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6 Biden in dark over defense chief's cancer for a month



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Zionists keep bombing Gaza

Nearly 150 killed in 24 hours • Blinken meets Palestinian leader, Bahraini King



GAZA: A mourner cries over the bodies of members of the Nofal family at Al-Najar hospital in Rafah after they were killed in Zionist bombardment on Jan 10, 2024. — AFP photos



RAMALLAH: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the Muqata'a on Jan 10, 2024.



MANAMA: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa on Jan 10, 2024.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Lanka envoy denies labor ban

KUWAIT: Contrary to recent reports, Sri Lankan Ambassador to Kuwait Kandeepan Bala refuted any plans by Sri Lanka to suspend the dispatching of domestic workers to Kuwait. He emphasized Sri Lanka is maintaining its collaboration with Kuwait, citing the legal protection afforded to all workers in the country. (See Page 3)

WHO warns COVID still a threat

GENEVA: Almost 10,000 COVID-19 deaths were reported in December, the WHO said on Wednesday, as it warned the virus remained a major threat despite partially passing under the radar. It said data from various sources pointed to increased transmission last month, fueled by gatherings over the Christmas holiday period and by the JN.1 variant. There was a 42 percent increase in hospitalizations and a 62 percent increase in intensive care unit admissions, compared with November. — AFP

Germany resumes arms exports to Saudi

BERLIN: Germany resumed direct arms exports to Saudi Arabia by approving the sale of missiles, ending a blockade in place since 2018, the government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said Wednesday. Hebestreit confirmed a report by the German weekly Spiegel, which said that Berlin had given the green light for the export of 150 Iris-T air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia. — AFP

10 family members killed in Pak

PESHAWAR: Ten members of the same family, including a two-year-old, were killed in a brutal late-night attack in Pakistan's northwest, police said Wednesday. Two brothers, their wives and six children aged 12 and under were killed along with a guest in the Lakki Marwat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Tuesday night. "We cannot dismiss the possibility of a personal vendetta as we further investigate the incident," police official Mamoor Shah said. — AFP

GAZA: US top diplomat Antony Blinken on Wednesday met the head of the Palestinian Authority and travelled to Bahrain on his Middle East tour aimed at stopping the Zionist-Hamas war from escalating. The Zionist military said it killed dozens of Palestinians and hit another 150 targets in Hamas-run Gaza, where the health ministry said 147 people had been killed over the previous 24 hours.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas spoke with Blinken of the need "to stop the (Zionist) aggression against Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank", which has also been torn by deadly unrest, said the official Palestinian news agency Wafa. Blinken told Abbas that Washington supports "tangible steps" towards the creation of a Palestinian state

Saudi says value of mineral resources has nearly doubled

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia said on Wednesday that the estimated value of its mineral resources had nearly doubled to \$2.5 trillion, highlighting a sector it hopes will help diversify its oil-reliant economy. "I am delighted to announce that our estimation for the kingdom's untapped mineral potential has increased from \$1.3 trillion to \$2.5 trillion, an increase of 90 percent," Industry and Mineral Resources Minister Bandar Al-Khorayef told a conference in Riyadh.

UK, US forces repel 'largest attack' by Houthis in Red Sea

LONDON: US and UK forces have shot down more than 20 drones and missiles over the Red Sea launched by Yemen's Houthis, in what London branded Wednesday the "largest attack" yet by the Iran-backed rebels. The Western allies' warships and planes took out 18 drones and three

Ecuador orders gangs 'neutralized' after studio attack

QUITO: Ecuador's president gave orders on Tuesday to "neutralize" criminal gangs after gunmen stormed and opened fire in a TV studio, as bandits threatened random executions on a second day of terror in the country. Gangs declared war on the government when President Daniel Noboa announced a state of emergency following the prison escape on Sunday of one of Ecuador's most powerful narco bosses. Noboa ordered military operations to "neutralize" criminal gangs, as the country exploded into what he called an "internal armed conflict".

— a long-term goal which the hard-right Zionist government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has opposed.

The secretary of state reiterated the US position that a Palestinian state must stand alongside the Zionist entity, "with both living in peace and security", said State Department spokesman Matthew Miller. As Blinken arrived under tight security at Abbas' headquarters in Ramallah, a group of protesters held up signs that read "Stop the genocide", "Free Palestine" and "Blinken out". Some scuffled with Palestinian security forces in riot gear.

Abbas was later set to discuss a "push for an immediate ceasefire" in Gaza in talks with Jordan's King Abdullah II and Egyptian President Abdel Fat-

"This is based on new discoveries in the form of rare earth elements, and a combination of the increase of volumes of phosphate, gold, zinc and copper, as well as the revaluation of these minerals." The earlier valuation of \$1.3 trillion had been cited by officials including Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, since at least 2017. Under Prince Mohammed, the world's biggest crude oil exporter hopes to diversify away from fossil fuels, and the government is eyeing the mining sector as a potential source of billions of dollars in foreign direct investment each year.

Risk intelligence firm Verisk Maplecroft wrote last year that the focus on mining was "among the more feasible parts" of Prince Mohammed's Vision 2030 reform agenda, aided by existing mines, plants

missiles in their latest Red Sea military intervention on Tuesday, the US military said.

The Houthis later said they had fired a "large number" of missiles and drones at a US ship, without giving details of timing and location. HMS Diamond, a British destroyer, intervened with "her guns and Sea Viper missiles" as drones were "heading for her and commercial shipping in the area", UK Defence Secretary Grant Shapps said.

It comes a week after 12 nations led by the United States warned the Houthis of consequences unless they immediately halted firing on commercial vessels in the busy international shipping corridor. The Houthis say they are targeting Zi-

onist-linked vessels in support of Palestinians in Gaza, where the Zionist entity is battling militant group Hamas. "Overnight, HMS Diamond, along with US warships, successfully repelled the largest attack from the Iranian-backed Houthis in the Red Sea to date," Shapps said in a statement.

Shapps later said on Sky News that there was "no doubt at all Iran is guiding what is happening there in the Red Sea", providing Houthis with equipment and intelligence to enable the attacks. "Enough is enough," said Shapps. "We must be clear with the Houthis that this has to stop and that is my simple message to them today: Watch this space."

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RIYADH: Saudi Mining and Industry Minister Bandar Al-Khorayef addresses the Future Mineral Forum on Jan 10, 2024. — AFP

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GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador: Ecuadorean police officers guard arrested suspects outside the TC channel after unidentified gunmen burst into the state-owned television studio live on air on Jan 9, 2024. — AFP

Local

American Journal of Nephrology publishes Kuwaiti kidney study

Research sheds light on link between genetic mutations and deterioration of kidney function

KUWAIT: The American Journal of Nephrology recently published a groundbreaking study conducted by researchers and specialists from Kuwait University, the Ministry of Health and the Dasman Diabetes Institute. The study delves into a comprehensive exploration of the correlation between genetic mutations and the decline of kidney function in patients suffering from hereditary dominant polycystic kidney disease (DPKD).

Dr Hamad Yassin, Secretary-General of the Kuwaiti Society for Organ Transplantation and the lead researcher of the study, emphasized its significance in advancing our understanding of polycystic kidney disease. The goal is to identify patients at higher risk of rapid renal function deterioration, enabling more targeted and effective therapeutic interventions.

According to Dr Yassin, the study sheds light on

the intricate relationship between genetic mutations and the deterioration of kidney function in individuals with the disease. The formation of fluid-filled cysts in the kidneys results in enlarged kidney size and a gradual decline in function.

This pioneering study, the first of its kind in Kuwait, tracked 42 patients, including 22 with truncated mutations in the PKD1 gene and 20 with non-truncated mutations, over an average of six years. The findings revealed that patients with truncated mutations experienced a faster deterioration in kidney function compared to those with non-truncated mutations.

Utilizing computer modeling, the researchers calculated the annual rates of decreased renal function and survival time without renal failure. The results indicated that patients with truncated mutations have a shorter

survival time on the kidneys compared to those with non-truncated mutations.

Dr Yassin underscored the importance of scientific research as a catalyst for advancing healthcare services, emphasizing the current focus on providing personalized healthcare based on individual genetic characteristics. He highlighted that the study, published in the prestigious American Journal of Nephrology, was primarily funded by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS).

These research endeavors, Dr Yassin noted, lead to improved therapeutic outcomes, reduced complications and open new avenues in transformative medicine. He emphasized the critical role of continuous investment in scientific research for the development and enhancement of healthcare services.

Expressing gratitude to KFAS, Dr Yassin praised the foundation's active role in supporting scientific research in Kuwait. He stressed that the foundation's support is pivotal for achieving scientific leadership, nurturing a generation of globally competitive scientists and researchers. Dr Yassin concluded by affirming that investing in scientific research is an investment in the nation's future, urging the need to continue support for sustainable scientific progress. — KUNA



Dr Hamad Yassin

Researcher documents march of Kuwait media

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti researcher Nada Abdul Rahman Al-Rifai, in her book titled "The March of the Kuwaiti Media from Originality to Renewal 1962-2022", meticulously examines the significant milestones and phases in the evolution of media in Kuwait. This initiative is part of her commitment to documenting the Kuwaiti media experience across various stages.



Nada Al-Rifai

Al-Rifai, speaking to KUNA on Wednesday, described her recently released book as a personal endeavor driven by her familiarity with the history of Kuwaiti media. She expressed her ambition for the work to serve as a reference for researchers and enthusiasts interested in Kuwaiti media and its institutions. In her exploration of the emergence of official and private media institutions in Kuwait, Rifai emphasized the antiquity and deep roots of Kuwaiti media, predating the establishment of formal media organizations. She highlighted the historical significance of the Mubarak Kiosk as a hub for information and the dissemination of world news, intertwined with the bustling trade activities in Kuwait at the time. Rifai underscored Kuwait's role as a pioneering media and cultural beacon in the region and Arab countries, serving as a launchpad for information, literary, cultural and artistic productions.

Regarding the current media landscape in the country, Rifai, the former head of the information documentation center at the ministry of information, commended the strides and advancements witnessed by Kuwaiti media in adapting to digital transformations. She noted the concrete steps taken by Kuwaiti media in cyberspace through various platforms and accounts on networking sites.

Rifai linked discussions about Kuwaiti media, its development, and achievements to the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, whom she referred to as "the founding father of Kuwaiti media". Sheikh Sabah played a crucial role in the Department of Publications and Publishing, issuing the official gazette of Kuwait (Kuwait Al-Yom), establishing the government printing press and overseeing the publication of the magazine "Al-Arabi", before becoming a minister in 1962.

The new edition of the book, spanning 280 pages and divided into five chapters, delves into the emergence of Kuwaiti media, its developments, transformations, and achievements. The content, reviewed by researcher Saleh Al-Masbah, also documents events and facts witnessed by the ministry of information and Kuwaiti media institutions, including profiles of media personalities and their accomplishments.

The first chapter examines the march of the official media, its origins, foundational elements, and leadership. The second chapter explores the Kuwaiti media discourse, while the third chapter focuses on the ministry of information's journey towards digital transformation. The fourth chapter delves into the ministers of information in Kuwait, detailing their resumes and achievements. The final chapter provides an analytical and statistical reading of the developments within the ministry of information. — KUNA

Municipality launches inspection campaign

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality on Wednesday launched its second inspection campaign. The field campaign is aimed at raising the level of cleanliness in all governorates. On the sidelines of the campaign, the Public Hygiene Monitor at the Jahra Municipality branch, Daham Al-Enezi, confirmed the continuation of the inspection campaign in all the governorates in order to maintain public hygiene.

The campaign began in the Kabd area, where the team removed rubble and waste, abandoned vehicles, and everything that obstructs the road and distorts the general view. He indicated that the next phase will be in the Abdali area. Al-Enezi stressed the municipality's keenness to distribute leaflets and place advertisements on social networking sites periodically, warning people not to violate the laws. — KUNA



Kuwaiti firms draw visitors at 'Plastics 2024' in Cairo

CAIRO: Leading Kuwaiti plastic and petrochemical manufacturers had a big turnout on Wednesday at the Plastics 2024 Expo held in Cairo. The Kuwaiti pavilion exhibited multiple different plastic products, which attracted the attention of people visiting the expo, which lasts until January 12 and draws 30,000 exhibitors. The products include architectural cladding materials designed in decorative styles - compliant with global and Gulf-specific eco-friendly standards, in addition to durable plastic pallets suitable for heavy-duty use.

The Kuwaiti pavilion included eight leading companies in the plastic and petrochemical industries, like Al-Sharhan Industries, Al-Mannai Plastic, Kuwait Packing Materials Manufacturing Company, Al-Arabi Plastic Factory, Plastic Industries Company, Kuwaiti United Factory, and International Partners for the Production of Plastic Derivatives, as well as the Awatan International Factory. — KUNA

Authority promotes positive culture and social responsibility

KUWAIT: The director general of the Public Authority of Agriculture Affairs And Fish Resources, Eng Nasser Taqi, announced the authority's plan for the Kuwait national holidays. He said the aim is to promote positive culture and social responsibility among the public while preserving the environment.

Taqi told the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) on Wednesday, after meeting with the chairman of the board of directors of the Kuwaiti Association for Festivals, Dr Tariq Al-Obaid, and the general supervisor, Nasser Al-Mahalhal, that the efforts of the authority and the association and their cooperation in this regard focus on working to instill the concept of national loyalty and community partnership as a whole.

He mentioned that the (sustainable agricultural tourism) initiative, in cooperation with the Association Kuwaiti Festivals, represents a qualitative leap towards promoting sustainable green initiatives in the community and providing a distinguished model for consolidating its principles. He added that this is done through qualitative commu-



nity initiatives within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the achievement of the seventeenth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals on Community Partnership, the formation of successful partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society based on common goals and visions, and the consolidation of sustainability principles.

He noted the full support of the Agriculture Authority for the initiative launched by the association to promote agricultural tourism and sustainable agriculture, which would support productive farming and urge citizens to pay attention to national products.

For his part, the chairman of the board of directors of the Kuwaiti Association for Festivals, Dr Tarek Al-Obaid, confirmed in a similar statement to KUNA that the association has taken upon itself to fully strive to establish meaningful national activities. Al-Obaid explained that these efforts fall under the cooperation of the Agriculture Authority, based on their joint keenness to improve Kuwait.

He pointed out that the initiative of the association (agricultural tourism) will receive great attention and keenness from the authority as it supports the national product. It is noteworthy that the Kuwaiti Association for Festivals launched an initiative under the name of 'Sustainable Agricultural Tourism' to promote the concept of food security, support na-



Director general of the Public Authority of Agriculture Affairs And Fish Resources, Eng Nasser Taqi, announces plan for the Kuwait national holidays.

tional producers and Kuwaiti farmers, and achieve sustainable development for the United Nations. The initiative falls within the scope of the government's work program (2023-2027) on supporting national agricultural products. It is sponsored by the Agriculture Authority and aims to support the agricultural sector as a whole. — KUNA



Local

Sri Lanka ambassador refutes media reports

No plans to suspend domestic workers to Kuwait

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Contrary to recent reports, Sri Lankan Ambassador to Kuwait Kandeepan Bala refuted any intentions by Sri Lanka to suspend the dispatching of domestic workers to Kuwait. He emphasized that Sri Lanka is maintaining its collaboration with Kuwait, citing the legal protection afforded to all workers in the country. The ambassador highlighted the substantial presence

of Sri Lankans in Kuwait at around 120,000, explaining that more than 58,000 Sri Lankans were recruited in Kuwait in 2023, with around 80 percent of them engaged in domestic work, underscoring the continued partnership between the two countries in the realm of labor.

Bala revealed that preparations are underway for signing an agreement on political consultations involving all relevant parties, underlining the importance of such agreements on bilateral relations. He

indicated that the report of the year 2023 by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment showed the total registration for final approval (manpower wise) is 38,198 Sri Lankans in Kuwait, split between qualified, skilled, semi-skilled and domestic workers, and 24,089 Sri Lankans who were self-registered.

Highlighting the enduring diplomatic ties, the Sri Lankan ambassador emphasized the distinguished 54-year history of relations between Sri Lanka and Kuwait, underscoring collaborative

efforts, including support from the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, which finances various projects in Sri Lanka. Bala noted a friendly meeting between the foreign ministers of both countries in New York, signifying a commitment to exchanging and strengthening bilateral relations. This interaction reflects the ongoing diplomatic engagement aimed at fostering cooperation and mutual understanding between Sri Lanka and Kuwait.



Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq

Amir congratulates Sultan of Oman

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable on Wednesday to the Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq, congratulating him on the fourth anniversary of his throne assumption. In his cable, His Highness the Amir praised the accomplishments of the Sultan and wished him everlasting health and Oman more progress and prosperity. His Highness the Amir also lauded the firm and historical fraternal relations between both countries and peoples, stressing permanent and joint interest in promoting and developing horizons of existing cooperation at all levels. Also, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah sent a cable of congratulations to the Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq, congratulating him on the fourth anniversary of his throne assumption. — KUNA



KUWAIT: A delegation from the External Information Department at the Ministry of Information visits the KUNA headquarters. — KUNA photos

Kuwaiti expert underlines importance of 'social and emotional learning'

MANAMA: Kuwaiti educational expert and Director of the Arab Center for Educational Research for the Gulf countries, Dr Mohammed Al-Sharika, confirmed on Wednesday the importance of 'social and emotional learning' as one of the modern global trends in the field of education, according to the latest scientific studies and research.



Dr Mohammed Al-Sharika

In his speech at a symposium held by the Arab Center for Educational Research for the Gulf States in Bahrain entitled 'Social and emotional learning', he stressed the need to integrate social and emotional competencies in the curricula of education in the member states in line with the results of modern scientific research.

Dr Mohammed said that "we urgently need to equip our new generations with the social and emotional competencies that enable them to adapt to the realities of life and keep up with the 21st century. We need to improve their chances of success at the personal, social, and professional levels, contribute more to achieving development visions at the national level, and live peacefully in a society dominated by the values of cooperation, understanding, and harmony."

He pointed out that research has proven that social and emotional learning has a great impact on improving students' academic performance, increasing graduation rates, reducing drop-out rates, reducing behavioral problems, developing positive social relationships, improving students' mental health, and providing them with skills of cooperation, communication, problem solving, and adapting to changing situations.

The seminar came within the framework of a series of events. The international educational program is organized by the Arab Center for Educational Research for the Gulf States with the aim of following up on educational developments in the international arena and monitoring modern global trends in the field of education.

Bahrain's minister of education, Mohammed Juma, stressed in his speech at the opening of the seminar the importance of such meetings in the framework of the pivotal role played by the Arab Center for Educational Research for the Gulf States, which represents one of the building blocks of unity and integration among the GCC countries.

He praised the center's tireless efforts to develop educational research, provide consultation and expertise, and keep abreast of the best national and international experiences. He pointed out that such seminars and conferences are of great importance because of the contemporary educational issues and problems they pose and the opportunities they provide for educational policymakers, specialists, and experts.

The seminar aims to shed light on the topic of "social and emotional learning," clarify its intellectual and theoretical foundations, its basic competencies, and highlight the importance of social and emotional learning for individuals and communities and its positive effects on the academic, personal, professional, and social levels. The participants recommended that more attention should be paid to strengthening learning skills. — KUNA

Ministry of Information delegation tours KUNA

KUWAIT: A delegation from the External Information Department at the Ministry of Information visited the headquarters of the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) on Wednesday, during which its members were briefed on the mechanism of its work in various sectors, departments, and news services, especially the information and research

center, the KUNA smart Oasis, and the rest of the agency's departments.

During their visit to the KUNA's Information and Research Center, the members of the delegation got acquainted with the scientific role and professional methodology in dealing with news and information. The center provided a comprehensive presentation on the processes of archiving, compiling, and classifying news materials and various forms of media materials, as well as the preparation of reports, studies, periodicals, and research.

The members of the delegation also toured the

KUNA Smart Oasis and learned about the nature of its work, the importance of its role in keeping pace with the new media concept, and the use of artificial intelligence technologies in the media. During the visit, the director of External Information Affairs at the Ministry, Aisha Al-Asusi, praised the role media (KUNA) play as a reliable source of local and international news. Al-Asusi pointed out the need for continued fruitful cooperation between KUNA and the Ministry's external media sector in order to improve the message of the Kuwaiti media as a whole. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah inaugurates the cyber security center at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Wednesday. — KUNA photos

Minister inaugurates cyber security center

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah inaugurated the cyber security center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Wednesday out of the ministry's keenness and interest to maintain cyber security in its

public offices and diplomatic and consular missions abroad against cyber threats and risks, secure and protect its information system and infrastructure, and respond to incidents and indicators of penetration and cyber security attacks and deal quickly with their effects.

In a statement, the Ministry said that the center is also one of the main pillars in the technical system of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a major tributary of the information technology sector. The National Center for Cyber Security in Kuwait

is part of the mechanism to protect institutions from internal and external cyber risks through cooperation and coordination between the National Center and the concerned authorities.

The minister pointed out that the center also aims to enhance awareness and provide the necessary support and advice to the employees of the ministry in the field of cybersecurity and the development of policies and frameworks necessary to reduce cyber threats, whether from inside or outside the country. — KUNA

Kuwait lawmaker calls for end to Gaza 'genocide'

TEHRAN: Parliaments across the Islamic region should ratchet up efforts aiming to put an end to the "genocide" being committed against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, a Kuwaiti lawmaker said on Wednesday. Such efforts include putting in place a definitive ceasefire in Gaza to subsequently allow the delivery of humanitarian aid there, the Kuwaiti chief of the parliamentary caucus, Dr. Mohammad Al-Mahan, told pan-Islamic talks in the Iranian capital.

The Kuwaiti lawmaker slammed Zionist efforts

to "forcibly displace" thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, calling for accountability over the "war crimes" perpetrated by senior Zionist leaders, which entails decisive action on the "legal and political" fronts, he underlined. He cited a statement issued by the Kuwaiti parliament's foreign affairs committee.

He called for the backing of a case of genocide South Africa has filed against a Zionist entity before the International Court of Justice, while also recalling a speech by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah before a gathering of Arab leaders, in which he vociferously reiterated his unwavering support for Palestinian statehood rights. The Kuwaiti lawmaker went on to urge nations across the wider Arab region to sever diplomatic ties with the Zionist entity in a show of support for the Palestinians, saying such a measure was "honorable" in light of the status quo. — KUNA



DEIR EL-BALAH: Smoke billows over buildings in Deir El-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, during Zionist bombardment on January 10, 2024. — AFP

Al-Mikshat 2 project a qualitative leap to support tourism

KUWAIT: The Minister of Social Affairs, Family, and Childhood Affairs, Sheikh Feras Saud Al-Malik Al-Sabah, said on Wednesday that the Al-Mikshat 2 project is considered a qualitative leap to support tourism and entertainment in Kuwait. Sheikh Feras Al-Sabah stressed in a statement to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) during an inspection tour of the Al-Mikshat 2 Project at the North Island site of Jaber Bridge the need to overcome all obstacles and provide the best possible way for the project to come out in the best possible way in line with the directives of the Council of Ministers to support tourism and entertainment in the country.

He stressed the keenness to support productive families affiliated with the ministry, creative people with special needs, and handicraft owners, considering that the Al-Mikshat project, with its model, imitates the original Kuwaiti heritage with a civilized flavor. He explained that this project represents a distinguished cooperation and partnership between many government and private entities that have been allocated places to showcase their services and hold various activities and events, and represents a qualitative leap to support tourism and entertainment in Kuwait. — KUNA



Photo of the day



BEIRUT: A guide stands in front of a painting called 'Golden frame' by Kuwait-born artist Amer Shomali during an exhibition titled 'The Little Prince of Gaza' at the Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF) in the Lebanese capital Beirut on January 9, 2024. The 'Little Prince of Gaza' exhibition, organized in collaboration with the Palestinian Museum in the West Bank, offers a platform to highlight the Palestinian struggle and the voices that often go unheard within this conflict – those of children. — AFP

Kuwait humanitarian officials visit Al-Arish, border crossing

Lebanon lodges complaint to UNSC against Zionist entity

CAIRO: Representatives of two Kuwaiti charitable organizations visited the Egyptian city of Al-Arish and the Rafah border crossing on Tuesday to follow up on the delivery of Kuwaiti humanitarian aid to the war-traumatized people of the Gaza Strip. The humanitarian delegation was headed by the Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General and Chairman of the Kuwait-based International Islamic Charity Organization (IICO), Dr Abdullah Al-Maatouq, and included several officials of the IICO and the Al-Salam Association for Humanitarian and Charitable Works.

In statements to KUNA following a tour of the aid warehouses at Al-Arish Hospital and Rafah Border Crossing, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Al-Salam Association Dr Nabil Al-Aoun said that the Kuwaiti delegation supervised the uploading of Kuwaiti humanitarian aid on trucks in preparation for transporting them to the Strip via the Rafah crossing

point. Al-Aoun explained that 90 percent of the Kuwaiti relief aid has entered the Gaza Strip.

The remaining 10 percent consists of large-sized electric generators in addition to solar-powered refrigerators, he said, noting that arrangements are being made to transport them to the Strip. He pointed out that the delegation oversaw the entry of 30 aid trucks loaded with tents, food supplies, blankets, in-kind materials, and clothes with a capacity of up to 700 tons into the Strip. He unveiled that the IICO and the Al-Salam Association have built a displaced camp, including a thousand tents, inside the Gaza Strip and plan to construct four others, including two wood and iron panels.

Complaint against Zionists

In another development, Lebanon on Wednesday instructed its Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Hadi Hashem, to lodge a grievance before the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in response to a recent Zionist complaint regarding

Lebanon's alleged non-compliance with UNSC Resolution 1701. In a press release, the Lebanese Foreign Ministry said Lebanon strongly condemns the nonstop hostilities committed by Zionist occupation forces against Lebanon since October 7, coinciding with its war on Gaza, citing documented evidence of Zionist violation of Resolution 1701.

The ministry highlighted incidents where Zionists targeted Lebanese territories, manipulating facts by blaming Lebanon for its blatant violations of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The complaint includes extensive evidence of Zionist military operations breaking Paragraph 1 of Resolution 1701, citing the use of internationally banned phosphorus shells targeting areas in southern Lebanon. However, the ministry reiterated its steadfast policy of self-defense and pursuit of its legitimate rights through lawful means, seeking the comprehensive application of Resolution 1701 by the United Nations Security Council, de-escalation, and calm along the Blue Line. — KUNA



Kuwaiti humanitarian officials pose for a group photo.

KRCS marks anniversary, records achievements

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) announced major achievements during 2023 thanks to the support and sponsorship of the political leadership, which contributed to delivering humanitarian aid to those in need around the world. KRCS had many accomplishments, executing projects in many countries around the world, especially those hit by natural disasters or humanitarian crises, said Dr Hilal Al-Sayer, KRCS's Chairman, in a statement to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) on Wednesday. His remarks marked the 58th anniversary of the society's foundation.

KRCS had become an embodiment of humanity in the midst of local and international crises, Al-Sayer noted, adding that it was evident in KRCS's continuous aid to the afflicted in Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, Ukraine, Morocco, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Somalia, Bangladesh, Yemen, and in Palestine, especially in the Gaza Strip. The aid, Al-Sayer added, included several areas, most notably health-care, food security, livelihood, and pioneering educational projects, in addition to water, energy, and transportation projects.

Al-Sayer went on to say that KRCS was keen to diversify activities to include all health aspects, including first aid, emergency medical care, health education, and providing urgent aid to victims of

disasters and crises, including providing medicines and medical devices, performing surgeries, equipping hospitals, and establishing mobile clinics.

Nevertheless, when it comes to aid inside Kuwait, Al-Sayer said KRCS's assistance and initiatives for families in need range from food, medical treatment, clothing, shelter, education, and women's and family support programs. KRCS is moving into a new phase in humanitarian aid and is anticipating an era full of humanitarian challenges that will require developing plans and strategies to confront them. — KUNA



KUWAIT: A handout photo shows workers loading humanitarian aid, bound for Gaza through Egypt, into a military aircraft at the airport. — AFP



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North Korea's Kim brands Seoul 'principal enemy'

Biden in dark over defense chief's cancer for month

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RAFAH: Displaced Palestinians who fled Khan Yunis line for food in Rafah on the southern Gaza Strip on Jan 4, 2024. — AFP

Gaza aid access 'shrinking'

Zionist entity forces cancellation of 6 WHO missions to northern Gaza since Dec 26

GENEVA: The World Health Organization (WHO) pleaded with the Zionist entity on Wednesday to allow the WHO and other UN agencies access to deliver aid within the Gaza Strip, branding the humanitarian situation "indescribable".

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said its teams have had to cancel six planned missions to northern Gaza since Dec 26 "because our requests were rejected and assurances of safe passage were not provided", while a mission planned for Wednesday was also called off.

"Delivering humanitarian aid in Gaza continues to face nearly insurmountable challenges," he told a press conference. "Intense bombardment, restrictions on movement, fuel shortages, and interrupted communications make it impossible for WHO and our partners to reach those in need."

"We have the supplies, the teams and the plans in place. What we don't have is access. We call on (the Zionist entity) to approve requests by WHO and other partners to deliver humanitarian aid."

Tedros said only 15 hospitals in the Palestinian territory were functioning even partially, while the lack of clean water and sanitation, and overcrowded living conditions in the coastal strip were creating the ideal environment for diseases to spread. "People are standing in line for hours for a small amount of water, which may not be clean, or bread,

which alone is not sufficiently nutritious," he said.

WHO had warned this week its ability to provide aid and support struggling hospitals in war-ravaged Gaza was "shrinking", despite international demands for more aid to be allowed in. WHO staff described desperate scenes of seriously injured patients, including young children, begging for food in hospitals — which have seen most of their health workers flee for their own safety.

"We're seeing this humanitarian catastrophe unfold before our eyes," Sean Casey, a WHO emergency medical teams coordinator, told reporters in Geneva via videolink from the Gaza Strip. "We're seeing the health system collapse at a very rapid pace," he warned.

The Zionist entity has claimed the war is entering a new phase, involving troop reductions and more targeted operations in the territory's center and south. But Casey said that on the ground, he had "not seen the lowering of the intensification".

"What we are still seeing ... is a huge number of casualties related to hostilities, so shrapnel injuries, gunshot wounds, crush injuries from buildings that collapse. That's still happening every single day."

The Zionist entity's relentless ground and air attack on Gaza has killed more than 23,200 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. The entity claims the bom-

bardment 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.

'Recipe for disaster'

The United Nations says the war has displaced around 85 percent of Gaza's population of 2.4 million, and left civilians in the besieged Palestinian territory at risk of famine and disease. A UN Security Council resolution last month demanded that more aid be let in but the WHO said its access had only got worse.

The Zionist entity has implied the United Nations is largely to blame for the lack of aid reaching those in need in Gaza. But Casey insisted the WHO and other UN organizations were "constantly trying to reach the areas in greatest need".

"Every day we line up our convoys, we wait for clearance (from the warring parties), and we don't get it," he said. "And then we come back and we do it again the next day."

The agency has long described desperate scenes in the few barely functioning hospitals remaining in the north, facing severe shortages of food, clean water, medicines and fuel. And it warned that the situa-

tion was increasingly dire in the middle and south of the densely populated territory.

"Hostilities and evacuation orders in neighborhoods of the middle area and Khan Yunis ... are affecting access to hospitals for patients and ambulances, and making it incredibly complex for WHO to reach those hospitals to provide supplies and fuel," said Richard Peepkorn, WHO's representative for the Palestinian territories. Speaking to journalists from Jerusalem, he warned that this "was a recipe for disaster and will make more hospitals non-functional".

'Must be protected'

The European Gaza Hospital, Nasser Medical Complex and Al-Aqsa hospital in the middle area, long among the best functioning facilities, are now near evacuation zones, Casey pointed out. "We cannot lose these health facilities," he said. "They absolutely must be protected."

He visited the Al-Aqsa hospital on Sunday, finding that hundreds of patients and around 70 percent of health workers had fled for safety amid increasing hostilities around the facility. The few remaining staff were struggling to care for patients lying on blood-streaked floors. "It was mostly children with gunshot wounds, with shrapnel injuries. Children who were playing in the streets when the building next to them exploded," Casey said. — AFP

Pastor slams Western church 'silence' on Gaza

BETHLEHEM: For his first service of 2024, Palestinian pastor Munther Isaac read a biblical passage in which God chooses the weakest "to shame the powerful", a key theme to him as the Zionist attack on Gaza rages on.

Since the start of the Zionist attack, Isaac has tirelessly preached for a ceasefire in Gaza and reproached Western churches for their "silence". Isaac, 45, said the passage, from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, is more relevant than ever given the current situation in the Palestinian territory.

"I believe God is using the children of Gaza to challenge the hypocrisy of the Western world, the racism, the prejudice of the Western world towards Palestinians and towards the children of Gaza," he told AFP. Isaac is a pastor at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem in the Zionist-occupied West Bank, the city revered by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus Christ.

Around 50,000 Christian Palestinians live in the West Bank and Jerusalem, according to the US State Department's 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom. Isaac said he felt that, as an English speaker and a Christian, he had to speak up against

the "genocide happening in front of everybody's eyes" in Gaza.

Viral video

"Many in the world will not listen to the actual stories of the people of Gaza but they will listen to me because I'm a pastor, because they resonate with a Christian clergy speaking," he said. A video of Isaac labelling the Zionist entity's actions in Gaza "genocide" during a sermon in December has been shared tens of thousands of times on social media.

During the sermon he also slammed Christian leaders for not speaking out, telling his congregation that "silence is complicity". "And we still don't see strong calls from church leaders calling for a ceasefire," he told AFP, calling on Christian leaders to visit the West Bank, occupied by the Zionist entity since 1967. The Zionist entity and its powerful ally, the United States, have vehemently rejected accusations of genocide.

Nativity scene

Instead, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently said his army was waging a war of "unparalleled morality". But Isaac said the Zionist entity was being treated with "impunity" and



BETHLEHEM: A picture shows an installation of a scene of the nativity of Christ set up by Palestinian pastor Munther Isaac inside the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. — AFP

"can break not just the international law, they can commit war crimes, and no one's going to hold them accountable". "We're angry that the world does not see us, does not look at Palestinians as equals," he said.

Isaac draws on sacred texts in his weekly sermons to cast light on the horrors of the war, now in its fourth month. At Christmas, he set up a nativity scene with images of baby Jesus, wrapped in a Palestinian scarf called a keffiyeh, lying in the rubble of what was meant to

represent a bombed-out house. Images of the scene quickly spread on social media. "We thought of making this nativity scene because we see Jesus's image in every child pulled from under the rubble, especially when they are dehumanized in the eyes of the world," the pastor said. Isaac said the image resonating with so many people showed that "many in the world actually feel our pain and many are not pleased with the actions of their governments". — AFP

Palestinian journalist freed from Zionist custody abused

DOHA: London-based news outlet Al-Araby Al-Jadeed announced on Tuesday the release of one of its Palestinian journalists from Zionist custody, alleging he faced torture during more than a month in detention.

Diaa al-Kahlout, who was among dozens of Palestinians shown detained by Zionist troops and stripped to their underwear in north Gaza last month, had been released back into the Palestinian territory, the Qatari-owned website said.

Kahlout told Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, sister operation of English-language news site The New Arab, that he had faced "indescribably tough and difficult" conditions following his arrest. The 37-year-old said he had been beaten and tortured. "The moment I was detained, (Zionist) soldiers crowded round me ... before they gagged me with tape so I couldn't speak." Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has said following his arrest the journalist was briefly held in Eshel prison in the Zionist entity and was subjected to torture, according to several of the organization's sources.

Footage of the men, including Kahlout, stripped down to their underwear, with some of them appearing to hand over weapons, was last month aired by Zionist media, which reported the alleged surrender of Hamas militants. The clips sparked outrage on social media, with Hamas denying the individuals were members of its armed wing. The Zionist army said it often strips people that it deems could pose a threat to ensure they do not carry arms or explosives. — AFP

International

Biden in dark over defense chief's cancer for month

'It's not good. We want to make sure that it doesn't happen again,' White House says

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden was kept in the dark over his defense secretary's cancer diagnosis and subsequent hospitalizations for about a month, the White House admitted Tuesday, as details of Lloyd Austin's deeply unusual disappearance raised questions about leadership of the world's top military.

The 70-year-old's failure to disclose his hospitalization has prompted an extraordinary row in Washington and could be embarrassing for Biden, who faces multiple foreign crises in his reelection campaign year, including in the Zionist entity and Ukraine. US defense secretary, career soldier Austin is personally overseeing military deployments to try and contain fallout from the Zionist war on Gaza, which has sparked violence against American forces in Iraq and Syria as well as attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea.

After days of refusal to issue details, the Pentagon came out Tuesday with its first full account of Austin's health issues, but the new transparency came too late for a clearly upset White House. According to two of his doctors from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Austin's prostate cancer was detected as a result of routine screening in early December.

He underwent minor surgery to treat it on Dec 22,

returning home the following day, the doctors said, referring to a procedure the Pentagon had previously been describing as "elective." However, Austin was readmitted to the same hospital on Jan 1 due to complications "including nausea with severe abdominal, hip, and leg pain," they said. "Initial evaluation revealed a urinary tract infection," while medical personnel found "abdominal fluid collections impairing the function of his small intestines" after Austin was moved to intensive care on Jan 2.

'Not good'

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby made clear that Austin had not followed procedures. "It is not optimal for a situation like this to go as long as it did without the commander-in-chief knowing about it or the national security adviser knowing about it, or frankly other leaders at the Department of Defense," Kirby said during a briefing at the White House.

"It's not the way this is supposed to happen ... It's not good. We want to make sure that it doesn't happen again," Kirby insisted that Biden retains "complete confidence" in Austin and was looking forward to having him back at the Pentagon.

However, amid an outcry both from Democratic allies in Congress and Republican opponents, White

House chief of staff Jeff Zients ordered an urgent review of the rules for when senior US officials are incapacitated. "There's an expectation that if a cabinet officer becomes hospitalized, and for whatever reason can't continue to perform the duties even temporarily, that that will be notified up the chain of command to the commander in chief," Kirby said.

'Full recovery'

The doctors in the Pentagon statement said Austin "continues to make progress and we anticipate a full recovery although this can be a slow process." The political damage may be as hard to heal.

While Austin was hospitalized on Jan 1, the Pentagon did not make any public announcement until four days later, and also waited to notify Biden and Congress. Some of Austin's authorities were transferred to Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks on January 2, but she was not told that he was hospitalized until two days later, Pentagon spokesman Major General Pat Ryder told journalists on Monday.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan was informed on January 4, while Congress was not told until the day after that — the same day the Pentagon made a public announcement, albeit with few details. Ryder reiterated Tuesday that the secretary has no plans to quit. Austin "remains in good spirits. He's



WASHINGTON: US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin testifies during a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense hearing in this file photo. — AFP

in contact with his senior staff and has full access to required secure communications capabilities and continues to monitor the (the Defense Department's) day-to-day operations worldwide," Ryder said.

The defense chief said in a statement over the weekend that he took "full responsibility for my decisions about disclosure," and admitted that he "could have done a better job ensuring the public was appropriately informed." — AFP



PORT MORESBY: People run with merchandise as crowds leave shops with looted goods amid a state of unrest on Jan 10, 2024. — AFP

Police race to 'control' unrest in Papua New Guinea

PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea: A festering pay dispute involving Papua New Guinea's security forces on Wednesday sparked angry protests in the capital, where a crowd torched a police car outside the prime minister's office.

Soldiers, police officers and prison staff staged a lively but peaceful protest on Wednesday morning, after noticing their pay had been docked without explanation. But by Wednesday afternoon pockets of unrest had spread through the capital Port Moresby, with video clips on social media showing crowds looting shops and stretched police scrambling to restore order. "It's unfortunate that the situation has turned out this way, so uncalled for," Police Commis-

sioner David Manning said. "But we are doing all we can to control the situation in the city."

Crowds tried to smash a chain on a tall security gate outside the prime minister's office, video images showed, before eventually tearing it off its rails. They then unsuccessfully tried setting fire to a guard post, before eventually torching a white police SUV parked outside the compound, an AFP correspondent on the scene said.

While security forces started the demonstrations, it was unclear if they were responsible for the ensuing turmoil. The AFP correspondent based in Port Moresby said a mix of "police, soldiers and civilians" appeared to be involved.

The government said the pay deductions were the result of an unintended glitch and has promised to fix it promptly. "I want to appreciate all of you today," Internal Security Minister Peter Tsiamalili said in conciliatory remarks to protesters before the trouble began. "I just want to again reassure all our policemen and women that I am here to make sure that your welfare is addressed." — AFP

Zionists keep bombing Gaza...

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Global concern has flared over Gaza's humanitarian crisis, and Blinken — while voicing continued US support for top regional ally the Zionist entity — has urged steps to reduce the suffering. Dire shortages brought by a Zionist siege mean the "daily toll on civilians in Gaza, particularly children, is far too high", Blinken said on Tuesday after talks with Netanyahu. Blinken called for "more food, more water, more medicine" for Gaza, where only limited relief supplies have arrived.

Desperate Gazans on Tuesday climbed onto one truck carrying flour and canned goods and tossed the food to the crowd below, AFP footage showed. Army spokesman Daniel Hagari said the Zionist entity is "ready and willing to facilitate as much humanitarian aid as the world will give".

The war raged on unabated and the army report-

ed more deadly fighting in Gaza's central Maghazi and southern Khan Yunis areas. One of the many displaced Palestinians, Hassan Kaskin, 55, told AFP: "We have lost our money, our houses, our jobs. We are losing our youths as well. We've sacrificed our children for our homeland."

Blinken is on his fourth tour of the Middle East since the outbreak of the war, and was due to head to Egypt, after earlier stops in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Washington has floated a post-war scenario in which a reformed Palestinian Authority governs Gaza as well as towns and cities in the West Bank, which the Zionist entity has occupied since 1967.

A post-war plan outlined by Defense Minister Yoav Gallant envisions local "civil committees" governing Gaza after the Zionist entity has dismantled Hamas. Hamas, an Islamist movement, seized sole control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, ousting Abbas' Fatah party, with which it had shared power after sweeping parliamentary elections. Hamas' Qatar-based chief Ismail Haniyeh said last week he was "open to the idea" of a single Palestinian administration in Gaza and the West Bank. — AFP

that carries up to 12 percent of global trade.

CENTCOM said US forces shot down a drone launched from Yemen over the weekend, while Vice Admiral Brad Cooper said the Houthis had launched an explosives-laden sea drone into shipping lanes last week — the first time they had used such a weapon in the current conflict. The Houthis — who control much of Yemen — are part of the "axis of resistance" of groups arrayed against the Zionist entity.

The United States rushed military aid to the Zionist entity, which has carried out a relentless campaign in Gaza that has killed at least 23,357 people. Those deaths have sparked widespread anger in the Middle East and provided an impetus for attacks by armed groups across the region that are opposed to the Zionist entity.

US forces in Iraq and Syria have also repeatedly come under fire from drone and rocket attacks that Washington says are being carried out by Iran-backed armed groups. Last week, the United States carried out a strike in Baghdad that killed a pro-Iran commander who it said was involved in attacks on American forces — a move that infuriated the Iraqi government. The violence in Iraq and Syria and the continued attacks by the Houthis have raised fears of a broader regional conflict directly involving Iran — a worst-case scenario that Washington is desperately seeking to avoid. — AFP

Spain politicians bicker as plastic swamps beaches

NOIA, Spain: Dozens of volunteers used strainers to sift sand at beaches in northwestern Spain on Tuesday to collect millions of tiny plastic pellets that have washed up in recent days, endangering wildlife.

The minuscule pellets, called nurdles, began arriving on the coast of Spain's Galicia region after six containers fell from a Liberia-registered ship on Dec 8 as it headed from the Spanish port of Algeciras to Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

One of the containers was loaded with bags full of the pellets, according to shipping giant Maersk which owns the containers. Sometimes called Mermaids' Tears, the pellets are the building blocks for most of the world's plastic production, from car bumpers to bottles to salad bowls.

Measuring less than five millimeters (0.2 inches) in size, they are not always readily visible except when they wash up in unusually huge quantities — as has been the case along the northwestern Spanish coast — and are notoriously hard to collect. "We are collecting the pellets with our own tools," said Adriana Montoto, a 35-year-old pharmacist, noting that instead of the authorities, it has been non-governmental groups that have "organized everything".

Sonia Iglesias Rey, a 26-year-old domestic worker who came to help at a beach in the municipality of Noia, was using a bamboo basket to gather the pellets floating in the water. The Ecologistas en Accion group, one of the cleanup organizers, accused regional authorities of "inaction". It would have been easier to collect "entire bags from the water" right after the containers fell overboard, said Cristobal Lopez, a spokesman for the group.

Spreading damage

Fish and birds often swallow the pellets thinking they are food, and once ingested the granules can make their way into the diet of humans. "Their shape and size attract many species of birds, fish and crustaceans that mistake them for fish eggs" and can die "once their stomachs are full of plastic", Ecologistas en Accion warned in a statement.

Galicia's rugged Atlantic coast, with hundreds of hidden coves, inlets and desolate beaches, is the heart of Europe's shellfish industry. In 2002, the verdant region's coastline was devastated by a huge spill of fuel oil from the Prestige tanker, Spain's worst ecological disaster.

So far the nurdle spill has most impacted beaches in the municipalities of Vigo, Pontevedra, Noia and La Coruna, but the pellets have also been found in neighboring regions of northern Spain. "We still don't know what the extent of the damage could be," Environment Minister Teresa Ribera told Cadena Ser radio on Tuesday.

Spain's state prosecutors have opened an investigation into how the pellets arrived, which has sparked a political blame game ahead of regional elections next month in Galicia, a stronghold of the main opposition conservative Popular Party (PP). Spain's leftist government has accused the region, which has been led by the PP since 2009, of taking too long to ask it for help. "The clean-up of beaches cannot be carried out solely through the tremendous commitment of volunteers and environmental organizations," a spokesman for the environment ministry told AFP.

On Tuesday, the hard-left party Sumar, a junior partner in Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's coalition government, filed a lawsuit against the Galicia regional government alleging "inaction" against the pollution. After initially downplaying the risk posed by the pellets, the Galicia government on Tuesday raised its pollution alert level to two, a step needed to ask for aid from the central government. — AFP

Saudi says value of mineral resources...

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and infrastructure including railways. Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman told the conference that rather than being called an oil-producing country, "what we are working on is that we would like to be an energy-producing country for all sources of energy".

Last year, the kingdom's deep-pocketed sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund, and state mining firm Ma'aden established Manara Minerals to snatch up global mining assets. Manara announced its first high-profile acquisition, a 10-percent stake in Brazil's Vale, in July. But foreign investment in Saudi Arabia "remains far behind ambitious targets", said Torbjorn Soltvedt of Verisk Maplecroft.

"The mining sector still represents one of the best bets for boosting foreign investment, but Saudi Arabia has yet to secure a landmark agreement with a major global mining company for any of its active mining licenses." While the valuation jump an-

nounced on Wednesday could help, Soltvedt said the current dynamic "mirrors a broader problem: Saudi Arabia is still seen more as a source of funding than a destination for FDI."

This week's conference in Riyadh drew delegations from "over 77 countries", organizers said, including resource-rich African countries where Saudi Arabia is expected to pursue mining acquisitions. Washington sent a large contingent including Geoffrey R Pyatt, assistant secretary of state for energy resources, who told reporters his government was focused on "how we de-risk our dependence on China, especially for so many of the key inputs that are going to be a pacing factor in the success or failure of our energy transition."

Soltvedt said mining could become "another pillar" of ties between Washington and Riyadh, who have navigated a tricky oil-for-security partnership for decades. "A formal arrangement where Saudi Arabia acquires African mining assets and US companies secure rights to buy some of the production has yet to emerge," Soltvedt said. "But discussions will continue, especially as Saudi Arabia becomes more active in the African mining sector this year." — AFP

UK, US forces repel 'largest attack' by...

Continued from Page 1

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said the Houthis had launched "a complex attack of Iranian designed one-way attack UAVs", as well as firing anti-ship cruise missiles and an anti-ship ballistic missile from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. They were downed by a combination of F/A-18 warplanes, operating from the USS Dwight D Eisenhower aircraft carrier, three American destroyers and the British naval vessel, CENTCOM said.

Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said "the naval forces, the missile force, and the unmanned air force of the Yemeni armed forces carried out a joint military operation with a large number of ballistic and naval missiles and drones". The attack targeted a US ship that was "providing support" to the Zionist entity during its war against Hamas, he said in a statement on X, formerly Twitter. The incident is the latest since the US set up a multinational naval task force last month to protect Red Sea shipping from Houthi attacks, which are endangering a transpor-

Ecuador orders gangs 'neutralized'...

Continued from Page 1

At least 10 people have been killed in a series of attacks blamed on gangs — eight in Guayaquil, and two "viciously murdered by armed criminals" in the nearby town of Nobol, police said Tuesday. Three other officers were wounded in Guayaquil. After the escape of Jose Adolfo Macias, aka "Fito" — leader of Ecuador's biggest gang Los Choneros — Noboa on Monday declared a nationwide state of emergency and nightly curfew.

Gangs retaliated, taking police officers hostage, setting off explosions in several cities. On Tuesday, they stormed a studio of state-owned TC Television in Guayaquil with guns and explosives. Hooded attackers fired gunshots during a live TC broadcast as a woman could be heard pleading: "Don't shoot, please don't shoot." The intruders forced terrified crew onto the ground and a person could be heard screaming as the studio lights went out but the broadcast continued. Police entered the studio after about 30 minutes of chaos.

Noboa, 36, who was elected last year on a pledge to fight drug-related violence, ordered the military op-

erations against gangs he described as "terrorist organizations and belligerent non-state actors". Authorities reported multiple explosions and cars set alight on Tuesday, including in the capital Quito, and said seven police officers had been kidnapped.

A video circulating on social media showed three of the kidnapped officers sitting on the ground with a gun pointed at them as one was forced to read a statement addressed to Noboa. "You declared war, you will get war," the visibly terrified officer read. "You declared a state of emergency. We declare police, civilians and soldiers to be the spoils of war." The statement added that anyone found on the street after 11:00 pm "will be executed". There was panic on the streets, with shops and businesses in various cities closing early and residents rushing home as face-to-face classes were suspended nationwide until Friday. The head of Ecuador's Joint Command of the Armed Forces, Jaime Vela, said that gangs had "committed bloody acts without precedent". "Despite their brutal wickedness, this attempt will fail," he told media after a security council meeting in Quito headed by Noboa.

Brian Nichols, the top US diplomat for Latin America, said Washington was "extremely concerned" by the violence and kidnappings, and pledged to provide assistance and "remain in close contact" with Noboa's team. — AFP

International

North Korea's Kim brands Seoul 'principal enemy'

Pyongyang to have 'no hesitation in annihilating' the south if provoked

SEOUL: North Korea's Kim Jong Un branded South Korea his country's "principal enemy" and warned he would not hesitate to annihilate it as he toured major weapons factories, state media said Wednesday. The report follows recent live-fire exercises by Pyongyang's military near the contested maritime border that prompted counter-drills and evacuation orders for residents on two South Korean border islands.

Images in state media showed Kim, in a full-length black leather jacket, standing in front of what analysts said were short-range ballistic missile launchers, purportedly nuclear-capable. "The historic time has come at last when we should define as a state most hostile toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea the entity called the Republic of Korea (South Korea)," Kim was reported as saying by the official Korean Central News Agency.

Kim, urging factory workers to modernize and "produce more weapons", said he had "no intention of avoiding a war" and warned he would have no hesitation in "annihilating" South Korea, KCNA added. The live-fire drills that started last Friday marked one of the most serious escalations between the two sides since 2010, when the North shelled Yeonpyeong island, leaving four dead, including two marines.

'Much tougher stance'

Kim, accompanied by senior party and military officials, toured multiple munitions factories on Monday and Tuesday, KCNA said, describing the visits as

encouragement "in the struggle for attaining the huge production goal for the new year".

Kim said that while the North would not "unilaterally" trigger a confrontation, it had "no intention of avoiding a war". Were Seoul to use force against the North, "we will have no hesitation in annihilating the ROK by mobilizing all means and forces in our hands," KCNA reported Kim as saying.

Those comments signal a shift in North Korean policy and hint that Pyongyang will take a "much tougher stance" toward Seoul in future, Hong Min, of the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP. "It is the first time that the North has called the South its 'principal enemy', signifying the change of North Korea's Seoul approach to an ultra-hawkish mode," he said.

The North's recent artillery drills were "emblematic of the changed approach," he added. Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points in decades, after Kim enshrined the country's status as a nuclear power into the constitution and test-fired several advanced intercontinental ballistic missiles.

At Pyongyang's year-end policy meetings, Kim threatened a nuclear attack on the South and called for a build-up of his country's military arsenal ahead of armed conflict that he warned could "break out any time". Kim also successfully put a spy satellite into orbit late last year, after receiving what Seoul said was Russian help, in exchange for arms transfers for Moscow's war in Ukraine. — AFP



This undated picture by North Korea's state media agency KCNA shows Kim Jong Un (center) inspecting a major munitions factory at an undisclosed location in North Korea. — AFP

China says it cracked AirDrop's encryption to identify senders

BEIJING: Chinese state-backed experts have found a way to identify people who use Apple's encrypted AirDrop messaging service, according to the Beijing municipal government. AirDrop allows users to send content to Apple devices in close proximity without an internet connection, encoded so they cannot be viewed by other people.

The service was widely used by participants in pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2019 that China's central government eventually quelled. Apple also limited file-sharing for Chinese iPhone users in 2022 following protests against the ruling Communist Party's stringent zero-Covid policy.

The Beijing municipal government's justice bureau said experts at the Beijing Wangshen Dongjian Justice Appraisal Institute in the capital had devised a way to reveal an iPhone's encrypted device log. From there, they could identify an AirDrop user's phone number and email accounts, the Monday statement on the bureau's website said.

It said the technique "cracked the tough technological problem of the transmission of inappropriate information with anonymous traceability via AirDrop". The method also "raised the efficacy and accuracy of case detection and resolution, and has effectively helped police ascertain several case suspects". The statement did not mention whether the technique had led to any arrests or convictions. Apple did not immediately respond to a request for comment from AFP.

Protest leaflets

There were widespread reports in late 2022 that people in China were using AirDrop to spread digital leaflets critical of the government. The transmissions were believed to be partly inspired by a protest in Beijing in which a man hung banners calling for the removal of President Xi Jinping.

In November of that year, Apple released an AirDrop update that meant users of Apple smartphones in China could only opt-in to receive files from unknown contacts during a 10-minute window before it automatically shuts off. The feature did not previously have a time limit.

The update made it virtually impossible to receive unexpected files from strangers. Chinese authorities have for years used extensive digital surveillance methods to silence dissent, with most domestic social media apps requiring users to register using their real names.

People must provide proof of identification to purchase SIM cards or install home broadband connections. Platforms such as Weibo employ thousands of content moderators and automatically block politically sensitive keywords, such as tennis star Peng Shuai's name after she accused a senior politician of sexual assault in 2021.

Apple has long faced criticism for making perceived concessions to Xi's increasingly repressive China. The company in 2019 removed a Hong Kong map application used by pro-democracy protesters, saying it endangered police, after China warned the tech giant to drop the app.

Apple CEO Tim Cook defended the move at the time, saying the firm had received "credible information" that the app was being used to target individual police officers. In 2020, Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong that has all but quashed public dissent in the former British colony. — AFP

Taiwanese chart separate identity

TAIPEI: Wrapping bamboo leaves around a nugget of sticky rice, cooking instructor Ivy Chen tries to replicate the recipe of a Taiwanese-style dumpling — a distinct cuisine integral to the democratic island's identity. She has spent nearly a quarter-century championing Taiwan's cuisine and teaching recipes to tourists and sometimes locals, explaining how a dish that originated from across the strait in China has transformed into a Taiwanese staple. The idea of a distinctly Taiwanese identity is looming large in the minds of some voters as the island prepares to go to the polls on Saturday to elect a new president and choose the path of relations with Beijing over the next four years. "I am made in Taiwan — I was born here, I grew up here, I know all the authentic flavors, I know the traditions," Chen, 66, told AFP from her Taipei kitchen.

Her latest cookbook "Made in Taiwan" seeks to show that "Taiwanese cuisine stands on its own", detailing recipes ubiquitous across the island such as the pork-belly buns and stinky tofu sold in Taipei's night markets. "(The) very act of being Taiwanese is a constant fight against unrelenting Chinese state attempts to obliterate our identity," Chen's co-author Clarissa Wei wrote in the book's introduction. "Our food isn't a subset of Chinese food because Taiwan isn't a part of China." Their staunch declaration of Taiwanese identity is in line with how the majority of the island feels — a clear separation from China, even as it claims Taiwan as part of its territory. After the Communist Party gained control in China in 1949, the nationalists fled to Taiwan, leading to a political standoff. But as the island moved from autocracy to democracy by the 1990s, sentiments of the population — which had initially been educated under a Chinese-first curriculum — began shifting within a more Taiwan-centric environment.

Taiwan's older generations see the "unification of China as inevitable", said Liu Wen, an expert on history and ethnology at Academia Sinica. "They respond to China's encroachment and the military exercises in a passive way because they believe that eventually ... Taiwan and China will be united."

'Second-class' food

This mindset is fading among younger generations. In 1992, around a quarter of the population identified as Chinese. But less than three percent now feel that way, according to polling from Taiwan's National Chengchi University for the past three years. Comedian Kylie Wang, who runs a popular news podcast, described herself as "without question" Taiwanese. "I'm born here and I love my country so I'm Taiwanese. My identity is Taiwanese," the 38-year-old said. Cookbook author Chen, who was born in 1957 — during the authoritarian nationalist-led regime — said this was not always the case. "Taiwanese food was considered second-grade food and the nationalistic government boosted Chinese food as the proper, high-quality food." This coincided with a push for people to speak only Mandarin Chinese in public. — AFP



TAIPEI: This picture taken on Dec 19, 2023 shows Ivy Chen (left), co-author of the "Made in Taiwan" cookbook, teaching students in her kitchen. — AFP



SEOUL: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung waves to his supporters as he leaves the Seoul National University Hospital on Jan 10, 2024. — AFP

'Political beliefs' behind attack on S Korean politician

SEOUL: The recent stabbing of South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung was meticulously planned by a well-prepared assailant who wanted to prevent the politician from becoming president, police said Wednesday.

Lee, chair of the Democratic Party, was stabbed in the neck in a near-fatal attack January 2 in southern Busan city by a man who pushed through a crowd to get close to him, pretending to be a supporter. Lee was wounded in his jugular vein and underwent hours of emergency surgery, but he recovered well and was released from hospital Wednesday, the same day that police announced the results of their investigation into his attacker.

"The suspect decided to kill Lee to prevent him from becoming president," Busan police chief Woo Cheol-mun told reporters, adding that the man had been planning the attack for months. He purchased the knife used in the attack in April, and had followed Lee on five separate occasions since June, disguising himself as a supporter while waiting for an opportunity to strike. Police said the man's "political beliefs" led him to commit the crime. The suspect also had "grown disgruntled" over what he viewed as a slow pace of prosecution of Lee, who is facing multiple criminal cases.

Lee lost in 2022 to conservative Yoon Suk Yeol in the tightest presidential race in South Korea's history. Lee is widely expected to run for president again in 2027, and recent polls have indicated that he remains a strong contender.

But his bid for the top office has been overshadowed by a string of scandals, and he faces trial on charges of bribery in connection with a firm that is suspected of illicitly transferring \$8 million to North Korea.

'Politics of hatred'

Lee, 60, was discharged from the Seoul National University Hospital and told reporters that the attack should serve as an impetus to overhaul South Korea's notoriously confrontational politics. "I sincerely hope this incident could serve as a milestone to end the politics of hatred and restore a politics of respect and coexistence", he said, his first public comments since the incident. "I myself too will reflect on my deeds and strive hard to create politics of hope."

The suspect is a 66-year-old real estate agent identified by the surname Kim who had struggled financially and had been unable to pay rent for his office for seven months, according to Yonhap news agency. Several high-profile South Korean politicians have been attacked in public in past years.

An elderly man hit Song Young-gil, who led the Democratic Party before Lee, in the head with a blunt object in 2022. In 2006, Park Geun-hye, then leader of the conservative party who later became president, was assaulted with a knife at a rally. The attack left a scar on her face. South Korean politics is extremely adversarial, with many former presidents being prosecuted and jailed for corruption by rivals after leaving power — and later pardoned. — AFP



KHARKIV: A prosecutor's office expert inspects remains of a missile used during an attack on Kharkiv on Jan 2. — AFP

US, allies slam alleged N Korea missiles to Russia

WASHINGTON: Nearly 50 countries joined the United States on Tuesday in condemning North Korea's alleged transfer of missiles to Russia, demanding an immediate end to the cooperation. The United States last week said that Russia, short of weapons nearly two years into its invasion, attacked Ukraine with missiles from North Korea, which is under a slew of international sanctions for its missile and nuclear work.

In a joint statement, Secretary of State Antony Blinken was joined by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and 47 foreign ministers in condemning the alleged transfer in "the strongest possible terms." "The transfer of these weapons increases the suffering of the Ukrainian people, supports Russia's war of

aggression, and undermines the global non-proliferation regime," said the statement released by the US State Department.

They said the alleged missile shipment "flagrantly" violated sanctions on North Korea by the United Nations Security Council, of which Russia is a permanent member. "We are closely monitoring what Russia provides to the DPRK in return for these weapons exports," said the statement, referring to the North by its official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

They called on the two countries to abide by Security Council resolutions and "immediately cease all activities that violate them." The 47 countries that signed overwhelmingly came from Europe and also included South Korea and Japan, treaty-bound allies of the United States.

Other signatories include the Zionist entity, which has been cautious in its statements on Russia — heavily involved in neighboring Syria — but also has counted on US support in its three-month military attack on Gaza in Palestine. — AFP

Business

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 2024

Seeking robots neither too human nor too machine at CES tech show

Amazon currently testing Agility's 'Digit', a two-legged android



LAS VEGAS: Collobot, a service robot from Nuwa robotics which can tailor software and hardware to fit any scenario, is seen at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) on January 9, 2024. — AFP photos

LAS VEGAS: With big, expressive eyes, elfin ears and adorable cooing, Miroka and Miroki could be an apparition from your favorite cartoon. But behind their cute facade, these robots are all sensors and engineering, and designed to perform the drudgery of logistical support in hospitals or hotels. "Why live with ugly machines," says Jerome Monceaux, head of Paris-based start-up Enchanted Tools, who was on hand to present the pair at the CES tech show in Las Vegas. "I could cut their heads off and erase their colors, but I'm not sure you'd want to share your daily life with them," he continues.

A number of start-ups are working on robots that look familiar and help humans, without making them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Amazon is currently testing Agility's "Digit", a two-legged android that wouldn't look out of place in Star Wars, to carry plastic bins in its warehouses. Enchanted Tools has also bet on team-playing robots, designed to relieve staff of repetitive tasks. But in addition to helping out, Miroki is meant to bring a touch of "wonder" to the workplace. "It's a way of celebrating something very beautiful in ourselves and avoid becoming machines ourselves," said Monceaux. His company

hopes to produce 100,000 robots over the next 10 years.

Filling jobs

Every CES brings its share of companion robots and androids, but they haven't gained much ground in homes and businesses. At the same time, "labor shortage has been the number one problem since COVID across different industries. Today, we have roughly 18 million job vacancies," said Joe Lui, the global lead on robotics at Accenture.

And while some tasks have been adapted for mechanical arms and autonomous forklifts, many others require language, mobility and understanding of the environment and therefore humans. Or humanoids infused with artificial intelligence, said Lui, who thinks AI can bring robots into everyday life. "Humanoids are going to be really like coworkers in the coming years and natural language interfaces like ChatGPT are going to be prevalent," said Chris Nielsen, head of Levatas, a US company that has integrated generative AI software into Spot, a quadruped robot from Boston Dynamics. Thanks to generative AI, robots depend less on pre-written scripts.

But "don't worry, robots like us are

designed to help humans make their lives better," robot Moxie told AFP. "We always follow the instructions and programs that humans give us. So you have the control." As tall as a teddy bear and doped with generative AI, Moxie is capable of interacting with children, telling them stories, giving math lessons and performing dance moves with two arms. "Moxie isn't here to replace anyone. Moxie is a mentor, tutor and a friend," said Daniel Thorpe of Embodied, the company that created the robot.

'Frightening'

Two-legged, mobile and autonomous humanoids still have a long way to go before they leave the laboratory. But some of their precursors have at least made it out of CES, like Moxie or Aura, a highly anthropomorphic robot that entertains patrons at The Sphere, Las Vegas' new concert venue. "I receive a lot of questions like how old are you, what's the meaning of life, who's going to win the Super Bowl?" said Aura to curious viewers.

Aura punctuates her answers with jokes, exaggerated laughter and even rolls her shoulders into a shrug. For Monceaux, highly anthropomorphic ro-



A Miroka social logistics robot by Enchanted Tools uses its AI to interact with attendees in real time during CES 2024.

bots risk "provoking an epidemic reaction. They create confusion between our humanity and their robot nature, and are frightening." "Nobody wants to have one in their home or hospital on a daily basis," he said. Above all, he added, "it creates an expectation of behavior similar to our own", and therefore a risk of disappointment, because the robot

doesn't see and understand the world as we do, and won't for years to come." For Jonathan Hurst, co-founder of Agility, its Digit robot would look strange without a head and creep out humans. "We had a lot of conversation about that internally at the company" and the head was kept even if it provided no significant technical purpose. — AFP

Honda unveils futuristic EV designs to hit US market

LAS VEGAS: Honda on Tuesday unveiled a new electric vehicle series to launch commercially in 2026, revealing a futuristic concept car at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. "We have gone back to basics and formulated the Honda 0 Series with a design for the new era," Shinji Aoyama, global vice president, said of the snazzy offerings. "A bold and pure proportion that from the first glance is overwhelmingly different from other EVs to evoke a new perspective for people."

The "Saloon" model features a low platform with a wide interior and sleek silhouette, with capacity to introduce "new advancements in design, automated driving, connected technologies, performance, and battery efficiency," according to a Honda press release. The firm plans to introduce a commercial model based on the Saloon in the United States in 2026. The Japanese company also presented a second concept car dubbed the Space Hub that employs some of the same visual motifs as the Saloon, but in a larger form akin to the sport utility vehicles currently popular in the United States.

To mark a new era, Honda is tweaking its signature "H" mark from the current incarnation, which dates to 1981. The new design evokes "two outstretched hands" to represent "Honda's commitment to expand the possibilities of mobility and continue to meet the needs of its customers," the company said. Three



LAS VEGAS: People view the Moonwalker from Shift, the first-ever mobility device that allows one to walk at the speed of a run up to three times faster than walking, during Showstoppers at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. — AFP

years ago, Honda set an ambitious target of achieving 100 percent electrified vehicle sales by 2040.

The company is also working with US auto titan General Motors on a driverless taxi service. When that plan was announced in October, "dozens" of the taxis were expected to be launched in Tokyo in early 2026. But in an interview with Bloomberg TV in Las Vegas on Tuesday, Honda CEO Toshihiro Mihe no longer gave a specific time frame. "We're thinking of sometime in the late 2020s for introducing self-driving vehicles into an urban environment," he said, according to Bloomberg. The robotaxi project is being developed by GM's self-driving car subsidiary Cruise, whose operations have been on hold since October 27 after California halted testing of the vehicles. — AFP

CES pet tech: Throw a dog a bone - or an AI collar

LAS VEGAS: They don't own smartphones and can't go online, but that doesn't prevent them from being connected: Pets are benefiting from a slew of animal-oriented technology at this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. How's Fido feeling? Tracking your dog's steps, detecting its heart problems, knowing exactly when kitty's litterbox has become too full - it's all possible. Here's a roundup of some of the technology for pets and their owners on display at this year's CES:

Smart collars

What is Rover up to now? The Smart Dog Collar not only helps owners locate their pet in real time, but also monitors its activity - including its heart rate and whether it is barking. The technology was developed by French GPS specialist Invoxia, which now also offers a mini version (small enough even for cats) called Minitailz - which records health data and can even help detect atrial fibrillation (a type of irregular heart rhythm) in animals.

Minitailz uses generative AI and notes when an animal is doing anything from scratching to eating. It even identifies when pets are exhibiting stress. Lately, daily exercise quotas have gone to the dogs - literally. Australian startup Ilume's collar, called Tracker, counts a dog's steps and lets an owner know via smartphone what a pet is up to - like walking or sleeping.

The company also offers a Smart Bowl, whose algorithm calculates ideal food portions based on age, weight and activity. The pet products market is expected to skyrocket in coming years, according to industry trackers, which is no surprise given that some 66 percent of US households now have at least one pet, according to the American Pet Products Association (APPA). Animals aren't the only ones benefiting from these relationships however: Numerous scientific studies have concluded that pet owners are healthier and have less risk of cardiovascular diseases in particular. Pet-related innovations are also helping out dogs' and cats' human companions. The Whiskers litter box sifts litter into a bin so owners don't have to scoop - and notifies pet parents via app when the litter drawer is full and needs emptying. — AFP



LAS VEGAS: The Mix Master Moodie, an AI generated cocktail maker from Doosan Robotics, delivers a drink during a display at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. — AFP

Business

Cubans fear worsening inflation as fuel price to soar 500 percent

Cash-strapped government announces five-fold increase

HAVANA: Already under the yoke of inflation and product scarcity, many Cubans don't know how they will cope with a new 500-percent surge in the fuel price. The communist island's cash-strapped government announced the five-fold increase Monday with effect from February 1, as part of a series of measures seeking to cut its budget 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, it said.

To buy ten liters of fuel for his motorbike - enough for a week - Domingo Wong told AFP he would now have to fork over half his monthly salary of about 21 dollars. "Ten liters is what I use in a week without doing anything special, just the daily: going to work, bringing my daughter to school, visiting my sister," the 57-year-old building guard said as he waited patiently in line to fill up his bike.

State-owned companies and private carriers will be able to buy fuel "at wholesale prices," which will increase by 50 percent, Transport Minister Eduardo Rodríguez said on Tuesday. He added that most public transport fares will maintain "their current prices", but announced major increases in domestic airline tickets and inter-province bus fares.

The nation 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 coronavirus pandemic, the tightening of US sanctions in recent years, and structural weaknesses in the economy. According to official estimates, the Cuban economy shrank by two percent in 2023, while inflation reached 30 percent in 2023. Independent experts say this is likely an under-estimation.

Fuel and other basics are already hard to come by. Cuba's government, which subsidizes almost all essential goods and services, already intimated last month it would have to increase fuel prices. "The country can not maintain the price of fuel, which is the cheapest in the world," said Economy Minister Alejandro Gil. The government on Monday also confirmed a 25-percent rise in the price of electricity for major residential consumers, as well as an increase in the price of natural gas.

Many Cubans now fear even worse inflation. "Prices in general will increase because even the food we eat depends on transport," motorbike taxi driver Rafael Olivier, 21, told AFP in Havana. Javier Vega, a 33-year-old driver for a ride-hailing company, said he feared the effect on trip prices in a country where public transport is already limited due to a shortage of fuel and car parts. Energy Minister Vicente de la O Levy said the price hike was exactly meant to curb shortages, "to buy fuel" and have "a stable supply."



HAVANA: A driver arrives at a petrol station in Havana, on January 9, 2024, a day after the Cuban government announced a 500 percent hike in fuel prices starting in February. - AFP

Authorities also announced tourists will now pay for fuel in foreign currency, also in short supply, and said the Central Bank was considering adjusting the exchange rate against the dollar. The peso has been devalued twice since 2021. Economist Omar Everleny Perez told AFP that fuel may be cheap in Cuba

compared to the rest of the world "but if you compare it with salaries in the country, it is very expensive." "Our purchasing power is not enough, it will affect all of us," said independent worker Juan Antonio Cruzata, 59. The average Cuban salary is the equivalent of about 40 dollars per month. - AFP

Asian markets drop again as traders steel for inflation, earnings

HONG KONG: Asian markets on Wednesday resumed the losses that have characterized the year so far, following a tepid lead from Wall Street as traders prepare for the release of key inflation data and start of earnings season. A nervousness has swept through trading floors in the past week as investors grow concerned that they may have been too hasty at the end of 2023 in pricing in a series of Federal Reserve interest rate cuts this year.

The bank said at its December meeting that it saw three reductions over the next 12 months but a string of data showing inflation tumbling and the economy slowing saw markets factor twice as many - sending stocks soaring. But the release last week of minutes from that meeting, and a forecast-beating jobs report forced dealers to re-evaluate their positions.

Analysts said consumer price index data this week will be crucial to how markets perform in the near term, with a miss on the upside seen fuelling another sell-off. Traders had ended last year optimistic that the Fed would cut rates for the first time in March but bets on that have fallen on swaps markets, while some analysts are now predicting the first to come in June.

Also coming up is the beginning of US earnings season later in the month, which could provide some idea about how companies are faring in the high-rate environment. "Attention gradually shifts to the upcoming earnings season to gain insights into companies' growth trajectories," said Stephen Innes at SPI Asset Management. "Mega-cap technology firms... are under close scrutiny due to their significant influence and substantial weight in the S&P 500. Investors are keen to discern whether recent declines are justified or whether companies' profits remain robust enough to revive the end-of-year rally."



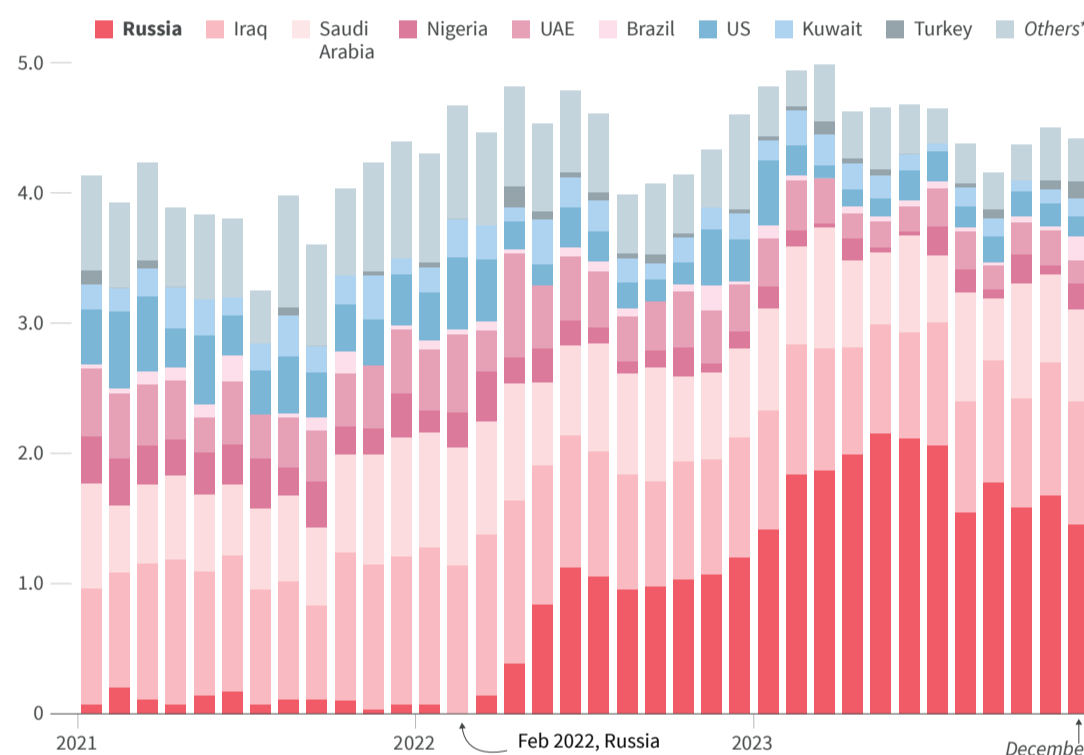
KARACHI: Fishermen repair their fishing nets on the boats at Ibrahim Haidery fishing village on the outskirts of Karachi, on January 9, 2024. - AFP

The S&P 500 and Dow ended lower, though the Nasdaq eked out a small gain, with sentiment also dampened by the World Bank decision to cut its 2024 global growth outlook, due in part to weaker activity in the United States and China. Asia performed hardly any better, having enjoyed a much-needed bounce on Tuesday. Hong Kong, Shanghai, Sydney, Seoul, Singapore, Taipei, Manila, Mumbai, Wellington and Bangkok all fell. Tokyo extended gains to hit a fresh 34-year high, boosted by a slowdown in wage growth that observers said would make it harder for the Bank of Japan to shift away from its ultra-loose monetary policy.

That, along with the Fed rate outlook, weighed on the yen. "With the market's expectation of an early Fed rate cut receding after the start of the new year, Japanese stocks remained firm on the back of expectations that the yen's depreciation against the dollar will support corporate earnings," said JPMorgan's Rie Nishihara. London and Paris fell at the open, while Frankfurt as flat. Bitcoin was slightly lower after whipsawing Tuesday following an unauthorized message posted to the US Securities and Exchange Commission's official X account saying it had approved the bitcoin exchange traded funds. The message sent the cryptocurrency to a 22-month high near \$48,000 but it sank back after SEC chair Gary Gensler took to his own X account to warn that the market account had been "compromised" and that an "unauthorized tweet" had been posted. It was sitting around \$45,800 Wednesday. - AFP

India oil imports

By origin, monthly rate in million barrels per day



*Mexico, Angola, Oman, Qatar, Colombia, Saudi-Kuwait Neutral Zone, Egypt, Malaysia, Rep. of Congo, Ecuador, Algeria, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Brunei

Source: Kpler data AFP

Rising prices cap India's thirst for Russian oil

NEW DELHI: Indian purchases of Russian crude in defiance of Western pressure over the Ukraine war have fallen to an 11-month low as the price tag on the discounted oil rises, figures show. Since the invasion of Ukraine nearly two years ago, India has bought hundreds of millions of barrels of cut-price Russian crude, saving itself billions of dollars while bolstering Moscow's war coffers. The purchases have catapulted it to second place among Russia's customers behind China, and Indian officials have made no secret of their decision to prioritize national interest over international sanctions against Moscow.

But the price of Russian crude has risen in the face of OPEC+ production cuts and increased demand from China, analysts say, making it less attractive to Indian customers. Indian refiners bought 1.45 million barrels per day of Russian oil last month, their lowest amount since last January and down nearly 16 percent from November, according to global energy trade intelligence platform Kpler.

The "interplay between India and China" was a key driver of the change, Viktor Katona, lead crude analyst at Kpler told AFP, "as both countries now vie for the same barrels". The biggest beneficiary of the change is Moscow: Russian crude has been trading above \$85 per barrel, reports say, even though a coalition of the G7, EU and Australia imposed a \$60 price cap a year ago. New Delhi's reduced imports will be welcomed by some

European policymakers who have raised concerns over how Indian refiners have processed Russian crude into fuel for the European market, effectively bypassing the EU's sanctions.

Pragmatism, not politics

New Delhi and Moscow have ties dating back to the Cold War, and Russia remains by far the biggest arms supplier to the world's most populous country. India has shied away from explicit condemnations of Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, even as it pursues greater security ties with the United States. But instead of following in the West's footsteps, it has doubled down on its historical partnership with Russia to secure cheap energy, to help it boost growth without running up its fiscal deficit.

Russia has become India's top oil supplier, overtaking the traditional heavyweight Middle Eastern exporters, and remains so by a distance despite the recent falls. India is the world's third-largest importer and consumer of oil, and imports nearly 80 percent of its needs. In the 10 months after Russia invaded Ukraine, India saved \$3.6 billion by importing heavily discounted crude from Russia, according to data presented by a ruling party lawmaker in parliament. Just before the war, India was importing just 67,500 barrels a day of Russian crude, Kpler figures show.

Its purchases soared to peak at over two million barrels per day in May 2023, but have steadily shrunk since. Government officials say the recent change is purely pragmatic and price-driven, rather than political. "If they don't offer us a discount, why would we buy from them," Indian oil minister Hardeep Singh Puri told reporters last week. "India's leadership has only one requirement: that the Indian consumer gets the energy at the most economical price, without disruption," he added. - AFP



GUWAHATI: An oil tankers train passes near the Guwahati Refinery operated by Indian Oil Corporation, in Guwahati. Indian purchases of Russian crude in defiance of Western pressure over the Ukraine war have fallen to an 11-month low as the price tag on the discounted oil rises, figures show. - AFP

China, Finland hold 'constructive talks' on damaged pipeline

HELSINKI: Finnish President Sauli Niinisto and China's Xi Jinping on Wednesday said their countries held "constructive dialogue" over a Baltic Sea gas pipeline that Finnish authorities believe was damaged by a Chinese vessel, Helsinki said. Finnish police in late October recovered an anchor believed to have damaged the Balticconnector pipeline between Finland and Estonia on October 8. They said findings suggested it belonged to the Chinese cargo ship Newnew Polar Bear. "The presidents noted the constructive dialogue between the countries regarding the Balticconnector pipeline incident," a statement from the Finnish presidency said. A Chinese statement about the presidents' video-link meeting made no mention of talks on the damaged pipeline. Finnish officials said in late October that China was cooperating in its investigation.

The incident came just over a year after underwater explosions struck three of four Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea, cutting off a major supply route to Europe from Russia at a time of heightened tensions between Moscow and the West over the war in Ukraine. The cause of that sabotage remains unknown. The Finnish operator of Balticconnector said in October it would take at least five months to repair the pipeline, leaving Finland dependent on liquefied natural gas imports for the winter.

Natural gas accounts for around five percent of Finland's energy consumption, being mainly used in industry and combined heat and power production. In the Finnish statement, Niinisto, whose country joined NATO last year, said he had also raised the issue of the war in Ukraine in his talks with Xi and "stressed the role of China in achieving a just and lasting peace." In a summary of the meeting on Chinese state television CCTV, Xi said the Asian nation was "firmly pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace." - AFP

Malaysia's 'Silicon Valley' hit by four-day water cut

PENANG: More than half a million households and businesses in northern Malaysia will be without water for up to four days from Wednesday due to engineering works at a major treatment plant, officials said. The disruption has forced hundreds of manufacturers in Penang state - often dubbed the "Silicon Valley of the East" - to suspend operations. Most schools have closed and some hospitals have postponed minor surgeries. About 100 water tanks have been deployed to help ease the situation, but some residents expressed anger over the disruption.

"Four days without running water is absurd," Ooi Chin Hock, a former investment banker who filled up six large plastic containers to stockpile water at his home, told AFP. "This is a black dot on the state," he added. Technicians carrying out the repair works at the Sungai Dua water treatment plant, which supplies water to about 80 percent of the state, were replacing two huge leaking and rusted water valves. Leaky pipes in other locations would also be replaced during the four-day interruption. "Work is progressing as planned," Penang Water Supply Corporation chief executive K Pathmanathan told reporters.

Pathmanathan said they hoped for a gradual resumption of water supply from Thursday. Lee Teong Li of the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers in Penang said most of its members would close for the first two days and hope for some partial water supply resumption after that. "We will run into millions of dollars in losses. We will lose revenue, since we have to pay for workers while being shut down," he told AFP. Penang counts manufacturing and tourism as key economic sectors. It is home to global electronic firms like Intel, AMD, Hewlett Packard, Motorola, Clarion and Flextronics. - AFP

Business

Boeing CEO takes responsibility for near-catastrophic aircraft incident

'It is our mistake,' Boeing's Calhoun admits, vows transparency

NEW YORK: Boeing Chief Executive Dave Calhoun took responsibility on Tuesday for a near-catastrophic Alaska Airlines incident last week, vowing "complete transparency" as the aviation giant tries to pivot from its latest crisis. "We're going to approach this (by) number one acknowledging our mistake," Calhoun told employees at a safety meeting called after Friday's emergency landing, which came after one of the plane's panels blew out mid-flight. "We're going to approach it with 100 percent and complete transparency every step of the way," he said.

Calhoun, who ascended to Boeing's top post in January 2020 as the company reeled from two fatal crashes on the 737 MAX, committed to working with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), which is probing the incident. The NTSB is "as good as it gets," Calhoun said, according to remarks released by the company. "I trust every step they take, and they will get to a conclusion."

US regulators have grounded 171 737 MAX 9 planes with the same configuration as the Alaska Airlines jet. The affected panel, a door plug, is used to fill an unneeded emergency exit in planes. NTSB investigators suggested Monday night that the part was not affixed adequately. On Tuesday, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said it was still working with Boeing to finalize detailed inspection instructions for grounded planes.

"Boeing offered an initial version of instructions yesterday which they are now revising because of feedback received in response," the FAA said Tuesday. "Upon receiving the revised version of instructions from Boeing the FAA will conduct a thorough review." Boeing said it is in contact with customers

and the FAA on requirements. "As part of the process, we are making updates based on their feedback and requirements," a spokesman said.

Apology

The back-and-forth on inspections comes after both United Airlines and Alaska Airlines reported Monday finding loose hardware on some of their Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes during preliminary inspections undertaken since Friday's incident. Hundreds of flights have been canceled due to the grounding of a fraction of the MAX fleet.

Alaska Airlines apologized to inconvenienced consumers in a post on X, formerly Twitter. "We understand that travel plans have been impacted, and we are doing everything possible to minimize the disruption," Alaska posted, reiterating that it is awaiting further direction from Boeing and the FAA. "Until then, the fleet will remain grounded," Alaska Airlines said. The crisis has heaped renewed pressure on Boeing, which has struggled to completely find its footing since the earlier MAX crashes led to a lengthy grounding of the jets.

Boeing has struggled with supply chain and quality control problems since the MAX returned to service, limiting its output and hitting its bottom line. The company's stock price has dropped over nine percent since Friday's incident. 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.

"It's just bad - sloppy work like this," said Michel Merluzeau, an aeronautics specialist with consult-



NEW YORK: An Embraer E175LR passengers aircraft of American Eagles airlines (center) is seen at La Guardia Airport on January 9, 2024. — AFP

ing firm AIR. "It's an indication of something going through the safety net at Boeing, for whatever reason." Boeing meanwhile reported on Tuesday it had delivered 44 737 MAX jets in December, reaching a total of 396 of the jets for all of 2023. That was within

Boeing's target, which the company lowered to 375 to 400 from an earlier range of 400-450. Boeing reported delivering 528 jets in all last year, up from 480 in 2022. However, deliveries stand far below the 806 in 2018 prior to the lengthy MAX grounding. — AFP

New US labor rule may help gig workers qualify as employees

WASHINGTON: A rule issued Tuesday by the US Labor Department making it tougher for companies to classify workers as "independent contractors" could take a toll on the gig economy -- and is likely to face challenges. The Biden administration rule rescinds requirements under former president Donald Trump which made it easier to consider workers contractors rather than employees. This includes drivers of ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft, or delivery workers for companies like DoorDash.

But the Department of Labor said Tuesday that it believes the Trump-era rule is not in line with US law and judicial precedent. Its latest rule "seeks to combat employee misclassification," which impacts workers' rights and "facilitates wage theft," the department added. Employees generally cost more to companies, given their right to minimum wage and overtime pay, among other benefits and protections. "Misclassifying employees as independent contractors is a serious issue that deprives workers of basic rights and protections," said Acting Secretary of Labor Julie Su.

The new requirement restores a "multi-factor analysis" used to determine a worker's ties with a company. These consider six factors such as chances for profit or loss, the financial stake and nature of resources invested by a worker, and the degree of permanence of the work relationship. This is expected to take effect on March 11. The 2021 rule placed more weight on the amount of control workers had over their work, and their opportunity for profit or loss.

Lyft said Tuesday that it does not see "immediate or direct impact" on its business for now, while Uber said that this "will not impact the classification" of Americans driving for Uber. Industry group Flex, which represents several US gig platforms, said the guidance "could generate significant uncertainty." "We will seek to ensure implementation of this rule does not target workers who overwhelmingly turn to app-based platforms to earn supplemental income on their own terms," Flex added. — AFP

Spain's Grifols to sue fund that questioned its financial reporting

MADRID: Spanish pharmaceutical firm Grifols said Wednesday it will take legal action against a US hedge fund that questioned its financial reporting, causing its shares to plunge. In a research note published Tuesday, Gotham City Research accused the Barcelona-based company of "manipulating" its reported debt and operational results to "artificially reduce" its debt ratio, and therefore its financing costs.

The report caused shares in Grifols, which makes blood plasma-based medicines, to close down nearly 26 percent on Tuesday, wiping out almost 2.2 billion euros (\$2.4 billion) off the company's market value. Gotham City is a prominent "short-seller" hedge fund that borrows stock in a

company and sells it in hopes of buying it back cheaper later to return it to the lender and pocket the difference.

The stock was up 9.1 percent on Wednesday in early afternoon trading. In a regulatory filing on Wednesday, Grifols said it "will initiate legal actions against Gotham City Research for the significant financial and reputational damage caused to the company and to all its stakeholders." "Grifols has been operating in the plasma sector for more than 100 years, it understands the business and its dynamics," it added. Grifols also said its board fully supported its chief executive officer, Thomas Glanzmann, who has headed the company since December.

In a separate statement issued Tuesday, Grifols denied the allegations made by Gotham City Research, saying it had always shown "integrity" with its accounting. Spanish stock market regulator CNMV said it was analyzing the hedge fund's report. The company traces its history back to 1909, first as a blood analysis and transfusion laboratory before specializing in products derived from blood



SANT CUGAT DEL VALLES: This picture shows a sign pointing the direction towards the headquarters of Spanish pharmaceutical firm Grifols in Sant Cugat del Valles, near Barcelona. — AFP

plasma. Grifols has since expanded and is now present in over 30 countries including Australia, the United States and Japan. It posted revenue of over six billion euros (\$6.6 billion) in 2022. — AFP

Farmer blockades, train strikes snarl transport in Germany

BERLIN: Nationwide strikes brought German transport to a near standstill Wednesday, with railway workers on a three-day stoppage and farmers on tractors blocking autobahns in a bitter protest over subsidy cuts. The ill-tempered sector disputes mark the start of what is expected to be a challenging year for Chancellor Olaf Scholz's unwieldy three-way government as it struggles with a weak economy and sinking popularity.

The GDL train drivers union called the strike on cargo as well as passenger routes after talks with public rail operator Deutsche Bahn hit an impasse. Deutsche Bahn warned of "massive" disruptions to service until Friday evening, urging travelers to "avoid any unnecessary journeys" during the strike. At Berlin's central station, student Philipp Kolb, 22, said the strike had complicated his travel plans. "I was supposed to take the train to Hamburg at 6 am," he said.

"Now I have to push the trip back by three hours but I think other people were hit harder than me." Passenger Piotr Bulej said he sympathized with the plight of the striking drivers in the face of high inflation eating into real wages. "People work a lot more hours with less money. The prices rise every day, every week," he said. "One has to protest, one has to say that."

'Continue the fight'

Deutsche Bahn lost in a last-ditch bid to halt the industrial action in the courts after a Frankfurt tribunal gave the union the green light late Tuesday. Following work stoppages in November and December, the current strike marks the longest in the protracted dispute over pay and working hours. Beyond salary increases to offset inflation for the 10,000 employees it represents, the union is seeking a reduction to a 35-hour, four-day work week.

Deutsche Bahn said last month it had made an offer of an 11-percent wage increase going into talks, as well as a "bonus to compensate for inflation" of up to 2,850 euros (\$3,120). The operator said Sunday it had come back with an improved offer last week which it said represented a "major step forward" regarding union demands on working hours. But GDL chief Claus Weselsky dismissed the latest overture by the employer in an interview with public broadcaster ZDF Wednesday as a "provocation". While stressing he was "ready for compromise", Weselsky warned that "if there is nothing by Friday, we will take a break and then continue the fight".

Deutsche Bahn last year also clashed with the EVG rail union, which represents some 180,000 non-driver rail personnel, reaching an agreement in late August. The



BERLIN: A commuter stands on an empty platform at the main train station in Berlin on January 10, 2024. The GDL train drivers union has announced strike action for the period from January 10 up to January 12, 2024. — AFP

railway strike, which hit long-distance, regional and commuter lines, comes amid a week-long protest by farmers over an end to tax breaks as the government seeks to trim spending.

Travellers who hoped to beat the strike by taking their cars ran into further obstacles presented by angry farmers staging motorway blockades across the country with their tractors since Monday. The sector has been up in arms over government plans to withdraw certain tax breaks for agriculture this year, which were announced after a shock court ruling forced the government to find savings in the 2024 budget. Pupils in rural states hit hard by the farmers' blockades including Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania were

given permission to stay home if their way to school was impeded.

German Farmers' Association president Joachim Rukwied also threatened further protests if the sector's demands for a full government reversal on the cuts were not met, cautioning against accepting "rotten compromises". "On Monday we are going to stage a big demonstration in Berlin and we will consider further steps," he told ZDF, stressing that they were fighting for "a level playing field and fairness in the EU". Scholz, whose government's approval rating has plummeted in recent months, said Monday Berlin had no plans to back down, calling the cuts "right and balanced" and urging "orderly" protests. — AFP

False tweet from US regulator briefly sends bitcoin soaring

NEW YORK: An unauthorized message posted to the US Securities and Exchange Commission's official X account briefly sent bitcoin prices soaring, forcing the market regulator to deny it had approved a new cryptocurrency product. Just after 4 pm local time, the price of the world's largest digital currency in terms of circulation surged towards its highest level for more than 22 months, before falling again a few minutes later. The jump in the price of bitcoin to almost \$48,000 came immediately after the SEC published a message on its X account (formerly Twitter) suggesting that it had approved the long-awaited launch of a new type of investment product, known as an ETF.

But minutes later, SEC Chairman Gary Gensler took to his own X account to warn that the mar-

ket regulator's account had been "compromised" and that an "unauthorized tweet" had been posted there. "The unauthorized tweet regarding bitcoin ETFs was not made by the SEC or its staff," an SEC spokesperson later told AFP. The market has been speculating for weeks that the SEC would grant approval for this new product, which would, for the first time, offer investors an index fund that replicates the performance of bitcoin without them having to hold the cryptocurrency directly.

Last year, a federal appeals court in Washington confirmed that the SEC was not justified in its decision to deny asset manager Grayscale approval for its bitcoin ETF, sparking speculation that it would soon approve such a fund. The Wall Street regulator has until Wednesday to rule on the oldest application for a bitcoin ETF currently under consideration, that of the investment company 21Shares. If the SEC were to give the ETF the green light, analysts widely expect it would broaden the appeal of - and access to - bitcoin and accelerate the adoption of this digital currency. — AFP



MIAMI BEACH: A view of atmosphere during Bitcoin Conference 2023 at Miami Beach Convention Center in Miami Beach, Florida. — AFP

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 2024

A private US lunar lander mission is doomed to fail, and NASA pushes back plans to return astronauts to the Moon. The twin developments Tuesday represent blows to America's ambitions to stimulate a commercial space economy, develop a lasting presence on Earth's nearest neighbor, and use it as a jump off point for Mars. China meanwhile is looming in the rear view mirror, targeting 2030 for a crewed landing.

Astrobotic's Peregrine Lunar Lander blasted off Monday from Florida's Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, then successfully separated from its rocket. Just hours later, though, Astrobotic reported an inability to orient Peregrine's solar panel towards the Sun and keep its battery topped up. A propulsion system glitch was found to be causing a critical loss of fuel and damaging the spacecraft's exterior.

The company said Monday the mission had "no chance of soft landing"—dashing hopes for the first ever successful landing by a non-government mission, and America's first soft touchdown on the Moon since Apollo 17 in 1972. NASA has paid Astrobotic more than \$100 million to ship scientific hardware to the Moon to answer questions about surface composition and radiation, as the US space agency prepares to send astronauts back for long term missions.

The failure doesn't mean the strategy of ramping up commercial partnerships is innately flawed, Michael Lembeck, a former NASA official turned associate professor in aerospace engineering at the University of Illinois told AFP. "It's a balance of making progress versus accepting risk—and I think in the long term these failures are just as informative success," he said, adding NASA's contracts with other companies, including Houston-based Intuitive Machines, which will attempt to launch a lander next month, helped spread such risks.



Bad day in space: Moon mission fails and NASA program delayed

Artemis safety issues

But, further spoiling the mood for space watchers, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson announced the agency was pushing back its planned return of astronauts to the lunar surface from December 2025 to September 2026, citing safety issues with the Orion crew capsule. And few analysts believe the new date for American boots on the Moon is credible.

In a briefing Tuesday, NASA officials went into new detail about concerns linked to the Orion capsule built by Lockheed Martin. First, the uncrewed Artemis 1 mission revealed

the heat shield lost some of its material during its fiery reentry to the atmosphere.

Second, a design flaw has been uncovered during new testing in Orion's ability to open and shut valves connected to the life support system—described by Amit Kshatriya, deputy associate administrator for the Moon to Mars program—as “unacceptable.” Third, when engineers put the vehicle under stress testing to simulate an emergency ejection from the Space Launch Systems (SLS) rocket, they found a battery became disconnected, meaning Orion might

not be able to maintain power as it floats back to the ground.

SpaceX complications

While it's back to the drawing board for Orion, its issues are dwarfed by the fact that the Artemis 3 lander, a modified version of SpaceX's next-gen Starship rocket, is nowhere near ready, having exploded in its two orbital test flights to date. Even once Starship stops blowing up, SpaceX will have to succeed in its own uncrewed lunar landing ahead of Artemis 3.

Its complex plans involve launching a spaceship to serve as a fuel depot,

having 10 more Starships launch and fuel up the depot, then having yet another Starship collect that fuel and journey to the Moon, where it would dock with an Orion capsule and fly down to the surface.

Given these constraints, the new deadline is far from realistic, said Lembeck, stressing that compared to the Apollo years, NASA is working to a much tighter budget, in a more risk-averse era, without a national imperative to beat the Soviet Union.—AFP



Baby Yoda gets his own 'Star Wars' movie

Coming to the big screen, he is. Fan favorite Baby Yoda will co-star in a new Star Wars movie entitled “The Mandalorian & Grogu,” Lucasfilm announced Tuesday. The film will be directed by Jon Favreau, who created the hit Disney+ streaming show “The Mandalorian,” in which the character was first introduced.

George Lucas created,” said Favreau in a statement.

“The prospect of bringing the Mandalorian and his apprentice Grogu to the big screen is extremely exciting.” It is not confirmed whether Pascal will reprise his role for “The Mandalorian & Grogu,” which will begin production later this year.

The movie is expected to become the first new Star Wars film since 2019's “The Rise of Skywalker,” which earned \$1 billion at the global box office despite poor reviews. Since then the big-screen future of the franchise has been in flux, with Disney boss Bob Iger having signaled a desire to slow the output of Star Wars films, and directors joining and then leaving mooted new projects.

No release date has been announced for “The Mandalorian & Grogu,” although the next Star Wars film on Disney's calendar is earmarked for May 2026. Other Star Wars films are in the works from directors such as Taika Waititi, best known for “Jojo Rabbit” and two Marvel superhero “Thor” films, and James Mangold, who helmed the recent “Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny.”

Another upcoming Star Wars movie will see Daisy Ridley reprise her role as Rey, the hero of the franchise's most recent big-screen trilogy. But other previously announced Star Wars films, which were to be directed by Kevin Feige—the producer behind the entire Marvel superhero universe—and Patty Jenkins (“Wonder Woman”) have been quietly shelved.

In Tuesday's statement, Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy said Favreau and “Mandalorian” co-creator Dave Filoni had “ushered into Star Wars two new and beloved characters,” calling the new story “a perfect fit for the big screen.”—AFP



That series followed mysterious bounty hunter Din Djarin (Pedro Pascal), aka The Mandalorian, as he was tasked with delivering an adorable, tiny green creature called Grogu to a sinister client.

Instead he formed a close bond with the creature—who appeared to be the same alien species as Yoda in the original Star Wars movies, earning him his nickname among fans. “I have loved telling stories set in the rich world that

Actor Idris Elba calls for action over UK knife crime

Actor Idris Elba on Monday urged the UK government to take urgent action to reduce knife crime, with public concern at mounting numbers of young people being injured or killed in stabbings. Elba, who shot to fame as drugs kingpin Stringer Bell in the hit TV series “The Wire”, helped launch a campaign in London calling for a ban on knives. “I can't stay silent as more young lives are lost to these brutal and heartless crimes,” he told reporters outside the UK parliament in central London.

On the grass in front of the legislature, piles of carefully folded clothes were laid out in line to represent those killed by knife crime. “We can't let knife crime escalate, we have to put a stop to it,” said the 51-year-old Elba, who has written to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak calling for a ban on bladed weapons such as machetes and “zombie” knives.

On Sunday, football clubs Arsenal and Liverpool abandoned their traditional red jerseys as part of the north London club's “No More Red” campaign against youth violence. Families of some of the victims of knife crime were applauded by the crowd at the Emirates stadium watching the FA Cup tie, which Arsenal lost.

'Zombie' threat

Some 250 people were killed in knife crime in England and Wales between July 2022 and June 2023, according to the Office for National Statistics. In London last year, 21 children under 18 lost their lives in violence, including 18 who were stabbed. The sale of knives is strictly regulated in the UK but young people are still managing to arm themselves with large “zombie” knives, where one side is serrated and the other curved.



A photograph shows clothing representing the human cost of UK Knife Crime displayed in Parliament square.

The weapons, inspired by horror films, are typically associated with gangs and can be bought cheaply on the internet. “I'm asking simply to put a ban on machetes and zombie knives,” said Elba, a rapper, singer and DJ also known for playing Nelson Mandela and television detective John Luther. Instead, he called for more investment in youth services to tackle the root causes of crime.

'Never-ending war'

The UK government in August promised a ban on “intimidating and threatening” zombie-style knives and machetes “that have no practical use”, as part of moves to reduce knife crime. But there has been no let-up in violence: in September a 15-year-old girl was stabbed to death as she made her way to school in south London.

And just before midnight on New Year's Eve, a 16-year-old boy watching fireworks with friends was killed in a north London park. “It's ridiculous how easy it is for young people to buy

knives and hurt other people,” said Nadine Searchwell, whose 22-year-old son was killed in October while he went to buy a pizza.

“The government doesn't pay attention because it's not one of their own.” Sunak's spokesman on Monday said knife crime had fallen by seven percent and hospital admissions for knife wounds were down by nearly a quarter.

“But still we know knife crime devastates lives. We do want to do more. It's welcome that Idris Elba and others continue to shine a light on this important issue,” he added. Julie Taylor, a former cook, was invited to parliament to give evidence to MPs after her 19-year-old grandson was stabbed to death outside a pub in Essex, east of London, four years ago.

“Everything in parliament takes so long, too long. It has to change,” she said. “Every day you get up in this country and you expect someone to be murdered in a knife attack. This is like a never-ending war.”—AFP

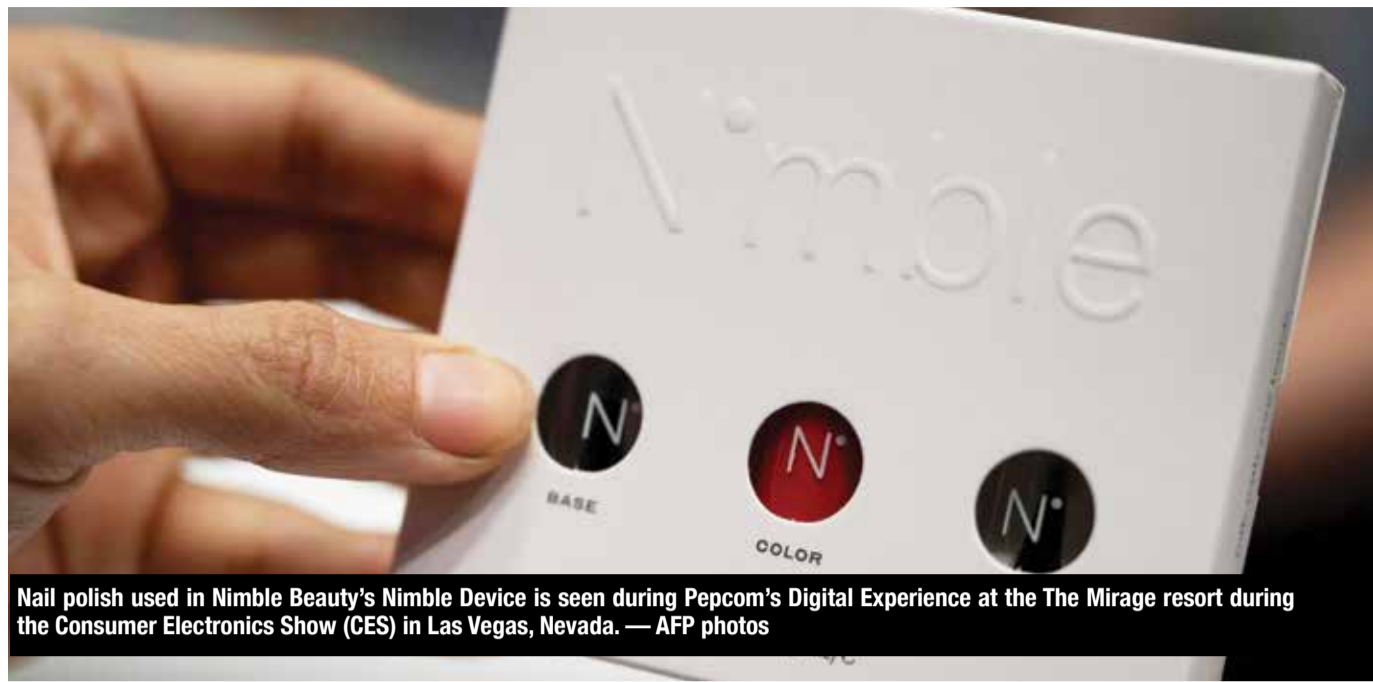


British actor Idris Elba (center) poses with relatives of victims of knife stabbing, among clothing representing the human cost of UK Knife Crime displayed in Parliament square, central London.—AFP photos



British actor Idris Elba speaks during an interview as he launches a campaign against knife crime to call the government to take immediate action to prevent serious youth violence, in Parliament square.

Lifestyle



Nail polish used in Nimble Beauty's Nimble Device is seen during Pepcom's Digital Experience at the The Mirage resort during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada. — AFP photos



A person uses Nimble Beauty's Nimble Device to paint their nail during Pepcom's Digital Experience at the The Mirage resort during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.



A person uses Nimble Beauty's Nimble Device to paint their nail during Pepcom's Digital Experience.

At CES, beauty products pamper with AI

Salon-worthy manicures at home and expert skin care advice from artificial intelligence: the beauty industry is counting on tech to get consumers pampered like the rich and famous. The Nimble manicure salon calls itself the world's first device to combine AI and complex robotics to paint nails flawlessly—without the hassle of making an appointment. Resembling a heavyset printer, Nimble can varnish all ten fingernails and dry them in just twenty-five minutes.

The device, an eight-kilo white box with a special door for the hand, is on display this week at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show (CES), the tech industry's annual hub. According to its creators, the device uses

high-resolution micro-cameras and 3-D imaging to determine nail shape, size and curvature.

Then a small robotic arm, guided by AI algorithms, applies the requisite three coats, with a blow dry after each applied layer. When it goes on sale in March, more than thirty colors will be available in capsules costing \$10 each. The unit costs \$599. In a study published in May, consulting firm McKinsey put the global beauty industry—which includes skin- and hair care, perfume and make-up—at \$430 billion in 2022 and forecast it to reach \$580 billion by 2027.

The industry's internet sales almost quadrupled between 2015 and 2022. AI, a term often deployed as the lat-

est catchphrase for anything tech, has also infiltrated beauty products such as make-up and skincare, including from industry giants. The free Beauty Genius app, presented by L'Oreal, is intended to be an AI-supported "virtual personal advisor."

It recommends skincare and make-up products according to skin type, gives tips on techniques and answers questions about problems such as acne and hair loss. Users can also try out the products virtually, guiding customers who are overwhelmed by a physical shop's rows of foundations with similar shades and varied textures, or creams with seemingly endless specificities.

This is also the aim of the program Beautiful AI, created by Perfect Corp,

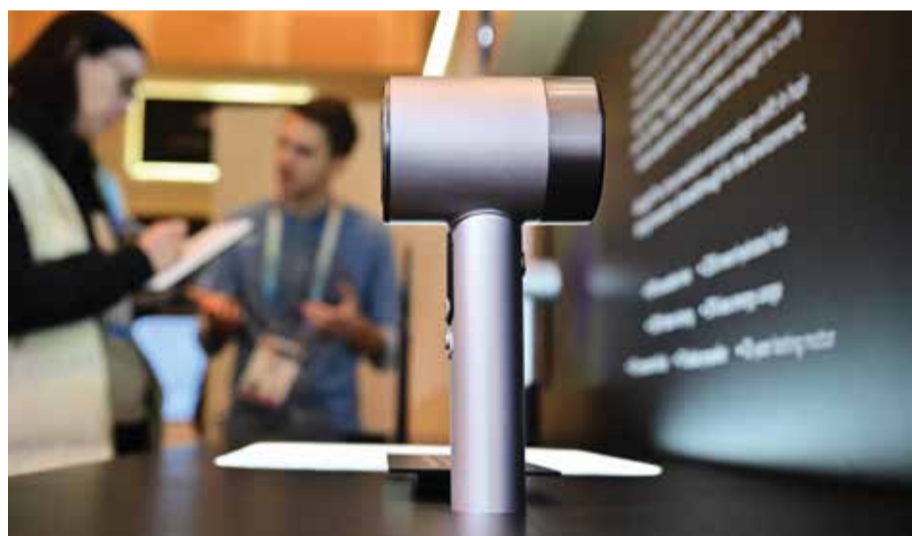
which combines generative AI and virtual reality to perform live skin analyses, 3-D hairstyle or jewelry trials and make recommendations. Korea's Prinker, a specialist in ephemeral, customizable tattoos for skin and hair, is unveiling a similar product that will apply make-up this year. The device will also put AI to work with a biometric 3-D scanner to map facial features and then recommend the right contours, "printing" the corresponding powders to the face.

Infrared hair blower

Companies are also bringing beauty personalization tech to hair care. This week, L'Oréal presents the world premiere of a connected hairdryer that can be customized via an app, taking

hair type into account and automatically adapting power and heat distribution.

The Airlight Pro uses infrared light to dry the hair, allowing it to preserve the hair's moisture, Adrien Chretien, head of augmented beauty development at L'Oreal, told AFP. Due to go on sale in April, it also offers energy savings of 31 percent compared with a conventional appliance, he added. Another product scheduled for launch later this year is Colorsonic, a brush-like hair coloring device that uses cartridges and that L'Oreal says has been in development for nine years.—AFP



The L'Oréal AirLight Pro hairdryer, powered by patented infrared light technology, on display at L'Oréal.



Barbara Laverne's, L'Oréal deputy Chief Executive Officer for Research and Technology, delivers a keynote address at the Venetian Expo Center during the Consumer Electronics Show.

TECH HELPS BEAUTY 'DREAMS' COME TRUE, SAYS L'OREAL

Technology, in particular artificial intelligence, is making it possible to fulfill beauty wishes like never before, Guive Balooch, global vice president of L'Oréal's Tech Incubator, told AFP. He spoke in an interview at the Consumer Electronics Show, the annual tech extravaganza in Las Vegas, where L'Oréal CEO Nicolas Hieronimus delivered the keynote speech

Is L'Oréal embracing tech?

A: Our CEO being the CES keynote is such a proud moment for us, and even more for the beauty industry. It's the first time a beauty company CEO is speaking at the largest tech stage in the world. It signals the essentiality of beauty in society today, and the critical role tech plays in elevating products and experiences.

We strive to build beauty products that are powered by tech, not tech products powered by beauty. We don't look at the latest tech trend; we look at what people need and where the consumer tensions lie, and then create the tech to solve it.

We've had consumer tensions for so long -- like the fact that 50 percent of



Emily Stephens demonstrates usage of L'Oréal's Airlight Pro hairdryer, which uses patented infrared light technology.

women can't find the right shade match of foundation -- and those tensions are now being solved more easily, faster and with more delight. We are meeting people's dreams and expectations more effectively, thanks to the marriage of tech and beauty.

Does AI have a role to play?

A: In many of our innovations, the common denominator is artificial intelligence -- which we have been using for years, guided by our sense of purpose.

We have growing experience of deploying AI across our brands and divisions. In 2018, L'Oréal acquired (augmented reality company) ModiFace, enabling us to create services like Virtual Try-On for hair, nail color and makeup try-ons.

A great product example is Rouge Sur Mesure by Yves Saint Laurent Beaute. It's an AI-powered, connected personalized lipstick device with augmented reality capabilities to virtually try-on and recommend lipstick shades from a selection of 4,000 shade options with a touch of a button and within seconds.

What do you expect from tech?

A: Tech isn't about tech. It's about guiding people to the right choices, and it's about understanding your individual beauty based on data that will be powered by tech.

We want to offer everyone the best of cosmetics innovation in terms of quality, efficacy and safety; and meeting the infinite diversity of beauty needs and desires all over the world. It is through technology that we can meet these needs. For our newest innovation, AirLight Pro, we're launching with hairstylist professionals first... With

other tech products, we launch to consumers first. It varies project to project and brand to brand.

How do you decide on tech products?

A: Our end goal is to build great products for our consumers. Starting with tech trends can lead to gimmicky results, especially in such a saturated market. While we need technology, we also need deep consumer insights into how we can make beauty lives better... Our approach is to first start with the consumer need, then use the technology that's been clinically tested for 100 percent accuracy, and through that, build products that are enhanced and augmented to bring experiences to a new level.

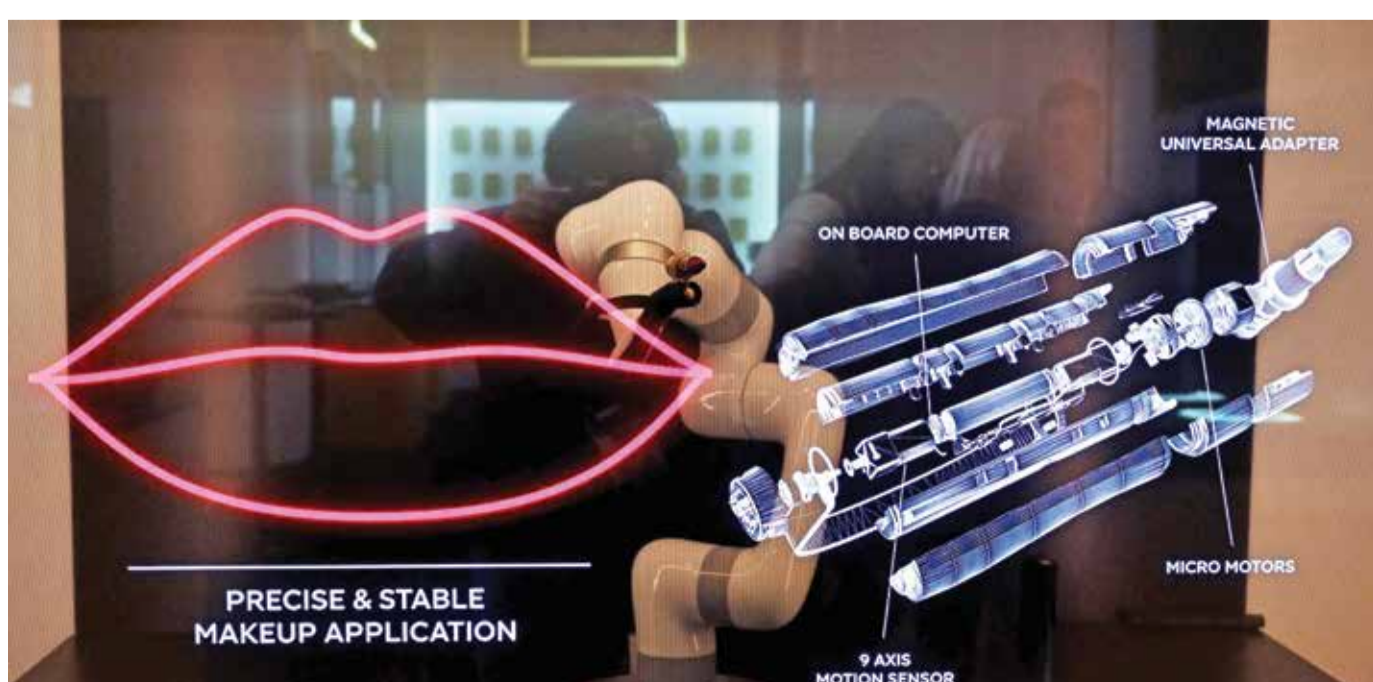
This process helps us constantly challenge ourselves to build on technology and develop great products and experiences that are completely unique. We also say no to projects that don't deliver experiences that go above and beyond what's already existing in the marketplace.—AFP



The 3D shu:brow, from Shu uemura, part of L'Oréal, which enables users to craft custom 3D brows at home in mere seconds, on display at L'Oréal on January 7, 2024 at the 2024 Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada. — AFP photos



A finger points out where the cartridge for hair dye goes on L'Oréal's Colorsonic, an at-home reusable hair color device that uses a mess-free process to mix hair color and apply it evenly, on display at L'Oréal.



PRECISE & STABLE MAKEUP APPLICATION

ON BOARD COMPUTER

MAGNETIC UNIVERSAL ADAPTER

MICRO MOTORS

9 AXIS MOTION SENSOR



The L'Oréal AirLight Pro hairdryer, powered by patented infrared light technology, is displayed beside attachments for the hairdryer and a cellphone displaying the app at L'Oréal.

Lifestyle



Students on the eSports program take a class at the National esports Performance Campus in Sunderland, north-east England.

— AFP photos



The entrance to "The Place", an office workspace housing the National esports Performance Campus is pictured in Sunderland, north-east England.

Game on: UK campus looks to turbocharge esports

Rows of super-powerful computers fill a classroom in northeast England, their LED-lit keyboards, mice and headsets washing the space in a futuristic blue glow. Each one costs £3,000 (nearly \$4,000) and is dedicated to one thing—training students to play video games at the highest level.

The new kit is part of a new eSports campus that has recently opened in the city of Sunderland, with the aim of boosting the country's virtual sports sector. Dave Martin, chief operating officer at the British Esports Federation, said there was "incredible talent" in the country. But he believes more could be done, particularly as other countries are further ahead.

Popularity

Esports—professional level competitive gaming—is booming in popularity and officially became recognized as a sport by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2017. The global market is worth more than \$1.8 billion, according to a report by Nielsen and specialized foundation ex corp. published in August.

That is still less than one percent of the entire video games market, which



Dave Martin, chief operating officer at the National Federation British Esports poses for a photograph in Sunderland, north-east England.

is worth more than £237 billion worldwide. But the esports sector is growing fast. It tripled in size worldwide between 2017 and 2022 and is projected to grow by another 50 percent by 2026. In the UK, the esports market was valued at over \$69 million in 2022, far behind industry giants like China (\$594 million) and the United States (\$440 million), the report said.

In an effort to catch up, the British Esports Federation has invested £7.0 million into Sunderland's National Esports Performance Campus (NEPC).

Martin says he hopes it will "enhance the UK esports ecosystem from grassroots upwards".

The federation already provides training for a range of gaming industry professions, including marketing, competition broadcasting, team management and pro-gaming itself.

Olympics

The new NEPC will not exclusively focus on training prospective players. It will also educate other future industry professionals via a partnership with

Sunderland College, a local higher education institution whose premises it shares. "The esports industry is comprised of lots of different professions," explained Toby Bowery, leader of the Sunderland College esports program.

"There's the events management side of things, the business side of things. There's the creative media side of things. Then you've got the sports side of things" with players, psychologists and nutritionists, he added. Bowery described the facility as a "real work environment" shared with the British Esports Federation, enabling students to meet pro-players.

Prize pools in virtual sports are now exceeding traditional sports. Each of the five-member team that won 2021's "The International"—a showcase tournament hosted annually for esports giant DOTA 2 -- took home more than \$3.6 million.

In comparison, that year's Wimbledon men's tennis champion, Novak Djokovic, won \$2.2 million. In September 2023, the IOC announced the creation of a separate commission dedicated to esports, to develop virtual sports as an Olympic staple. Sunderland's new campus will soon

complete construction of "The Arena", a complex designed to host esports tournaments.

'Quite surreal'

Nicholas Wilkinson, a student on the college's esports program, called the development of an esports campus in northeast England "quite surreal". He hopes to start a career as a "caster"—the esports equivalent of a professional commentator. Previously, "every time you'd want to go to an esports event or anything to do for esports, you'd have to travel down south to London, to Nottingham," Wilkinson said. Another student on the course, Evan Howey, aims to become a pro-player.

"Different people on the course have different interests," he explained. With students aiming to get into a variety of jobs in the sector, he said it would be good to encourage collaboration, to help growth. The new campus is also a gateway for "students with underprivileged backgrounds that may not be able to have access to this equipment at all at home", added Chris Jeffrey, an independent game developer and esports coach.—AFP



(From left) US film editor Carol Littleton, US actor Mel Brooks and US actress Angela Bassett pose with their Academy Honorary Award while US film executive Michelle Satter poses with the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award during the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' 14th Annual Governors Awards at the Ray Dolby Ballroom in Los Angeles. — AFP photos



US actor Mel Brooks (second left) accepts the Academy Honorary Award.

'Anatomy of a Fall' actor Thisis faces rape investigation

French investigators have opened a rape probe into actor and film director Samuel Thisis, the star of the Golden Globe-winning film "Anatomy of a Fall". Prosecutors in Metz in eastern France confirmed that a preliminary investigation is under way following a criminal complaint filed in late July. A second complaint was filed in mid-November, they added. The alleged rape took place last summer during the filming of a movie called "Je le jure" ("I swear") directed by Thisis. A 27-year-old technician said he had been forced into a sexual act after people working on the shoot gathered for drinks in an apartment. Thisis, 45, told AFP that he had had "consensual o**i sex" with the man the morning after the party.

An internal investigation was launched when the technician texted him that he felt he was the victim of "sexual assault". In a statement, Thisis said that the months-long investigation found "no conclusive evidence" or "any information that could characterize misconduct" and asked people to respect the "presumption of innocence".

Thisis was kept apart from the rest of the crew for the remainder of the shoot, directing the film from a distance. A source close to the case told AFP the movie's producers wanted both to complete the filming and take the technician's allegations seriously. "Given the circumstances and some people's reactions, this protocol was the lesser evil, even if it was difficult to bear for the director, who inevitably felt shut out of his own shoot," Thisis told AFP.—AFP



French director Samuel Thisis poses during a photocall for the film "Petite Nature" at the 14th Francophone film festival in Angouleme. — AFP

Mel Brooks earns honorary Oscar at 97

97-year-old Mel Brooks accepted a lifetime achievement Oscar in Hollywood on Tuesday, more than half a century after he won his only Academy Award with "The Producers." At a black-tie gala, Brooks—who memorably sent up Adolf Hitler in seminal satire "The Producers," as well as exposing racial bigotry in films like "Blazing Saddles"—joked that he felt bad about the fate of his previous Oscar for best original screenplay. "I miss it so much. I never should have sold it," he said, to raucous laughter in the ballroom. "I won't sell this one, I swear to God!" Brooks added.

The legendary US comic and filmmaker is already one of the select few entertainers to win an Oscar, Emmy, Tony, and Grammy—collectively called an "EGOT"—across a career spanning eight decades. His latest honor came at the Governors Awards, hosted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which each year honors four beloved industry veterans, many of whom are felt to have not received their dues at the regular Oscars.

Angela Bassett, who was Oscar-nominated for playing Tina Turner in "What's Love Got to Do With It" and Queen Ramonda in 2022 superhero sequel "Black Panther: Wakanda For-

ever," without winning either, was also honored Tuesday. Noting that she was only the second Black actress to earn an honorary Oscar, after Cicely Tyson, Bassett paid tribute to other Black female Hollywood pioneers such as Hattie McDaniel, who won an Oscar for "Gone with the Wind" in 1940. It would be another half-century until McDaniel was followed by Whoopi Goldberg.

"My prayer is that we leave this industry more enriched, forward-thinking and inclusive than we found it," said

Bassett. "A future where there won't be a 'first', or an 'only', or suspense around whether 'history will be made' with a nomination or a win."

'Voting'

As well as reflecting on stellar careers, the Governors Awards represent a key chance for this year's Oscars hopefuls to schmooze and network with Academy voters on behalf of their latest films. Attendees included Christopher Nolan, Cillian Murphy, Robert

Downey Jr and Florence Pugh on behalf of "Oppenheimer," and Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie for "Barbie."

Emma Stone—fresh from her Golden Globes win for "Poor Things"—also attended, as did Paul Giamatti from "The Holdovers," and Leonardo DiCaprio and Martin Scorsese on behalf of "Killers of the Flower Moon."

"It's award season. There's a lot of emotion and expectation in the air. Some of you are probably even aware that voting ends in seven days," joked the night's host, comedian John Mulaney. This year's Governors Awards were delayed due to the Hollywood actors' strike, which prevented stars from working or promoting their movies for months, before a deal with studios was clinched in November.

The night's other honorees were "E.T." editor Carol Littleton, and Michelle Satter, founding senior director of the Sundance Institute's Artist Programs, which have helped foster the early careers of filmmakers from Quentin Tarantino to "Everything Everywhere All At Once" directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. The 96th Academy Awards will take place on March 10.—AFP



US actor Mel Brooks (left) and US actress Angela Bassett pose with their Academy Honorary Award.

Sports

Rybakina, Pegula dig deep to stay alive in Adelaide

Shelton ends losing run to reach Auckland quarter-finals

ADELAIDE: World number three Elena Rybakina and fifth-ranked Jessica Pegula ground out wins at the Adelaide International Wednesday to book their spots in the quarter-finals. Coming off the back of crushing Aryna Sabalenka to lift the Brisbane International title on Sunday, top seed Rybakina had to battle hard to get past Spain's Cristina Busca 6-3, 7-5.

The Russian-born Kazakh, aiming for a deep run at the upcoming Australian Open, will face either Veronika Kudermetova or Ekaterina Alexandrova for a place in the semi-finals. Pegula rallied from a slow start to overcome Bernarda Pera and set up a quarter-final against 2021 French Open finalist Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova.

The second seed needed two-and-a-quarter hours to win the all-American battle 4-6, 6-2, 6-3. "I stayed relaxed and tried not to get frustrated. I want to keep improving and have a good mindset," said Pegula. "It's a brand new year and I want to find my confidence for the Australian Open."

Pegula has made the quarter-finals at the Australian Open in each of the past three tournaments. Pavlyuchenkova defeated Katerina Siniakova 2-6, 6-3, 6-2 to keep her tournament hopes alive. Laura Siegemund, part of Germany's United Cup winning team, advanced past Romanian Ana Bogdan 6-4, 7-5 with either Anna Kalinskaya or Daria Kasatkina awaiting her in the last eight.

Meanwhile, Latvia's former French Open winner Jelena Ostapenko proved too good for France's Caroline Garcia, coming through 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 and will next play Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk. In men's action, top seed Tommy Paul scored an emphatic 6-3, 6-2 win against qualifier Alex Bolt, while fellow American and third seed Sebastian Korda saw off a stiff challenge from Lorenzo Sonego 6-4, 7-6 (12/10).

They will play Briton Jack Draper and Australian Chris O'Connell respectively in the quarter-

nals. "The first match of the year, you never really know what to expect," said Paul. "I was obviously working pretty hard in the past two months, but you can't recreate the feelings that you have on court. So I was happy to get out there and play some good tennis."

Draper came through a marathon, battling for 3hr 39min before finally advancing against Serb Miomir Kecmanovic 5-7, 7-6 (11/9), 7-6 (9/7). Chilean second seed Nicolas Jarry also needed more than three hours to topple Italian Matteo Arnaldi 6-7 (5/7), 7-6 (9/7), 6-4, saving a match point in the second-set tiebreak.

In contrast, O'Connell cruised past Russia's Alexander Shevchenko 6-3, 6-1 in 60 minutes. At the WTA Hobart International, top seed Elise Mertens powered into the last eight with a 6-2, 6-3 thrashing of the Slovak Republic's Anna Karolina Schmiedlova.

She will face Arantxa Rus next after the Spaniard swept past France's Varvara Gracheva 6-2, 6-3. Chinese pair Zhu Lin and Yuan Yue also progressed, but fifth seed and 2020 Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin crashed out.

Meanwhile, Top seed Ben Shelton got his Australian Open preparations back on track Wednesday with a 6-3, 6-4 win over Hungary's Fabian Marozsan at the Auckland Classic, having suffered a series of first-round defeats in earlier tournaments.

The American world number 16 reached the quarter-final of the Australian Open, the last four at the US Open and secured a first ATP title in Tokyo in his first full season on tour in 2023. But the 21-year-old ended his campaign with first-round exits in Vienna and Paris, before another first-up loss last week in Brisbane.

"It was definitely a tough match playing against Fabian," said Shelton after getting past the world number 65 Marozsan in 71 minutes. "I had a tough



Elena Rybakina

win against him last year at a Challenger tournament. So really cool to have a match-up first against him, he's a great player. It was a fun match but happy to get through it."

Shelton, who sent down 10 aces, faces a quarter-final on Thursday against Spaniard Roberto Carballes Baena, who beat Austrian seventh seed Sebastian Ofner 7-5, 6-3, one of four seeds to tumble out on Wednesday. Third-seed Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina was thrashed 6-1, 6-1 by France's Alexan-

dre Muller and eighth-seeded Australian Max Purcell lost 6-2, 6-4 to Japan's Taro Daniel.

Fourth seed Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada lost his first singles match of the year 7-6 (11/9), 7-5 to German Daniel Altmaier. Second-seeded Briton Cameron Norrie survived a scare from French teenager Luca Van Assche, winning 6-3, 6-7 (6/8), 6-1. Norrie's quarter-final will be against Chilean qualifier Alejandro Tabilo, who got past Dutchman Botić van de Zandschulp 7-5, 6-3. — AFP

Smith to replace Warner as opener against W Indies

SYDNEY: Steve Smith will open the batting alongside Usman Khawaja against the West Indies in place of the retired David Warner, Australia selectors said Wednesday, with all-rounder Cameron Green coming in at number four.

Warner bowed out of Test cricket the weekend after the last Test against Pakistan in Sydney, having been a fixture at the top of the order for 12 years. Recognised openers Cameron Bancroft, Marcus Harris and Matt Renshaw were long seen as the main contenders to fill the role, until Smith last week said he wanted to do the job.

"Steve Smith will be opening the batting and Cameron Green will be coming into the number four position which is fantastic," chief selector George Bailey told reporters. "Steve's motivated and energised and keen to do it."

"It's a challenge for him, it's something ... he thinks he can do. It's an itch he'd like to scratch and ultimately for us, as a team, it's something that fits." The highly-rated Green has been sidelined recently by a resurgent Mitchell Marsh, who has assumed the all-rounder role. Shifting Smith up the order, rather than opting for a specialist opener, allowed selectors to bring Green back primarily as a batsman.

"The way the rest of that batting order is functioning left us feeling like we have someone who we think is pretty talented, who potentially was going to find it hard to get any Test cricket in the next period," Bailey said of Green.

"I don't think that's going to be particularly beneficial for Greeny. We can get a lot of benefits out of him playing." Renshaw was handed a Test lifeline as the only change in a 13-man squad for the two-Test series starting on January 17 in Adelaide, leaving Bancroft and Harris out in the cold.

His inclusion is a big blow for Bancroft, who is the leading run-scorer in Sheffield Shield over the last two seasons. But at 27, Renshaw is four years younger. Whether pace spearheads Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc, who played all three Tests against Pakistan, can back up for another two is another unknown.

If selectors decide to rest one of them, Boland will step in. Selectors also named a 13-man squad for the one-day series against the West Indies that follows the Tests, with Cummins rested and Smith taking over as captain. Marsh, Starc, and Hazlewood will also sit out the three games.

Australia Test squad: Pat Cummins (capt), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Cameron Green, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Matt Renshaw, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc

Australia ODI squad: Steve Smith (capt), Sean Abbott, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Aaron Hardie, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Glenn Maxwell, Lance Morris, Jhye Richardson, Matt Short, Adam Zampa. — AFP



SYDNEY: Australia's David Warner hugs his daughters after his 112th and farewell Test on day four of the third cricket Test match between Australia and Pakistan at the Sydney Cricket Ground in Sydney. — AFP



The Iranian delegations.



(From left) Luciano Rossi, Sheikh Salman Al-Humoud, Eng. Duaij Al-Otaibi.

Kuwait all set to hold Asian Shotgun championship

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The Higher Organizing Committee of Kuwait Asian Shotgun Championship being held at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex completed its preparations as competitions will start from Friday.

Participating teams began arriving in Kuwait few

days earlier and were carrying out trainings that will end today. Shooters are looking forward to qualify for the Paris 2024 Olympics by winning in the championship. Meanwhile, President of International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF) Luciano Rossi arrived in Kuwait Wednesday to attend competitions.

He said upon arrival that this is a very important championship with its 8 quota qualifying places for Paris 2024 besides Kuwait having the best players not only in Asia but in the world.

He said "I appreciated what Kuwait Federation is doing, as it is working hard for a long time", he added "I appreciate the work of the President of Asian Shooting Confederation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah on developing the game. He said the excellent level of participating

shooters who will compete for the (8) quota place giving the championship an added importance, and hope Kuwait shooters qualify as they deserve it.

"The good sporting spirit of Kuwait sends a beautiful message about our sport to the world", he concluded.

Meanwhile, the head of Iran's delegation to the tournament Amir Charoshi said the atmosphere at the shooting ranges is idle, with the preparations being at top level, with determination to come out with the best Asian Shooting tournament, specially that Kuwait organized many tournaments before with an unprecedented success.

He said Iran is participating with six shooters in the trap and skeet with the hopes that they qualify for Paris Olympics.



A competitor performs during Red Bull Car Park Drift World Finals at F1 Circuit in Jeddah Corniche, Saudi Arabia on December 8, 2022



Haitham AlHadi performs during Red Bull Car Park Drift World Finals at F1 Circuit in Jeddah Corniche, Saudi Arabia on December 8, 2022



A participant performs during the Red Bull Car Park Drift in Anjalay Stadium, Mauritius on September 2, 2023

Red Bull Car Park Drift returns to Kuwait

KUWAIT: Drift enthusiasts and adrenaline junkies have a date with the most exhilarating event of the year, the Red Bull Drift Car Park Drift Kuwait, where drifters will have to prove their mettle through two stages to qualify for this high-octane competition.

On February 2nd at 7:00 PM (doors open at 6:00 PM), and across two rounds taking place at Kuwait Motor Town, competitors must navigate a challenging course while simultaneously avoiding obstacles. Each participant will be judged according to a set of nine criteria, with a total of 400 points up for grabs.

A maximum of 120 points will be allocated towards showcasing drifting skills, while the flipper and pendulum challenges will account

for up to 60 and 50 points, respectively. In addition, the car's aesthetics and design will make up 40 points, while factors such as tire smoke, car sound, the gate, and spiral tasks will each contribute a maximum of 20 points toward the final score. The ultimate challenge, the tight 'Box,' where drifters must execute a perfect 'doughnut,' will be worth a hefty 50 points.

However, drifters must also exercise caution as they will lose points if they hit obstacles, drift in the wrong direction, or spin their car. Should they accumulate three penalties in one round, they will be automatically disqualified.

This year marks a significant milestone as Red Bull Car Park Drift Kuwait returns after a three-year hiatus, promising an adrenaline-packed show that's not to be missed. The event is in partnership with Red Bull MOBILE by Zain, Abdulmohsen Abdulaziz Al Babbain Co (AABC), the exclusive authorized dealer of Nissan in Kuwait, Acqua Eva, and Kuwait Motor Town. Dunlop, and Al Babbain Auto and will be attended by renowned figures in the world of drifting, including Red Bull Athletes,



A participant performs during the Red Bull Car Park Drift in Anjalay Stadium, Mauritius on September 2, 2023

Abdo Feghali, Brian Capper.

For those who want to participate in this event, registration is now open. Secure your spot and be part of the 2024 Red Bull Car Park Drift Kuwait by visiting [redbull.com/kuwait/en/events/red-bull-car-park-drift-kuwait](https://www.redbull.com/kuwait/en/events/red-bull-car-park-drift-kuwait)

Sports

Middlesbrough stun Chelsea to take League Cup semi-final lead

Chelsea have lost five of their last six away games

MIDDLESBROUGH: Chelsea boss Mauricio Pochettino bemoaned a familiar lack of cutting edge after his team lost the first leg of their League Cup semi-final 1-0 to Championship side Middlesbrough at the Riverside on Tuesday.

Hayden Hackney scored the only goal on 38 minutes as Pochettino's expensively assembled array of stars again failed to perform away from home. Chelsea have lost five of their last six away games and 21 times on the road since the beginning of last season—the most of any Premier League team.

The Blues must turn the tie around when the sides meet again at Stamford Bridge on January 23 to avoid heaping more pressure on Pochettino's position during a disappointing first season in charge for the Argentine. "If we assess the performance overall we were the better side, had clear chances, but we didn't score and weren't clinical," said Pochettino. "It happened a lot this season."

Boro boss Michael Carrick could have been forgiven for cursing his luck after losing top scorer Emmanuel Latte Lath to injury after just three minutes. Carrick was also forced to withdraw Alex Bangura inside 20 minutes but the second-tier side were not fazed. "It's very special," said the former Manchester United midfielder. "I know it's a two-legged affair and there is still all to play for, but for what we've had to go through, the injuries, the setbacks we've had, to beat a team of Chelsea's quality is unbelievable."

Middlesbrough had not scored against Chelsea for over 17 years. The Blues had won the past nine meetings by an aggregate score of 21-0. However, the home side ended that drought eight minutes before half-time. The pace of Isaiah Jones down the right caused Chelsea's makeshift left-back Levi Colwill problems all night and his low cross was turned in by Hackney from close range.

Profligate Palmer

Chelsea, though, should have at least been level at the break had Cole Palmer maintained his fine scoring form in front of goal. The former Manchester City academy graduate has been one of Chelsea's few big money signings to hit the ground running under Pochettino.

However, Palmer twice failed to hit the target with glorious first-half chances. Firstly, he pulled his shot wide from the edge of the area after pouncing on an errant pass from Jonny Howson, and then he fired over the rebound after Tom Glover fumbled Enzo Fernandez's effort.

Palmer then fired too close to Glover with another big chance just before the break. The flow of the second half was a different story as Chelsea pegged the home side back in search of an equaliser.

But there was a familiarity to the visitors' inability to find a way through. Despite the club spending over £1 billion (\$1.3 billion) on players in the last three transfer windows, Pochettino suggested last month he would need to look to strengthen once more in order to address the lack of a goal threat.

Noni Madueke looked the most likely spark to Chelsea's attack, but he was sacrificed as Pochettino threw on Mykhailo Mudryk and Armando Broja. Raheem Sterling should have been more alive to meet one dangerous low cross from Broja, but that was all



MIDDLESBROUGH: Chelsea's English midfielder #20 Cole Palmer (L) controls the ball in front of Middlesbrough's English midfielder #17 Paddy McNair during the English League Cup first-leg semi-final football match between Middlesbrough and Chelsea at the Riverside Stadium in Middlesbrough. — AFP

Chelsea's vast amount of possession in the final 20 minutes amounted to.

Middlesbrough conceded late to lose 1-0 to Aston Villa in the FA Cup third round on Saturday. But

this time the team that sit 12th in the Championship held out to keep their dreams of a Wembley final against either Liverpool or Fulham very much alive heading into the second leg. — AFP

Son set to light up Asian Cup as Qatar takes centre stage

DOHA: The Asian Cup begins on Friday with defending champions Qatar the hosts, Japan favourites and Son Heung-min's South Korea vowing to win the title for the first time in 64 years. The 24 teams spanning Australia to Palestine will battle for regional glory over the next four weeks, culminating in the final at the 88,000-capacity Lusail Stadium on February 10.

It will take something special to beat the last big game at Lusail—the World Cup final 13 months ago when an Argentina side inspired by Lionel Messi defeated France on penalties. The 18th edition of the Asian Cup was supposed to have been held last summer in China but was moved to World Cup host Qatar because of China's COVID-19 rules.

Qatar will mostly use stadiums that staged World Cup matches, a notable absentee being Stadium 974, the temporary arena made partly of shipping containers. In the lead-up to the World Cup, the Gulf state came under intense scrutiny over its human rights record and treatment of migrant workers. Rights groups say little has changed since, something Qatar disputes. There has been no such outcry ahead of the Asian Cup.

Japan vow to erase 'frustration'

Qatar won plaudits for its organisation of the World Cup but the team flopped on the pitch, their three straight defeats the worst performance of any World Cup host. That lingering pain will motivate them in the defence of their Asian crown, but Carlos Queiroz was fired as coach only last month, giving replacement Tintin Marquez little time to prepare.

"I know the players, I know my mentality and I know... my idea for playing," said the Spaniard, who coached Qatar club side Al Wakrah for six years before taking over the national team. Qatar open the tournament against Lebanon at Lusail Stadium.

There are six groups of four, the top two from each reaching the last 16, along with the four best third-placed teams. Japan, defeated 3-1 by Qatar in the 2019 final in the UAE, look the team to beat and are the most successful side in Asian Cup history with four titles.

Japan have fond memories of Qatar, having stunned Germany and Spain in the group stage of the World Cup before losing to Croatia on penalties in the last 16. Hajime Moriyasu's team have enjoyed a strong year since, losing only once in 12 matches and winning 4-1 in Germany in a friendly.

Moriyasu named Kaoru Mitoma in his squad despite the Brighton winger suffering an ankle injury and said that Japan are determined to erase the "frustration" of their 2019 final loss. All or nothing for Klinsmann.

South Korea, Iran, Australia and Saudi Arabia—all

of whom played at the 2022 World Cup and are former Asian champions—are also teams to watch. In Tottenham Hotspur attacker Son, South Korea have the best player in Asia and a world-class performer who is enjoying his football again under Spurs manager Ange Postecoglou.

South Korean fans were sceptical about the appointment nearly a year ago of legendary German striker Jurgen Klinsmann, given his patchy record as a coach. But after a slow start his side have hit their stride, their last competitive match a 3-0 World Cup qualifying win in China with Son scoring twice and setting up the third.

The 59-year-old Klinsmann has said anything other than winning the Asian Cup for the first time since 1960 will be a failure. "It's 64 years -- 64 years is a long time for Korea. It's about time that we get this done," said Klinsmann.

There will be extra interest in how Saudi Arabia—coached by the Italian Roberto Mancini—get on following an influx of foreign stars into their domestic football led by Cristiano Ronaldo. The Palestinian team face an uphill task to emerge from a group containing Iran, United Arab Emirates and Hong Kong, with their minds on the war in Gaza, in which some players have lost loved ones. "Everyone is glued to the news, before and after training, be it on the bus or at the hotel," coach Makram Daboub said. This will be Palestine's third time at the Asian Cup and they are chasing a first victory after failing to win any of their six matches so far. — AFP

Ancelotti unhappy to face Atletico in trio of Madrid derbies

RIYADH: Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said Tuesday he was unhappy to be pitted against fierce city rivals Atletico Madrid three times in under a month. Los Blancos take on Diego Simeone's Atletico on Wednesday in Riyadh in the Spanish Super Cup semi-final, again next week in the Copa del Rey last 16, and also in La Liga in early February.

Atletico are the only team to beat Real Madrid this season in all competitions, with the Rojiblancos earning a 3-1 league win in September in the derby at their Metropolitan stadium. "The calendar is what it is, we have to face Atletico Madrid again, we have to play this game," Ancelotti told a news conference.

"I don't like facing Atletico because they are one of the best teams, it's always tough to play them—but Atletico will be thinking the same thing. "We are two strong teams and it will be complicated, but I think the fans will enjoy these fixtures, both Real Madrid and Atletico fans."

Ancelotti said Atletico's victory over Madrid this season damaged his side, although they have since gone on a 19-match unbeaten run. "The truth is the last game we played (against Atletico) did us a lot of damage," continued Ancelotti.

"I think tomorrow we can put a better version of ourselves out there than in our first match against Atletico Madrid." Atletico had won just one of their previous 14 La Liga matches against Real Madrid before this season's victory.

Real Madrid also beat Atletico in the 2020 Spanish Super Cup final, the first to be played in Saudi Arabia. Madrid midfielder Fede Valverde was dismissed for hacking down Atletico striker Alvaro Morata as he ran through on goal deep in extra-time, allowing his team to get to penalties, where they triumphed. "I'd do it (again), if it's for the team," Valverde told reporters. "If we're losing 3-0 then there's no sense in it, in that final we were battling it out, it was hard-fought... if that was the scoreline again, I'd do it again."

Atletico Madrid midfielder Rodrigo de Paul said he was happy to face off with Los Blancos in the derby triple-header despite the toll it takes on the players. "I've always enjoyed playing the best teams, and Madrid are one of them," said De Paul.

"Obviously this fixture leads to being worn down mentally and physically a lot, but (Madrid derbies) always have their negatives and positives—I'll appreciate being able to face one of the best teams." Simeone said Atletico's triumph over Madrid in September had no bearing on the clash at the Al-Awwal stadium.

"Madrid had some players who couldn't play, and they will be there tomorrow... that was another game, in another moment," said Simeone. "We will prepare to play this one in the way we think is apt for this moment." — AFP

Mahrez reveals recipe for Cup of Nations success

ABIDJAN: Algeria captain and former Manchester City star Riyad Mahrez believes he knows the recipe for winning the Africa Cup of Nations—through preparations, good luck and experience. "Whichever country is the best prepared and enjoys a little bit of luck will go all the way," the 32-year-old winger told reporters.

"Experience is also a major factor. I and many teammates in the Algerian squad know all about the Cup of Nations. "Making a good start is often crucial. We beat Kenya in our opening match in 2019 and won the tournament. We drew with Sierra Leone three years later and flopped."

France-born Mahrez, who left the Premier League for the lucrative Saudi Pro League this year, was a key figure when Algeria won the 2019 Cup of Nations in Egypt. He was also part of the squad that fared dismally when defending the title in Cameroon two years ago as defeats by Equatorial Guinea and Ivory Coast led to elimination after the first round.

Algeria, with a mix of 2019 survivors and new blood, are favourites to win Group D at the 2024 finals, which kick off in the Ivory Coast commercial capital Abidjan on Saturday. They are the top seeds in a section including Burkina Faso, a team with sec-



Riyad Mahrez

ond, third and fourth place finishes in their past four appearances, and outsiders Angola and Mauritania.

The top two in the final standings automatically advance to the round of 16 and it would be a shock if Algeria and Burkina Faso did not fill those positions.

"Deep sense of belonging" That would leave two-time quarter-finalists Angola and Mauritania, seeking a first win at the tournament, fighting to be one of the best four third-place finishers and also qualifying. Born in a northern Paris suburb, Mahrez qualifies for Algeria because his late

father was born in the oil-rich north African country.

"I visited the village where my father was born every year and felt a deep sense of belonging. I was really close to the people, and to my adopted homeland." Mahrez recalls with visible joy the reception the Desert Foxes received when they conquered Africa five years ago by defeating Senegal 1-0 in a final won by a Baghdad Bounedjah goal.

"The bus parade was supposed to last 30 minutes, but actually lasted seven hours. The passion of the people was incredible. I have not witnessed it in any other country." Goalkeeper Rais M'Bolhi, defenders Rami Bensebaini and Aissa Mandi, midfielders Ismael Bennacer and Sofiane Feghouli and forwards Youcef Belaili and Bounedjah are other 2019 winners called up.

Also chosen was Nice defender Youcef Atal, who received an eight-month suspended sentence from a French court last week for inciting religious hatred in a social media post concerning Gaza. Burkina Faso have constantly punched above their weight in recent Cup of Nations and boast a star defender in Edmond Tapsoba from Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen.

A setback for the Stallions, though, is the lack of game time for their best known forward, Bertrand Traore, at Aston Villa this season. After shock qualification for the 2006 World Cup and two last-eight Cup of Nations appearances soon after, Angola have regressed, missing three of the last four African tournaments. Mauritania were the worst performers of all 24 teams at the last edition, losing all three group matches and failing to score. — AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khalidiya	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

Al-Attiyah, Quintanilla dominate Dakar Rally dunes to win stage 5

Branch reclaim lead in bikes category after Quintanilla dominated the dunes



SHUBAYTAH: Nasser Racing's Qatari driver Nasser Al-Attiyah and his French co-driver Mathieu Baumel race their car through the dunes as they compete in Stage 5 of the Dakar Rally 2024, between Al Hofuf and Shubaytah, Saudi Arabia, on January 10, 2024. — AFP

SHUBAYTAH: Five-time winner Nasser Al-Attiyah posted his first win of this year's Dakar Rally on Wednesday, clocking the quickest time in the Empty Quarter dunes between Al-Hofuf and Shubaytah in Saudi Arabia. The 53-year-old Qatari, driving for Pro-drive, finished 1min 51sec ahead of Toyota's Guerlain Chicherit to claim his 48th stage win in the Dakar and moved second in the standings, gaining two minutes on cars leader Yazeed Al-Rajhi, who finished fourth behind Argentinian Juan Cruz Yacopini.

"There was no strategy on my part," said Al-Attiyah who will now have to open the road at the start of the '48H chrono', a new two-day stage across Thursday and Friday. "I wanted to win the stage no matter what they have in store for us tomorrow."

"It's 600 kilometres long and I don't mind opening

the road. Even if I lose time, what matters to me is finishing these 600 kilometres." Sebastien Loeb (Pro-drive) tried his luck by deliberately missing a compulsory checkpoint, a "mistake" that cost him a 15-minute penalty. As a result, he finished 21min 13sec down the order, giving up time in the overall standings in the hope of optimising his chances in the '48H Chrono' by starting from behind.

Quintanilla 'flat out'

Ross Branch reclaimed the lead in the bikes category after Chilean rider Pablo Quintanilla dominated the dunes to win stage five. On a short 118km special stage, Quintanilla was pushed all the way as he completed his seventh Dakar stage win, beating his Honda team-mate Adrien Van Beveren by just 37 seconds.

"After two awful days, everything fell into place," said Quintanilla. "I went flat out. It wasn't easy because the glare of the sun made it hard to see the tracks but I went 100 percent from the first kilometre. "It was tough, but I managed to set a fast pace and had a great stage. "I wasn't expecting this type of soft sand because I heard it had rained in the last few days, but I had fun anyway. I had a great time on my bike." Two-time winner Toby Price (KTM) completed the podium at 1min 39sec. Honda's other Chilean Ignacio Cornejo had a difficult day in the saddle. After his stage four victory on Tuesday, which had given him the overall lead, he had the difficult task of opening the special and finished 6min 11sec down on his compatriot.

That allowed Botswana's Ross Branch (Hero), who came sixth on the stage, to retake the lead in the pro-

visional overall classification, 1min 14sec ahead of "Nacho" Cornejo. "Opening the road in the dunes was tough," said Cornejo.

"I tried to do a good job and my teammate Ricky Brabec joined me around the kilometre 50 mark. I reckon we worked well together. "I hope tomorrow will be better." The American Brabec is third in the standings at 3min 47sec.

Argentine world champion Luciano Benavides (Husqvarna) was on course for a fast time before running into technical problems in the last five kilometres. He finished the stage 4min 22sec behind Quintanilla and later said his team would be installing a new engine which will mean a 15min penalty. The "48H Chrono" is the last big chunk of the first week of the Dakar before a rest day in Riyadh. — AFP



Group photo of athletes with UAE officials

Sheikh Talal Al-Fahad awarded Arab Sports Personality of the Year

DUBAI: The Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Creative Sports Award on Wednesday honored Sheikh Dr Talal Al-Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah with the Arab Sports Personality of the Year Award. The aforementioned honor comes in recognition of Sheikh Talal's outstanding contributions to promoting sports in Kuwait and the Arab region. Sheikh Talal Al-Fahad expressed to KUNA, after the closing ceremony, his gratitude for such honor by Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashid.

This award, Sheikh Talal Al-Fahad said, would

motivate him to exert more efforts to develop sports in the Gulf region and globally. He added that "this distinguished honor from the UAE and its generous people," came after a long journey in the field of sports, hoping for a bright future for Kuwaiti sport.

For his part, Kuwait's Consul General in Dubai and the Northern Emirates Ambassador Ali Al-Thaydi, told KUNA that this honor comes as an extension of previous achievements, as Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad was honored 10 years ago. The Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Creative Sports Award honors individuals, teams and organizations who have made significant sporting contributions in the United Arab Emirates and globally. It is designed to celebrate and promote the best initiatives in projects or programs in the sporting field, such as tolerance, knowledge management, empowering communities and tackling global challenges. — KUNA



Members of the Consulate of Kuwait in Dubai with Sheikh Talal Al-Fahad and the Consul General Ambassador Ali Al-Thaydi.

Davis rallies Lakers in thriller over Raptors

LOS ANGELES: Anthony Davis scored a season-high 41 points as the Los Angeles Lakers edged past the Toronto Raptors 132-131 in a thrilling NBA clash on Tuesday. A pulsating duel that saw no fewer than 23 lead changes swung decisively in favor of the Lakers thanks to a huge fourth-quarter display from Davis.

The eight-time All-Star erupted for 20 points in a high-scoring final period, including a perfect 11-from-11 free throws, to help the Lakers overturn a six-point deficit and claim a second straight victory. The win followed Sunday's nail-biting derby victory over the Los Angeles Clippers, and left the Lakers at 19-19 for the season -- 10th in the Western Conference.

"We'll take it, we can do better, but obviously for us that's a big-time win," a relieved Davis said after the game. Davis received crucial scoring support throughout the line-up—something that has been a problem for Los Angeles in recent outings.

LeBron James scored 22 points while five other Lakers players finished in double digits. "All our guys

came in and did a heck of a job," Davis said. "Obviously there's going to be a lot of attention on me and Bron and that's going to give the others a lot of open shots and open plays. "We've just got to keep feeding them the ball, keep trusting them to keep making plays." Scottie Barnes led Toronto's scorers with 26 points while Pascal Siakam finished with 25 and R.J. Barrett 23.

Magic for Wolves

In other games on Tuesday, the Western Conference-leading Minnesota Timberwolves cruised to an impressive 113-92 road victory over the Orlando Magic in Florida. The result was never in doubt after Minnesota sprinted into a 17-point lead at the end of the first quarter, and the Wolves continued to score freely—extending their advantage to 34 at one stage—as they romped to a wire-to-wire win.

Karl-Anthony Towns led the rout for Minnesota with 28 points including a perfect five-from-five three-pointers. French international Rudy Gobert also caught the eye with a dynamic all-round display, finishing with 21 points, 12 rebounds, three blocks and a steal as Minnesota improved to 26-10 for the season.

Moritz Wagner led the Orlando scoring with 21 points. In New York, the Knicks extended their winning streak since the acquisition of forward O.G. Anunoby to five games with a blowout 112-84 win over the Portland Trail Blazers. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers dunks the ball during the second half of a game against the Toronto Raptors at Crypto.com Arena on January 09, 2024 in Los Angeles, California. — AFP