regarding the regulatory and legislative environment governing the cryptocurrency market in the United States is the most prominent obstacle to these potential gains in terms of market fundamentals.

Note: Samer Hasn is market analyst and part of the research team at XS.com

Fitch: Asia Pacific growth to remain strong in 2024

WASHINGTON: The economic growth in Asia Pacific will remain strong in 2024 and GDP is expected to grow by about 5 percent in India and a host of emerging market countries, Fitch Ratings said on Wednesday. In its report titled 'APAC Cross-Sector Outlook 2024', Fitch said the outlooks for the banking sectors in India and Indonesia, as well as APAC emerging markets as a whole,

move to improving in 2024, partly reflecting the robust economic backdrop.

"Economic growth in APAC will generally remain strong in 2024, especially in emerging markets (EMs), supporting sector outlooks across the region. We expect real GDP to expand by, or above, 5 percent in India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, and China's performance will still be strong by most other countries' standards," Fitch said.

The Indian economy grew 7.2 percent in 2022-23 fiscal year. India's GDP expanded 7.8 percent and 7.6 percent in the June and September quarters, respectively. Fitch had last month said it expects India to be among the world's fastest-growing large sovereigns, with resilient GDP growth of 6.9 percent this fiscal, followed by 6.5 percent in 2024-25.

Business

Weyay recognized as 'Fastest Growing Digital Bank' in Kuwait by Mastercard

Award a testament to bank's standout innovation, growth in digital banking landscape

KUWAIT: Recognizing its standout innovation and growth in the digital banking landscape, Weyay, Kuwait's first digital bank, was named the "Fastest Growing Digital Bank" in Kuwait by Mastercard.

The award was presented on the sidelines of the recent Mastercard Mena East Business Forum held in Dubai, and attended by numerous professionals, including fintech and industry experts and banking leaders to exchange ideas and discuss the future of digital payments. Weyay is the only bank in Kuwait to receive this outstanding recognition. This prestigious award is a testament to the bank's unwavering commitment to innovation and solidifying its position as a pioneer in Kuwait's digital banking arena.

Since its inception as Kuwait's first digital bank in 2021, Weyay has created a forward-looking concept, by combining technology with a dynamic

design for a seamless and comprehensive banking experience, while relentlessly striving to develop new products and services to serve the needs of its customers. Weyay has played a pivotal role in providing cutting-edge banking services to the youth and early career professionals, aligning seamlessly with their tech-centric lifestyles. Through an intuitive mobile application, Weyay extends a comprehensive suite of banking products and services, including Student Allowance and Salary Transfers, Saving Pots, a Digital Store, Budgeting and Tracking, and Referral programs.

An innovation standout is Weyay's introduction of Kuwait's first numberless prepaid card, committed to providing their customers with absolute transparency and enhanced accessibility through a streamlined two-step application process. This



groundbreaking card sets itself apart with unparalleled transaction transparency, illuminating the traditionally opaque realm of banking by providing a detailed breakdown of fees and markups for international transactions.

Within a short period since launch, Weyay widely captured the interest of GenZ-ers to open new accounts in a simple and fully digital process without any of the usual paperwork. The bank also received many accolades including the "Outstanding Innovation in Mobile Banking" Award in Global Finance's annual Innovators Awards for 2022.



UK electricity from fossil fuels hits 1957 low: Study

LONDON: Britain's electricity production from polluting fossil fuels sank in 2023 to its lowest level in almost 70 years as the nation embraces renewables, a study showed Wednesday. Coal, gas and oil generated 104 terawatt hours of electricity, a total last seen in 1957, according to analysis from specialist website Carbon Brief, which added that it was 22 percent lower than 2022. Electricity from fossil fuels has now fallen by two thirds since hitting a peak in 2008, caused by both a renewables boom and weaker electricity demand, it added.

Fossil fuels accounted for around one third of total UK electricity supplies last year, attaining the lowest ever share. Low-carbon energy sources comprised 56 percent, with renewables on 43 percent and nuclear on 13. Britain is targeting carbon neutrality by 2050 and aims to derive 95 percent of its electricity from low-carbon sources by 2030, with plans to fully decarbonise the sector by 2035.

However, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak last year softened policies aimed at the UK achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050 -- specifically delaying a ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars by five years to 2035. Britain has spearheaded a push into low-carbon energy as part of its strategy to combat sky-high domestic electricity and gas bills, which rocketed after key producer Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022 and sparked a cost-of-living crisis. — AFP

EU sanctions Russia's largest diamond producer Alrosa

BRUSSELS: The European Union on Wednesday imposed sanctions on Russia's state-run diamond giant Alrosa and its CEO as part of a ban on imports of the precious stones over the Ukraine war. The EU in December agreed to prohibit diamonds exported from Russia as it tightens sanctions to further sap the Kremlin's coffers.

The 27-nation bloc added Alrosa, the world's largest diamond mining company, and its chief executive Pavel Marinychev to a blacklist subject to a visa ban and asset freeze in the EU.

The EU said the company—which accounts for 90 percent of Russia's diamond production—constitutes an important part of an economic sector that is providing substantial revenue to the government. "Russia's diamond exports totaled around \$4 billion in 2022."

The EU's ban went into force on January 1 on natural and synthetic diamonds exported from Russia. A prohibition on Russian diamonds processed in third countries will be phased in by September.

The EU ban came after months of painstaking negotiations with G7 countries to set up a system to trace Russia diamonds. Belgium, which is home to the world's biggest diamond trading hub, insisted the system needed to be put in place to make any embargo effective.

The EU has so far imposed 12 rounds of unprecedented sanctions on Moscow since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. But the Russian economy has so far managed to adapt to the sanctions and dislocations caused by the conflict. — AFP

Electric car sales hit a record in France in 2023

PARIS: In 2023, electric cars, either partially or entirely, achieved a record in France, constituting one in every four cars, according to a report published on Monday by the "Platform Automobile" (PFA), representing manufacturers and equipment makers. Fully electric

ECB plans to test banks' response to cyberattack

FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank said Wednesday it would test lenders' response to cyberattacks this year in a first of a kind stress test for banks in the eurozone. The critical scenario set out by the ECB assumes that the bank has been "hit by successful cyberattack that disrupts their daily operations", the ECB said in a statement.

Some 109 banks would be tested on their means to "respond to and recover from a cyberattack, rather than their ability to prevent it", the ECB said. The exercise will examine financial institutions' emergency procedures and their plans to restore normality after such an attack.

A subset of 28 banks from across the eurozone would be subjected to a more rigorous test that would take a closer look at the risks of cyberat-

tacks spilling over into other areas. The results of the exercise, which will be published later this year, would not have an impact on banks' obligations to build capital buffers against financial risks, the ECB said.

The ECB runs stress tests on the banks it supervises every year to evaluate their preparedness to handle adverse events. While most tests have focused on adverse economic and financial scenarios, the ECB has also run a climate stress test on banks. The cyber stress tests were announced last year as the risk of hacking attempts was seen to have increased following the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "The number of cyberattacks is higher than it was before the pandemic," Anneli Tuominen a member of the ECB supervisory board, told German daily Boersen Zeitung last year.



RHONDDA, UK: A delivery driver carries a box down a flight of steps in Tylorstown near the Tylorstown tip on December 6, 2023 in the Rhondda Valley, south Wales.

Fears in Wales over legacy of its coal mining past

TYLORSTOWN, United Kingdom: It was nearly four years ago but the memory of the landslide that sent 60,000 tons of old mining debris sliding down a Welsh hillside still haunts former miner Jeff Coombes. First the river he was walking along with his dog in the heart of the Rhondda Valley in south Wales turned brown. Then the water slowed down.

He noticed the coal tip was moving. After that it was the noise that hit him. "Well it was more of a roar," Coombes, 77, told AFP. The ever-present danger of disused coal tips, exacerbated by the effects of global warming, looms large in Wales. On October 21, 1966, a slag heap collapsed onto a village school and houses in the small south Wales mining village of Aberfan.

The disaster killed 28 adults and 116 children. Nearly 60 years later, it still casts a long shadow. No-one was hurt in the 2020 incident on the hillside at Tylorstown. But it prompted the Welsh authorities to undertake a comprehensive census of old tips, also known as slag or spoil heaps.

It found more than 2,500 of the mini-mountains of debris from old mine shafts nationwide, a legacy of Wales's mining past. Of

those, 350 were deemed to pose a serious risk of collapse, including 79 located in the Rhondda Cynon Taf region north of Cardiff, according to the latest count.

They will now have to be monitored twice a year. The heaps can "become destabilized because they comprise of loose (unconsolidated) material" sitting on slopes, said Ashley Patton, a geological engineer at the British Geological Survey. "The other major triggering factor for destabilizing spoil heaps is water," he said, adding that intense rainfall had been implicated in the slippage at Tylorstown.

In 2021, an independent report on climate change risks highlighted the increasing likelihood of future landslides linked to former mining activity, as rains become more frequent and more violent. Along the road that winds through the Rhondda valley, the slopes on either side are now covered in vegetation, making the danger almost invisible. "Most of them are covered over by trees (but) it's around you."

"People have become conscious of that after Tylorstown tip slid," said Phil Rowe, a former local councillor in neighboring Ferndale. The fear of another disaster had caused "a lot of panic" locally, he said, adding that he didn't believe the authorities were carrying out the necessary surveillance.

Memories of the mining industry that once dominated the valleys of south Wales remain strong among the older generation. But, said ex-miner Roy Jones, 78: "Younger generations



The biggest increase was seen in "distributed denial of service attacks, in which perpetrators interrupt banking services by flooding and clogging bank servers with fake requests", Tuominen said.

There had also been an increase in ransomware attacks, where banks are asked to fork out money to regain

access to their data, she said. "Euro area banks have proven to be resilient so far," Tuominen said, but warned "a successful attack could occur at any time". The ECB's next round of its standard stress tests, aimed at evaluating banks' ability to weather various financial risks, will be carried out in 2025. — AFP



RHONDDA, UK: Former miner and local resident Roy Jones poses for a photograph on the hill top above Tylorstown on December 6, 2023 in the Rhondda Valley, south Wales. — AFP Photos

don't know a lot about it." That makes them less aware of the risks.

On the hill above Tylorstown, he pointed to another slag heap, which has been drained and levelled off to lessen the danger. "They flatten the top and it is now as big as a football field," he said.

The situation has generated anger among locals, who feel forgotten since the closure of the mines made the region less economically important. Rowe said that without the collapse at Tylorstown nothing would have been done to make that slag heap safe. "They said they'd be monitoring it within the last two or three years. "Well, if that was the case, they should have seen that there's something's going to happen," he said. The cost of making safe all the potentially dangerous slag heaps has been estimated at between £500 million and £600 million (\$633 million and \$760 million) over 15 years, according to the Welsh authorities.

But they say the UK government in London is not willing to contribute directly. "Is it right (that) the UK took the economic benefit from Welsh coal but won't fund the safety of its legacy?" local Labour MP Beth Winter recently asked Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in parliament. Sunak responded that the devolved Welsh government in Cardiff "has the resources it needs" to manage the issue.

"I don't think it's the people of the valley who should have to pay for all that," said Coombes, recalling that Welsh coal powered the ships of the Royal Navy, and fuelled the expansion of the former British Empire. — AFP

these, the "Rivian R1T" was named the best high-performance pickup truck with an excellent rating of 4.0. The 2023 BMW iX took the lead as the best luxury SUV with four-wheel drive, also earning an excellent 4.0. The 2023 Chevrolet Bolt EV was recognized as the best small electric hatchback with an excellent 4.0, while the 2023 Genesis GV60 earned an excellent 4.0 as the best alternative to the Tesla Model Y. The "Hyundai Ioniq 6" (2023) followed as the most stylish sedan with an excellent rating of 4.0, and the 2023 Kia EV6 came next as the best mid-priced crossover with an excellent 4.0 rating. — Agencies

THURSDAY, JANUARY 4, 2024

Bangladesh's 'tiny houses' tackle giant flood challenge

An award-winning architect in Bangladesh, one of the nations most at risk from flooding driven by climate change, has developed an ingenious two-floor housing solution to help people survive what scientists warn is a growing threat. This year, when the annual monsoon floodwaters swelled the country's mighty Brahmaputra river, 40-year-old farmer Abu Sayeed did not have to abandon his home for the first time in his life — but merely climb up a ladder and wait out the waters.

The "Khudi Bari" or "tiny house" — resilient homes made on bamboo stilts rising out of the floodwaters that are also easy to move to safer locations when needed — offer hope to millions. "Khudi Bari has saved us," Sayeed told AFP, who like millions, lives on Bangladesh's vast river floodplains because the fertile soil is good for the maize and chilli crops he grows. "We did not leave... we slept on the upper floor. I hope we will never have to flee our homes thanks to this house."

Bangladesh is listed as the seventh most vulnerable to extreme weather caused by climate change and rising sea levels, according to the environmental rights organization Germanwatch. Much of Bangladesh is made up of deltas as the Himalayan rivers of the Ganges and Brahmaputra slowly wind through the low-lying country towards the sea. With millions at risk, relocating people to higher ground is a near-impossible task.

"Fleeing your home during the floods is part of your life," said Sayeed, from the northern village of Shildaha, where 17 prototype Khudi Bari houses have been built by Bangladeshi architect Marina Tabassum. "And often, when the floodwater recedes, you come back to see that your goods were all stolen."



Architect Marina Tabassum, who designed the "Khudi Bari", speaks during an interview with AFP at her office in Dhaka.

'Climate preparedness'

Scientists warn of the growing impact of climate change — increasing the intensity of monsoon rains, as well as warning that ice in the Himalayas is melting faster than ever before. Floods in 2022 in Bangladesh's northeastern Sylhet region were some of the worst on record, leaving millions stranded and around a hundred killed. The government has built thousands of strongly built shelters for cyclones — the equivalent of hurricanes in the North Atlantic or typhoons in the Northwest Pacific — to withstand the severe storms that are also increasing in regularity.

But while reducing fatalities, cyclone shelters are suitable only for hunkering down during the short span of a storm. However, floods can swamp land for months. Tabassum therefore worked to design a home for the "lowest cost possible for those in need", using locally available materials by combining bamboo poles and metal sheeting.

Winner of the Aga Khan Award for architecture for her design of the Bait-ur-Rouf Mosque in Dhaka, and designer of the country's Independence Monument, Tabassum developed prototype shelters to test them



In this photograph taken on Sept 3, 2023, a man works near a "Khudi Bari" or "tiny house", a mobile modular shelter, in Char Shildaha. — AFP photos



Members of a family pose for photos as they sit inside a "Khudi Bari".



against flash flooding and storm winds. "It can be assembled and disassembled very easily," she told AFP, calling it a "climate preparedness" project, with each house costing around \$450 to build, including labor. "It's a mobile modular system, so that's why it can be moved from one location to another," said Tabassum, the winner of Britain's Soane Medal for architecture in 2021, including for her tiny house work.

Most of the Khudi Bari owners use their own solar panels, according to Mohammad Azam Khan whose charity, National Development Program, joined with Tabassum's organization to build the homes for farmers. Arman Abedin, an associate of Tabassum, said every four-meter-high tiny house has two floors, each 100 sq ft. He said the architect has also used the Khudi Bari model to build a large

community center for Rohingya refugee women in the Bangladeshi camps.

'All over the country'

Mohammad Kalu, 35, who lives in one of the Shildaha homes on stilts, said the design meant people could easily adapt. "If water rises to the chest or even cheek level, still we can stay in this house... we can go to the upper floor and cook with gas or firewood," he said. "When the current is strong, we untie the tin walls and the water goes through our houses without any obstruction."

Tabassum said she was partly influenced by the traditional wood homes of Bangladesh's central Munshiganj, raised on stilts to allow floodwaters to pass under during monsoon season. But Sayeed said

the design meant the new houses — with wooden stilts wrapped in metal covers — were far easier to move than traditional constructions. "Now we don't need to buy new materials when we disassemble the houses," he said.

Tabassum is busy building more than a hundred Khudi Bari across Bangladesh to offer an example and inspiration for others. Mohammad Jashim, who sells flat-pack wood homes in Munshiganj, said similar raised wooden home designs were proving popular. "We are selling these homes all over the country," he said. "They are environmentally friendly, can be easily relocated and can resist floods." — AFP



A child climbs a ladder inside a "Khudi Bari".



Aerial photograph shows "Khudi Bari" mobile modular shelters surrounded by floodwaters in Char Shildaha.

Vietnam's Ha Long Bay losing its hue



This aerial photo taken from a seaplane shows tourist boats sailing on the waters of Ha Long Bay in Vietnam's northeastern province of Quang Ninh on Dec 28, 2023. — AFP photos



Passengers take selfies in front of a seaplane.

Vietnam's Ha Long Bay is losing its famous turquoise hue as pollution and over-development threaten its wildlife and picture-perfect image. The UNESCO site is one of Vietnam's most popular tourist destinations, with more than seven million people visiting its blue-green waters and rainforest-topped limestone islands last year. But the bay's popularity, and the subsequent rapid growth of

Ha Long City — now home to a cable car, amusement park, luxury hotels and thousands of new homes — have severely damaged its ecosystem.

The surrounding town is already heavily developed, with docks and luxury apartments clogging the shoreline. Last month pictures were published in state media of an enormous construction site running through the waters of a neighboring bay, sparking outrage

among conservationists. Conservationists estimate there were originally around 234 types of coral in the bay — now the number is around half. There is also a huge problem with both human and plastic waste.

On Thursday tourists queued up for seats in a boat-plane to wing their way over the bay and see its more than 1,900 islands from the air. "I was actually expecting for more blue waters in

Vietnam," said Anete Cimble from Latvia. "We would like to see cleaner waters." After his third flight over the bay, captain Nguyen Ba Hai was more upbeat about the future. "Over the past decade... the discharge of plastic trash onto the sea has greatly improved, that's very encouraging," he said. But, he added, he would "love to see the water as blue as it used to be." — AFP



A seaplane docks on the waters of Ha Long Bay.

In Colombia, illegally felled timber repurposed to help bees

In northeast Colombia, police guard warehouses stacked high with confiscated timber with a noble new destiny: Transformation into homes for bees beleaguered by pesticides and climate change. The illegally harvested wood is used in the Santander department's "Timber Returns Home" initiative, building hives since 2021 to house the little pollinators so critical to human survival.

So far, the project has seen about 200 cubic meters of wood transformed into 1,000 bee hives, with another 10,000 planned for the next phase, according to the Santander environmental authority. Previously, confiscated timber was turned into sawdust, donated to municipalities for projects... and sometimes just left to rot. Now it is being repurposed to help address the "extremely serious problem" of possible bee extinction, said biologist German Perilla, director of the Honey Bee Impact Foundation.

About three quarters of crops producing fruits or seeds for human consumption depend on pollination, but the UN has warned that 40 percent of invertebrate pollinators — particularly bees

and butterflies — risk global extinction. "The main threat is that we will run out of trees and there will be no flowers, because without flowers there are no bees, without bees there are no humans, and we will run out of food," said beekeeper Maria Acevedo, one of the beneficiaries of the project. In 2023 alone, she told AFP, she lost more than half of her hives. She blames pesticides used in nearby production of crops such as coffee.

Multiple threats

According to official data, some 3,000 hives, each able to house around 50,000 bees, die off in Colombia each year. Laboratory tests found traces of the insecticide fipronil in most of the dead insects. Colombia has issued a ban on fipronil — already banned in Europe and restricted in the United States and China — starting February 2024.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, higher temperatures, droughts, floods and other extreme events caused by climate change reduces nectar-bearing flowers that bees feed on, and studies have also linked bee infertility



Beekeeper Maria Zoila Acevedo and biologist German Perilla check a beehive in the municipality of Socorro in Santander department, Colombia, on Dec 3, 2023. — AFP photos

to heat stress. The Santander environmental authority seizes some 1,000 cubic meters of illegally felled timber in anti-trafficking operations in Santander every year. The country lost 123,517 hectares of

trees in 2022, mainly in the Amazon — the world's largest rainforest. Nearly half of all timber traded in Colombia is of illegal origin, according to the environment ministry. — AFP



Acevedo checks a beehive.



Perilla hands Acevedo hives made from illegal timber.



A police officer shows illegal timber at a warehouse.

Lifestyle

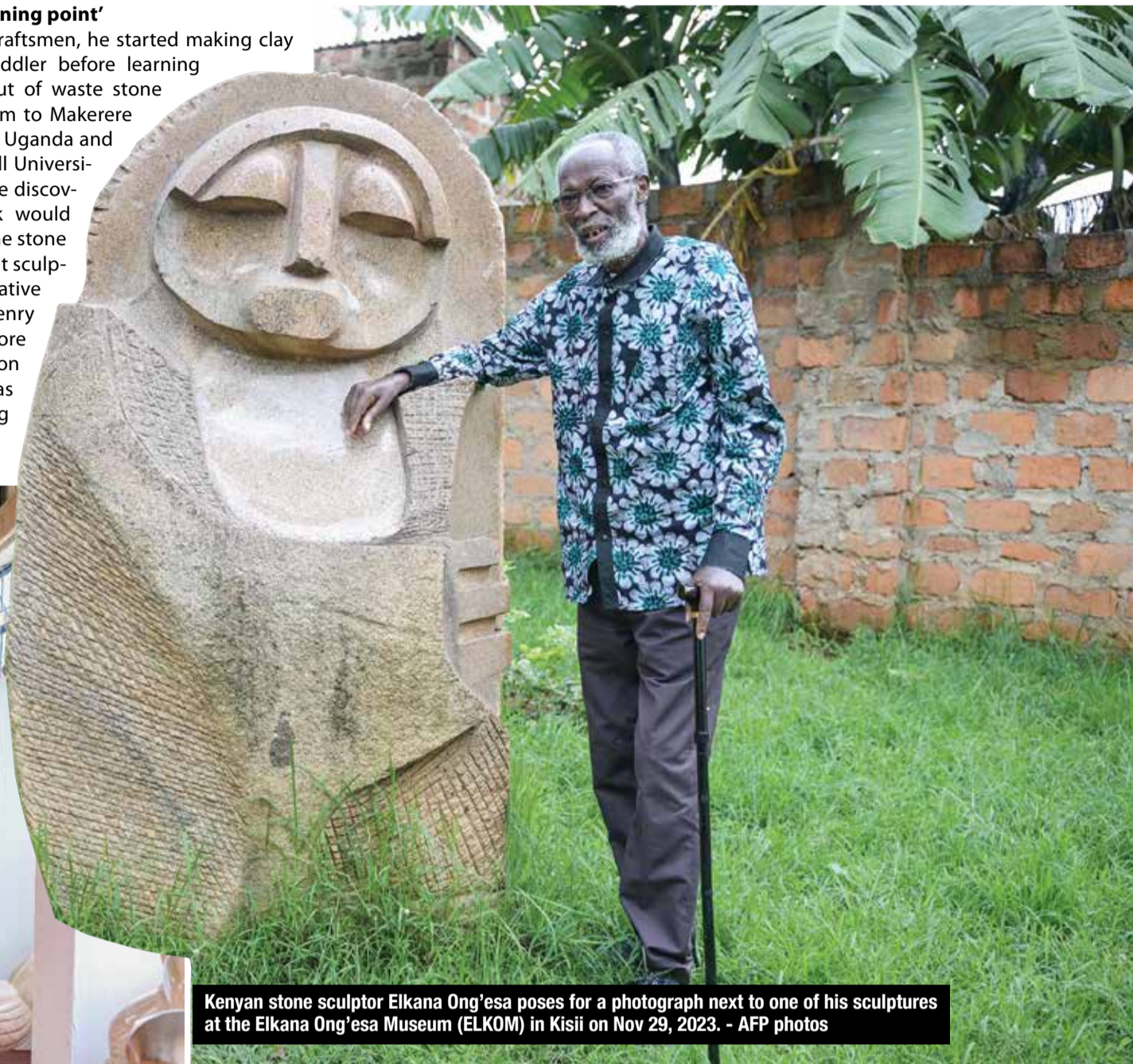
Kenyan sculptor Ong'esa on a mission to elevate African art

Kenya's most lauded sculptor, Elkana Ong'esa, has seen his gigantic stone creations displayed across the globe, but feels African art still deserves greater recognition at home and abroad. "African art has influenced Western art heavily," the 80-year-old sculptor said, pointing to Pablo Picasso's early 20th-century masterpieces, such as *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Les Femmes d'Or*. Despite this, "African art has been left behind," he told AFP in an interview at his home in Tabaka in western Kenya's hilly Kisii county.

His work — much of it inspired by nature — has been showcased at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, the United Nations in New York and respected galleries in cosmopolitan capitals. But it still has not attracted the "very high" prices assigned to artworks produced in the West, he said, with neither African nor foreign collectors willing to shell out for pieces

'Turning point'

Born into a family of craftsmen, he started making clay toys for himself as a toddler before learning to carve little animals out of waste stone shards. His talent took him to Makerere University in neighboring Uganda and onward to Canada's McGill University for graduate studies. He discovered artists whose work would influence his own, from the stone carvings produced by Inuit sculptors to the use of negative space by British icon Henry Moore. "Their work was more (about) artistic expression than craft," he said. "It was a very important turning point for me."



Kenyan stone sculptor Elkana Ong'esa poses for a photograph next to one of his sculptures at the Elkana Ong'esa Museum (ELKOM) in Kisii on Nov 29, 2023. - AFP photos



Ong'esa walks among some of his sculptures.



Ong'esa poses for a photograph at the Elkana Ong'esa Museum.



A stone sculpture is seen outside the home of Ong'esa in Tabaka, near Kisii.



Ong'esa delivers a speech surrounded by relatives and friends during the celebration of his birthday.

from the continent. And that's not the only obstacle. "The Kenyan government does not give enough support to artists," he said, recalling a 2014 fiasco that prevented his work from taking center stage at the Smithsonian Folklore Festival in Washington. Ong'esa had carved a monumental granite sculpture for the prestigious event, and was offered 1.2 billion Kenyan shillings (then equivalent to \$13.8 million) by an interested buyer.

But Kenyan authorities, who insisted on handling transport requirements for the 13-tonne elephant — refusing foreign offers of help — eventually said it was too heavy to be airlifted. Media reports said officials had demanded kickbacks in exchange for transporting the piece. Ong'esa would not comment on the specific allegations, saying only that "some people in the Kenyan government, who were supposed to help, turned against the concept". If the sale had gone ahead, it would have entered the record books and "Kenyan art would be in a different league", he added.

Even so, there is no mistaking the African imprint on his creations. Kisii stone, his favored medium, is found only in western Kenya, unlike soapstone, a widely available rock it is often confused with. Furthermore, his work often features symbols from African myths and songs. The giant granite sculpture gracing the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, "Enyamuchera" ("Bird of Peace" in the Kisii language), has its origins in the fiscal shrike, a black and white bird native to Sub-Saharan Africa. The bird can be a harbinger of good luck or misfortune depending on the angle from which it is seen. "That sculpture says something about me as a person," he said. "It shows what is in me as an artist, as a Kisii."

'Hoping and praying'

It also reflects his insistence on creating art that resonates at home, not only in global capitals. His sculptures are displayed along Kisii's streets, in his garden where he teaches stone

carving to young artists and children, and in the museum he has built to host workshops and showcase African art. His impact on the community was evident at his birthday party last month, with former students and artists paying tribute to their visibly moved mentor as his family cheered.

After ill health forced him to stop working for seven years, the grandfather of five is slowly picking up his tools again. "I have a desire to do my art," he said. He has already begun carving

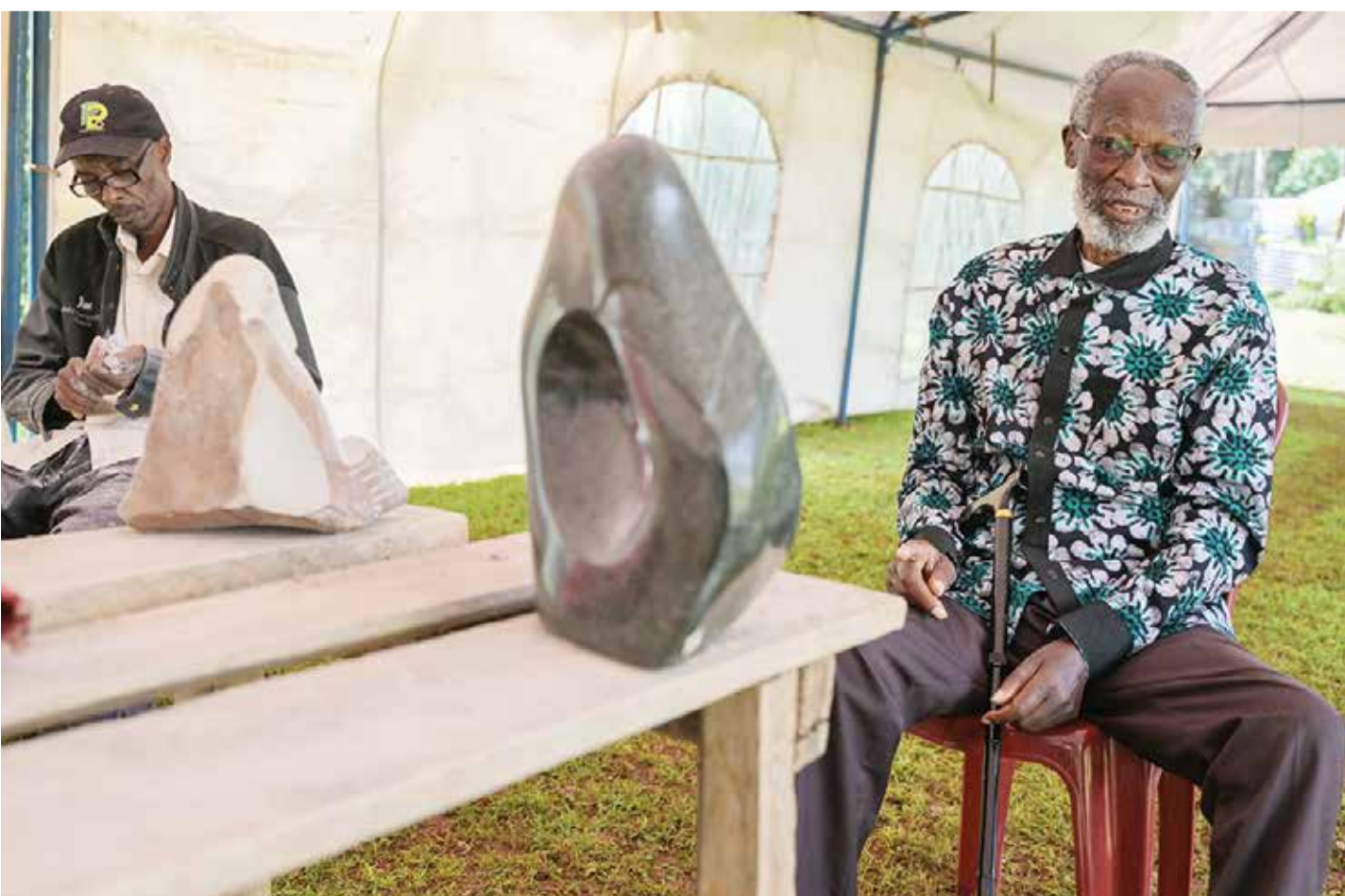
smaller sculptures because he is no longer able to stand for the long periods of time needed to make larger pieces. "I am hoping and praying that my body will improve," he said. "When you cut a stone and see the inside, it is so beautiful, it is so exciting." — AFP



A stone sculpture is seen outside the home of Ong'esa.



A set of tools used by Ong'esa are seen at his workshop.



Ong'esa observes one of his sculptures while mentoring a workshop on stone carving in Tabaka.

Sports

Pakistan fight back to frustrate Australia after early collapse

Cummins captures five for 61 for his third successive five-wicket haul

SYDNEY: Gritty Pakistan hit back from looming disaster to finish with 313 on the back of fighting half-centuries from Mohammad Rizwan, Agha Salman and Aamer Jamal on the first day of the third Test against Australia on Wednesday.

The tourists, staring down a meagre innings total when reduced to 96 for five after winning the toss, went on the counter-attack to frustrate the Australians late in the day at the Sydney Cricket Ground. Rizwan clubbed 88 off 103 balls, number nine Jamal smashed four sixes in a spirited 82 off 97 and Salman hit 53 off 67 to give the tourists renewed hope after a car-crash start to the innings.

David Warner, playing in his 112th and final Test, had to see off a tense final over before the close and survived a scare when the ball ricocheted just over his stumps off spinner Sajid Khan before finishing with six in Australia's reply of 6-0.

Australia skipper Pat Cummins captured five for 61 for his third successive five-wicket haul in the series. "When I came out to bat I knew the Australians were going to come hard after us, I was well prepared for that, they wanted to get us out as early as possible, so I was going after every ball," said Jamal, who reached his highest Test score.

"There was no personal milestone for me, because my milestone was just to represent my country and that I achieved. I was trying to get as many runs as I could." On a day that began with elation for Australia ended in frustration as Pakistan's tail wagged furiously to rescue their side after a terrible start.

Rizwan and Salman triggered the comeback with a spirited 94-run stand to defy the stellar Australia attack. Rizwan, who had been dropped for the

Test, blasted two sixes and 10 fours off 103 balls before he fell to a legside trap set by Cummins.

Rizwan top-edged a pull shot for Josh Hazlewood to take the catch at fine leg after posting the highest individual score by a Pakistan batsman of the series.

Rousing morning

Salman took up the cudgels with a half-century before he was caught by Travis Head off Mitchell Starc. Jamal maintained the fightback and was nearing a century before he fell to Nathan Lyon. That left Warner, who received a guard of honour from the Pakistan team, to see out the final over of the day and he began with a flourish, cutting the first ball for four from Sajid.

"Fair play to Aamer Jamal, he batted beautifully. We threw everything at him and I thought he batted really well," said Australia all-rounder Mitchell Marsh. "I think it finished a pretty even day. I think it's going to be a traditional SCG wicket with a lot of fielders in front of the wicket, we'll take that today."

It was a rousing morning session for Australia as openers Abdullah Shafique and debutant Saim Ayub were dismissed inside two overs. The out-of-form Shafique fell to the second ball of Starc's opening over and Ayub, brought in for Imam-ul-Haq to make his Test debut, only lasted two balls before a Hazlewood outswinger was edged to Alex Carey.

Babar Azam caressed three glorious cover drives to the ropes before he was out for 26, lbw to Cummins, leaving the tourists tottering at 39 for three. Saud Shakeel copped a nasty blow on the collarbone from a Cummins lifter before he prodded a catch off Cummins to Carey for five.



SYDNEY: Pakistan's Agha Salman plays a shot during the first day of the third cricket Test match against Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground in Sydney on January 3, 2024. — AFP

Skipper Shan Masood, on 32, survived a catch off Marsh when it was ruled a no-ball. Marsh got the last laugh two overs later when Masood, on 35, again edged the medium-pacer to Steve Smith in

almost identical fashion to leave Pakistan at 96 for five. Australia clinched the three-match series with a tense 79-run win in the second Test in Melbourne over Christmas. — AFP

Asian Shotgun Championship begins Jan 12

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: In preparation for Asian Shotgun Championship Kuwait 2024 to be held at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex from Jan 12th until Jan 23rd, the higher organizing committee held a meeting in the presence of its Chairman Eng Duajj Khalaf Al-Otaibi and tournament director Obaid Al-Osaimi beside heads of sub-committees.

The committee discussed the preparations that are already made and what should be done in all details due to the importance of this event that has qualification quotas for Paris 2024 Olympics, and is followed by the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) due to the significance of the results.

Obaid Al-Osaimi said the IOC inspected facilities, ranges and equipment related to the tournament activities, as committees submitted their reports about what has been done to bring out the event at its best and reflect the well known image about Kuwait's ability to organize such major events.

He said the Kuwait Shooting Federation and



KUWAIT: Eng Duajj Al-Otaibi (L) and Obaid Al-Osaimi during the meeting.

Club were keen on preparing for the tournament early on due to its importance, as he thanked HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for his support of this noble sport and shooters. He also thanked Public Authority for Sport, ministries and all concerned entities for assisting in preparing for this Asian event.

Al-Osaimi said there will be refresher workshops for referees in cooperation with the ISSF to make sure they are ready to run the competitions. The HOC will hold a press conference Saturday at the Shooting complex to give all details about the event.

Anisimova comeback halted by Bouzkova at Auckland Classic

AUCKLAND: Marie Bouzkova ended Amanda Anisimova's return to tennis at the Auckland Classic on Wednesday as she romped to a 6-0, 6-1 win. The 22-year-old American Anisimova, who took an indefinite break from tennis in May for mental health reasons, had no answer to her Czech opponent's superior movement and shot-making.

Although her ranking has ballooned to 373rd, the former teenage sensation has been granted a special exemption to compete at the Australian Open. After impressing in her first match against Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova on Monday, Anisimova struggled for timing and appeared to lack motivation as she was bundled out in just 51 minutes. By contrast, everything came off for 25-year-old sixth seed Bouzkova, who has climbed to a career-high world ranking of 23rd. "It couldn't get any better for me, I just stayed really solid and tried to be really aggressive when I could because obviously Amanda is such a huge hitter," Bouzkova said.

"Obviously it's the start of the year so we're still pretty fresh and I'm taking advantage of that right now." Bouzkova's quarter-final will be against the winner of Thursday's high-profile fitout between Ukrainian second seed Elina Svitolina and British wildcard Emma Raducanu.

Diane Parry pulled off the biggest upset of the tournament to date, fighting back to beat third-seeded Ukrainian Lesia Tsurenko 2-6, 6-4, 6-1. The unseeded former junior world number one from France said she started going for her shots after a sub-par first set display.

"I was a little bit tight at the beginning, I wasn't feeling good but I tried to stay positive because I knew I could do better," said Parry, the world number 76. Her next opponent is the 71st-ranked Wang Xiyu from China who upset sixth-seeded compatriot Wang Xinyu 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 (7/2). American world number 31 Emma Navarro beat Elina Avanesyan 6-1, 6-2. US Open champion and top seed Coco Gauff faces Czech qualifier Brenda Fruhvirtova on Thursday. — AFP

Pliskova ends Osaka comeback

BRISBANE: Naomi Osaka said Wednesday she was "super disappointed" but just being on court was a "personal win" after her return to tennis at the Brisbane International was ended by defending champion Karolina Pliskova.

Pliskova, who won the tournament the last time it was held in 2020, bounced back from losing the first set to grind down the Japanese star 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 in the second round. World number two Aryna Sabalenka, meanwhile, thumped Italian Lucia Bronzetti 6-3, 6-0 in a dominant display on Pat Rafter Arena, while second seed Elena Rybakina downed Australian qualifier Olivia Gadecki 6-4, 6-1.

"Even though it's super disappointing today, I know that if I keep training and if I keep putting in the work, then I'll eventually get to where I want to be," said Osaka. "It's kind of tough because she has such a great serve—my break points could have been better, but I think other than that, we both played really well."

"Even stepping on the court is a personal win because a couple of weeks ago I was even doubting if I could play with everyone," she added. "So I guess these two matches that I've had kind of prove

Questions over LIV linger as PGA Tour opens 2024 campaign

LOS ANGELES: Uncertainty and controversy over a potential merger with LIV Golf's Saudi backers loom over the US PGA Tour as its 2024 season tees off Thursday in Hawaii. The PGA's tournament of champions, now dubbed The Sentry, again will be played at Kapalua, this time in support of wildfire-devastated host Maui following last August's tragedy.

A field of 59 will compete in the \$20 million opener with four-time major winner Rory McIlroy the only qualified player skipping the event to begin his 2024 campaign later. Even as the PGA Tour returns to a calendar-year format, the impact of last June's shock announcement of a framework merger deal with the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF)

S Lanka name captains for Test, ODI and T20

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka cricket selectors Wednesday named different captains for the Test, one-day international and Twenty20 sides ahead of tours by Zimbabwe and Afghanistan. Batting all-rounder Dhananjaya de Silva, 32, will be Test skipper while Kusal Mendis, 28, will lead the ODI team and Wanidu Hasaranga, 26, will captain the Twenty20 squad.

It is the first time that Sri Lanka will have separate skippers for all three formats. "I would have preferred to have the same captain for all three formats," chief selector U-pul Tharanga told reporters in Colombo.

"But we are unable to do that at the moment with the players we have." Selectors had resolved to retain Mendis through to the next ODI World Cup in 2027, Tharanga said, despite finishing second from bottom at last year's showpiece in India.

Mendis took over after the last-minute injury withdrawal of Dasun Shanaka and Tharanga said Shanaka had not considered for the captaincy due to performance issues over the past two years. Hasaranga will lead the side for the T20 World Cup starting in June in the West Indies and United States.



COLOMBO: Chief selector and former international player U-pul Tharanga speaks during a press conference at the Sri Lanka cricket board office, in Colombo on January 3, 2024. — AFP

The latest selection announcement came ahead of white ball series against Zimbabwe starting Saturday. Following that Sri Lanka will host Afghanistan for three T20s, three ODIs and one Test match.

Sri Lanka ODI squad to play Zimbabwe: Kusal Mendis (captain), Charith Asalanka, Pathum Nissanka, Avishka Fernando, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Sahan Arachchige, Maheesh Theekshana, Dilshan Madushanka, Dushmantha Chameera, Dumith Wellalage, Pramod Madushan, Jeffrey Vandersay, Akila Dananjaya and Wanidu Hasaranga. — AFP



BRISBANE: Naomi Osaka of Japan reacts during her women's singles match against Karolina Pliskova of the Czech Republic at the Brisbane International tennis tournament in Brisbane on January 3, 2024. — AFP

to me that I am doing okay, and the year is just going to get better for me."

The four-time Grand Slam champion had not played a tournament since September 2022, citing mental health concerns. She had a baby daughter in July before deciding to make a comeback. After

an impressive first-round win over Germany's Tamar Korpatich, Osaka started strongly against the 39th-ranked Pliskova, breaking the Czech's opening service game.

Pliskova, a two-time Grand Slam finalist, levelled but Osaka broke again to take a 4-2 lead then held on to bank the opening set. The momentum began to shift in the second set as the tall Pliskova began to find the mark with her serve.

She won the second set tiebreak then got an early break in the third, holding on with ease to take the match in 2hr 13min. Pliskova has won the Brisbane International three times and said she felt better as the match progressed.

"I thought I played quite well—there are a lot of things to improve but it's a good start," said Pliskova, adding that, after a first-round bye and having not played since September, she needed time to find her feet.

"You can practise as much as you want but in matches it's always a little bit different," she said. Reigning Australian Open champion Sabalenka was in imperious form against Bronzetti, breaking the Italian once in the first set and three times in the second.

"I'm super happy with the performance and I think I played a really great match," said Sabalenka, who won 24 points to Bronzetti's five in the second set. "I just hope I can keep this same level for each match, or even better. — AFP

and DP World Tour lingers over the series. Reigning Masters champion Jon Rahm of Spain, who won last year's Kapalua crown, will not defend his title, having jumped to LIV last month for rich financial guarantees. That signals the upstart series can drain top PGA talent ahead of LIV's season openers next month at Mayakoba in Mexico and Las Vegas during Super Bowl week there.

Negotiations between PGA and PIF officials have gone beyond an original December 2023 deadline and still no details have emerged about plans for what a unified PGA-LIV structure would feature even as the rivals plan separate 2024 seasons. PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan, criticized by many players for keeping details of LIV merger talks secret, said in a memo to players on Sunday that LIV talks were "active and productive" and the PGA was working to extend talks into 2024. Three of the past five major winners are now with LIV Golf—Rahm, 2023 PGA Championship winner Brooks Koepka and 2022 British Open winner Cameron Smith—even though its lack of world ranking points means fewer LIV golfers qualify for majors.

For now, the only events where LIV and PGA rivals will compete are the majors, which this year feature the Masters on April 11-14 at Augusta National, the PGA Championship at Valhalla on May 16-19, the US Open at Pinehurst on June 13-16 and the British Open at Royal Troon on July 18-21.

Tiger Woods, a 15-time major winner and member of the Tour Policy Board that must approve any LIV deal, said last month he was "pleased at the process and how it has evolved" in PIF talks but frustrated by its slowness. Asked how a merged PGA-LIV series would work, Woods said, "The answer is murky," citing a large number of possibilities and trying to find what works best for players.

"I'm confident a deal will get done in some way," Woods said. "We're working together. We're trying to get a deal done for the tour and for all parties involved." Until then, the PGA Tour's revamped 2024 schedule includes eight "signature" tournaments, starting this week, in a 36-event lineup ending with 70 players qualifying for the FedEx Cup playoffs that conclude September 1. — AFP

Sports

'Bondi Beach here we come': Swiatek leads Poland into United Cup semis

Greece meet Canada, with winner facing the best runner-up from group play in Sydney

PERTH: Top-ranked Poland overpowered China on Wednesday, with Hubert Hurkacz and Iga Swiatek propelling them into the United Cup semi-finals with a singles sweep. The pair of straight-set victories in Perth put the tie out of reach and sent the Poles into a clash against either Norway or France in Sydney.

Adrian Mannarino and Caroline Garcia had earlier pushed France into a last eight tie against the Norwegians with victory over Italy. Hurkacz secured a clinical 6-3, 6-4 defeat of Zhang Zhizhen before world number one Swiatek followed up, winning nine games on the trot at one point to beat Zheng Qinwen 6-2, 6-3 despite losing serve twice.

Swiatek was eager to get to Sydney as the first nation to qualify for the semi-finals of the 18-nation mixed team tournament. "Bondi Beach here we come," she said, after swatting aside Zheng who was the 2023 WTA Most Improved Player. "I'm looking forward to a day off."

"I'm really happy with my game, and also how the atmosphere in the team is," added Swiatek. "I really feel like we can just be better when we're together, so for sure playing (with Hurkacz) is an exciting thing to do, and I'm real happy with every match that I play here."

Hurkacz fired 10 aces as he dismissed Chinese number one Zhang. "It's always a tough match with him. He can play some amazing shots," the winner said. The 24-time Grand Slam champion needed treatment on a sore wrist during his win over the Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka on Tuesday and fac-

es another tough task against Australian number one Alex de Minaur.

'Went my way'

In Sydney, journeyman Mannarino, who enjoyed his best-ever season last year, swept past Lorenzo Sonego 6-4, 6-4 before Garcia overcame a stubborn Jasmine Paolini 6-4, 5-7, 6-4. It gave France an unassailable 2-0 lead to put them into the knockout rounds. The last quarter-final slot will be decided when Greece meet Canada, with the winner facing the best runner-up from group play in Sydney.

The Sydney quarter-finals are played on Thursday and Friday before the semis on Saturday and the final a day later. The 35-year-old Mannarino won titles at Astana, Newport and Sofia last season to clock a personal best 43 wins, propelling him to a career-high 22.

After opening his season with a loss to world number seven Alexander Zverev, the no-frills Frenchman proved too hot for 46th-ranked Sonego on a scorching day at Ken Rosewall Arena. "It's always a tough match with him and in the second set I felt it could go either way," Mannarino said. "I was lucky at four-all to go the break up and everything went my way today."

The Frenchman did not face a break point and was solid throughout, especially on second serve, winning 13 of 18 points. Garcia, who has slipped to 20 in the rankings after hitting a career-high four in 2018, finished the job against Paolini.

But the 29th-ranked Italian refused to go quietly, pushing it to three hard sets over 2hr 16min before Garcia served to love and banked the victory. — AFP



PERTH: Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return against China's Qinwen Zheng during their women's singles match at the United Cup tennis tournament in Perth on January 3, 2024. — AFP

Al-Arabi, Qadsiya draw 2-2 in Zain Premier League



KUWAIT: Al-Arabi and Qadsiya soccer teams played a 2-2 match on Tuesday in the 13th round of Zain Premier League. Matches of the tournament's first round will end tomorrow with encounters between Al-Nasr and Khaitan, as well as a match between Kuwait and Al-Shabab. The championship concludes with a match between Fahaeel against Jahra and another pitting Kazma against Salmiya. — KUNA

Algeria footballer Atal convicted over Gaza post

NICE: Algerian international footballer Youcef Atal was handed an eight-month suspended sentence by a French court Wednesday for inciting religious hatred in a social media post about the conflict in Gaza. The 27-year-old defender, who plays for Ligue 1 side Nice, must also pay a fine of €45,000 (\$49,000) for sharing a video calling for a "black day for the Jews", the Nice criminal court ruled.

He will further pay for details of his conviction to be published in regional daily Nice-Matin and national newspaper Le Monde, and make it visible for one month on his Instagram

page. The comments at issue came in a video of a preacher, Mahmoud Al-Hasanat, which Atal posted to his 3.2-million-follower Instagram account. The Zionist entity's campaign against Hamas has cost over 22,000 lives. After speaking about the children killed in the bombardments, Hasanat called on god to send a "black day for the Jews" and "guide the hand" of Gazans striking back. Atal was with the Algerian national team in his home country when he shared the video. He withdrew it the following day when Nice warned him it was likely to attract controversy, offering his apologies. Atal had apologized again to the court during the hearings, saying he had wanted to send a "message of peace" and did not watch the entire 35-second video before posting it. That argument did not convince prosecutors or plaintiffs, mostly Jewish organizations and the Professional Football League (LFP). "Sharing a video means being party to its message and lending it visibility," prosecutor Meggi Choutia told the court. "There is no talk of peace at any moment in these 35 seconds," she added. Wednesday's decision was "expected, given the context

and the strong political pressure," Atal's lawyer Antoine Vey told AFP following the verdict. He added that the footballer would likely appeal his conviction. — AFP

shown a straight red card for a studs up challenge on Celtic goalkeeper Joe Hart. Greg Taylor added a third goal from Paulo Bernardo's pass on the hour mark and only wasteful finishing and the woodwork prevented Celtic from racking up a much more convincing margin of victory.

Rangers bounced back against in-form Kilmarnock as Abdallah Sima showed why he will be missed as he departs to represent Senegal at the Africa Cup of Nations. Two goals in the five minutes before half-time swung the game in Rangers favour as Ross McCausland opened the scoring before Sima's finely struck volley registered his 15th goal of the season. — AFP

Celtic, Rangers win ahead of winter break

GLASGOW: Celtic's lead at the top of the Scottish Premiership remains eight points heading into the winter break after scoring twice inside six minutes to beat 10-man St Mirren 3-0 on Tuesday. Rangers had earlier briefly cut the gap to five points with a 3-1 victory over Kilmarnock at Ibrox.

Belichick brushes off NFL future talk

NEW YORK: New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick brushed off questions about his future on Tuesday, saying he was solely focused on his struggling NFL team's upcoming season finale against the New York Jets.

Belichick, winner of a record eight Super Bowls as head coach or coordinator, has been the subject of intense scrutiny this season, with speculation raging that Patriots owner Robert Kraft may finally be ready to usher him towards the exit. New England are bottom of the AFC East with just four wins against 12 defeats, the worst winning percentage of Belichick's dazzling coaching career.

However, the famously taciturn 71-year-old was in no mood to discuss what the off-season might mean for him during an appearance on Boston sports radio station WEEI-FM on Tuesday. "Whatever success I have had, I've tried to go about my job the same way every week," Belichick said when asked about his future.

"Win, lose, good years, bad years, whatever they are. Just, each week, get ready to go for that week, do the best you can to help your team win, and after that game, move on to the next one. "On a week-to-week basis I don't want to spend time or get caught up in what happened five years ago, or what's going to happen two years from now, or a bunch of other random stuff. So, just working on the Jets."



Bill Belichick

Belichick, meanwhile, was similarly non-committal about whether he would welcome the Patriots adding a general manager to work alongside him next season. Belichick is a rarity in the NFL in that he has effectively worked as both New England's head coach and de facto general manager throughout his tenure.

"I appreciate the question. Again, right now, just looking to the Jets, trying to get ready to go on them," Belichick said. "It has been a long time since we've played them here, whatever, 14, 15 games ago. So really going to focus on that and that's what we're doing this week."

"It's a lot of hypotheticals and you know, a lot of in the past, in the future. I'm really focused on what's going on right now and that's what my job is, that's what I'm trying to do and that's what I'm going to do." — AFP

Teenager Littler storms into world darts final

LONDON: Sixteen-year-old Luke Littler's sensational run at the world darts championship goes on after he thrashed former champion Rob Cross 6-2 in Tuesday's semi-final. Littler has taken England by storm over the festive season with his fairytale run on his debut at London's Alexandra Palace.

Along the way he has dumped out his hero Raymond van Barneveld and 2018 winner Cross had no answer as Littler's three-dart average topped 106. "I have no words, it's just crazy, that I'm in a world championship final on my debut," said Littler, who celebrated with an emotional hug from his mum.

"I was happy winning one game but I could go all the way. "My target was to still be here after Christmas and now here I am in the final. "I've just settled on the stage - once I find the rhythm, I'm good to go." Littler will face Luke Humphries in Wednesday's final after the third seed swept aside Scott Williams 6-0

And the youngster from Warrington, in England's north-west, has no plan in changing his routine over the course of the tournament. "I'll just keep doing what I've been doing," added Littler. "In the morning I'll go for my ham and cheese omelette, then later a pizza and then practice on the board." — AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khalidiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804

Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospita	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000

Change of Name

I TASNEEM, holder of Passport No. R7728875 do hereby change my name to TASNEEM (as Given name) LOKHANDWALA (as Surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name TASNEEM LOKHANDWALA and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (#4561) 3-1-2024

I, Zahiya Ameerah holder of Indian Passport no. UO204458 having permanent address 12-5-172 /1 south Lalaguda, Vijaypuri colony Secunderabad, Hyderabad. Pin code 500017, Telangana, India residing in Kuwait at present, here by declare that henceforth my name will be read as under given Name: Zahiya Ameerah and surname: Syed (#4582) 3-1-2024



OKLAHOMA CITY: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander #2 of the Oklahoma City Thunder defends Derrick White #9 of the Boston Celtics during the second half at Paycom Center. — AFP

Gilgeous-Alexander stars as Thunder roll past Celtics

Memphis Grizzlies downed San Antonio Spurs 106-98

LOS ANGELES: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the way with 36 points as the Oklahoma City Thunder snapped Boston's six-game winning streak with a 127-123 victory on Tuesday. A heavyweight clash between two of the league's top teams lived up to its billing as Oklahoma City's youthful line-up went toe-to-toe with the Celtics, who lead the NBA's Eastern Conference.

Gilgeous-Alexander's points haul came from 14-of-22 shooting, with the talented point guard adding eight rebounds and six assists on a night when five Thunder players finished in double figures at Oklahoma City's Paycom Center.

Australia's Josh Giddey added 23 points while Jalen Williams scored 16 and Chet Holmgren 14. Isaiah Joe chipped in with 10 off the bench as the Thunder extended their own winning-streak to five games. "Those guys have been to multiple conference finals, won plenty of basketball games and they have the best record in the league," Gilgeous-Alexander said of Boston.

"We knew it was going to take a whole game if we wanted to beat them. No matter how big the lead, we knew they weren't going to lie down." Boston led 61-58 at halftime but the game swung decisively in favor of Oklahoma City after a devastating third quarter in

which they outscored the Celtics 40-25, with Gilgeous-Alexander pouring in 16 points.

Oklahoma City appeared to be cruising towards victory, opening up an 18-point lead midway through the fourth quarter. Boston, however, rallied bravely to cut the Thunder's lead to just two points to set up a nervy finish.

Gilgeous-Alexander and Giddey steadied the ship for the home team down the stretch, bagging clutch free throws in the dying seconds to give Oklahoma City the win.

'A little sloppy'

Thunder coach Mark Daigneault was satisfied with the victory but admitted his team had been "sloppy" after allowing Boston back in the game in the closing stages of the fourth quarter. "I thought we were pretty resilient tonight. But they kept coming, they're a talented team," Daigneault said.

"I thought we got a little sloppy at both ends of the court trying to slam the door on the game, but then we made big plays down the stretch and executed with poise." Kristaps Porzingis led Boston's scorers with 34 points while Jayson Tatum had another big game with 30 points, 13 rebounds and eight assists. Boston remain at

the top of the Eastern Conference with a 26-7 record while Oklahoma City are now just one game adrift of the Western Conference-leading Minnesota Timberwolves, improving to 23-9.

In other games on Tuesday, Joel Embiid made a successful return from a four-game absence with a triple-double as Philadelphia maintained their pursuit of Boston at the top of the East with a 110-97 win over the Chicago Bulls.

Embiid's second triple-double of the season comprised 31 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists, and came after he had missed several games with an ankle injury. "I wasn't able to put weight on my foot a few days ago," Embiid said afterward.

"That's why I felt so tired. I was out of shape. Over the next couple of days I've got to get back to get on the floor and try to get back to myself." Elsewhere, Ja Morant scored 26 points and Desmond Bane added 24 as the Memphis Grizzlies downed the San Antonio Spurs 106-98. French No. 1 draft pick Victor Wembanyama led San Antonio's scorers with 20 points, while Keldon Johnson added 19 from the bench. In New Orleans, the Pelicans cruised past the Brooklyn Nets 112-85, leading from start to finish to extend their win streak to three games. — AFP

Djokovic injury dooms Serbia to Australia defeat

PERTH: Novak Djokovic suffered a frustrating fitness saga as a wrist problem led to the Serb's upset 6-4, 6-4 loss to Australia's Alex de Minaur in the quarter-finals of the United Cup in Perth on Wednesday. Djokovic, who received multiple massages on court on his troublesome right wrist—hurt in training 24 hours earlier—fell victim to an inspired de Minaur, who led his side into the weekend semi-finals in Sydney.

Ajla Tomljanovic then sealed the 2-0 win for the team with her 6-1, 6-1 defeat of Serb 184th-ranked substitute Natalija Stevanovic. Stevanovic had replaced an exhausted Olga Danilovic, who featured in previous ties here alongside Djokovic.

World number one Djokovic produced 31 unforced errors as his 43-match win streak in Australia was ended after 93 minutes on court against de Minaur. "I was not on my level, it was just one of these days where you didn't feel your best," Djokovic said.

"Your opponent played very well. That's all I can say. "I think I have enough time to get myself in the right shape for the Australian Open, and that's what matters the most at this point. "I knew I was not going to be at 100 per cent physically, emotionally, mentally game-wise in the opening week of a season.

"It's all a part of the build-up for the Australian Open, that's where I want to perform at my best." Victory marked revenge for the low-key de Minaur, beaten by Djokovic a year ago at the Australian Open.

The 24-year-old Australian was recording his first victory over a world number one, adding Djokovic to a list which also includes Rafael Nadal, the number two whom he beat here a year ago. "This was extremely special, Novak is an unbelievable competitor," de Minaur said.

"This feels surreal, I'm happy to do it here in Australia. When you go against Novak you just have to try and enjoy it. "You must keep fighting to the end. Today was my day—I'm happy I was able to get the win. "This one means a lot." — AFP

West Ham hold on for Brighton stalemate

LONDON: West Ham missed the chance to close in on the Premier League's top four as Brighton were denied victory at the London Stadium by Alphonse Areola in a 0-0 draw on Tuesday. Despite being ravaged by defensive absences due to injury and suspension, the Seagulls held out for their first Premier League clean sheet of the season and deserved all three points on their second-half performance.

"We played a great game," Brighton boss Roberto de Zerbi told the BBC. "We deserved to win. We played a very smart game because the best quality of West Ham is counter-attack and we played with a focus - don't concede a counter-attack.

"We created eight clear chances to score and I'm really pleased for the performance, the understanding of the play I want and demand." Brighton enjoyed nearly 70 percent of possession but were blighted by a familiar lack of cutting edge in the final third.

Areola had to be at his best to deny Danny Welbeck, Joao Pedro, Pascal Gross and Adam Lallana and maintain the Hammers' unbeaten run. David Moyes' men have taken 10 points from a possible 12 over the festive season but are still six points adrift of the top four.

The home side's threat was blunted without the injured Lucas Paqueta and Mohammed Kudus, who was denied the chance to feature in one final club game before the Africa Cup of Nations by the Ghanaian federation. James Ward-Prowse had West Ham's best effort that Jason Steele saved before the break. A point is enough to edge Brighton above Manchester United into seventh, but they remain three points behind West Ham in sixth. — AFP



LONDON: Brighton's English midfielder #14 Adam Lallana (R) shoots the ball but misses to score during the English Premier League football match between West Ham United and Brighton and Hove Albion at the London Stadium. — AFP