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**3** Social support, empathy needed to overcome suicidal tendencies



**5** Palestinian village fearing Zionist wartime demolitions



**8** Expedite diversification, scale up non-oil growth, IMF urges Kuwait



**15** Qatar under pressure in Asian Cup defense after abrupt Queiroz axing

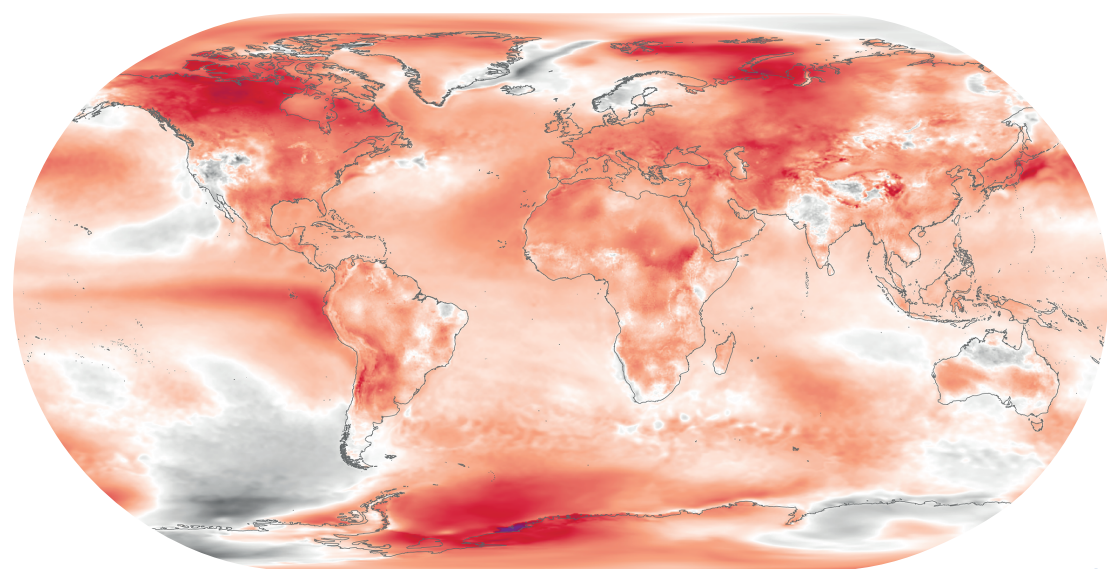
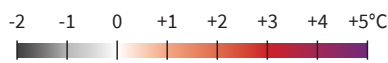


## 2023 hottest year on record

Rapidly warming world nearly crosses critical threshold of 1.5C

### Temperature anomalies in 2023

Variation compared to the 1981-2010 average, in °C



Source: Copernicus C3S/ECMWF



PARIS: The year of 2023 was the hottest on record, with the increase in Earth's surface temperature nearly crossing the critical threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius, EU climate monitors said Tuesday. Climate change intensified heatwaves, droughts and wildfires across the planet, and pushed the global thermometer 1.48 C above the preindustrial benchmark, the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) reported.

"It is also the first year with all days over one degree warmer than the pre-industrial period," said Samantha Burgess, deputy head of the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S). "Temperatures during 2023 likely exceeded those of any period in at least the last 100,000 years." Nearly half the year exceeded the 1.5C limit, beyond which climate impacts are more likely to become self-reinforcing and catastrophic, according to scientists.

But even if Earth's average surface temperature breaches 1.5C in 2024, as some scientists predict, it does not mean the world has failed to meet the Paris Agreement target of capping global warming under that threshold. That would occur only after several successive years above the 1.5C benchmark, and even then the 2015 treaty allows for the possibility of reducing Earth's temperature after a period of "overshoot".

2023 saw massive fires in Canada, extreme droughts in the Horn of Africa or the Middle East,

unprecedented summer heatwaves in Europe, the United States and China, along with record winter warmth in Australia and South America. "Such events will continue to get worse until we transition away from fossil fuels and reach net-zero emissions," said University of Reading climate change professor Ed Hawkins, who did not contribute to the report. "We will continue to suffer the consequences of our inactions today for generations."

The Copernicus findings come one month after a climate agreement was reached at COP28 in Dubai calling for the gradual transition away from fossil fuels, the main cause of climate warming. "We desperately need to rapidly cut fossil fuel use and reach net-zero to preserve the livable climate that we all depend on," said John Marsham, atmospheric science professor at the University of Leeds.

The year saw another ominous record: two days in Nov 2023 exceeded the preindustrial benchmark by more than two degrees Celsius. Copernicus predicted that the 12-month period ending in January or February 2024 would "exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level".

Reliable weather records date back to 1850, but older proxy data for climate change — from tree rings, ice cores and sediment — show that 2023

Continued on Page 6

### Anti-abaya Attal picked as France's youngest premier

PARIS: French leader Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday picked Gabriel Attal as prime minister in a bid to give new momentum to his presidency, with the 34-year-old becoming France's youngest head of government.



Gabriel Attal

Following days of speculation, Macron on Monday accepted the resignation of Elisabeth Borne, 62, who stepped down after serving less than two years in office.

The overhaul comes ahead of the Olympic Games in Paris and European parliament elections this summer, where Macron's centrist forces risk defeat at the hands of the far-right under Marine Le Pen. It also further intensifies maneuvering to succeed Macron, who himself took office in 2017 aged just 39, ahead of 2027 presidential elections. A wider cabinet reshuffle is expected this week as Macron seeks to sharpen his team for the final three years of his presidency.

Attal has quickly risen through the ranks since entering politics in his early 20s. He was elected to France's lower house of parliament, the National Assembly, in 2017, and later served as government spokesperson and budget minister. He was made education minister in July, receiving one of the most high-profile and politically sensitive government posts.

But his most high-profile move came less than two months into his job when he banned pupils from wearing the abaya, a loose-fitting garment from the shoulders to the feet worn by Muslim women.

Continued on Page 6

### Assembly cancels session due to govt's absence

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun on Tuesday adjourned the Assembly's regular session due to the absence of the government, which resigned over two weeks ago. Under Kuwaiti law, the presence of at least one Cabinet minister is essential for the Assembly's session to be legal, although a number of MPs have disputed this fact and called for holding sessions without the presence of ministers.

Caretaker Prime Minister HH Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah submitted

his government's resignation on Dec 20 after HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was sworn in. In his speech after the oath taking, he had criticized both the government and the Assembly for taking decisions harmful to national interests. Last week, HH the Amir named former foreign minister Sheikh Dr Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah to form the new Cabinet.

Saadoun said that the next Assembly sessions will be held on January 16 and 17. But no session will be held if the new government is not formed. A number of MPs have criticized adjourning sessions because of the government's absence. MP Abdullah Al-Mudhaf said he has proposed amendments to the Assembly's internal charter to state that Assembly sessions can be held even without the presence of Cabinet ministers. MP Dawood Marafi called on MPs to insist on holding sessions, whether Cabinet ministers are present or not.



KUWAIT: MPs arrive for a session of the National Assembly on Jan 9, 2024. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

### Zionists drive over body of Palestinian

TULKAREM: Palestinian officials accused the Zionist entity of a "brutal crime" on Tuesday after footage shared on social media appeared to show a military vehicle running over a dead Palestinian in the occupied West Bank. The foreign ministry of the Palestinian Authority, which governs the West Bank, said the footage was from a military operation in the city of Tulkarem. The Palestinian ministry said the incident

summed up the "culture of hatred" fostered by Zionist forces.

"This complex and brutal crime is not the first and will not be the last in the series of crimes of the occupation and terrorist settler militia members," the ministry said in a statement. Violence in the West Bank has surged to levels unseen in nearly two decades since Oct 7. Zionist forces carry out regular raids in the West Bank, often triggering gun battles with Palestinian fighters.

A Zionist police spokesman said their forces had carried out an operation with other agencies in Tulkarem on Monday to arrest a "wanted" man. "Forces arrested the wanted man



TULKAREM: A man walks next to a destroyed car following an overnight Zionist raid on the Tulkarem refugee camp in the occupied West Bank on Jan 9, 2024. — AFP

### South Korea bans trade in dog meat

SEOUL: South Korea's parliament on Tuesday passed a bill banning breeding, slaughtering and selling dogs for their meat, a traditional practice that activists have called an embarrassment for the country. Dog meat has long been a part of South Korean cuisine, and at one point up to a million dogs were killed for the trade every year, according to activists. But consumption has sharply declined recently as Koreans embrace pet ownership in droves.

Eating dog meat is a taboo among younger, urban South Koreans, and pressure on the government to

outlaw the practice from animal rights activists has been mounting. Official support for a ban has grown under President Yoon Suk Yeol, a self-professed animal lover who has adopted several stray dogs and cats with First Lady Kim Keon-hee — who is herself a vocal critic of dog meat consumption.

The bill, which was proposed by both the ruling and main opposition parties, was passed unopposed by a 208-0 vote, with two abstentions. It will come into effect following a three-year grace period after it receives final approval from Yoon. Under the law, breeding, selling and slaughtering dogs for their meat will be punishable by up to three years in prison or 30 million won (\$23,000) in fines.



SEOUL: Animal rights activists hold placards reading "Good bye dog meat!" during a rally welcoming a bill banning dog meat trade at the National Assembly on Jan 9, 2024. — AFP

Continued on Page 6





## Local

# Women and marriage: Evolving perspectives

## Women embrace independence amid challenges

By Zainab Al-Mashoor

**KUWAIT:** In the historical context, marriage often revolved around fulfilling religious, societal or sexual expectations. Criticisms like being labeled a spinster for remaining unmarried at a certain age were commonplace. However, contemporary society, influenced by advancements in education and women's rights, has witnessed a transformative shift in the perception of women and marriage.

Today, women embrace independence, leveraging education to explore their needs, wants, and desires before choosing marriage, free from societal pressures. Engaging with women of diverse experiences sheds light on the evolving dynamics of marriage. At 28 years old and unmarried, Hadil emphasizes the significance of self-dependence in shaping her personality and priorities. Choosing to delay marriage until achieving a certain career goal and attaining emotional stability, Hadil advocates discovering oneself to know what they are looking for in the significant other before taking a decision to get married.

Dua, at 34, reflects on an early marriage at 21, which she deemed a premature decision. After a divorce at 26, she focused on personal growth and maturity before marrying the right person at 33. Dua contends that the optimal age for marriage is 25 and

above, as women are more likely to have discovered themselves and made informed choices.

Fatima, married at 22 for societal and religious purposes, acknowledges the challenges of early marriage. She hoped she had waited longer to understand herself and the complexities of marriage. "Marriage has treated me well enough. I am exploring the experience, coping, cherishing, sacrificing and gratifying the process. It wasn't as easy as expected, more like being lost in a maze, finding your way out with no answers to everything that's going on around you," she said.

"After marriage, it's an ease of mind, being with a partner, leaning on and learning about each other. Being able to share your thoughts, happiness and sorrow; being patient, forgiving, finding your way back to each other and studying about your suitability," Fatima said, implying that the most important things about marriage are trust, love and support. She emphasizes that maturity can manifest at any age, underscoring the importance of family education on marriage roles and sacrifices.

Seham, married at 18 due to love at first sight, acknowledges the ups and downs of a young marriage. Despite the challenges, she and her partner grew together, supporting each other's decisions and embodying the enduring aspects of marital commitment.

These diverse narratives highlight the evolving



nature of women's perspectives on marriage. From Hadil's emphasis on self-discovery to Dua's advocacy for maturity before marriage, Fatima's acknowledgment of the ongoing learning process and Seham's

enduring commitment, each woman offers a unique insight into the complex interplay between personal growth, societal expectations and the evolving institution of marriage.

## OAPEC aims to unite Arab efforts, boost economic activities

**KUWAIT:** The secretary general of the organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), Jamal Al-Loughani, said on Tuesday that the establishment of the organization is a fundamental turning point in the process of joint Arab action, stressing its keenness on cooperation between member states to achieve common economic interests and benefits.

In a press statement on the occasion of the 56th anniversary of the establishment of the organization, Al-Loughani added that the main objective of OAPEC is the cooperation of member states in various aspects of economic activity in the oil industry, achieving the closest relations among them in this field, and deciding means to preserve the legitimate interests of its members in this industry - individually and collectively.

He stated that OAPEC aims to unite efforts to secure access and provide the appropriate conditions for the capital and expertise of investors in the petroleum industry in the member states. He added that



Jamal Al-Loughani

OAPEC has established a group of spin-off companies from the member countries. The Arab spin-off companies have contributed effectively to enhance the Arab petroleum industry through the projects implemented or financed by most Arab member and non-member countries alike.

He stressed the keenness of the OIC General Secretariat to follow up on all the developments taking place in the global petroleum industry, pointing out that it monitors their repercussions on the economies of the member states through its technical studies.

Al-Loughani said that with the development of

the energy industry, the increasing interest in renewable and clean energy, and the introduction of many strict environmental legislation, the OAPEC issued a decision to review and develop the organization's activities and objectives to be in line with developments in industry, energy production technology, and environmental legislation and to be able to play a bigger and more effective role.

He appreciated the great support provided by the member states to the work of the organization, which enabled it to fully perform its mission, in addition to its unlimited support towards achieving its objectives. He expressed his thanks to Kuwait, which has hosted the permanent headquarters of the organization on its territory for more than five decades.

The 9th of January marks the 56th anniversary of the establishment of the OAPEC in 1968 under the agreement concluded in Beirut between the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the state of Kuwait, and Libya (the kingdom of Libya at the time) on the establishment of a specialized regional Arab Organization of international character, and Kuwait City was chosen as its permanent headquarters.

The membership of the organization expanded in 1970 to include the United Arab Emirates, the state of Qatar, the kingdom of Bahrain, and the Republic of Algeria, and in 1972, Syria and Iraq joined. The Arab Republic of Egypt joined in 1973, while Tunisia joined in 1982. — KUNA

## Third edition of Hajj and Umrah services exhibition launched

**KUWAIT:** The third edition of the Hajj and Umrah services conference and exhibition was launched on Tuesday in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, under the patronage of the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman Bin Abdulaziz, and with the participation of Kuwait. Kuwait's delegation participating in the conference is headed by the undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf, Dr Badr Al-Mutairi.

The Saudi minister of Hajj and Umrah, Dr Tawfiq Al-Rabeeh, said in a speech at the opening of the conference that the kingdom was honored (for the first time historically) with the service of hosting these conferences. He attributed this to the unprecedented facilities and the integration of efforts between all relevant authorities.

It was announced that the Umrah exhibition and conference will be organized in its first edition this year in Madinah. He stressed the ministry's keenness to attract all service providers for pilgrims under one dome so as to provide many options available at the exhibition. He said that projects have been launched to develop infrastructural and developmental projects for the holy sites worth more than five billion riyals (about 3.1 billion dollars). He said that more than 44,000 people have been trained to serve during Hajj and Umrah. Thirteen international visits were carried out last year under the guidance and empowerment of the leadership.

Al-Rabeeh pointed to the launch of a unified call center (1966) to serve guests with any inquiries, complaints, or reports, indicating that the ministry is working on the rehabilitation of historical sites in order to enrich the pilgrim's journey. The conference was opened by the deputy governor of the Makkah Region, Prince Saud bin Mishaal. It was organized by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah. The conference will continue until January 11 and will discuss initiatives, products, services, distinctive projects, and investment in innovative technologies. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** The Ministry of Interior has announced the opening of an experimental smart center to serve citizens around the clock starting Tuesday in the Shuwaikh area. The General Department of Relations and Security Media at the ministry said in a press release that this step comes within the steps of the security institution towards digital transformation and facilitating citizens in completing their transactions with ease and convenience. — KUNA

## Info Ministry issues a report on its strategy

**KUWAIT:** The Ministry of Information issued a report on the follow-up of its strategic plan for the period between April 1, 2021, and March 31, 2023, under the title (Ministry of Information in Two Years). "This included the achievements of the ministry during these two years, specifically since the beginning of its five-year plan (2021-2026), which is designed to achieve the objectives of the New Kuwait Vision 2035.

The ministry said in a press statement that, under the directives of the minister of information and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, the strategy implementation follow-up team was keen on the practical and realistic application of the strategy. He pointed out that this report recorded significant success indicators in achieving the goals and objectives of the strategy during the first two years of its application and highlighted the efforts of the ministry in all its sectors towards achieving the goal of providing a comprehensive and advanced information service that reaches various segments of society.

The report showed the progress achieved by the ministry in many areas of its work and operational plans, showing an increase in financial revenue collection by more than 68 percent, while the number of commercials on radio and television increased

from 1,666 ads in 2021 to 4,607 commercials in the first quarter of 2023. The number of radio ads increased by 3,121 percent, while the number of television ads increased by 6,207 percent.

The report recorded an increase in the percentage of e-collection services by 300 percent and an increase in digital transformation projects in the ministry by 153 percent. The ministry also recorded an increase in construction projects by 56 percent. The report pointed out that the construction and development projects in the ministry include 16 projects in 2020-2021, 21 projects in 2022-2023, and four new studios in 2022-2023. Also, the number of digital systems increased from 15 systems in 2020-2021 to 38 systems in 2022-2023.

He pointed out that the ministry's services provided through the Sahel government application have increased to reach four services, including e-publishing licenses and right of access requests, and revenue collection services, which have reached 12 in 2022-2023. The report noted the most important pillars of the strategic plan, which is to focus on the quality of the targeted content industry, especially in the television sector, which has witnessed a renewal of visual identity as well as the development of the quality of the content published in social media applications.

The report included a detailed explanation with illustrative images and graphs, in addition to figures and percentages that show the results of the implementation of the strategic plan through the data monitored in the annual operational plans of all sectors of the ministry. — KUNA

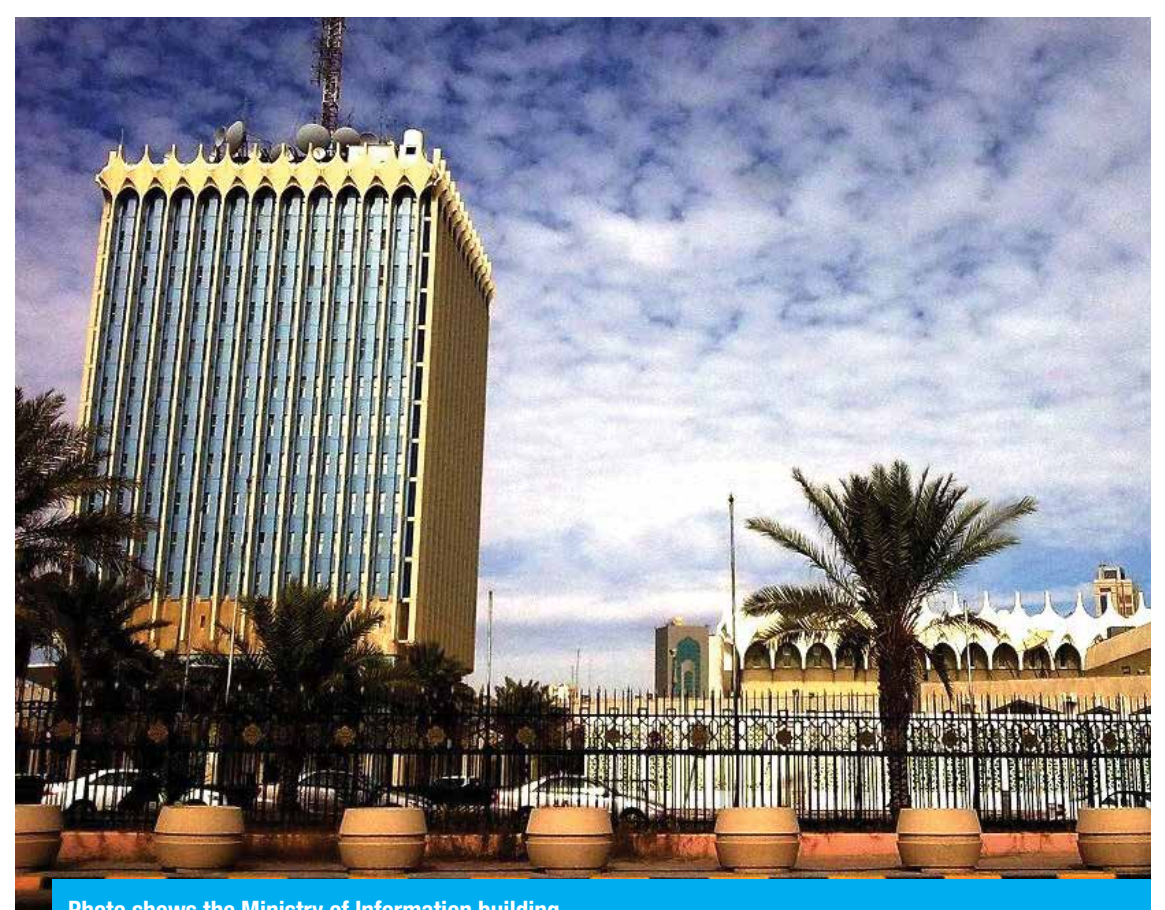


Photo shows the Ministry of Information building.



# Understanding the complex phenomenon of suicide

## Social support needed to overcome emotional suppression

By Passant Hisham

**KUWAIT:** Looking into human nature, it's easy to assume that people are born with the instinct of self-love and the desire to live, which brings one to wonder how the idea of committing suicide gradually sneaks into the mind of some people, creating this ongoing conflict of choosing between life and death. Dr Talal Alali, an assistant professor at Kuwait University's psychology department, started by highlighting the previous fact and addressing the type of conflict that every human being is prone to, which on rare occasions, escalates to the idea of quitting life.

While one's instinct keeps on holding them back from taking this action, sometimes it's too late for them to control the idea any longer, he told Kuwait Times. "The majority of people don't surrender to this idea, but unfortunately some do, and in a moment of weakness, they commit it without being aware of its consequences," Dr Alali said. Suicide, Dr Alali noted, is a very complicated and unnatural behavior that undeniably exists in Kuwait and in all societies, resulting from different causes that vary from one individual to another. Around 136 suicide attempts were registered in Kuwait during 2022, the latest figures available.

One of the most neglected causes of suicide is living in an emotionally suppressing environment that doesn't give a chance for someone to express their thoughts or feelings out loud, making it hard to continue living with that burden. "Not every person committing suicide does it out of psychological disorders, because sometimes it's the environment surrounding them that's unhealthy and emotionally stressing," Dr Alali said.

This kind of suppression, whether it's out of ac-



Dr Talal Alali

ademic, work, financial or family related stress, if kept increasing, can easily make someone lose their sense of self value and appreciation. In return, this can deeply affect their positive view of life in general, forcing them to seek an escape out of it. "When humans feel stressed, they become unpredictable," he affirmed.

Dr Alali noted that the first step of every suicide attempt is "suicide ideation", which is a popular psychological term that means thinking about suicide or taking your life. This behavior encourages one to share the idea with people out loud, which helps in normalizing the act of committing suicide. "The human mind is very sensitive and smart — even when a person talks in an informal way, in many ways they are trying to prepare the ground for practicing the behavior itself," he said.

According to Dr Alali, a person who is about to commit suicide gives people enough clues about their intentions before making an attempt, in the hope that someone might notice and try to save them before it's too late. The problem is that most of the time, we ignore these signs, and even when we acknowledge them, we keep attacking the person, adding extra pressure on their shoulders. Without realizing, we find ourselves unconsciously involved in facilitating their decision of committing suicide. "Even when we think we are helping them, we notice that we are just making things harder on them," he said.



Dr Alali explained that to prevent the spread of this kind of phenomenon, the behavior of society must be altered. People should stop judging each other and providing unsolicited advice unless they are asked to, because sometimes all what a person needs is just someone to listen to them and understand their pain, without uttering a single word. Listening, on its own, can restore someone's sense

of self-worth, bringing back their connection with life, as it provides a sense of psychological security. "I have dealt with multiple cases of people who faced severe mental challenges in their lives, but never thought of committing suicide because they were given the social support that they needed. They had someone to listen to them, be it a parent, a sibling or a friend," Alali affirmed.



## National Diwan for Human Rights makes recommendations

**KUWAIT:** Chairman of the Permanent Committee for Complaints and Grievances and Member of the Board of Directors of the National Diwan for Human Rights (NDHR), Dr Abdulredha Assiri, said on Tuesday the important role of the Diwan is to provide proposals and recommendations to improve humanitarian work.

Dr Assiri said in a press conference organized by the Center for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies at Kuwait University that the symposium on human rights policies in Kuwait and interaction with the local and international situation, held last December, came up with important recommendations after the completion of the workshops and meetings.

Among the recommendations was the establishment of awareness and educational programs about the role of the National Office for Human Rights in the appropriate fields. Furthermore, Dr Assiri pointed out the importance of the NDHR's community initiatives for human rights and mobilizing effective partnerships within the framework of spreading the culture and goals of human rights. In order to benefit from higher education institutions and their expertise in allocating matters related to human rights through research and proper evaluation.

Dr Assiri stressed the need to urge the establishment of a joint Gulf system for national human rights institutions, similar to the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions, which is entrusted with raising the capabilities of workers in national human rights institutions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Such institutes also provide logistical support to national and Gulf institutions to raise the societal level of human rights concepts, he added.

Dr Assiri emphasized the importance of activating cooperation between the NDHR and judicial and legal institutions to conduct joint training and awareness programs, involving public benefit institutions in measuring the training impact of the joint programs that are implemented, and working in the future to develop such programs. Dr Assiri continued that one of the recommendations was to hold a periodic meeting or forum with the public in order to spread the culture of human rights, increase public human rights awareness, and shed light on the policies and activities carried out by all governmental and non-governmental agencies related to human rights.

In addition to laws and decrees approving international conventions concerned with human rights and their explanatory memoranda equipped with the necessary resolutions, interpretations, clarifications, and comments, Dr Assiri continued issuing a volume containing the texts of the Kuwaiti Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

He said that the recommendations included holding closed or limited workshops for specialists and stakeholders in human rights matters to discuss issues and develop plans, policies, strategies, and problem solving in order to deepen the common understanding of those concerned with human rights. Moreover, Dr Assiri also added activating strategic relations with Kuwait University, public and private educational institutions, civil society institutions, and other official governmental and private bodies concerned with human rights to prepare an accredited academic or training program that provides human rights activists with the understanding and skills necessary to deal with international, regional, and national systems while developing capacities for negotiating and managing human rights projects.

He went on to explain the importance of preparing a comprehensive draft on human rights laws that explicitly stipulates the repeal of any issue that can cause violations of the aforementioned rights in the draft. Finally, Dr Assiri reiterated the importance of initiating laws that regulate interaction with technologies and artificial intelligence techniques in a way that guarantees and preserves the basic requirements of human rights. —KUNA

## Kuwait participates in 19th edition of 'Plastics 2024'

**CAIRO:** The 19th edition of Plastics 2024, which is the largest exhibition of plastics and rubber in the Middle East and North Africa, was launched on Tuesday with the participation of more than 500 exhibitors representing 50 countries, including Kuwait. The exhibition is being held (from January 9–12) at the Egypt International Exhibition Center in Cairo.

Egypt's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Eng Ahmed Samir, in the presence of Egyptian Minister

of Environment Dr Yamin Fouad, Ambassador of Kuwait to Egypt Ghanem Al-Ghanem, and leading international and regional manufacturers and decision-makers in the field of plastics and rubber, attended the event.

Plastics 2024 aims to shed light on comprehensive and sustainable products for the markets in the Middle East and North Africa and to identify machines, equipment, raw materials and derivatives, semi-finished and finished products, reinforced plastics, components and spare parts, artificial intelligence, robotics technology, and automation, which is the integration of machines into an automatic control system.

It also aims to communicate with industry leaders to discuss regional developments, build new links, and review the latest solutions in the plas-

tics and rubber markets so as to promote regional development and achieve long-term growth. The exhibition includes four specialized exhibition areas on an area of 20,000 square meters, including packaging, recycling, and rubber, in addition to an area dedicated to fourth-generation industrial technologies.

The international pavilions participating in Plastics 2024 include, most notably, the pavilions of Kuwait, Germany, India, Turkey, Taiwan, Korea, and China. They will review the products of each country to exchange experiences and views on sustainability and innovation. Kuwait is participating in the exhibition with a delegation from the general authority for industry headed by the deputy of the Industrial Export Development Sector. The Kuwaiti pavilion includes eight companies. —KUNA

## Sri Lanka suspends sending domestic workers to Kuwait

**KUWAIT:** Sri Lanka's manpower development companies that recruit and send Sri Lankan domestic workers to foreign countries have halted sending laborers to Kuwait, according to local sources. The sources said that a new decision was expected on the issue as Sri Lanka is waiting for a labor agreement with Kuwait that will include conditions and rules to bring in Sri Lankan helpers to Kuwait. They said Sri Lankan side wants Kuwait to reconsider salaries of domestic helpers and increase their minimum wage, in addition to give eligible leave for each laborer.

### 41 offices suspended

Meanwhile, the tripartite committee (Interior, Commerce ministries and Public Authority for Manpower) said that on the first day of implementing the ministerial decision with regards to domestic help offices to use the K-Net in collecting fees, six violations were recorded, and the offices were suspended for six months. The inspection team also discovered 35 domestic help offices that do not have K-Net machines in violation of Commerce Ministry circulations. These offices were suspended and referred to investigation authorities.

## MoI implements plan to arrest iqama violators

**KUWAIT:** Despite being only a few days into the new year, there are clear indications that the ministry of interior is resolutely implementing its plan to apprehend residency violators, whose numbers in the country exceed 100,000. Sources within the interior ministry have confirmed that recent instructions emphasize the aim of fully addressing the issue of residency violators



**KUWAIT:** The tripartite committee announced on Tuesday the suspension of 41 recruitment offices for domestic workers for violating the domestic labor law and the decisions of the Ministry of Commerce. —KUNA

### Smart Identification

In another development, Public Authority of Manpower asked offices and companies of domestic helpers to commit to issuing the "Smart Worker Identification", through the government's unified application "My ID", for helpers registered on the facility's license. The ID that was launched on Feb-

ruary 2023, enables the Kuwaiti family to check the details of the helpers before allowing them to carry out the job in order to stop loose labor and commercial cheating. Manpower urged citizens to check the smart ID of workers when they go to the offices and compare the contracts and receipts to make sure they belong to the office being dealt with.

within a strict two-year timeframe. It was noted that "during just one week of this year, more than 3,000 individuals of various nationalities were apprehended, with over 40,000 individuals deported by the end of 2023".

The sources clarified that the ministry would not set specific deadlines for residency violators, as they have the option to leave the country without settling residency violations. However, the ministry will maintain a rigorous approach, imposing fines as the previous leniency did not yield sufficient compliance.

Emphasizing the ministry's plan to tighten control in areas with a significant expatriate presence, the sources mentioned particular focus on "bachelors" residing in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, Mah-

boula, Hawally and Farwaniya. "There is a strong likelihood of establishing fixed security points at the entrances and exits of Jleeb," they said. While confirming a fixed plan for Jleeb, the sources indicated that a final decision is needed. The plan aims to streamline inspections to combat black markets and the smuggling of state-subsidized foodstuff.

The sources also mentioned concerns from the environment authority's teams, stating that Jleeb has become heavily polluted, with the sewage network suffering from deliberate neglect. Checkpoints in Jleeb are expected to be operational in the first quarter of this year, coinciding with a possible decisive decision affecting the valuation of buildings in the area or the relocation of residents to labor cities.



# Is social media you, the real you? Unveiling the mirage

By Nour Hamoudah

**KUWAIT:** In the captivating world of social media, reality intertwines with virtual magic. Filters have become an integral part of self-expression, offering instant allure while quietly chipping away at the self-esteem of a new generation. These digital embellishments promise flawlessness, larger-than-life eyes, smoother skin, and contoured features with just a tap. But beneath the glittering allure lies a troubling reality: the subtle but powerful influence of filters on body image and mental health, particularly among young girls.

As the virtual world becomes increasingly entwined with reality, it's crucial to uncover the potential ramifications of these filters, particularly in the context of body and facial dysmorphia. The filtered reality once upon a time, a simple photograph was just that – a frozen moment in time, capturing smiles, memories, and authenticity.

However, the advent of filters has transformed this concept. Users can become captivated by their own altered reflections, lured into believing that the filtered version of themselves is not just aesthetically pleasing, but a benchmark for perfection. What began as a playful enhancement has subtly intertwined with the way we perceive ourselves. Amid the glittering array of filters lies a harsh reality – their potential to mold a generation of insecure teenagers.

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, a staggering 72 percent of teenagers in the United States use Instagram, a platform where filtered images reign supreme. The impact is profound; as young females scroll through altered images of themselves and others, they're constantly reminded of an unattainable ideal, leading to a downward spiral of comparison and self-doubt.

In the Middle East, where beauty standards

have long been held in high regard, the influence of social media filters has proven to be just as potent. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, where the allure of flawless skin and captivating eyes is deeply ingrained, filters offer a tempting path to achieving these expectations – albeit virtually. While concrete statistics from the GCC region might be limited, the global impact of filters remains consistent.

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) conducted a survey highlighting the detrimental effects of filters, showing that 50 percent of girls aged 14 to 24 felt that platforms like Instagram heightened feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and poor body image. This data transcends borders, reminding us that the struggle against the filtered facade is universal.

## From selfies to self-perception

The dangerous mirage journeying into the personal experiences of young females uncovers the profound implications of filters on body image. During an interview, a young 24-year-old Kuwaiti woman shared her harrowing experience – she entered a plastic surgeon's office and handed over a filtered selfie, asking to look like her digitally altered self. She also shares, "before, women were not able to leave their homes without makeup, for us filters became our makeup! Makeup filters have now become so advanced that it looks so real I don't need to rely on putting makeup on anymore to snap a photo."

This anecdote speaks volumes about the blurred line between reality and the enhanced digital mirage, and how filters can distort our self-perception. Redefining beauty beyond filters however, all hope is not lost. Amidst the haze of filtered imagery and societal expectations, there is a glimmer of light – the power of self-acceptance



and authenticity. It's a call for all females to recognize that they are not their filters.

Real beauty lies not in pixel-perfect skin, but in the quirks, imperfections, and unique features that make each individual incomparably beautiful. The solutions are manifold. Education and awareness campaigns can empower young females with the tools to critically evaluate the images they consume and create. Digital detoxes, where individuals take breaks from social media, can provide much-needed respite from the constant barrage of idealized images.

Additionally, open conversations about body image and self-worth can create a supportive network that counteracts the negative impact of filters. In a world that encourages filters and alterations, it's crucial to remember that the true reflection staring back at us holds more depth and beauty than any digitally enhanced image ever could. As we navigate the digital landscape, let's stand united against the perils of distorted self-perception. The journey to self-love and acceptance begins with acknowledging that we are far more captivating than the filtered version of ourselves.



## Inspection team removes neglected vehicles, boats

**KUWAIT:** Officials from the department of public hygiene and road works at the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Municipality branch went on an inspection tour in the governorate. Nine neglected cars and boats were removed. The inspection team placed 29 stickers on neglected cars, boats, groceries, and commercial containers in preparation for their removal after the end of the specified period.

The Director of the Department of Public Hygiene and Road Works at the Governorate Municipality Branch, Fahd Al-Qurayfah, explained that the aim of the intensive field tours is to monitor violators and take legal measures against them. He pointed out that the supervisory team pays great attention to raising the level of cleanliness in the areas as well as removing everything that distorts the aesthetic view.



**KUWAIT:** Abdullah Al-Salem University and National Center for Education Development officials sign a cooperation agreement on Tuesday to enhance cooperation in the field of education development. — KUNA photos

## Abdullah Al-Salem University, NCED sign agreement

**KUWAIT:** Abdullah Al-Salem University signed a cooperation agreement with the National Center for Education Development (NCED) on Tuesday to enhance cooperation in the field of education de-

velopment, in particular the implementation of the unified university entrance tests project, effectively between the two parties. The chairman of the founding board of directors of the university, Dr Moudi Al-Hammoud, said the agreement was approved by the council.

Al-Hammoud stressed that the university aims, through its scientific programs and cooperation with other stakeholders in Kuwait, to empower young people, praising the efforts of the center in this project and the role of the competent committee of the Ministry of Higher Education. The secretary of the board of directors of the university, Dr Adel Al-Husseinan, said in a similar speech that the National Center is working to enhance the quality of education by standardizing the national tests for admission to universities, praising the efforts of those in charge of the project.

Al-Husseinan explained that the agreement gives the center the right to use the university buildings and equip them to be a center for national testing and provide unified university

admission tests. In turn, the Director General of the National Center for Education Development, Amina Al-Jaber, said that the center believes in the importance of real investment in human resources and educational advancement to drive the development of the country.

Al-Jaber praised this cooperation, which culminated in the development of the first building block for the logistical requirements of this project. The university admission project aims to achieve the highest levels of education quality, raise the level of higher education students, and ensure the principles of justice, equality, and equal opportunities between high school graduates from public and private education wishing to join higher education institutions.

The National Center for Education Development was established in 2010 in accordance with the Amiri decree issued in 2006. The center aims to develop the educational process in Kuwait based on scientific foundations and also adopts national development projects. — KUNA



## Kuwaiti academic Dr Al-Haroun wins architectural prize

**RIYADH:** Kuwait University's (KU) assistant professor at the Department of Architecture, Dr Yousef Al-Haroun, won the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments' (IASTE-Berkeley) prize on Monday at its event held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Speaking to KUNA, Dr Al-Haroun expressed joy over winning the prize at the IASTE 2024 Riyadh held on January 5-9 under the title "The Dynamism of Tradition." The academic said that his research, which won the prize, focused on the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on architecture design, identity, and cultural making in Kuwait and the GCC region.

The research enables architects to use AI to maintain Gulf cultural identity while seeking improvements in design and construction. The Inter-



**Kuwait University's (KU) Assistance Professor at the Department of Architecture Dr Yousef Al-Haroun receives the award.**

national Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE) was established at the First International Symposium on Traditional Dwellings and Settlements held at Berkeley in April 1988. IASTE is keen on comparative, cross-cultural, and inter-disciplinary understanding of traditional dwellings and settlements as an expression of cultural conventions. — KUNA



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Grand new India temple evokes memories of murder

## RSF siege, looting edges Sudan closer to famine



AL-WALAJA: A Palestinian youth stands with a donkey in front of the West Bank barrier in Al-Walaja, a Palestinian village in annexed East Jerusalem on Dec 28, 2023 as dozens of families in Al-Walaja have pending demolition orders. — AFP photos

# Palestinian village fears Zionist demolitions

## Unfair planning laws force Palestinians to leave ancestral lands or tear down own homes

**AL-WALAJA, Palestine:** Dabbing away tears, Ghadeer Al-Atrash stood before her bulldozed home in a Palestinian village abutting Zionist settlements, a fate feared by hundreds of villagers as the Zionist entity ramps up demolitions of Palestinian homes.

Destruction of homes built without Zionist-issued permits, which campaigners say are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain due to the Zionist entity's restrictive planning policy, have roiled occupied territories for years.

But campaigners say surge in demolitions illustrates the wider impact of the current three-month Zionist assault, on Palestinian communities beyond the Gaza Strip. Atrash, a divorced mother-of-two, scrounged together about 200,000 shekels (\$54,000) to build a house in Al-Walaja, a village carved into hillside terraces and olive farms that is divided between the Zionist-occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem.

"My son dropped out of college. We saved money, borrowed money," Atrash, 43, told AFP, standing in front of concrete debris from her house that was demolished last February. "I had built it to get away from exhaustion and misery, for stability in my life."

Dozens of Al-Walaja families with pending demolition orders fear the same fate. Since Oct 7, the government has accelerated demolitions in Palestinian areas, in what campaigners call collective punishment that threatens to inflame already high tensions.

Zionist demolitions due to a lack of permits have caused the displacement of 444 Palestinians in Area C — West Bank territory under full

Zionist control — and annexed east Jerusalem, according to the United Nations humanitarian agency (OCHA). This represents a 36 percent increase in displacement since the beginning of 2023, OCHA said.

The Al-Walaja part impacted by demolitions falls under east Jerusalem, where the activist group Ir Amim said destructions jumped more than 50 percent in the three months since Oct 7 compared to the rest of 2023.

### 'Anxiety and fear'

"Whether I'm sitting, sleeping or eating, I keep thinking about what they are going to do to us and our house," said Mahmoud Abu Khirah, a 28-year-old construction worker and father-of-three who built a house in 2017 on ancestral land in Al-Walaja. "There's anxiety and fear."

Municipal authorities in Jerusalem redirected AFP's request for comment to the finance ministry and COGAT, a military body responsible for civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories. Neither of them responded. The Zionist Supreme Court has stayed demolition orders for 38 houses in Al-Walaja, which has a population of about 3,000. At least six houses that are not part of the freeze, including Abu Khirah's, face an imminent risk, Ir Amim said.

The Zionist entity's relentless ground and air military campaign in Gaza has killed more than 22,835 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. The entity claims the bombardment is aimed at destroying Hamas after the Palestinian resistance group attacked southern Zi-

onist communities and military bases on Oct 7. Around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, died in the attack and subsequent Zionist military operation aimed at regaining control of communities targeted by Hamas.

Fueling fears of a broader escalation, the jump in demolitions comes amid rising settler violence, military raids and movement restrictions facing Palestinians in the occupied territories. At the heart of the demolitions is what OCHA calls the Zionist entity's "discriminatory" planning policy.

Since 1967 when the Zionist entity occupied the West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, authorities never made a zoning plan for the Al-Walaja area under its jurisdiction, making it impossible for residents to build legally. "Residents have to choose between uprooting themselves from Al-Walaja, where they were born and their families live, to building without a permit and risking demolitions," Aviv Tatarsky, an Ir Amim researcher, told AFP.

### 'Live on streets'

The Zionist entity claims the whole of Jerusalem as its undivided capital. Many Palestinians view demolitions as an attempt to push them out of annexed east Jerusalem. The sprawling Jewish settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo — illegal under international law — have already encroached on Al-Walaja land.

The village is also hemmed in by the kilometers-long West Bank barrier — built by the Zionist entity in the early 2000s against Palestinian violence — which has cut off residents from pastureland and freshwater springs.



Palestinian villager Ghadeer Al-Atrash reacts during an interview with AFP journalists in front of her bulldozed home.

Many Palestinians with demolition orders say they choose to tear down their own homes to evade high government levies and the cost of renting the municipality's bulldozers. "The Zionist entity, as the occupying power, is obligated to protect the Palestinians," Greg Puley, acting head of OCHA's office for occupied Palestinian territories, told AFP. "Palestinians must have access to a fair and equitable planning system."

Al-Walaja's residents have taken it upon themselves to raise funds to develop a zoning plan with the help of a Zionist planner. The detailed proposal, seen by AFP, was submitted to Zionist planning authorities in early October.

In early December, the Supreme Court granted a request by authorities for up to four months to review it, legal records show. While they do so, the threat of demolitions persists. "If they demolish our house we will live on the streets," Abu Khirah said, cradling his toddler in his arms. — AFP

## Zionist entity faces Gaza 'genocide' case at UN court

**THE HAGUE:** The Zionist entity and South Africa face off at the UN's top court from Thursday, after Pretoria accused the entity of "genocidal acts" in Gaza, charges the Zionists have dismissed as "blood libel".

In an 84-page submission to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), South Africa urged judges to order the Zionist entity to "immediately suspend its military operations" in Gaza. South Africa alleges that the entity "has engaged in, is engaging in, and risks further engaging in genocidal acts against the Palestinian people in Gaza".

The Zionist entity has angrily hit back at the accusations, with government spokesman Eylon Levy vowing to fight the South African case he described as "absurd blood libel". "How tragic that the rainbow nation that prides itself on fighting racism will be fighting pro bono for anti-Jewish racists," added Levy. "No, South Africa, it is not we who have come to perpetrate genocide, it is Hamas," said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Top officials from the two countries will face off in the ICJ's Great Hall of Justice housed in the extravagant Peace Palace in The Hague.

The Zionist entity's relentless ground and air military campaign in Gaza has killed more than 22,835 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. The entity claims the bombardment is aimed at destroying Hamas after the Palestinian resistance group attacked southern Zionist communities and military bases on Oct 7.

Around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, died in the attack and subsequent Zionist military operation aimed at regaining control of communities targeted by Hamas. The United Nations estimates 1.9 million Palestinians in Gaza are displaced, with fears growing of famine and disease.

The ICJ rules on disputes between states and while its decisions are legally binding, it has limited power to enforce them. The court could in theory order the Zionist entity to stop its invasion, but it is highly doubtful it would be obeyed. In March 2022, the ICJ ordered Russia to "immediately suspend" its invasion of Ukraine — a directive Moscow has ignored.

Johann Soufi, a lawyer and international justice expert, told AFP there would be an "extremely significant symbolic impact" if the court ruled against the entity. "Of course, there is the problem of implementing the decision. But at the end of the day, international justice is all there is left," said Soufi, who worked for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees in Gaza.

### 'Criminally complicit'

South Africa has filed the case against the Zionist entity because both countries have signed the UN Genocide Convention, created in 1948 as a response to the Holocaust. Any country that has signed the convention can sue another at the ICJ if they disagree on the "interpretation, application or fulfillment" of the rules designed to prevent genocide.

South Africa said it was "acutely aware of the particular weight of responsibility in initiating proceedings against (the Zionist entity) for violations of the Genocide Convention". It also "unequivocally" condemned the Hamas attack but said "no armed attack... no matter how serious... can provide any possible justification for breaches" of the Genocide Convention.

Pretoria's case is that the Zionist entity's action in Gaza is "intended to bring about the destruction of a



RAFAH: A displaced Palestinian man reacts as he sits among objects salvaged from a house that was used as a shelter by his extended family members, many of whom were reported killed by a Zionist strike on Jan 7, 2024. — AFP

substantial part of the Palestinian national, racial and ethnic group". It says the entity's "genocidal acts" stem from the killing of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza, forced displacement, and preventing adequate aid access, resulting in starvation.

South Africa wants the ICJ to impose so-called "provisional measures", or emergency actions, while the broader case is being considered — which would probably take years. "The circumstances could not be more urgent," argues Pretoria, describing an "exceptionally brutal military campaign by (the Zionist entity) in Gaza, which is extensive and ongoing".

Other measures requested by South Africa include reparations and reconstruction of Gaza, plus the safe return of displaced Palestinian refugees. The case has been dismissed in Washington as "meritless, counterproductive and completely without any basis in fact whatsoever". — AFP

## ICC says probing journalist killings in Palestine

**THE HAGUE:** The International Criminal Court confirmed Tuesday that it is investigating potential crimes against journalists since the beginning of the ongoing wave of Zionist attacks on Palestine, where dozens of reporters have been killed. Media advocacy group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said in November that it had filed a complaint with the Hague-based ICC alleging war crimes over the deaths of journalists trying to cover the conflict. "The office of prosecutor Karim Khan has assured the organization that crimes against journalists are included in its investigation into Palestine," the NGO announced on Monday.

The court confirmed the statement, saying: "The ICC Office of the Prosecutor's investigation into the situation in the State of Palestine concerns crimes committed within the Court's jurisdiction since 13 June 2014." At least 79 journalists and media professionals, the vast majority Palestinian, have been killed since the war began three months ago, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

On Sunday, broadcaster Al Jazeera said two of its Palestinian journalists in the Gaza Strip were killed in a Zionist strike on their car. Hamza Wael Dahdoh and Mustafa Thuria, who also worked as a video stringer for AFP and other news organizations, were killed in what Al Jazeera called a "targeted killing". The Zionist army said it had struck "a terrorist who operated an aircraft that posed a threat" and was "aware of the reports that during the strike, two other suspects who were in the same vehicle". After the latest deaths, the UN's rights office said Monday that it was "very concerned by (the) high death toll of media workers in Gaza". — AFP



## International

# RSF siege, looting edges Sudan closer to famine

## Damage to agriculture sector could cripple country's food security for years: Analysts

**AL-JAZIRA STATE, Sudan:** Since Sudan's war spread to Al-Jazira state south of Khartoum, farmers have watched their livelihoods wither away after fighting between paramilitary forces battling the army wreaked havoc on once-bountiful lands. "For weeks I haven't been able to reach the wheat I planted in November," Ahmed al-Amin, 43, told AFP from his farm 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of state capital Wad Madani.

After war erupted in April last year between the regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Al-Jazira — just south of Khartoum — became a sanctuary for more than half a million people, according to the United Nations. But the front line has been edging southwards for months, and in December the fragile peace in Al-Jazira was shattered. The fight for Wad Madani began, and hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee from the state.

When the army quickly retreated from the state capital, the RSF took over swathes of agricultural land, laying siege to entire villages and leaving farmers unable to tend to vital crops. Amin says his crops need water and fertilizer that he and other farmers in the area can no longer provide.

His farm is part of the Gezira agricultural scheme, an important irrigation project that is a key source of food for the northeast African country. Local officials had announced plans in October to plant 600,000 acres of wheat — vital to fend off widespread hunger. Most of its food is imported, and with a war-crippled economy and 5.8 million people displaced within the country, the specter of famine has stalked Sudan for months.

### Widespread hunger

According to the UN's World Food Programme (WFP), nearly 18 million people are currently facing acute hunger, with five million at "emergency levels of hunger". Although a famine has not been officially declared, "there is no other way around what's about

to happen in Sudan", according to Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) country director William Carter.

On Saturday, US agency USAID's Famine Early Warning Systems Network said "fighting in central and eastern Sudan, which is the country's most important region for crop production, is a serious threat to national food availability". The NRC's Carter is more direct. "Unless peace magically descends on Sudan, there is going to be famine. At this point, it's not just air strikes and urban warfare killing people," he told AFP.

The fighting has killed more than 12,190 people, according to a conservative estimate from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. There are no figures for indirect casualties, including those who have died due to the nationwide breakdown of essential services, infrastructure and hospitals — 80 percent of which remain out of service.

All along the highway from Khartoum to Wad Madani, the RSF has set up checkpoints, seized land and besieged entire communities. Kamel Saad, 55, saw this happen to his village, 50 kilometers (31 miles) north of Wad Madani.

He had just begun to collect his vegetable crop — on which he had spent his life savings — in a last-ditch effort to make it through this year's harvest season. "My crop rotted because of the RSF deployment on the road," Saad told AFP. He now has nothing left to his name.

### Rotting crops

Others were lucky enough to have gathered in their harvest before the tanks arrived. But now they have nowhere to take their produce. At this time of year, markets across the state would usually be teeming with farmers and merchants moving their crops, feeding millions.

Now most of these markets are abandoned, looted or closed for fear of attack. According to officials, local activists and farmers, the RSF fighters have left nearly nothing untouched in their wake.



**GEDAREF:** People from states of Khartoum and Al-Jazira, displaced by the ongoing war in Sudan, queue to receive aid from a charity organization. — AFP

In a statement, Gezira scheme head Omar Marzouk said "the project's cars and machinery have been looted and workers in every department are unable to reach their work". Last month, the WFP said paramilitary fighters looted its warehouse in Al-Jazira, stealing "enough stocks to feed nearly 1.5 million severely food insecure people for one month".

By the end of December, "300 cars and farm vehicles" had been looted from the Junaid project on the east bank of the Nile, according to project head Mohamed Gad al-Rabb. Fertilizer and pesticide ware-

houses stood empty, their contents looted, and water pumps came to a halt. "Already we hadn't been paid our profits from the government for two years. Now the water pumps have stopped and our crops are at risk of rotting," farmer Khader Abbas told AFP.

Sudan was already suffering before the war, with triple-digit inflation and a third of the population needing humanitarian aid. Now, as the fighting spreads southeast, local experts have warned that the damage to the country's agriculture sector could cripple its food security for years to come. — AFP

## Kidnappings, explosions rock Ecuador

**QUITO, Ecuador:** At least four police officers were kidnapped in Ecuador following a declaration of a state of emergency on Monday after a dangerous narco boss escaped from maximum security detention.

President Daniel Noboa announced the 60-day state of emergency as a manhunt was under way for the gang leader Jose Adolfo Macias, known as "Fitó." The announcement triggered the mobilization of soldiers on streets and in prisons, as well as a nightly curfew from 11:00 pm to 05:00 am.

In the coastal city of Machala "three police officers, who were on duty at the scene, were kidnapped", while a fourth officer was kidnapped in the capital Quito, Ecuador's police force said on X.

Three people driving a vehicle "without license plates" abducted the officer in Quito, according to the police statement. In a video posted on Instagram, Noboa said the state of emergency would allow armed forces to enter and help control prisons. "We will not negotiate with terrorists nor rest until we return peace to all Ecuadorians," he said.

Noboa came to power with promises to clamp down on gangs and insecurity. He announced last week that he will build two maximum security prisons — similar to the one built by Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele during his war against gangs — to hold the most dangerous criminals.

### Prison break

Macias had been serving a 34-year sentence for organized crime, drug trafficking and murder. The 44-year-old leader of the powerful Los Choneros gang was found missing by police conducting an inspection of the prison in the port city of Guayaquil. He is believed to have been tipped off and es-

caped just hours before police arrived, according to presidential spokesman Roberto Izurieta.

The Attorney General's office filed charges against two prison officials it accuses of being involved in Macias' escape. This is his second prison break — the last was in 2013 when he was recaptured after three months.

After his escape on Sunday, unrest broke out at penitentiaries in six of Ecuador's 24 provinces, according to Ecuador's prison authority SNAI, with guards taken hostage at some of the facilities. Heavily armed police and soldiers entered the prisons of El Oro, Loja, Chimborazo, Cotopaxi, Azuay and Pichincha, after which the military distributed images of half-naked inmates rounded up in courtyards. The SNAI said there had been no injuries due to the incidents.

### Violence

Long a peaceful haven between top cocaine exporters Colombia and Peru, Ecuador has seen violence explode in recent years as enemy gangs with links



**QUITO:** Soldiers stand guard in downtown Quito on Jan 9, 2024, a day after Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa declared a state of emergency. -- AFP

to Mexican and Colombian cartels vie for control. The kidnapping of police officers on Monday night was com-

pounded by explosions in the coastal town of Esmeraldas, in a region controlled by gangs. — AFP

## 2023 hottest year on record...

Continued from Page 1

temperatures "exceed those of any period in at least the last 100,000 years", Burgess said. Records were broken on every continent. In Europe, 2023 was the second-warmest year on record, at 0.17°C cooler than 2020. 2023 saw the beginning of a naturally occurring El Niño weather phenomenon, which warms waters in the southern Pacific and stokes hotter weather beyond.

The phenomenon is expected to reach its peak in 2024, and is linked to the eight consecutive months of record heat from June to December. Ocean temperatures globally were also "persistently and unusually high", with many seasonal records broken since April.

These unprecedented ocean temperatures

caused marine heatwaves devastating to aquatic life and boosted the intensity of storms. Oceans absorb more than 90 percent of excess heat caused by human activity, and play a major role in regulating Earth's climate. Rising temperatures have also accelerated the melting of ice shelves — frozen ridges that help prevent massive glaciers in Greenland and West Antarctica from slipping into the ocean and raising sea levels.

Antarctic sea ice hit record-low levels in 2023. "The extremes we have observed over the last few months provide a dramatic testimony of how far we now are from the climate in which our civilization developed", said Carlo Buontempo, C3S director. In 2023, carbon dioxide and methane concentrations reached record levels of 419 parts per million, and 1,902 parts per billion, respectively. Methane is the second largest contributor to global warming after CO2 and is responsible for around 30 percent of the rise in global temperatures since the industrial revolution, according to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). — AFP

office on a wave of hope for radical reform in 2017.

"I know I can count on your energy and your commitment," said Macron on X, adding that the new premier would act in line with the spirit of "excellence and audacity" of 2017. But the conservative daily Le Figaro warned "youth does not create a program" and said Attal may also have his eye on climbing to the very top. "With such a promotion, the race for the 2027 presidential election is also inevitably set in motion," said the newspaper.

Opposition leaders reacted with derision to the elevation of Attal to prime minister, which makes him the fourth head of government since Macron took power. "The presidential monarch rules alone with his court," said hard-left figurehead Jean-Luc Melenchon. "What can the French expect from this fourth prime minister and fifth government in seven years?" said Le Pen. "They can expect nothing."

Under the French system, the president sets general policies and the prime minister is responsible for day-to-day government management, meaning the latter often pays the price when an administration runs into turbulence. The appointment of Attal had been expected, although the absence of a swift announcement fueled talk that heavyweight government figures were unhappy over the meteoric promotion of a man known sometimes by fellow ministers as "young Gabriel". Sources close to those said to be behind the tensions, including Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, denied this. — AFP

## Zionists drive over body of...

Continued from Page 1

after he was hit by fire from our forces," the spokesman said, confirming three other fighters were killed. The police gave no detail of the possible charges against the suspect.

The armed wing of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party, Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, said the three men were their fighters. Large crowds of people marched through Tulkarem on Tuesday chanting slogans during the funerals of the men, an AFP correspondent reported. The footage shared on social media appears to be taken from a security camera and shows an armored vehicle slowly driving over an apparently lifeless body.

The vehicle then stops, restarts and drives off, crushing the body again with its back wheels. Other footage, apparently taken from the same camera, shows an exchange of fire between Zionist forces and fighters. In a separate incident on Tuesday, Zionist forces shot and killed a Palestinian man near Ramallah, according to sources on both sides.

Zionist army raids and settler attacks in the West Bank have killed at least 334 people since Oct 7, according to the Ramallah-based Palestinian health ministry. The Zionist entity has occupied the West Bank, home to about three million Palestinians, since 1967. Some 490,000 Zionists live in West Bank settlements deemed illegal under international law.

Meanwhile, more than three months into the deadliest ever Gaza war, US top diplomat Antony Blinken urged the Zionist entity on Tuesday to "avoid further civilian harm" in the besieged Palestinian territory where

more than 23,000 people have died in the war. Blinken also voiced hope that, after the war, the Zionist could push on with its efforts towards regional integration, following its US-brokered normalization deals with the United Arab Emirates and other states.

On Tuesday, the Zionist army again bombed Gaza and battled Hamas fighters. An AFP correspondent reported intense strikes overnight in Khan Yunis and Rafah, the biggest cities in the south of Gaza which are crowded with internally displaced people. The Zionist entity's relentless bombardment and a ground invasion of Gaza have killed at least 23,210 people, mostly women and children. The Zionist army says its death toll inside Gaza had risen to 185 after nine soldiers were killed on Monday. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, speaking in Qatar on Tuesday, argued that the Oct 7 attack "came after an attempt to marginalize the Palestinian cause".

He charged that, "despite the heavy price, the massacres and the war of genocide, it (the Zionist entity) failed to achieve any of its goals". In further comments, released later by Hamas in Gaza, he called on Muslim states "to support the resistance with weapons, because this is... not the battle of the Palestinian people alone". The war has displaced most of Gaza's 2.4 million people, and the United Nations says many are at risk of famine and disease.

Since the war started, fears have also grown of an escalating conflict between the Zionist entity and its other regional enemies, a loose alliance of Iran-backed armed groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Hezbollah said Tuesday it had launched a drone attack on the Zionist entity's "northern command center" in Safed as part of its response to the killings of Hamas deputy leader Saleh Al-Aruri and Hezbollah field commander Wissam Tawil. The Zionist army also said Monday it had killed a "central" Hamas figure in Syria, Hassan Akasha. — AFP

## South Korea bans trade in...

Continued from Page 1

"Now there is no longer any justification for being criticized as a 'dog-eating country'," said Thae Yong-ho, a ruling People Power Party lawmaker who proposed the bill. "The ruling and opposition parties and the government must now take the lead in protecting... animal rights," he said in a statement. Activists and some lawmakers gathered outside the National Assembly to celebrate the passing of the bill, with people cheering and waving posters saying "Goodbye dog meat consumption" and "dog meat free Korea is coming".

Activists also welcomed the bill, saying it was "history

in the making". "We reached a tipping point where most Korean citizens reject eating dogs and want to see this suffering consigned to the history books," Jung Ah Chae, executive director of Humane Society International/Korea, said in a statement. "Today our policymakers have acted decisively to make that a reality," she said. "While my heart breaks for all the millions of dogs for whom this change has come too late, I am overjoyed that South Korea can now close this miserable chapter in our history and embrace a dog friendly future."

In a survey released on Monday by Seoul-based think tank Animal Welfare Awareness, Research, and Education, nine out of 10 people in South Korea said they would not eat dog meat in the future. Tuesday's vote was a pioneering decision globally, said activist group Animal Liberation Wave, adding it would pave the way for protecting the rights of other animals. — AFP

## Anti-abaya Attal picked as France's...

Continued from Page 1

"It will no longer be possible to wear an abaya at school," he said. Attal's decision has sparked a debate about France's secular rules and whether they are used to discriminate against the country's large Muslim minority. The move was also seen by many as a ploy to appease conservatives and raise Attal's public profile.

Attal hailed his appointment as a symbol of "audacity and movement" as he took over from Borne during an official ceremony at the prime minister's Matignon residence in Paris. "France will never rhyme with decline, France rhymes with transformation, France rhymes with audacity," he said. Borne, only the second woman to lead the French government, said she would continue to serve France as a lawmaker, telling women "the future belongs to you".

Attal is set to bring a major change of style to the office of the prime minister. Borne's austere and no-nonsense demeanor won respect from colleagues but not necessarily popularity among the public, whereas Attal is a highly popular figure in government after his stint at the politically crucial education ministry. The president said he wanted Attal to bring back the spirit of bold change from when Macron first won



## International

# Grand new India temple evokes memories of murder

## Shrine built on ruins of torn-down mosque to be inaugurated this month

**AYODHYA, India:** For many Indians the opening of a grand new temple this month is a long-held dream come true but for Muslims like Mohammed Shahid, the day will evoke only blood-soaked memories. The shrine in Ayodhya has been built on ground where a mosque stood for centuries, before it was torn down by Hindu zealots in a campaign backed by the Bharatiya Janata Party currently ruling India.

killed 2,000 people, with most of the victims Muslim. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will this month inaugurate the shrine built to replace it in a grand ceremony that will burnish his image as a custodian of the Hindu faith, a de facto campaign launch for national elections later this year.

Shahid shudders at the thought of the thousands of pilgrims expected to throng the quiet riverside town each day once the temple's doors are thrown open. "For me, the temple symbolizes nothing but death and destruction," he said.

### 'Given my blood and sweat'

The temple is dedicated to Ram, one of the most revered deities in the Hindu pantheon, said to have been born in Ayodhya around 7,000 years ago. Devout Hindus believe the Babri Masjid was built on top of his birthplace in the 16th century during the Mughal Empire, under rulers they say oppressed their faith. Carved from pink sandstone and marble, the temple complex has been constructed at an estimated cost of 20 billion rupees (\$240 million), which the government said was sourced entirely from public donations. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party had campaigned for decades to build the temple and its activists were instrumental in the demolition of its predecessor.

Santosh Dubey, a member of the mob that destroyed the mosque, said the temple's opening on January 22 would be a "more significant" day for his country than when India declared independence from Britain in 1947. "I have given my blood and sweat for the temple," Dubey, 56, told AFP. "A lifelong dream of all Hindus is coming true."

Dubey, then in his mid-twenties, recalled how thousands of religious volunteers had gathered in Ayodhya on the eve of the 1992 demolition. "It was all well-planned," he said. "We were determined to bring down the mosque, come what may."

Around 50 men including Dubey climbed up to the mosque's central dome with ropes and used sledgehammers to reduce it to rubble. Dubey fell from the roof of the mosque during the fervor, breaking 17 bones. He spent nearly a year in prison afterwards on charges of criminal conspiracy and promoting religious enmity before a court released him. "But I have no regrets," he said. "I am proud of what I did. I



This photo taken on Dec 28, 2023 shows a flag depicting the Hindu deities Ram and Hanuman waving on a rooftop beside a mosque in Ayodhya.

have been born to serve Lord Ram ... He is the living soul of India."

### 'So what if Muslims died?'

Dubey said he was untroubled by the bloodbath that followed. "I can give up my life for Ram and I can also take a life for Ram. So what if Muslims died? So many Hindus have also sacrificed their lives for the cause." The site where the mosque once stood lay vacant for decades before India's top court gave permission for the temple's construction in 2019, after years of legal wrangling. Land has been earmarked for the construction of a new mosque mandated by the court verdict, some 25 kilometers (15 miles) from the city.

A vacant field greets visitors to the site, with a poster on an otherwise bare wall announcing a "masterpiece in making" alongside an image of the

proposed design. Fundraising for the project has not begun, as many within Ayodhya's Muslim community are unhappy with the isolated location.

The court verdict greenlighting the temple has emboldened activist groups to pursue other claims against Islamic houses of worship they say were built over Hindu shrines during Mughal rule. Last month an Indian court permitted a case to proceed on whether a mosque in the holy city of Varanasi should be opened to Hindu worshippers, with a ruling expected later this year. Azam Qadri, the president of a local Muslim body in Ayodhya, said he feared more mosques would meet the same fate as the Babri Masjid. "Muslims should be allowed to live in peace and their places of worship should not be taken away," Qadri told AFP. "The rift between Hindus and Muslims should get finished. Only love and brotherhood should prevail." — AFP



AYODHYA: Santosh Dubey, 56, a member of the mob that demolished the 16th century Babri Masjid, shows a 1992 newspaper article with his picture alongside fellow members, during an interview with AFP in Ayodhya. — AFP photos

Shahid, 52, vividly remembers the day in 1992 when hundreds of men demolished the Babri Masjid with pickaxes and sledgehammers in a religious frenzy, leaving a trail of death in their wake. "My father was chased down a street by a mob. They hit him with a broken glass bottle before burning him alive," he told AFP. "My uncle was also brutally killed. It was a long, dark night for our family."

Shockwaves from the demolition of the mosque were felt around the country and triggered riots that

## Former Bhutan PM wins poll amid economic troubles

**THIMPHU, Bhutan:** Former prime minister Tshering Tobgay's party won Bhutan's election Tuesday, media reported, after polls dominated by economic threats challenging the Himalayan kingdom's longstanding policy of prioritizing "Gross National Happiness" over growth. Foremost in the minds of many who voted are the struggles facing the Buddhist-majority kingdom's younger generation, with chronic youth unemployment and a brain drain. Both parties in the election are committed to a constitutionally enshrined philosophy of a government that measures its success by the "happiness and well-being of the people".

Tobgay's People's Democratic Party (PDP) won nearly two-thirds of seats in parliament. The Bhutanese newspaper reported, with the 58-year-old conservation advocate expected to become premier for the second time. Tobgay's PDP "wins the 2024 National Assembly general elections with 30 seats" while the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP) took the remaining 17, the paper said, based on preliminary results from each constituency. There was no immediate confirmation from the Election Commission, which is expected to release final results on Wednesday, according to an official timetable released ahead of the polls.

### 'Mass exodus'

Some voters had to trek for days to cast their ballots in the landlocked mountain nation of about 800,000 people, similar in area to Switzerland. "Job opportunities in Bhutan are scarce and the new government should focus on solving this, so young people don't leave abroad for greener pastures," said 22-year-old student Ugyen Tshering, after voting in the chilly mountain air in the capital Thimphu, with Buddhist prayer flags fluttering in the background.

Bhutan's youth unemployment rate stands at 29 percent, according to the World Bank, while economic growth has sputtered along at an average of 1.7 percent over the past five years. During campaigning, Tobgay sounded the alarm over Bhutan's "unprecedented economic challenges and mass exodus".

His party's manifesto quoted government statistics showing that one in every eight people were "struggling to meet their basic needs for food" and other necessities. His electoral rival, BTP leader and career civil servant Pema Chewang, 56, also warned the country was losing the "cream of the nation". — AFP



THIMPHU, Bhutan: Women wait in a queue to cast their votes outside a polling station in Thimphu on Jan 9, 2024. — AFP



XICHANG, China: A Long March-2C rocket, carrying the Einstein Probe satellite, lifts off from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center in southwestern China's Sichuan province on Jan 9, 2024. — AFP

## Taiwan issues alert over China satellite days before election

**TAIPEI:** Taiwan issued a national emergency alert on Tuesday as China launched a satellite, days before the self-ruled island holds a crucial presidential election that has heightened security worries. The alert came hours after election front-runner Lai Ching-te, Taiwan's current vice president, accused Beijing of using "all means" to influence this weekend's poll, which will set the course of cross-strait ties for the next four years.

Phones across Taiwan blared with a "presidential alert" at about 3:15 pm (0715 GMT), around the time Beijing announced the successful launch of its Einstein Probe satellite, which it says will gather astronomical data. "China launched (a) satellite which flew over the southern airspace," said Taiwan's alert in Chinese, urging the public to stay safe. The English part of the message described it as an "air raid alert" warning of a "missile flyover Taiwan airspace", but officials said this was a mistranslation. The defense ministry later apologized for the mistake, saying the default message in English had not been updated.

Foreign Minister Joseph Wu was giving a news conference about the elections when the alert message buzzed on mobile phones, interrupting his address. He explained that the alert was issued because of possible falling "debris". "When a rocket is openly flying in our sky, some of their tubes or debris will fall in this region," Wu told reporters.

He said the launch was part of a pattern of "grey zone" activities by Beijing aimed at intimidating Taiwan. "With this kind of threat against Taiwan, I think we should be clear-eyed, we should not be provoked," Wu said. The Einstein Probe set off from the Xichang Satellite Launch Centre in southwestern Sichuan province, around 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles) from Taiwan's capital Taipei, state media said.

CCTV said it was launched "using the Long March-2C carrier rocket... and the satellite entered its designated orbit". The satellite will "observe mysterious transient phenomena in the universe comparable to the flickering of fireworks", state-run news agency Xinhua reported Tuesday.

It will aim to unveil "the violent and little-known aspects of the cosmos", Xinhua added. Footage released by CCTV showed the white rocket soaring into the air in a plume of white smoke before separating in orbit.

### 'No illusions'

Earlier Lai warned voters to have no illusions about China maintaining peace but said that he would keep the door open for exchanges with Beijing if he takes power. Saturday's election will be closely watched from Beijing to Washington as voters choose a new leader to steer the island in the face of an increasingly assertive Beijing.

China claims Taiwan as part of its territory, rejecting the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government's stance that the island is "already independent". Beijing has maintained a near-daily military presence around Taiwan — with four Chinese balloons moving across the sensitive median line on Monday, the latest in a series of incursions that Taiwan and conflict experts say is a form of "grey zone" harassment. Lai said that while China interferes in "every election in Taiwan", the latest efforts are the "most serious". "In addition to political and military intimidation, (it is using) economic means, cognitive warfare, disinformation, threats and incentives," he told reporters. "It has resorted to all means to interfere with this election."

### Hong Kong warning

President Tsai Ing-wen, who is leaving office after reaching the two-term limit, won a landslide in the last election in 2020. She was carried to victory by the Taiwan public's fears of becoming like Hong Kong, which had seen Beijing crack down on dissent by implementing a national security law after city-wide protests for greater freedoms.

Under her administration, Beijing refused all high-level communications with Tsai and ramped up political and military pressures against Taiwan. Lai said Tuesday that "as long as there is parity and dignity, Taiwan's door will always be open" for exchanges and cooperation with China under his leadership. "But we cannot have illusions about peace. Accepting China's 'one-China' principle is not true peace," he said, referring to a Beijing doctrine that Taiwan is a part of China. "Peace without sovereignty is just like Hong Kong. It is a false peace."

Touting deterrence as a main defense policy, Lai said the DPP's "pursuit of peace relies on strength, not on the goodwill of the aggressor". "The goodwill of invaders cannot be relied on — if you look at Tibet and Xinjiang in the past, or Hong Kong today, these are all good examples," Lai said.

His opponents on Saturday include Hou Yu-ih, a former police chief and mayor with the Kuomintang (KMT), a party which has long encouraged closer cooperation with China. Hou has said that Lai — who has previously dubbed himself a "pragmatic worker for Taiwan's independence" — represents a danger to cross-strait relations. — AFP

## US appeals court judges skeptical of Trump's immunity

**WASHINGTON:** A panel of US appeals court judges appeared skeptical on Tuesday of Donald Trump's claim that as a former president he should be immune from prosecution on charges that he conspired to overturn the 2020 election. The 77-year-old Trump attended the appeals court hearing held under tight security in a federal courthouse just blocks away from the US Capitol stormed by his supporters on Jan 6, 2021.

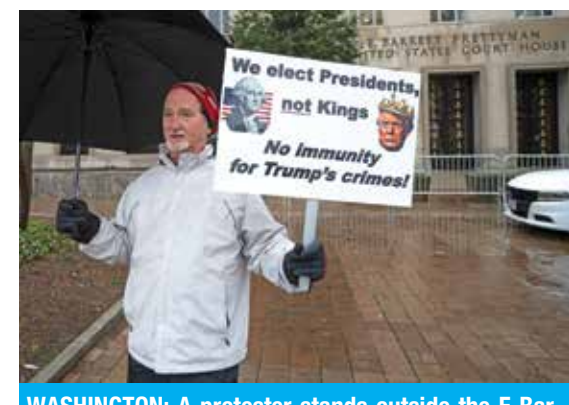
Trump, the frontrunner for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, is scheduled to go on trial in Washington on March 4 on charges of conspiring to overturn the 2020 election won by Democrat Joe Biden. Trump's attorney John Sauer told a three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit that a president can only be prosecuted for actions taken while in the White House if they have first been impeached and convicted by Congress.

"To authorize the prosecution of a president for his official acts would open a Pandora's Box from which this nation may never recover," Sauer said. "The notion that criminal immunity for a president doesn't exist is a shocking holding ... It would authorize, for example, the indictment of President Biden in the Western District of Texas after he leaves office for mismanaging the border."

US District Judge Tanya Chutkan, who is to preside over Trump's election interference trial, rejected his immunity claim last month and the judges who heard his appeal on Tuesday also appeared to be unconvinced by the argument. "I think it's paradoxical to say that his constitutional duty 'to take care that the laws be faithfully executed' allows him to violate criminal laws," said Judge Karen Henderson, an appointee of former Republican president George HW Bush.

Judge Florence Pan, a Biden appointee, asked whether a president who ordered the assassination of a political rival by the Navy SEAL special forces could be criminally prosecuted even if they had not been impeached and convicted first by Congress. "My answer is a qualified yes," Sauer said. "There's a political process that would have to occur."

"So therefore he's not completely and absolutely immune because under the procedure that you concede he can be prosecuted if there's an impeachment and conviction by the Senate," Pan said. James Pearce, an attorney for the Justice Department, pushed back against the immunity claim and said the circumstances surrounding Trump's conduct were unique. — AFP



WASHINGTON: A protester stands outside the E Barrett Prettyman US Courthouse on Jan 9, 2023, during a hearing on immunity for former US President Donald Trump. — AFP







## Business



PORTLAND: This handout image released by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) shows agents inspecting the door plug from Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 on January 8, 2024 after being found in Portland, Oregon. — AFP photos



NEW YORK: A Boeing 737-900er passenger aircraft of Alaska Airlines on its way to San Francisco is seen before take-off at John F Kennedy Airport on January 8, 2024. Shares of Boeing plunged after an airplane panel blew out mid-flight, reviving safety questions at a time when the company hoped to recover its reputation.

# United, Alaska Airlines report loose hardware on Boeing 737 MAX jets

## Installation issues in the door plug • Bolts need additional tightening

NEW YORK: United and Alaska Airlines both reported on Monday that loose hardware had been discovered on some of their Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes during preliminary inspections after a dramatic mid-flight incident last week. The disclosures come as US federal transportation inspectors probe what caused a so-called door plug component to blow out last Friday on an Alaska Airlines passenger plane, forcing it to make an emergency landing. United said on Monday it had "found instances that appear to relate to installation issues in the door plug - for example, bolts that needed additional tightening." Hours later, Alaska Airlines said its staff had found that "loose hardware was visible on some aircraft."

Boeing shares tumbled on Monday as investors began to assess the financial implications of the incident, while US aviation authorities provided airlines with protocols to check planes with similar configurations to the 737 MAX 9 aircraft involved in Friday's incident. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) inspectors said late Monday that they did not find bolts for the component that came off on Friday's Alaska Airlines flight, but hadn't determined whether they existed or had flown off with the panel.

Through further equipment testing, "we will be able to determine whether the bolts were there," NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy told reporters. Homendy didn't comment directly on the latest disclosures from United and Alaska about loose components, saying the probe was focused on Friday's incident. But the board could issue an urgent safety recommendation if need be, she said.

Hundreds of flights have been canceled due to the grounding of a fraction of the MAX fleet. "As operators conduct the required inspections, we are staying in close contact with them and will help address any and all findings," Boeing said late Monday. "We are committed to ensuring every Boeing airplane meets design specifications and the highest safety and quality standards." Aviation analysts said the issue appeared to be a quality control defect rather than a design issue akin to the problem with a flawed flight handling system involved in two fatal MAX crashes in 2018 and 2019.

But Boeing has struggled with supply chain and quality control problems since the MAX returned to service, limiting its output and hitting its bottom line. In December, Boeing urged airlines to undertake ad-

ditional inspections to check for loose hardware on plane rudder control systems after an international operator discovered a bolt with a missing nut while performing routine maintenance.

### Inspection protocols

United has 79 MAX 9 planes, more than any other carrier. The US airline said it has canceled 200 MAX 9 flights since the incident and expects "significant cancellations" on Tuesday. Following the Alaska Airlines incident, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered operators to ground 171 jets with the same door plug configuration. A door plug is a cover panel used to fill an unneeded emergency exit in planes with smaller seat configurations.

On Monday, the FAA announced that it approved a roadmap for airlines to complete inspections that include both left and right door plugs, components and fasteners. Alaska Airlines said it was still awaiting "final documentation" from Boeing and the FAA before beginning the formal inspection process. "The safety of these aircraft is our priority and we will take the time and steps necessary to ensure their airworthiness," the carrier said. AeroMexico, which has

suspended 19 planes, said it is in the "final phase" of inspections, adding: "We expect all MAX-9s in our fleet to return to operation in the upcoming days."

### Culture challenge

The incident is the latest setback for Boeing, particularly over the 737 MAX. The worst were two crashes - a Lion Air flight in October 2018 and an Ethiopian Airlines flight in March 2019 - that caused the deaths of 346 people in total and triggered the grounding of all 737 MAX planes for nearly two years. Boeing Chief Executive Dave Calhoun called a company-wide meeting for Tuesday focusing on safety.

Analysts said the Alaska Airlines problems may have stemmed from a manufacturing defect. Since the crashes, Boeing has repeatedly slowed or suspended production on both the MAX and the larger 787 Dreamliner due to problems uncovered by staff. The latest episode is "indicative of a major cultural challenge" facing Boeing, said Richard Aboulafia, managing director at AeroDynamic Advisory. "They need to change. They can't just keep lurching from crisis to crisis." Analysts said Boeing could face slower government approvals for new jets or on proposed repairs. — AFP



NEVADA: Izumi Kawanishi, President and COO of Honda Mobility Inc, introduces the Afeela car, where Honda teams up with Sony and Microsoft on AI and other tech for the mobility industry during the Sony press conference at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES), January 8, 2024. — AFP

## Airbus: Taiwan's EVA Air orders 33 planes

PARIS: Airbus said on Tuesday that Taiwan's EVA Air has finalized an order for 33 planes from the European aircraft maker, including 18 long-range A350-1000 planes and 15 single-aisle A321neo models. Airbus did not provide a figure but the deal could be worth as much as \$8.5 billion under catalogue prices that the aerospace giant has not updated since 2018. Airbus said it has more than 1,000 firm orders from 60 customers worldwide for its A350 models.

The wide-bodied A350-1000 type can seat up

to 410 passengers and travel up to 18,000 kilometers (9,700 nautical miles) non-stop. "The A350 is setting new standards across the board in terms of range, payload, fuel efficiency and passenger comfort," Benoit de Saint-Exupery, Airbus executive vice president for sales and commercial aircraft, said in a statement. The A321neo, part of the A320neo family, has received more than 5,600 orders since its launch in 2016. "In both size categories we have selected the most modern and fuel-efficient types, that offer the highest levels of passenger comfort," EVA Air president Clay Sun said in the Airbus statement. Founded in 1989, EVA Air has a fleet of 86 planes. It carried 2.2 million passengers in 2022. The airline serves 61 destinations over four continents, not including Africa, according to its website. — AFP



BROUGHTON: Workers are pictured on the Airbus A350 wing manufacturing floor at the Airbus Broughton plant in north Wales. — AFP

## EU examines Microsoft investment in OpenAI

BRUSSELS: The European Union's competition regulator said Tuesday it was looking into Microsoft's investment into ChatGPT developer OpenAI to see if it merits further investigation under the bloc's merger rules. The European Commission said in a statement it was "checking whether Microsoft's investment in OpenAI might be reviewable under the EU Merger Regulation".

The move is part of efforts by Brussels to make sure its oversight can catch up with the fast-moving world of artificial intelligence and stop major players shutting out competitors. EU competition chief Margrethe Vestager, who will meet top tech bosses California this week, said "it is fundamental that these new markets stay competitive". "We are inviting businesses and experts to tell us about any competition issues that they may perceive in these industries, whilst also closely monitoring AI partnerships to ensure they do not unduly distort market dynamics," she said. — AFP

## France drops renewables targets in new energy bill

PARIS: Critics are deriding as a step backward a new French energy bill that favors the further development of nuclear power and avoids setting targets for solar and wind power and other renewables. France, like other EU countries, aims to achieve carbon neutrality in 2050. The proposed text, which is slated to go before the cabinet early next month and then be submitted to lawmakers, reaffirms France's commitment to nuclear power to ensure "energy sovereignty".

The country became a leader in nuclear power generation after the 1973 oil crisis, building over 50 such power plants that produced around two-thirds of the country's electricity. But those reactors are ageing and France has yet to bring the first of a new generation of nuclear power plants online. The proposed text affirms "the sustainable choice of using nuclear energy

as a competitive and carbon-free" source of electricity, and targets the construction of at least six but as many as 14 new reactors to pull off the transition to clean energy and meet climate change goals.

But the proposed text sets no such targets for building renewable capacity, in particular wind and solar, whereas previous energy laws did. The Ministry of Energy Transition said "it is false to say that there is no renewables objective" as the government will set the targets itself later. But that pledge does not satisfy activists and experts. "It's a terrible step back," said Arnaud Gosse, a lawyer specializing in environmental law. He recalled that in a 2019 law, parliament stated the desire to debate the share of different energy sources in overall production.

### 'Tending' instead of targets

"If you only quantify nuclear power, you do not know the share of non-renewable energies. As a result, nuclear gets prioritized and, depending on remaining coverage needs, non-renewables will be the subject of floating (future) decrees. It's no longer a mix," Gosse said. To reach its stated ambition of carbon neutrality by 2050 France will have to massively ramp up the

production and share of renewables, studies have repeatedly shown.

After years of prevarication, France last year voted through two bills designed to speed up progress on nuclear as well as renewables. In November, the government put forward initial figures proposing a doubling to 18 GW of offshore wind power in 2035 as well as setting out the annual rate of deployment of solar panels needed to hit 75 GW in 2035, while also aiming for a doubling of onshore wind power capacity to 40 GW in 2035.

Jules Nyssen, president of France's Renewable Energies Union, declared himself "stunned" after discovering that renewables targets did not appear in the draft. The text promises to make efforts rather than set objectives and uses formulations such as "tending towards a reduction". For Anne Bringault, energy transition manager of the Climate Action Network, "this is an extremely significant step backwards, and totally inconsistent with European objectives. Even if the objectives are raised, we no longer have such a strong commitment to them," she said. The draft law also drops targets for reducing energy consumption via renovation of buildings. — AFP

## iPhone survives 16,000-foot fall from flight

WASHINGTON: Now that's what you call airplane mode—an iPhone that plummeted 16,000 feet (5,000 meters) from an Alaska Airlines flight landed without a single crack in the screen and even a battery still half-charged. The phone was sucked out of Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 on Friday when a fuselage panel blew off, leaving a gaping hole. The passenger plane made an emergency landing shortly after, with all aboard safe. A few items, reportedly including AirPods and a boy's shirt, made more dramatic landings after shooting out of the suddenly depressurized cabin.

Amid a search for debris, a man named Sean Bates in the northwestern state of Washington found an iPhone on the side of the road, appearing to belong to one of the passengers. A photo of the device posted on X, formerly Twitter, on Sunday showed the intact screen and an emailed \$70 baggage receipt. The battery is shown charged to 44 percent and the smartphone remains on flight mode.

Aside from the port, where the terminal of the charger protrudes after being ripped from the rest of the cord, the phone appears untouched. In a follow up TikTok post, Bates said he'd found the phone "pretty clean, no scratches on it, sitting under a bush." Bates said he contacted the National Transportation Safety Board, which told him it was the second phone from the flight to have been found.

NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy replied to his post on X thanking him and offering to meet. In a briefing on Sunday, Homendy told reporters that "We'll look through [the phones] and then return them," adding that it was "very, very fortunate" that the incident had not ended in tragedy. In response to the incident, regulatory bodies swiftly grounded some versions of Boeing's 737 MAX 9 jet, pending inspections. Boeing shares plunged in trading on Monday.

### Vision Pro headset

In another development, Apple said it will release its highly anticipated Vision Pro mixed reality headset in the United States on February 2, in its first major release since the Apple Watch in 2015. Announced in June, the Vision Pro will cost a hefty \$3,499 before tax, more than double the price of Meta's top-of-the-range Quest Pro headset. "The era of spatial computing has arrived," said Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, calling the Vision Pro "the most advanced consumer electronics device ever created."

The headset has been in development at Apple for years, and is seen as a much needed boost to a segment that Facebook-owner Meta has struggled to grow with its own releases. Meta's experience with the so-called metaverse has been humbling despite it being a leader in the emergent sector, and many questioned whether Apple would in the end jump in. Apple said the headset could be used in the workplace, to watch streaming entertainment and play games. — AFP



## Business

# High tech gadget extravaganza delivers wave of new inventions

## At CES, tech knows if you're sick and rocks babies



LAS VEGAS: (Left) An oral cleaning system from Proclaim is seen during Pepcom's Digital Experience at The Mirage resort during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada on January 8, 2024. (Right) A person adjusts settings on the Bartsian Premier, an automatic cocktail maker, during Pepcom's Digital Experience. — AFP photos

LAS VEGAS: CES, the annual high tech gadget extravaganza in Las Vegas, again delivers its wave of new inventions and cutting edge technology with artificial intelligence this year's unavoidable buzzword. Here's a look at some selected examples shown to the media, ahead of the official opening on Tuesday. - Mirror, mirror on the wall... - ...who's the healthiest of them all? Called "Magic-Mirror," NuraLogix's connected mirror scanned the face of the company's marketing executive Lindsay Brennan determining in a matter of seconds her body mass index, blood pressure and even her "mental stress index," calculated from heart rate. "You can see for me I'm a bit high, I'm almost in the yellow zone," said Brennan, pointing to the indicator displayed on the mirror. "That's because of the show," she joked.

NuraLogix claims that thanks to its optical technology and artificial intelligence software, its mirror can assess risks of diseases such as type 2 diabetes. "This actually started out of the University of Toronto when they were researching lie detection in children," she said. "They learned that when you get excited or your blood pressure is high, the blood flow actually changes in your face and you can actually capture these patterns using any conventional camera." Intended to be used in a doctor's waiting room or pharmacies, the mirror is expected to cost about \$70,000. NuraLogix also plans to market the software separately.

### Implant to walk again

If all goes according to plan, Wimagine, the brain implant designed by France's Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), should enable paralyzed people to walk again. Equipped with electrodes, this brain-to-machine interface is installed in direct contact with the motor cortex, which controls voluntary movement of a paraplegic or tetraplegic patient. In a first case, the data collected by the implant is transferred wirelessly to a connector attached to the spinal cord, below the paralyzed lesion. All the patient has to do is think about walking, and the information is transferred to the connector and then to the legs. "It's a digital bridge," Guillaume Charvet, head of the CEA research program, told AFP.

In the second case, the implant communi-

cates with an exoskeleton or purpose-built skeleton that performs the gestures commanded by the patient. With a connector placed on the forearm, it can, for example, be used to grasp an object with the hand. "A clinical trial is about to begin," said Charvet, stressing that five to ten years of research are still needed. But patient volunteers have already been involved for several years. "The aim is for it to be in the same price range as a pacemaker," he added.

### 'Rock my baby'

"We're the first electric stroller with all the AI features for comfort and safety," said Gluxkind engineer Jeffrey To. The AI-powered stroller is supposed to make parents' complicated lives easier, like a co-pilot, he explained. The electric

assistance makes it possible to climb hills without breaking a sweat, and the brakes engage automatically "so there's never a chance of a runaway stroller," To said.

"It recognizes humans, pets, scooters, bikes, vehicles that might not be stopping and gives an extra warning so that sleep deprived parents essentially have driver assist on a daily basis," added Kevin Huang, co-founder of the Canadian company. When the parent activates the "Rock my baby" function, the stroller performs a regular back-and-forth motion to help the child fall asleep. "There are also built-in speakers that can read stories, play music or white noise," said To. Gluxkind hopes to start production next spring priced at around \$2,400. — AFP



## NBK awarded 'Best Foreign Exchange Provider in Kuwait'

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) was awarded "Best Foreign Exchange Provider in Kuwait" for 2024, for the 12th consecutive time in Global Finance's annual survey based on the input from industry analysts, corporate executives and technology experts around the world. The criteria for choosing the Foreign Exchange Providers Award winners included transaction volume, market share, scope of global coverage, customer service, competitive pricing and innovative technologies. Global Finance also considered bank submissions, input from industry analysts, corporate executives and technology specialists.

On this occasion, Global Finance mentioned, "This year's winning FX banks have invested heavily to both increase the breadth of the FX services they offer and provide innovative FX tools to help their clients navigate headwinds." Global Finance magazine has named its 24th annual World's Best Foreign Exchange Providers in 87 countries including 7 different global regions, as well as the winning providers for FX research and analysis and for FX trading technology.

NBK was listed among the Best Foreign Exchange Providers in the Middle East and the World, in terms of providing FX market services along with major international financial institutions such as J.P. Morgan, BBVA, Societe Generale, and UBS. Receiving this prestigious award reaffirms NBK's position as a local and regional leader in providing top-notch innovative banking solutions to its clients. This leadership is the fruit of the bank's huge investments in developing its infrastructure to offer high-quality services as well as its investments in high-caliber banking professionals.

Furthermore, it is a testimonial to the dedication and hard work of NBK Treasury team who strive tirelessly to ensure providing clients with highly competitive rates, top-notch customer service, and innovative solutions tailored to their individual needs. Global Finance, founded in 1987 and headquartered in New York, is one of the most reputable magazines specialized in finance and economics. It has a circulation of 50,000 readers in 193 countries around the world, including senior corporate and financial officers responsible for making investment and strategic decisions at multinational companies and financial institutions.

The magazine conducts various surveys annually about innovation and profitability for banks and financial institutions all over the world, based on which it selects top performers on the regional and international levels. For more information about Global Finance's Best Foreign Exchange Provider Award 2024, please visit their website: <https://www.gfmag.com/>

## Budget-crunched Cuba to hike fuel prices over 500%

HAVANA: Cuba's cash-strapped government announced Monday that fuel prices will soar by more than 500 percent beginning February 1, part of a series of economic measures aimed at reducing the deficit. The cost of a liter of regular gasoline will rise from 25 pesos (20 US cents) to 132 pesos, while the price of premium gasoline will jump from 30 to 156 pesos. Minister of Finance and Prices Vladimir Regueiro said on state television. Authorities also said

tourists to the struggling island nation will pay for fuel in foreign currency.

Cuba's government, which subsidizes almost all essential goods and services, announced a series of measures in late December aimed at cutting the deficit at a time of severe economic crisis across the country. According to official estimates, the Cuban economy shrank by two percent in 2023, while inflation has reached 30 percent.

Late last month Economy Minister Alejandro Gil acknowledged that the government could no longer sell fuel at "subsidized" prices, with the Communist-led country short of foreign currency and still under a punishing decades-long US embargo. "The country can not maintain the price of fuel, which is the cheapest in the world compared to prices in

other countries," Gil said. Cuban gasoline is "very cheap, but if you compare it with salaries in the country, gasoline is very expensive," economic Omar Everleny Perez told AFP, adding that the new price structure will affect "the whole of society."

The government on Monday also announced a 25 percent increase in electricity prices for major consumers in residential areas, as well as hikes in costs for natural gas. It also said the Central Bank was studying a potential new exchange rate against the dollar. The peso has been devalued twice since 2021. The island of 11 million people is experiencing its worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, due to consequences of the pandemic, tightening of US sanctions in recent years, and structural weakness. — AFP

## China mulling more tariffs on Taiwanese goods ahead of vote

SHANGHAI: China said it would consider slapping more retaliatory tariffs on goods from Taiwan, days before the self-ruled island holds a presidential election in which relations with Beijing are a looming issue. China claims Taiwan as part of its territory, and has ramped up military, diplomatic and economic pressure on the island in recent years.

Beijing previously suspended tariff concessions on twelve products from Taiwan—including chemicals used in the plastics industry—over what it called "discriminatory bans" by Taipei on mainland products. The Chinese commerce ministry on Tuesday said it was "studying further measures to suspend tariff concessions", including for machinery and auto parts, accusing the Taiwan government of "not taking any effective measures to lift trade restrictions on the mainland".

Taiwan authorities have instead "engaged in political manoeuvring in an attempt to shift blame and avoid responsibility", the commerce ministry said in a statement. The earlier round of tariffs by China, announced last month and implemented on January 1, prompted Taiwan to accuse Beijing of interfering in its election and deploying "classic economic coercion". Saturday's election will be closely watched from Beijing to Washington as voters choose a new leader to steer the island in the face of an increasingly assertive Beijing.

## False convictions for UK Post Office thefts spur outrage

LONDON: Public anger is mounting over what has been described as Britain's biggest ever miscarriage of justice that saw hundreds of subpostmasters wrongly convicted of theft because of a computer software glitch. Lives were ruined by the false accusations that led to some Post Office branch managers being jailed, going bankrupt, losing their homes and their health. Four people took their own lives and dozens of those since exonerated died without seeing their names cleared. Now, a TV drama telling the story of

the subpostmasters' ordeal at the hands of their own employer has generated a wave of sympathy for the victims. Critics hailed the four-part "Mr Bates vs The Post Office", broadcast last week, for humanizing the ordeal of hundreds of people prosecuted for false accounting and theft between 1999 and 2015. Far from being criminals, the subpostmasters - pillars of their local communities - had not stolen a penny.

In fact they were the victims of flawed accounting software and the state-owned Post Office's determination to defend it. Following the broadcast, a petition calling for former Post Office boss Paula Vennells to be stripped of an honor she received from Queen Elizabeth II has garnered more than a million signatures. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has described the scandal as an "appalling miscarriage of justice"

that should "never have happened".

The drama stars award-winning actor Toby Jones as Alan Bates, who leads a long David and Goliath battle to prove the postmasters' innocence. It documents the fear and desperation of the branch managers as they struggled with the new "Horizon" software supplied by Japanese tech giant Fujitsu. In one scene, subpostmaster Jo Hamilton is depicted calling a helpline only to see the supposed shortfall in her accounts double on the screen as she speaks.

Hamilton was accused of stealing £36,000 (\$45,000) but pleaded guilty to false accounting for fear of being sent to jail. More than 700 subpostmasters ended up with criminal convictions as a result of the scandal, with 236 serving jail time. Jess Kaur, whose story was featured in the TV programme, broke down as she recounted the

shame of being dragged before a judge for a crime she had not committed.

"It drove me so mad that I tried to commit suicide," she told Good Morning Britain, adding that after she was accused customers would spit on the floor of her shop in disgust. Kevan Jones, an MP who sits on a board set up to award compensation to victims, said the program had successfully communicated the depths of the subpostmasters' suffering. "The drama was very good not only at exposing the lies and deceit that took place, it showed the complete heartache and broken lives," he said.

He warned, however, that it would be difficult to get more convictions overturned because "most of these people will not come forward... They will not go anywhere near a court of law because of the trauma". — AFP



TAIPEI: People look towards a view of Taipei 101 and the skyline from Jiantanshan in Taipei on January 9, 2024. — AFP

Beijing has maintained a near-daily military presence around Taiwan—with four Chinese balloons moving across the sensitive median line in the Taiwan Strait on Monday, the latest in a series of incursions that Taiwan and conflict experts say is a form of "grey zone" harassment. Election frontrunner Lai

Ching-te, Taiwan's current vice president, accused Beijing on Tuesday of using "all means" to influence this weekend's crucial poll. "In addition to political and military intimidation, (it is using) economic means, cognitive warfare, disinformation, threats and incentives," he told reporters. — AFP



WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10, 2024

## Mass Hindu wedding defies poverty and persecution in Pakistan



Pakistani Hindu couples arrive for a mass marriage ceremony.

**U**nder a chequered marquee dazzling with chandeliers, 122 Hindu couples unable to afford their own weddings were instead married in a mass ceremony in Muslim-majority Pakistan. In the southern megacity of Karachi, the joint nuptials on Sunday were a riot of celebration in defiance of poverty and persecution. "I am getting married here because my parents are poor. They cannot afford the wedding expenses," 25-year-old bride Kalpana Devi told AFP, swathed in traditional red attire.

Her financial misfortunes -- and sharing her big day with dozens of oth-

Pakistani Hindu couple attend a mass marriage ceremony. — AFP photos

er brides -- failed to dampen her spirits. "I wish that everyone could get married here," she said. Weddings are a costly affair in Pakistan, where the bride's male relatives are also often expected to pay a dowry to the groom's family, with the expense delaying the marriage of women. "This is a good opportunity for me as my financial state is very weak. I was not able to raise funds for the wedding," says 25-year-old Sateesh Parmar, the brother of bride Neha Parmar.

The nation is clawing its way out of a financial crisis, and rights monitors have long warned that marginalized Hindus suffer some of the worst socio-economic discrimination in Pakistan. The Pakistan Hindu Council, which hosted the ceremony, says there are eight million Hindus among the 240 million people living in Pakistan, according to last year's census.

Rights groups say Hindu women are sometimes subjected to forced conversion to Islam through marriage. Last January, UN experts said there was a reported rise in girls as young as 13 being "kidnapped from their families, trafficked to locations far from their homes, made to marry men sometimes twice their age, and coerced to convert to Islam".

Shiva Kacchi, a Hindu activist, said he spoke with more than 170 families who said their daughters were forcibly converted in 2022. Police, however, have said that the girls eloped with affluent Muslim men to evade poverty.

"Young girls have many desires, and our parents cannot afford to fulfill them," explained Hindu activist Sundarta Rathor, also involved in arranging the mass wedding. "The combination of economic challenges and limited education makes them susceptible to external pressures." —AFP

### Bottled water contains hundreds of thousands of plastic bits

**B**ottled water is up to a hundred times worse than previously thought when it comes to the number of tiny plastic bits it contains, a new study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences said Monday. Using a recently invented technique, scientists counted on average 240,000 detectable fragments of plastic per liter of water in popular brands—between 10-100 times higher than prior estimates—raising potential health concerns that require further study.

"If people are concerned about nanoplastics in bottled water, it's reasonable to consider alternatives like tap water," Beizhan Yan, an associate research professor of geochemistry at Columbia University and a co-author of the paper told AFP. But he added: "We do not advise against drinking bottled water when necessary, as the risk of dehydration can outweigh the potential impacts of nanoplastics exposure."

There has been rising global attention in recent years on microplastics, which break off from bigger sources of plastic and are now found everywhere from the polar ice caps to mountain peaks, rippling through ecosystems and finding their way into drinking water and food.

While microplastics are anything under 5 millimeters, nanoplastics are defined as particles below 1 micrometer, or a billionth of a meter—so small they can pass through the digestive system and lungs, entering the bloodstream directly and from there to organs, including the brain and heart. They can also cross the placenta into the bodies of unborn babies.



Empty plastic bottles move down a production line to be turned into bottled water.--AFP

There is limited research on their impacts on ecosystems and human health, though some early lab studies have linked them to toxic effects, including reproductive abnormalities and gastric issues.

To study nanoparticles in bottled water, the team used a technique called Stimulated Raman Scattering (SRS) microscopy, which was recently invented by one of the paper's co-authors, and works by probing samples with two lasers tuned to make specific molecules resonate, revealing what they are to a computer algorithm.

They tested three leading brands but chose not to name them, "because we believe all bottled water contain nanoplastics, so singling out three popular brands could be considered unfair," said Yan.

The results showed between 110,000 to 370,000 particles per liter, 90 percent of which were nanoplastics while the rest were microplastics.

The most common type was nylon—which probably comes from plastic filters used to purify the water—followed by polyethylene terephthalate or PET, which is what bottles are themselves made from, and leaches out when the bottle is squeezed. Other types of plastic enter the water when the cap is opened and closed. Next, the team hopes to probe tap water, which has also been found to contain microplastics, though at far lower levels. —AFP



Pakistani Hindu bride Deepa poses while waiting to participate in a mass marriage ceremony organized by the Pakistan Hindu Council, a non-profit organization, in Karachi.



Pakistani Hindu couple Neha Parmar (right) throws rice on Omesh Bhatti (left) as part of a ritual upon his arrival for a mass marriage ceremony.



Pakistani Hindu bride Kalpana Devi poses while waiting to participate in a mass marriage ceremony. — AFP photos



Relatives of Pakistani Hindu couples dance during a mass marriage ceremony.



Pakistani Hindu groom Vijay Kumar attends a mass marriage ceremony.



Lifestyle



Native American actress Alaqua Cox



US actor Zahn McClarnon arrives to celebrate the upcoming launch of Marvel Studios' "Echo" at the Regency Village Theater in Westwood, California.--AFP photos



US actress and writer Cara Jade Myers arrives for an event celebrating the upcoming launch of Marvel Studios' "Echo".



Canadian actress K Devery Jacobs

# Disney debuts deaf Native superhero as 'woke' debate swirls

**C**an a deaf, Native American superhero with a prosthetic leg reinvigorate Disney's Marvel franchise, just weeks after its CEO appeared to criticize his filmmakers for prioritizing messaging over storytelling? Streaming series "Echo," which launches on Disney+ and Hulu on Tuesday, tells the story of Maya Lopez, a tough former villain who returns from a life of criminality in New York to rediscover her Indigenous roots in her Oklahoma hometown.

Much of the dialogue takes place through sign language, with subtitles, and filmmakers worked closely with Choctaw Nation leaders to create authentic scenes, including a flashback to a sporting festival in pre-European contact America. "I'm just so proud to be able to represent a platform that is uplifting voices for Indigenous people... we're doing it the right way," star Alaqua Cox—who is herself deaf, Indigenous and an amputee—told a recent press conference.

But the series comes at a delicate time for Disney, whose Marvel superhero films have struggled recently at the box office after over a decade of global domination. Last year, for the first time since 2016, Disney was not the highest-grossing studio in Hollywood, pipped by Universal.

Simultaneously, the company has found itself at the heart of the US culture wars, attacked by right-wing commentators and Republican politicians for becoming "too woke" in its storytelling.

At a conference talk in November, Disney CEO Bob Iger said that the company's storytellers had become overly concerned about introducing "positive messages," and had "lost sight of what their number one objective needed to be." "What I've really tried to do is to return to our roots, which is remember we have to entertain first. It's not about messages," said Iger.

**'Frustration'**

With its diverse casting, "Echo" represents the culmination of a trend for Disney. The Marvel superhero films launched in 2008 with "Iron Man," starring Robert Downey Jr. It would take until the series' 18th movie, "Black Panther," that a solo lead character was not a white man.

Since then, there have been a plethora

of diverse leads, even as box office returns have dipped. But Bethany Lacina, an assistant professor at University of Rochester who has studied audience demographics, said there is no evidence

viewers, who flocked to films like the Oscar-nominated "Black Panther"—a film singled out for praise by Iger at his November talk for "fostering acceptance." Instead many analysts suggest Disney

options of nostalgia, they are disproportionately white and male," said Carnes, a Duke University professor.

Disney's entire Marvel project is "taking people who like a story about Iron



Author Joely Proudfit



Actress Wren Zhawenim Gotts



Actress Katarina Ziervogel



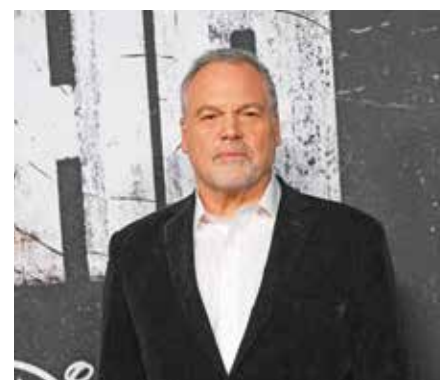
Canadian actress Tantoo Cardinal



Navajo filmmaker Sydney Freeland



Producer Brad Winderbaum



US actor Vincent D'Onofrio



Casting Director Sarah Finn

to suggest the trends are linked.

Disney's casting decisions "are moving their movies closer to what their audience has always been," especially as young Americans become more diverse, she said. "Non-white people are more likely to watch Marvel films than white people. Particularly Black people and white Hispanics," she said.

Lacina suggested Iger's comments may reflect "frustration" that simply casting non-traditional leads had not automatically brought in vast untapped minority audiences, as hoped. Still, there is no evidence of a "backlash" from white

has simply produced too much content, including a dozen Marvel TV series, leading to what has been dubbed "superhero fatigue" as well as a perceived decline in quality.

**'Legacy heroes'**

Marvel's shift toward more diverse superheroes stems from both commercial strategy, and the history of the source comic books themselves, according to Nick Carnes, editor of "The Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe." "If you look at the legacy heroes, the oldest characters that have gener-

Man or Spider Man, and then exposing them to characters who are different," he said. According to Carnes, Iger's comments could simply reflect "a time when it is very fraught and very challenging to be a leader who engages with politics."

The success or failure of "Echo" will still rest on the storytelling, he said. "And at the end of the day, we're all human beings," said cast member Chaske Spencer, of Lakota Sioux origin. "What it relates to is emotion... all of us can relate to that." --AFP

## Golden Globes ratings recover even as 'horrid' host bombs

**T**he Golden Globes bounced back from years of scandal and dwindling audiences to draw 9.4 million viewers, preliminary figures showed Monday, even as the gala's flailing host was savaged by critics. The ratings represented a marked improvement for the Globes, a Hollywood film and television awards show that once ranked second only to the Oscars, but has been in crisis—and even nearly ceased to exist—in recent years.

Last year, television ratings for the event had slumped to a new low of just 6.3 million viewers, after being bumped to an unhelpful Tuesday evening slot. A year earlier, the gala was not even aired, when former broadcaster NBC pulled the plug due to outrage over the lack of diversity and ethical lapses of the group of journalists that previously organized the awards. The Globes relaunched this year under new private ownership, led by US billionaire Todd Boehly, with the telecast moved to CBS and restored to its Sunday night spot. According to trade reports, CBS agreed to broadcast the show for a discounted price on a one-year basis, making the 50 percent ratings bump for this year's show potentially vital to the Globes' future. But despite the bounce, the gala's ratings remain way down from 2020, when more than 18 million tuned in.

And comedian Jo Koy, who was brought in last-minute to host the event after several bigger names declined the role, was panned by critics. Koy's opening monologue fell flat, causing him to protest that he only "got the gig 10 days ago," and to blame the show's writers for many of his ill-received jabs.



US comedian Jo Koy arrives for the 81st annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California.--AFP

The New York Times dubbed the opening monologue "a highlight reel of mortifying moments," while Vanity Fair called it a "horrid, sophomoric mishmash of lazy jokes." Perhaps the night's most meme-worthy moment came later as Koy cracked a joke about Taylor Swift, who is regularly featured on NFL telecasts as she cheers on her boyfriend, Kansas City Chiefs player Travis Kelce.

"The big difference between the Golden Globes and the NFL? On the Golden Globes, fewer camera shots of Taylor Swift," said Koy, before the camera cut to the world's biggest pop star, who stared coldly as she sipped her drink. --AFP

## No hard feelings? Macron hails French Golden Globes winner

**P**resident Emmanuel Macron on Monday congratulated French director Justine Triet for her Golden Globes victory, breaking his previous silence over the successes of her hit film "Anatomy of a Fall" after she bitterly criticized his government. Triet picked up best screenplay and best non-English language film at the Golden Globes, traditionally seen as a bellwether for the Oscars which are handed out on March 10.

Her courtroom drama about a woman charged with murdering her husband already won the Palme d'Or for best film at last year's Cannes Film Festival and was a box office smash hit in France and beyond. "Proud to see French cinema recognized at the Golden Globes," Macron wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

"Congratulations to Justine Triet, the actors and the entire team of the film Anatomy of a Fall," he added. The message was in marked contrast to his glacial silence after Triet's victory in Cannes, where the director used her acceptance speech to launch a lacerating denunciation of his government.

She slammed the "shocking" suppression of pension protests and said the "commercialization of culture that this neoliberal government supports is in the process of breaking France's cultural exception". Culture Minister Rima Abdul Malak hit back that she was "gob-



Justine Triet, winner of the Best Screenplay, Motion Picture award for "Anatomy of a Fall" poses in the press room during the 81st Annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills, California. --AFP

smacked" by Triet's "unfair" comments at one of France's most prominent events.

Some commentators saw this rancour as the reason why France put forward another film as its entry for best international picture at the Oscars, although the decision is made by an independent commission of professionals. They chose "The Taste of Things", an homage to French gastronomy, which won best director at Cannes for French-Vietnamese filmmaker Tran Anh Hung and played well with international audiences, but fared poorly in France

where many saw it as cliched.

Triet herself reposted social media users who said the snub "stinks of revenge" and another who called "The Taste of Things" "one of the most boring films at Cannes". Macron recently also courted controversy in film circles with his staunch defense of actor Gerard Depardieu, who has been charged with rape and faces other sexual assault allegations, saying he was being subjected to a "manhunt". --AFP



## Lifestyle

## Top Italian influencer suspected of fraud in cake deal

Italy's Instagram star Chiara Ferragni is being investigated for fraud over a charity cake deal in which she suggested erroneously that the proceeds would help children with bone cancer. The fashion entrepreneur with 29.5 million followers on Instagram is at the heart of a scandal surrounding her 2022 endorsement of a pandoro cake—a Christmas treat similar to a panettone—purportedly to raise funds for children undergoing treatment at a Turin hospital.

Italy's competition watchdog found last month that shoppers were falsely led to believe their purchase of the special edition cake made by Balocco—which reaped over one million euros for Ferragni's companies—would contribute to the charity effort. Ferragni's lawyer, Giuseppe Iannaccone, confirmed Tuesday to AFP that his client had been officially listed by prosecutors in Milan on a register related to the criminal case on suspicion of aggravated fraud.

The procedural step does not imply guilt but indicates enough evidence to place the person under preliminary investigation. Prosecutors in Milan did not respond to an AFP request seeking confirmation. "I am not worried because I have always acted in good faith and I am sure that this will emerge from the ongoing investigation," Ferragni, 36, said in a statement.

Last month, the anti-trust authority fined two of Ferragni's companies and Balocco approximately 1.4 million euros (\$1.5 million) for implying to consumers that in buying the "Pandoro Pink Christmas", released in November 2022, they would be contributing to charity. But in fact, Balocco, based south of Turin, had months earlier made a fixed-sum donation of 50,000 euros to the Regina Margherita Hospital.

### 'Communication error'

Since launching her "The Blonde Salad" blog in 2009, Ferragni has built up a business empire estimated by Forbes as worth \$8 million per year, launching her own brand and earning lucrative endorsement contracts for everything from Evian water and Nespresso, to Dior perfume and Louis Vuitton heels. But the Pandoro scandal, which has made headlines in Italian newspapers for weeks, has been a significant blow to the reputation of the A-list star and her business activities.



Italian blogger Chiara Ferragni poses prior to the Fendi catwalk show for the Women Fall/Winter 2022/2023 collection on the second day of the Milan Fashion Week in Milan.—AFP

La Repubblica reported last week that Coca-Cola shelved a television spot with the star planned for January, while Italian eyewear maker Safilo cut short a licensing deal with Ferragni in December after the watchdog's findings.

Last month, Ferragni posted a near-tearful apology on Instagram, in which she said admitted having committed a "communication error" in linking her charity work with a commercial activity, adding that she would donate one million euros directly to the hospital.

She also said she would challenge the competition watchdog's fine, and were it reduced, she would contribute that sum above and beyond her one million euro donation. The legal problems of Ferragni may not be over, however, with newspapers reporting that prosecutors have opened a separate investigation into a similar situation, in which the star promoted chocolate Easter eggs, saying their sale would support a children's charity.

Il Fatto Quotidiano reported last month that the candy maker made a 36,000 euro contribution to the charity, while Ferragni was paid 500,000 euros and 700,000 euros in 2021 and 2022 for her promotion.—AFP



A fan poses next to a plaque during the inauguration of a street, named after British rock music and pop icon David Bowie, on the day of his 77th birthday, in the 13th district of Paris, on the left bank of the city.—AFP photos



French fashion designer Agnes Trouble known for her fashion brand "Agnes B." arrives to deliver a speech.

## PARIS NAMES STREET AFTER DAVID BOWIE

The city of Paris on Monday named a street after rock music icon David Bowie, a first in honor of the singer eight years after his death. "Rue David Bowie" was officially inaugurated in the capital's 13th district on the left bank of the city. "Long live rock, long live pop, long live David Bowie and long live Paris," said Jerome Coumet, mayor of the 13th district, as he unveiled the street sign.

Coumet, a Bowie fan, launched the idea for the street in early 2020, and won Paris city approval later that year. The

thoroughfare, around 50 meters (165 feet) long, was previously known to city planners as "VoieDZ/13". There is no record of a street named after the musician anywhere else. Bowie, who died on January 10, 2016, of liver cancer, would have been 77 on Monday.

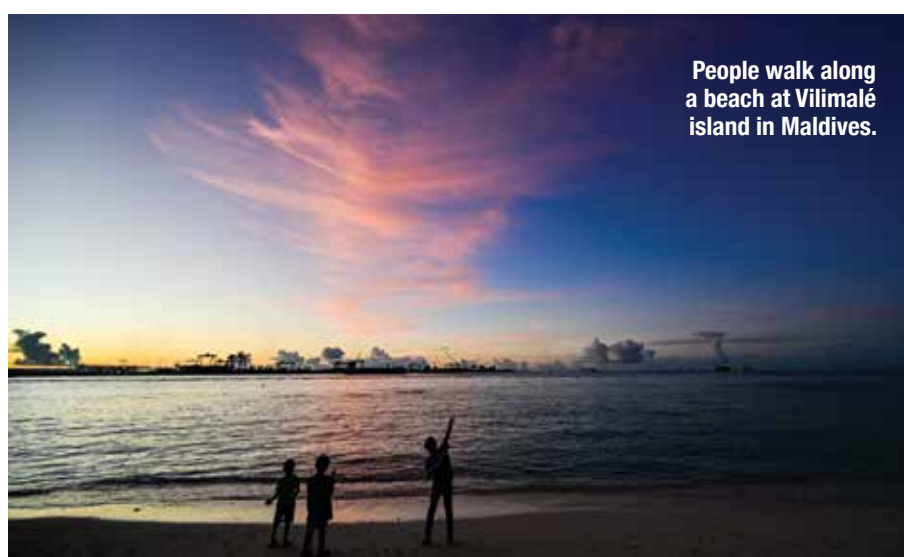
He was one of the most influential, as well as best-selling, musicians of the 20th century. His landmark songs and albums include "Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars" and "Aladdin Sane", and the commercial smash hits "Let's Dance" and "China Girl" as well as gloomily ex-

perimental works such as "Low".

Paris played less of a prominent role in Bowie's life than London, Berlin and Los Angeles, but French avant-garde theatrical culture was an influence on his visual style. Jerome Soligny, who wrote a biography about the singer, said it was in the French capital that Bowie declared his love to top model Iman on a boat on the river Seine. The couple wed in 1992.—AFP



A photo shows a plaque during the inauguration of a street, named after British rock music and pop icon David Bowie.



People walk along a beach at Vilimalé island in Maldives.



A general view shows people at a beach in Hulhumale.

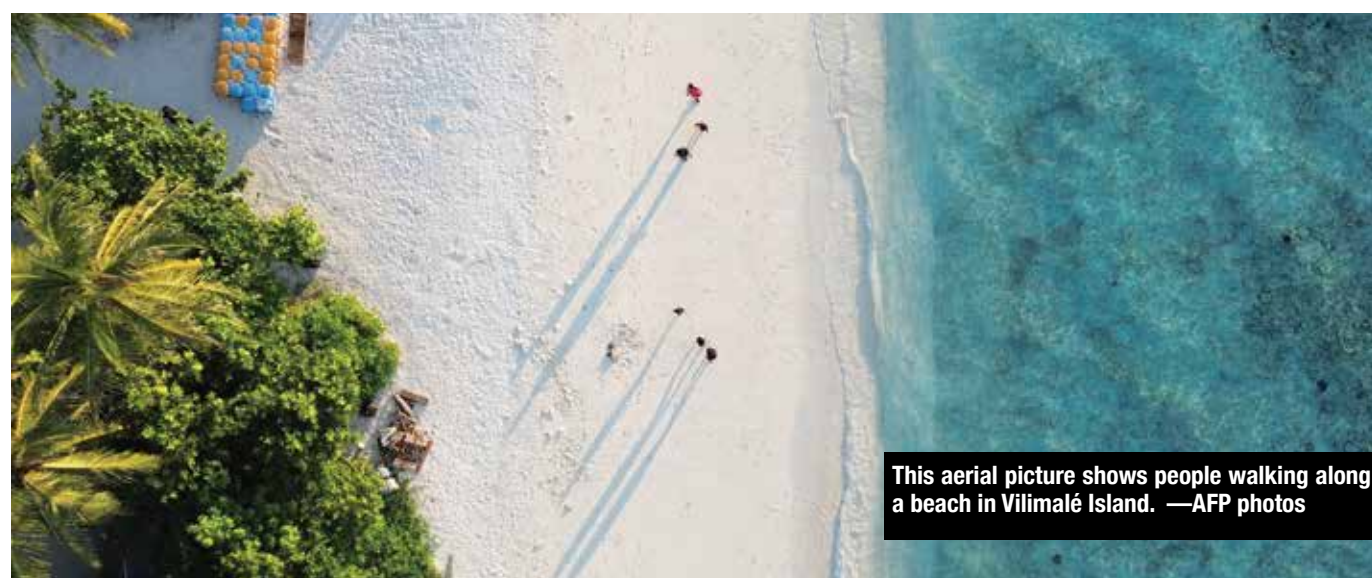
## Maldives row sparks beach boycott campaign in India

The Maldives is in hot water over calls by Indian celebrities for a boycott of the tropical beach destination, following derogatory remarks about Prime Minister Narendra Modi by government ministers. Tourism makes up nearly one-third of the economy in the archipelago nation, known for its upscale resorts and celebrity visitors, with Indians making up the largest share of foreign arrivals.

Racy photos by Bollywood starlets and social media influencers vacationing in the Maldives are also a regular source of fodder for tabloids and online news sites in India. Pro-China President Mohamed Muizzu's administration has been scrambling to contain a diplomatic row with India after three of its junior ministers reportedly called Modi a "clown" and a "terrorist" in since-deleted social media posts last week.

Bollywood actors and some of India's cricket greats have responded with calls for their compatriots to boycott their southern neighbour and instead book their next holiday closer to home. "Why should we tolerate such unprovoked hate?" Akshay Kumar, one of Indian cinema's most bankable actors, wrote Monday on X in a post since viewed more than 6.5 million times.

"I've visited the Maldives many times and always praised it, but dignity first," he added, urging other Indians to "support our own tourism". National cricket vice-captain Hardik Pandya



This aerial picture shows people walking along a beach in Vilimalé Island. —AFP photos

said he was "extremely sad to see what's being said about India" and that he was planning his next holiday at a beach in his country.

EaseMyTrip, a platform with nearly 10 percent of the market share for online travel bookings in India, joined the boycott on Monday by suspending flight bookings to the archipelago. The row has continued despite Muizzu suspending the ministers Sunday, with local media reporting that the Maldivian envoy was summoned to the foreign ministry in New Delhi the following day.

The ministers' comments were

prompted by a social media post of Modi's in which he praised the "pristine beaches" of Lakshadweep, an Indian island not far from the Maldives which his government has sought to promote as a tourist destination. Known as an expensive holiday destination with secluded resorts, the Maldives is also a geopolitical hotspot where India and China are competing for influence.

Global east-west shipping lanes pass the nation's chain of 1,192 tiny coral islands, stretching around 800 kilometers (500 miles) across the equator. India's government has tradi-

tionally considered the Maldives, home to around half a million people, to be within its sphere of influence.

Muizzu, currently visiting China on his first official state visit since coming to power last year, was elected after pledging to expel Indian troops stationed in the Maldives. But after his election, Muizzu toned down his anti-Indian rhetoric and said he would not upend the regional balance by replacing Indian forces with Chinese troops.—AFP

## Japanese comedian vows to fight 'groundless' sexual assault allegations

A popular Japanese comedian Hitoshi Matsumoto, who has denied sexual assault allegations published in a prominent magazine, vowed on Monday to fight the "groundless" accusations. "I'll fight it" as the allegations are "groundless", he wrote on X, formerly Twitter. His agency Yoshimoto Kogyo announced Monday that he will suspend performances to focus on the case.

Japan's Shukan Bunshun magazine last month published a report quoting two women as alleging Matsumoto, now 60, forced them into sexual activities at private parties at a Tokyo upscale hotel in 2015. Matsumoto, "expressed strong will to suspend his activities for the time

being, as continuing his entertainment activities would cause a great deal of burden to many more stakeholders and co-stars," the agency said.

"Matsumoto expressed his strong desire to focus," on the case, it said in a statement. Last month, the agency which said was considering legal action, said there are "no facts whatsoever" in accusations published by the weekly Shukan Bunshun magazine against Matsumoto. Among the claims, one woman alleged forced oral sex and the other said she was forcibly kissed.

Matsumoto is half of the comedy duo known as Downtown, a household name in Japan. Shukan Bunshun was one of

the first publications to report, as long ago as 1999, on a sex abuse scandal that rocked Japan's entertainment industry earlier last year.

A boy band empire formerly known as Johnny & Associates admitted in September its late founder had sexually abused young recruits over decades, leading to an organizational shake-up. The global #MeToo movement was slow to pick up in Japan, where many victims are said to be too scared to come forward, although a handful of high-profile cases recently forced a reckoning.—AFP



Japanese comedian Hitoshi Matsumoto



## Sports

# Djokovic must defy wrist injury, Alcaraz threat at Australian Open

## Djokovic has not lost at the Australian Open since 2018

MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic is once again red-hot favourite at the Australian Open as he chases an unprecedented 25th Grand Slam title, but a wrist problem and the emergence of Carlos Alcaraz puts his all-conquering reign under threat.

The 36-year-old from Serbia defeated Stefanos Tsitsipas in last year's final for a record-extending 10th Melbourne crown then added the French and US Open titles to his collection in 2023. But he lost a pulsating Wimbledon final to Alcaraz, who is a different player to the one that last graced the Australian hard courts as an 18-year-old ranked outside the top 30.

The 20-year-old missed last year's event with a hamstring injury and arrives this time as a two-time major champion, world number two—behind Djokovic—and the brightest young star in tennis. Rafael Nadal, Djokovic's long-time rival, on Sunday pulled out of the Australian Open with a muscle tear in a fresh blow to the veteran's hopes of returning to the top of the sport.

Nadal's fellow Spaniard Alcaraz opted to skip a warm-up tournament for the opening Grand Slam of the year, making his 2024 form a mystery. But Djokovic dropped a set to the Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka at the United Cup and then

crashed to Australian Alex de Minaur 6-4, 6-4. It snapped a 43-match win streak in Australia and Djokovic will begin his defence with an injury cloud hanging over him, needing treatment on his right wrist through both matches. "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," he said after losing to De Minaur.

"It's all part of the build-up for the Australian Open. That's where I want to perform at my best." Djokovic's United Cup troubles followed defeat to Jannik Sinner at the Davis Cup to end his 2023 season, with the burgeoning Italian world number four another young pretender out to dethrone him. It will be a tall order.

Djokovic has not lost at the Australian Open since 2018 and has a 20-0 record in semi-finals and finals at Melbourne Park. "When I'm fit, when I'm at the peak of my performance, I can win any Slam or any tournament, I know that, I'm not afraid to say that," said Djokovic. "It's not a secret that I want to break more records and make more history in the game."

### Nadal farewell?

Djokovic's haul of Grand Slam titles makes him the most successful player

in the history of men's tennis, ahead of Nadal on 22. If he wins again in Melbourne he will overtake the Australian Margaret Court, who won 24 majors in the women's game.

At least he no longer has to worry about Nadal, who has flown back to Spain for treatment. The 37-year-old only made his comeback last week at the Brisbane International after being out of tennis since injuring his hip at the 2023 Australian Open. Nadal's absence could spell the end of his career in Australia, after saying in Brisbane there was a "high percentage" that 2024 would be his farewell to the tour.

### Medvedev threat

Russia's Daniil Medvedev, a Melbourne finalist in 2021 and 2022, will also be a contender. Like Alcaraz he chose not to play a warm-up event, but enjoyed a resurgent 2023 with 66 wins—more than any other player on tour—to earn five titles.

The 27-year-old, who won the US Open in 2021 for his only Slam crown, said he had never been more motivated. "At this stage of my life, at least right now—and I hope this can last for a long time—I have just the biggest motivation



MELBOURNE: Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne on January 9, 2024. — AFP

ever to just continue finding my limits," he said. Last year's losing finalist Tsitsipas will also fancy his chances, while world number five Andrey Rublev will get his campaign under way on the back of win-

ning the Hong Kong Open. The Australian Open starts on Sunday, becoming a 15-day event for the first time to help spread out the early round action and prevent some late-night finishes. — AFP

### News in Brief

#### Pitch rated 'unsatisfactory'

CAPE TOWN: The Newlands pitch on which India beat South Africa in less than two days last week was rated "unsatisfactory" by the International Cricket Council (ICC) on Tuesday. India won by seven wickets in Cape Town on Thursday to level the two-match series in a game that lasted just 107 overs and was the shortest Test to produce a result. On Tuesday, the ICC said that match referee Chris Broad's report expressed "the concerns of the match officials and...captains Dean Elgar and Rohit Sharma, both of whom felt that the pitch was below standard". The ICC quoted Broad in its statement. "The pitch in Newlands was very difficult to bat on," said the former England opening batsman. "The ball bounced quickly and sometimes alarmingly throughout the match, making it difficult to play shots. — AFP

#### Japan's football star retires

TOKYO: Japan's veteran midfielder Yasuhiro Endo on Tuesday announced his retirement after 26 years of his career and joined Gamba Osaka as a coach. "I had a really long and fulfilling 26 years of football life" between 1998 and 2023, Endo said in a video message posted on the club's website. "I never thought I'd play this long," the 43-year-old added. Endo was in Japan's World Cup squad for three times and was named Asian player of the year in 2009. He won 152 Japan caps, a record. Having spent nearly two decades at Gamba Osaka as a footballer, Endo said he's "very happy" to be back as a coach. "As a coach, I am still learning... but I want to grow with the players and contribute to the team's victories," he said. — AFP

#### Michigan tramples Washington

HOUSTON: The Michigan Wolverines rumbled past the Washington Huskies to end their 27-year football title drought with a 34-13 victory in the US College National Championship game on Monday. The University of Michigan's Wolverines, who last won the national college crown in 1997, scored four rushing touchdowns to cap an unbeaten season at Houston's NRG Stadium. Michigan's ground game proved too much for Washington, who themselves had been chasing a first national title since 1991. Michigan took control in the first quarter, with running back Donovan Edwards motoring into the end zone for a 41-yard rushing touchdown. Edwards then grabbed a second touchdown late in the first quarter, accelerating through a huge gap in the Washington defense before galloping 46 yards to score. Washington finally got a touchdown of their own just before half-time when quarterback Michael Penix Jr found Jalen McMillan with a three-yard pass to make it 17-10 at the break. — AFP

#### Slain athlete to be buried

NAIROBI: Slain Ugandan athlete Benjamin Kiplagat will be laid to rest in his ancestral home in Kenya on Thursday, his family said. The 34-year-old Kenyan-born Olympian was found dead on a road on the outskirts of the Rift Valley town of Eldoret in the early hours of New Year's Eve with a stab wound to his neck. Both Kenya and his adopted country Uganda have laid claim to the steeplechase runner, but his brother Vincent Chemweno told AFP on Tuesday he would be buried at the family farm in the village of Kamendi, more than 60 kilometres (40 miles) from Eldoret. "We are making all the necessary arrangements for the funeral where we expect a host of fellow athletes and politicians," said Chemweno. — AFP

## Wales and British Lions legend Williams dies

LONDON: Rugby paid tribute to one of the sport's greatest ever players after former Wales and British and Irish Lions full-back JPR Williams died at the age of 74 on Monday. A three-time Five Nations Grand Slam winner with his country, he also boasted an unbeaten record in eight Tests as a Lion in historic triumphant tours to New Zealand in 1971 and 1974 in South Africa.

He later went on to become a surgeon and served as Bridgend's club president until his passing. "Bridgend Ravens are devastated to announce the passing of JPR Williams," his former club said in a statement.

"One of Bridgend's most-decorated players and an icon of world rugby, JPR served the club most recently as club president. Our thoughts are with JPR's family and friends at this sad time." Williams made his Wales debut against Scotland in 1969, with his last of his 55 international caps coming against the same opponents at Murrayfield 12 years later.



WIMBLEDON: (FILES) Former Welsh rugby union player John Peter Rhys JPR Williams gestures at the Centre Court's Royal Box, on the sixth day of the 2023 Wimbledon Championships at The All England Tennis Club in Wimbledon. — AFP

A star performer during Welsh rugby's 1970s golden era, he was a fearless defender in addition to his attacking panache. He scored the decisive drop goal that secured the Lions only ever series triumph over the All Blacks in 1971. Williams was equally as prominent on the unbeaten 1974 South Africa tour,

which the Lions took with three wins and a draw. "One of the greatest ever Lions," the Lions posted on X. "A man who inspired so many."

"It is with huge sadness to learn that JPR Williams has passed away at the age of 74. All our thoughts are with his family and friends." He also starred for the Barbarians in their unforgettable 23-11 victory over New Zealand in 1973, touching down in a game chiefly remembered for Gareth Edwards' spectacular touchdown that completed a breathtaking length-of-the-field move.

At club level, his career included an eight-year stint at London Welsh, when the Exiles were a major force in British rugby. "All at London Welsh RFC are deeply saddened by the news this evening that rugby legend JPR Williams has passed away," the club said.

"Our thoughts and condolences go out to his friends, colleagues and family. A huge loss to all who knew and loved him." Also a talented cricketer and tennis player, Williams was made an MBE for his contribution to rugby.

And he continued playing into his early 50s, lining up for village club Tondou before finally calling it a day in 2003. World Rugby posted on X: "One of the greatest players the game has ever seen. JPR Williams leaves behind an incredible legacy. All our thoughts are with his family and friends." — AFP

## Ex-biathlon chief on trial in Norway for corruption

OSLO: Former biathlon head Anders Besseberg went on trial in Norway on Tuesday accused of "aggravated corruption" for allegedly covering up Russian doping cases in exchange for favours including prostitutes and hunting parties. Besseberg, who led the International Biathlon Union (IBU) between 1992 and 2018, is accused of accepting bribes between 2009 and 2018, allegedly including luxury watches and a rental car. The 77-year-old Norwegian denies any wrongdoing.

"Why did the Russians want to butter Besseberg up? Why was (rights holder) Infront interested in paying bribes? We will seek to prove this," news agency NTB quoted prosecutor Marianne Djupesland as telling the court in Buskerud.

The charges against Besseberg echo the conclusions of a damning report

from an independent commission set up by the IBU and published in January 2021. The commission concluded he had protected "Russian interests" for many years with the help of IBU secretary general Nicole Resch of Germany.

Based on testimony from whistleblowers, raids by Austrian and Norwegian police, and a report from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), the commission concluded that Besseberg had received at least \$200,000 from Russian officials, accepted invitations to all-expenses paid hunting parties in Russia and received the services of prostitutes.

In return, he allegedly concealed several doping cases and lobbied intensely in favour of Russia. Besseberg faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted. The trial is scheduled to conclude on February 16. —AFP



HOKKSUND: Former president of the International Biathlon Union (IBU) Anders Besseberg's lawyers Christian Fredrik Bonnevie Hjort (L) and Mikkel Toft Gimse (C) speak with prosecutor Marianne Djupesland on the first day of the trial at the Buskerud district court in Hokksund, Norway where Besseberg is charged with gross corruption on January 9, 2024. — AFP

## Footballer goes viral after scoring Cambodian dream

PHNOM PENH: Dribbling a football, Antoine Lemaire might be thousands of miles from home, but the journeyman is now on top of the world having landed his first professional football contract and scored online fame—in Cambodia.

The 27-year-old midfielder went viral on YouTube after his unexpected signing to the Cambodian Premier League's Boeung Ket FC in the capital Phnom Penh. Having posted videos on his channel since 2020, Lemaire was shocked at the response to footage of his first match for the "Blue Dragons", which racked up more than 140,000 views.

"I was stunned, it's so unlikely," he told AFP. "My life has changed completely," he added, explaining he was signed after years of struggling as an amateur in Europe. He will live and play in Cambodia until May under a contract worth several thousand dollars, with the club providing a flat—and a scooter for his daily commute.

Lemaire has documented online the difficult conditions and scant rewards in the lower reaches of the European game while he worked part-time as an ice-cream seller, pizza delivery man, removal man and valet to make ends meet. He made headlines last year after leaving a third division Greek club, alleging



PHNOM PENH: This photo taken on January 3, 2024 shows French footballer Antoine Lemaire (C) warming up during a training session with the Cambodian premier league's Boeung Ket FC team at the Morodok Techo National Stadium in Phnom Penh. — AFP

that the manager had threatened to assault him. His experience shone a light on the unscrupulous side of the sport, where young players can be vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

"There were many ups and downs, very low moments, bad encounters," he said. His YouTube channel has more than 20,000 subscribers, many based in France, and it is where he posts videos of his experiences both on and off the field.

"It is also interesting to show a bit of the life

around me, as I am not in a random club, I am in Cambodia," he said. "For them, it is interesting to discover another country, I think." Cambodian football suffers from crumbling infrastructure and relative anonymity, but Lemaire is part of a small coterie of foreigners plying their trade in south-east Asian country. Boeung Ket coach Hong Pheng told AFP that overseas players were an asset and he welcomed the extra attention brought by his newest player. — AFP



Sports

# Qatar under pressure in Asian Cup defence after abrupt Queiroz axing

## Qatar's football association gave no reason for the decision to get rid of him

DOHA: Qatar go into the Asian Cup starting on Friday as hosts and holders but the shock axing of Carlos Queiroz as coach last month has thrown their title defence into serious question. Prior to that, the talk was about how Qatar would right the wrongs of a disappointing early exit from their home World Cup just over a year ago.

Qatar's three straight defeats was the worst performance of any World Cup host in history. Former Real Madrid and Portugal coach Queiroz took over following the departure of Felix Sanchez, but in early December the Portuguese was sacked and replaced by Tintin Marquez.

Marquez is a familiar face to Qatari fans because he coached Al Wakrah in the domestic league and has a long relationship with football in the Gulf state. "In football all the time there is pressure," the 62-year-old Spaniard told AFP soon after his sudden appointment.

"More important for the players is enjoying the match," he said, downplaying the idea that his side was under pressure to make up for their World Cup flop. Qatar open the Asian Cup on Friday when they face Lebanon at the 88,000-capacity Lusail Stadium, which staged the World Cup final.

### 'Big mistake'

Queiroz, who coached Iran at the World Cup and was assistant to Alex Ferguson at Manchester United, had a four-year contract with Qatar. He won five, lost five and drew two during his aborted tenure. Qatar's football association gave no reason for the decision to get rid of him and the move, and its timing, baffled many.

Former national team player Raed Yaqoub said

Queiroz had started the "positive" work of refreshing Qatar's starting line-up to "give other names a chance". Interfering with that, said the player-turned-pundit, was "a big mistake".

Yaqoub said that although Marquez is popular and well known in Qatar, "I think that holding him responsible only a month before the tournament is a mistake". Mohamed Mubarak al-Mohannadi, another former national player, said the switch so close to the Asian Cup left the team "facing the gun" given the difficulty "for any coach to make the required transformation within a month's period".

Marquez's first game in charge, at the end of December, was a 3-0 win over a Cambodia team which failed to qualify for the regional championship. The Spaniard, who played for Espanyol, said it was "important" that he knew Qatari football.

"I know the players, I know my mentality and I know... my idea for playing," he said, explaining he was not "arriving new".

### 'Significant decline'

Publicly at least the players have welcomed his appointment. Defender Tarek Salman told AFP the change meant the team would need to adapt to a Spanish style, but added: "I think it's going to fit us and we hope to achieve good things with the coach."

He insisted that the expectations on the team were not the same as they had been going into the first World Cup in the Middle East. "Normally you have pressure," he added, saying that being the current Asian champions would affect the team "in a positive way, not in a negative way".



DOHA: Men walk near a wall displaying the five desert rodents, the official mascots of the upcoming 2023 AFC Asian Cup, in Doha. — AFP

Yaqoub said that despite the upheaval Qatar should easily get out of a group that also contains China and Tajikistan, and that the semi-finals should be possible. But he sees Japan, beaten in the final by Qatar in 2019, as the strongest team, while also fancying Roberto Mancini's Saudi Arabia.

Mohannadi warned that Qatar will have a target on their backs as holders, particularly in the eyes of Japan, who he said would be "looking for revenge". "Japan is a developed team and its level has risen greatly since then," he said. "Unlike the Qatari team, whose level has declined significantly." — AFP



Zain and KFA officials with the awarded players.



Recognizing Qadisiya SC's Bader Al Mutawa.



Recognizing Arabi SC's Bandar Al Salamah.



Awarding Kuwait SC's Mohammed Daham.

## Zain recognizes top-performing players

KUWAIT: Continuing to support and encourage local athletes, Zain has awarded the top performing players in the latest rounds of Dawri Zain's Premier League and First Division competitions.

The recognition came during the special event held at the Zain Innovation Campus (ZINC) in partnership with the Kuwait Football Association (KFA).

In attendance were Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Affairs and Relations Officer Waleed Al Khashli, KFA Secretary-General Salah Al Qenaie, Head of the Technical Committee Abdulaziz Hamadah, along with committee members, KFA representatives, and Zain officials.

For the Zain Premier League, Zain presented the

following players with the 'Best Player of the Round' award (KD 500): Qadisiya SC's Khalid Al Rashidi (7th round), Arabi SC's Bandar Al Salamah (8th round), Arabi SC's Sultan Al Enzi (9th round), Kuwait SC's Mohammed Daham (10th and 13th rounds), Fahaheel SC's Ahmad Raheel (11th round), and Qadisiya SC's Bader Al Mutawa (12th round).

For the Zain First Division League, the company presented the following players with the 'Best Player of the Round' award (KD 200): Sahel SC's Mohammed Al Mousawi (6th round), Sahel SC's Hussain Ismail (7th round), Tadamon SC's Waleed Al Tourah (8th round), Yarmouk SC's Abdulrahman Al Hussainan (9th round), and Yarmouk SC's Nasser Al Failakawi (10th round).

Before the new season's kickoff, the Kuwait Football Association formed a special committee to outline the standards and criteria on which the prize winners will be selected. The committee is membered by former international players and experts Abdulaziz Hamadah (committee head), Hamad Al Enzi, Ahmad Mousa, Hussain Hakem, and Hussain Al Mutairi.

Zain remains a strong supporter of local athletes and believes that last season's prizes contributed to elevating the league's performance and quality. For this reason, the company has pledged not only to continue this support, but to also add new prize categories to reflect its interest in shouldering the local sports sector.

This season, Zain's cash prizes for athletes in the top flight are as follows: Player of the Season: KD 10,000, Best Player in the Round: KD 500 (per round), Season's Top Scorer: KD 5,000, Season's Top Local Scorer: KD 5,000, Season's Best Goalkeeper: KD 5,000, Season's Best Coach: KD 3,000, Season's Rising Star: KD 2,000, and Best Photo of Season: KD 1000. For the Zain First Division League, the company also presents a new Best Player in the Round prize of KD 200 (per round).

The company also presents a total of KD 10,000 of cash prizes to the winners of the first three places in the Dawri Zain Fantasy League, the first ever local fantasy league game. With this, the total of Zain's prizes for athletes and fans reaches over KD 60,000, the biggest prize pool in the local league's history.

## Klinsmann stakes it all on Asian Cup glory with S Korea

DOHA: It's all or bust at the Asian Cup for Jurgen Klinsmann, who has declared that anything but a first title since 1960 for South Korea will be a failure. It is a bold target for a coach who did not win any of his first five games in charge and has never hit the same giddy heights he scaled as a player.

South Korean fans were skeptical about the legendary German forward's appointment 11 months ago given his coaching record and he quickly came under fire following a poor start. The 59-year-old former coach of the United States also faced criticism from media and fans who said he spends more time at home in California than he does in South Korea.

Results have improved but Asian Cup failure over the next month in Qatar could spell the end of a patchy coaching career which had fallen off the map until he took the South Korea job. His previous post was a 10-week stint at Hertha Berlin in 2019-2020.

Klinsmann nevertheless believes it is "right" that South Korean fans expect a team led by Son Heung-min to win the Asian Cup for the first time in more than 60 years. "We have to aim for the highest goal, and if we don't reach it, then it's the fault of the coach—no problem," he said.

Klinsmann has one of the strongest squads in the tournament, led once again by Tottenham Hotspur striker and skipper Son. Son has long been South Korea's focal point but several of his team-mates have come into form with their clubs at just the right time.

Fellow attacker Hwang Hee-chan has impressed for Wolves this season, scoring 10 goals in 20 Premier League matches. Attacking midfielder Lee Kang-in, who was out of favour under previous South Korean boss Paulo Bento, has played his way into the Paris Saint-Germain side and the 22-year-old could be one of the breakout stars of the Asian Cup. — AFP



PAJU: (FILES) Jurgen Klinsmann, new head coach of South Korea's football team, arrives for a press conference at the Paju National Football Center (NFC) on March 9, 2023. — AFP

# Classifieds

### Clinics & Hospitals

#### Clinics

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

### Change of Name

**I, Azra Ali**, holder of Indian passport No. B6045689, permanent address 15/212 Doodh Bungalow civil lines, Kanpur Nagar, Pin: 208001, Uttar Praesh, India, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under Given name: Azra Ali old passport No. T0709151 as name Safia Ali. (#4587) 10/1/2024

**I, Shaikh Ahmed Shaikh Umar**, holder of Indian passport number M1863962 having permanent address at house no. 6-56, Moosa Nagar, Allipur Zahirabad district Sangareddy. Pin 502318, Telangana. Residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (Given name) Ahmed and (surname) Shaik. (#4586) 10/1/2024

**I, Hashim**, holder of Indian passport No. M6102991 having permanent address Mohammedipura, Temba, Sagwara, Dungarpur, Rajasthan, India, Pincode: 314025 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under: (Given name) Hashim and (surname) Sagir. (#4585) 10/1/2024

**I, JOSHI BABU KATIKA**, Holder of Indian Passport No. M5451781 Having Permanent Address 4 18 Po Polamuru Penumantra, West Godavari, 534238, Andhra Pradesh, India Residing In Kuwait At Present, Hereby Declare That Henceforth My Name Will Be Read As Under: Given Name KISHOR KUMAR And Surname KATIKA. (#4588) 9/1/2024



## Indiana Pacers battle through Haliburton injury to sink Celtics

Thunder down Washington Wizards 136-128



INDIANAPOLIS: Jaylen Brown #7 of the Boston Celtics dribbles the ball against the Indiana Pacers at Gainbridge Fieldhouse on January 08, 2024 in Indianapolis, Indiana. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: The Indiana Pacers overcame a scary injury to star point guard Tyrese Haliburton before beating the in-form Boston Celtics 133-131 on Monday in the NBA. Haliburton, one of the brightest stars in the league, was carried off the court by teammates after a painful tumble near the end of the second quarter at Indiana's Gainbridge Fieldhouse Arena. The 23-year-old grimaced after inadvertently doing the splits as he attempted to change direction while driving towards the basket. The Pacers later said Haliburton, who did not return to the game, had suffered a left hamstring strain.

With Haliburton out of action, Benedict Mathurin stepped up with 26 points off the bench to lead the second-half fightback after Indiana trailed 68-59 at the break. A frantic finale looked to have tilted Boston's way after the Pacers were adjudged to have fouled Jaylen Brown in the closing seconds with the score locked at 131-131.

But Indiana challenged the call and the foul was overturned to leave the score level and give the Pacers one last chance to snatch the win. Boston's Kristaps Porzingis then fouled Mathurin with one second on the clock and the Pacers shooting guard promptly sank two free throws to secure the victory. "We lost the best player on the team, so my role

was to step up and help the team win the game," Mathurin said afterwards. "Ty (Haliburton) was down but it felt like the team pretty much knew what to do. Everyone had to step up. If your name gets called, be ready to play," the Canadian added.

"We have a lot of depth on this team. We have a lot of players who can play and perform and have an impact on the game. It was a great win for us." The Pacers bench combined for 75 points overall, with the starters finishing with 58.

Boston's scoring was led by Brown with 40 points, while Jrue Holiday finished with 21 and Porzingis 19. Boston remain top of the Eastern Conference standings at 28-8 while fifth-placed Indiana improved to 21-15. Pacers coach Rick Carlisle meanwhile hailed his team's response to Haliburton's injury, adding that the star would undergo an MRI on Tuesday. "Really amazing effort from our team," Carlisle said. "Lot of emotions in this game. We hope it isn't serious. He's getting an MRI tomorrow."

In other games on Monday, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Chet Holmgren both impressed as the Oklahoma City Thunder downed the Washington Wizards 136-128. Jordan Poole scored 24 points for Washington but the Wizards were ultimately overpowered by the youthful Thunder line-up.

Gilgeous-Alexander finished with 32 points while Chet Holmgren weighed in with 31 points, including four of five shooting from three-point distance. The Milwaukee Bucks' recent slump continued with a 132-116 home defeat to the Utah Jazz. Utah dominated for almost the entirety after trailing briefly in the first quarter, jumping into a 33-point lead just before half-time, before cruising to victory.

Lauri Markkanen and Jordan Clarkson led the Pacers with 21 points each while Giannis Antetokounmpo topped the Bucks scoring with 25 points, completing a triple double with 10 rebounds and 11 assists. In Miami, Tyler Herro scored 28 points and Bam Adebayo 22 as the Heat edged past the Houston Rockets 120-113.

In Charlotte, Terry Rozier scored 39 points but it was not enough to prevent the Hornets falling 119-112 to the Chicago Bulls. Coby White led the Bulls scoring with 27 points. The Los Angeles Clippers meanwhile dominated the Phoenix Suns 138-111 in their Western Conference clash.

Kevin Durant posted a game-high 30 points for Phoenix, but the Clippers' balanced offense proved too strong for the Suns, with Paul George finishing with 25 points. Six Clippers players ended in double figures. — AFP



Kuwaiti athletes Ali Al-Zaid and Bader Al-Shelaby.

### Gold, bronze for Kuwait at Emirates Archery League

ABU DHABI: Kuwait on Monday managed a credible top-flight rostrum among 170 participants at the UAE Archery League held at Ras Al-Khaimah winning two medals: Gold and bronze. The Kuwaiti athlete Ali Al-Zaid won the gold medal and his compatriot Bader Al-Shelaby won a bronze medal. They displayed a very professional performance in the sport at a global stage.

In a statement to KUNA, Al-Zaid said that the achievement is a great addition to professional sports in Kuwait magnifying "our nation's efforts in tallying among the best in the world", while also thanking the Kuwait Shooting Club for their moral and monetary support. For his part, Secretary General of the Kuwaiti and Arab Archery Federations Obaid Al-Osaimi said the two Kuwaiti archers who managed these top podium positions have marked a magnificent achievement, dedicating this victory to the leadership and the Shooting Club family. —KUNA

### Kuwaiti swimmers partake in Arab championship

DOHA: The Kuwaiti national swimming team will participate in the second Arab junior championship starting Wednesday in the Qatari capital, Doha, amid great participation, and expected competitions, which would last six days.

The head of the delegation, a member of the Board of Directors of the Kuwait Aquatics Federation, Faisal Abu Al-Hassan, told Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), before the delegation's departure to Doha, that the Kuwaiti team would participate in the tournament in the 13-14 and 15-16 age categories.

He added that nine swimmers would represent the team, noting that the tournament also included the establishment of competitions in the 17-18 age category. Abu Al-Hassan continued saying that the swimmers Mohammad Zabid, Hassan Jaafar, Hamad Al-Ghaith, Saud Al-Enezi, Abdullah Ahmad, Hassan



Zaid, and Hamoud Al-Hamoud would compete in the championship, along with Saba Ahmad supervised by Kuwaiti Mohammed Jassem and Simone Testasca, the coach of the Kuwaiti Italian team.

He revealed that the national team players prepared well for the tournament by training daily in the past period, expressing his hope that they would achieve good results in the tournament. — KUNA

### Kuwait wins medals at Doha Int'l Arabian horse, camel show

DOHA: Kuwaiti stables won two gold medals and one silver at the third Doha International Arabian horse and camel show 2024. The MHS SORA from Al-Khashab stable won the gold medals for the foal one-year-old category, while a horse from Al-Bashir stable won the gold medal for the stud category. The Shurai'an and Al-Rasman stable's

horse came in second and silver medal for the foal category age two to three. Speaking to KUNA, head of Al-Shurai'an and Rasman stable Dr Abdulaziz Al-Shurai'an indicated that Kuwaiti participants excelled in this year's competition, which concluded yesterday.

The Kuwaiti official affirmed that the Doha International Arabian horse, camel show was an important event to maintain the tradition of horse breeding, indicating that Kuwaitis were amongst the top of horse breeders in the world. The third Doha International Arabian horse and camel show 2024 began last Friday with the participation of stables from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and host Qatar. —KUNA



DOHA: The Shurai'an and Al-Rasman stable's horse came in second.