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Democracy has failed us!

By Dr Ziad Al-Alyan



A new face to the old system will simply flop

Once again, we congratulate Sheikh Dr Mohammad Al-Sabah for his new appointment. It has been an extremely welcomed announcement as Sheikh Dr Mohammad is one of the most educated and respected members of our royal family. He comes at a time when we find Kuwait at its most dire of state with a corruption's perception index score of less than 40, leaving us with nothing to be proud of.

If I may remind our readers that a score of a 100 is considered clean: 0 being the most corrupt. I suppose for the optimists of us, that might not be such a bad score, after all. Our public education system has been on a spiraling downfall since the early 90s, with the majority of financially able Kuwaitis sending their children to private schools, which was something quite unheard of during the 1980s.

The country still, despite its small population, spends more than two billion dollars annually on treating its patients abroad. In a similar fashion to the education sector, most Kuwaitis still seek medical attention in the private sector. In fact, the government even subsidizes for the elderly in receiving treatment in the private sector through "Afia".

While we continue to see road works at almost every corner, it is always "too little too late". Our infrastructure and roads still resemble many third world countries with far less financial capabilities than our own. Our government officials are getting tired of the comparisons we make with our neighboring countries who have catapulted their economies and identities to become top contenders on the world stage. In response to that, one of our previous PMs commented "go live there". The absurdity of such a comment is quite insulting to the Kuwaiti public.

Sheikh Dr Mohammad, let me assure you, that the public is with you and is thirsty for reform. Keep in mind, the system is categorically against you. As a graduate of Imperial College, London and the son of the Father of journalism in Kuwait, I am embarrassed to say, that under the current climate, democracy is not what is needed for Kuwait to progress.

We pride ourselves with a democratically elected parliament; yet being of a tribal nature, Kuwait's parliamentarians are chosen based on nepotism, social status, affluence or endorsed by businessmen. Our democratic process has made us a laughingstock of the Arabian Gulf. Most would agree that the biggest impediment to progress in Kuwait has been parliament. Time after time, we see ministers being questioned based on personal feuds and not public interest.

Ministerial posts are only being accepted by those who are desperate to climb a ladder and make a name for themselves as truly worthy candidates often refuse to become ministers for the reasons stated above. The caliber and educational status of many of the ministers would not qualify them to lead a small local coffee shop branch, let alone run a country.

Dear Prime Minister, we implore you, to choose wisely. Choose the most educated, the most qualified and the most hungry to see change in Kuwait. Please abstain from the regular pool of advisors that have recommended previous ministers as clearly, they have let us down so far. Avoid the pressures of the enforced quota of minimum female, minimum number of Shiite, minimum number of tribal candidates etc, as a government needs to be effective rather than have the appearance of being inclusive. Empower your ministers, protect them and allow them to make the necessary changes without the fear of persecution. Time after time, I have sat with ministers who claimed their hands are tied as the decisions are taken by a higher up entity.

Dear Sheikh Dr Mohammad, thanks to your predecessors, the bar for success has been set quite low. Kuwaitis are easy to please. We need better schooling, better health care services, better roads and a healthy platform for those that want to excel privately to do so. Eliminate the archaic bureaucratic system that dissuades any citizen or foreigner from conducting business in our country.

We wish you luck.

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed deep concern over the recent developments in the Red Sea and the attacks on positions in Yemen early Friday. In a statement on Saturday, the Ministry affirmed the need to safeguard security and stability in the area and protect the freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. It also underlined the importance of immediately de-escalating tension to protect the maritime navigation that most countries depend on.

Meanwhile, United States carried out a fresh strike Saturday on a Houthi rebel target in Yemen, the US military said, after the Iran-backed militants warned of further attacks on ships in the Red Sea. The strike on a Houthi radar site came a day after US and British forces hit scores of targets across the country, heightening fears that Zionist war could engulf the wider region. Violence involving Iran-aligned groups in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria has surged since the war in Gaza began in early October.

The Houthis, who say they are acting in solidarity with Gaza, have carried out a growing number of missile and drone attacks in the key Red Sea international trade route. They say they are targeting Zionist-linked shipping. Around 12 percent of global trade normally passes through the Bab Al-Man-

deb Strait, the Red Sea entrance between southwest Yemen and Djibouti. But since mid-November the rebel attacks have affected trade flows when supply strains are already putting upward pressure on inflation globally.

The Houthi attacks have followed Hamas's unprecedented October 7 attack which sparked the war still raging in the besieged Gaza Strip. US Central Command said Saturday's strike was "a follow-on action on a specific military target" related to the previous day's strikes. The Houthis' official media earlier said Al-Dailami airbase in Yemen's rebel-held capital of Sanaa had been struck in the latest bombardment.

Britain, the United States and eight allies said strikes on Friday aimed to "de-escalate tensions", but the Houthis vowed to continue their attacks. Analysts said the Western strikes are unlikely to stop the rebels. They will "diminish but not end the Houthi threat to shipping," said Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The Houthis withstood thousands of air raids while battling a Saudi-led coalition for more than seven years. They earlier fought six wars against Yemen's government between 2004 and 2010.

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'We love life': Gaza couple celebrate wartime wedding

RAFAH: Surrounded by family and friends, clapping and cheering, Gaza woman Afnan Jibril beams a brilliant smile on her wedding day, determined to celebrate even as war rages. "We are a people that love life, despite death, murders and destruction," said her father, Mohamed Jibril. Relatives were gathered on Friday for the wartime wedding in a tiny room at an abandoned school building in the besieged Gaza Strip's southern city of Rafah, near the frontier with Egypt. The city has suffered daily bom-

bardment, and the families of both bride and groom are among hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who have fled the fighting further north. "The usual preparations for marriage are not possible, and traditional ceremonies are not feasible," said the bride's father. "However, clothes are available, although they are scarce and expensive."

Afnan, 17, donning a crown of flowers and pristine white dress with stark red embroidery, and her partner

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Thousands march in London for Gaza 'day of action'

LONDON: Thousands of pro-Palestine protesters marched in central London on Saturday as part of a "global day of action" to oppose Zionist bombing campaign in Gaza. Around 1,700 police were on duty for the march, with major demonstrations taking place in London on most Saturdays since Zionist entity began its war against Hamas following the October 7 attack.

"We want to show the people of Palestine we are with them and to speak up against

our government as well," 27-year-old health service worker Malecha Ahmed, who was at the march with her family, told AFP. "They are playing a very, very big role in allowing Zionists to continue what they are doing and it's just not acceptable," she said. Another marcher, Dipesh Kothar, 37, said it was "very frustrating to sit and watch the world do nothing".

"That's why we come out to show support for the Palestinian people and show our unhappiness with the governments around the world," he said. Saturday's march holds particular significance given the UK's air strikes in Yemen this week against Houthi bases, after attacks by the Iran-backed militants on ships in the Red Sea in solidarity with Gaza. Police warned protesters that they face arrest if they "intentionally push the limit" with placards and chants. They also said that protesters must stick to the route specified and that the event must finish by 5.00 pm. — AFP



HODEIDA: This combination of pictures show (top) shelters in Hodeida airfield, in Hodeida, Yemen before airstrikes by the United States and Britain. (Bottom) Destroyed shelters in Hodeida airfield, in Hodeida, after airstrikes by the United States and Britain.— AFP



RAFAH: Palestinian bride Afnan Jibril (center) is escorted by her father (center-right) during her wedding at the UNRWA School in the Al-Salam neighborhood of Rafah, southern Gaza Strip.— AFP



LONDON: A pro-Palestinian supporter waves a Palestinian flag while sitting on a set of traffic lights in front of the Elizabeth Tower, commonly known by the name of the clock's bell, 'Big Ben', at the Palace of Westminster on January 13, 2024. — AFP

Arab countries to issue joint Gaza postage stamp

Kuwait seeks membership in UN postal agency's board of directors

KUWAIT: Arab countries are issuing a postage stamp in honor of Gaza, state representatives agreed during a meeting for the 44th Session of the Arab Permanent Postal Committee on Thursday. The stamp is aimed at showing full Arab solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza, which has been subjected to a vicious war by the Zionist occupation forces since the Oct 7, 2023, which killed more than 23,000 people and injured about 60,000, said Acting Assistant Undersecretary of Kuwait's Ministry of Communications for the postal sector, Abdullah Al-Humaida.

This came in a statement made by Humaida to Kuwait's state media, KUNA, during his chairmanship of the delegation of the State of Kuwait participating in the meeting, which was held at the headquarters of the general secretariat of the Arab League under the presidency of Egypt. Humaida said Kuwait will be applying for membership in the Universal Postal Union's board of directors at its meeting scheduled to be held in the United Arab Emirates in 2025.

A committee has already been set up to prepare

and organize the candidacy file and obtain the necessary Arab and international support, he added. He said the postal sector plays a very important role and provides essential services to the public and confirmed the keenness of the state of Kuwait to actively participate in all meetings and events that contribute to the development of the sector and its services. The Universal Postal Union is a specialized agency of the United Nations that aims to organize and improve postal service throughout the world and to ensure international collaboration in this area.

Postal excellence

Thursday's Arab Permanent Postal Committee meeting discussed a number of topics related to joint Arab work in the postal sector. Participants also reviewed the results of the Universal Postal Union's fourth Extraordinary Congress, which was held in Riyadh last October. Another topic on the agenda was the 2024 Arab postal service pricing system for documents, parcels and urgent mail. Humaida hailed the

great achievements accomplished by the Arab states, including winning titles of excellence in the Universal Postal Union's integrated index for postal development, which provides the most comprehensive view on current global postal development.

The committee also discussed the regional development plan for the Arab region for the period from 2022 to 2025 in the field of mail in preparation for submitting a report on the results of its work and recommendations to the executive office and to officials at the next meeting of the Council of Arab Ministers of Telecommunications and Information Technology to be held in Abu Dhabi next week.

At the opening of the meeting, Dr Khaled Wali, Director for ICT Development of the Arab League in Egypt, stressed the need to use modern technologies, train people and introduce reforms that will improve the quality of postal service in the region and provide comprehensive modern services that keep pace with the enormous technological development in the field of communications and

information technology.

He explained that "the successive developments in communications and information technology require us more than ever to join hands in order to successfully overcome the challenges surrounding this vital sector." He added that the process of improving this sector should consider all Arab countries, including those that are less fortunate in terms of development. It must also adopt a comprehensive view, with the aim of integrating the Arab postal system the global postal system, through continued international cooperation and communication with other regional groups.

Wali praised the Arab efforts to support the Arab post system, which comes within the framework of the Council of Arab Ministers of Telecommunications and Information Technology and the Arab Permanent Postal Committee, pointing to the great efforts by the Universal Postal Union to support and keep up with the joint Arab work in the postal sector. — KUNA

NBK TAMAKAN program inspires Kuwaiti youths

KUWAIT: In its second panel discussion featuring executive management members of National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), the TAMAKAN program welcomed Sulaiman Al-Marzouq, Deputy CEO for Kuwait at National Bank of Kuwait. During the session, Al-Marzouq shared valuable insights into the pivotal stages of his career with the Kuwaiti youth, offering insights into the most significant stages of his career that eventually led to his assumption of top leadership positions within the largest banking institution in Kuwait.

Al-Marzouq discussed the challenges he encountered during his enriching journey with the participants of the TAMAKAN program, dedicated to training university graduates. This program, now in its fifth consecutive year, is sponsored and strategically supported by NBK and organized by Creative Confidence. In addition to sharing insights into his experiences, Al-Marzouq offered valuable advice to the participants, serving as a guiding light for them to forge a successful career path.

Fostering an inspiring workplace atmosphere

Al-Marzouq emphasized the significance of establishing goals early in life for success, along with the importance of selecting a work environment that fuels energy and creativity. During his conversation with young individuals, he remarked, "In the prime of your professional life, each person should define their goals and align their job choices accordingly. While a job can be a means to achieve financial and professional objectives, passion for the work remains the fundamental cornerstone for success, progress, and the realization of one's aspirations."

NBK offers an optimal work environment for individuals driven by passion and ambition to attain top leadership roles. With a workplace atmosphere comparable to international institutions, the bank is dedicated to supporting employees in realizing their aspirations. NBK provides outstanding opportunities for continuous professional development, extending to its workforce, including recent graduates, through high-level training programs in collaboration with renowned educational institutions," Al-Marzouq added.

Al-Marzouq offered guidance to the youth, advising them to embrace the current phase of their lives. His advice included finding joy in their work while their responsibilities are still minimal, pursuing their passion wherever it may lead, maintaining ambition, striving to acquire new skills daily, and making the most of the competencies and experiences gained through their work.

Courage & accountability

In reference to the commencement of his professional journey, Al-Marzouq remarked, "I initiated my career in the treasury department, drawn to the multitude of skills and experiences it imparts—vital for anyone in the banking sector. I developed a deep appreciation for this role and dedicated 12 years to it, recognizing that the department serves as a crucial link between the



KUWAIT: The TAMAKAN program welcomed Sulaiman Al-Marzouq, Deputy CEO for National Bank of Kuwait-Kuwait in its second panel discussion featuring executive management members of National Bank of Kuwait (NBK).

bank and the dynamic local and international financial markets, demanding swift decision-making."

"Engaging in treasury management not only deepened my love for banking but also instilled in me the courage to embrace greater work responsibilities. Hence, every ambitious individual should be fearless and unafraid of making mistakes, recognizing that one cannot learn without them. A mistake serves as the initiation of the journey toward success and growth. However, the crucial lesson lies in avoiding the repetition of the same mistake," Al-Marzouq advised.

Continuing his discussion on his professional journey, Al-Marzouq mentioned, "Following a 12-year tenure in treasury management, I transitioned to the Central Bank of Kuwait. This move afforded me the opportunity to gain extensive skills and knowledge concerning the regulatory and administrative framework that govern the operations of the banking sector in Kuwait."

Emphasizing the significance of the Central Bank of Kuwait, Al-Marzouq highlighted it as a venerable and crucial institution for the operations of local banks. He noted that the Central Bank houses experienced bankers whose wealth of expertise significantly contributes to bolstering confidence in both the local banking sector and Kuwait's economy.

Crucial role of confidentiality

Al-Marzouq directed the focus of the youth engaged in the "TAMAKAN" program to a crucial aspect when embarking on a career in the banking sector – the importance of safeguarding work confidentiality. He emphasized that an employee's reputation is inseparable from the institution they work for, highlighting how a strong personal reputation significantly contributes to one's professional development. Stressing the need for responsibility, he underscored the importance of maintaining both personal and organizational reputations, particularly in the banking sector, where the nature of the work often involves handling sensitive information.

Team spirit

In response to a participant's inquiry regarding rapid development, Al-Marzouq emphasized the advantages of collaborative teamwork, highlighting how the exchange of experiences and skills among team members is mutually beneficial.

also provide training programs in which students may have the opportunity to work for the telecom and digital solutions pioneer based on their performance and work ethic. The various programs under the MoU will be launched over the course of 12 months and will be tailored to students from different majors.

Aside from the MoU, stc will be partnering with KTECH to host a coding competition starting from March 6th till March 9th 2024. The competition is aimed to enhance the participants' skills in solving challenging coding problems using the Python programming language, equipping them with valuable expertise in one of the most widely used and versatile programming languages in the technology industry today. 30 participants from different public schools will be participating in the competition for a chance to win one of the valuable prizes awarded to the winners in the top positions.

Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, commented, "stc is thrilled to be partnering with KTECH to launch various initiatives throughout 2024 tailored to empower the youth. This partnership reflects our commitment to empowering the youth with essential skills for the digital era. Additionally, we are also excited to sponsor the coding competition, serving as a testament to our drive for innovation and excellence in technology."

Both the MoU and the coding competition align with stc's extensive CSR strategy, emphasizing our role in nurturing talent and advancing society. Our initiatives, focusing on practical skills and career readiness, demonstrate our dedication to building a knowledgeable, dynamic workforce for the future, and strengthening our role in community empowerment through sustainable education as stc continues its ongoing efforts within the company's strategy to promote the concept



Encouraging continuous learning, Al-Marzouq emphasized that it enhances an individual's promptness and accuracy. He advised young professionals to exercise patience, urging them not to leave their roles or organizations solely due to factors related to a specific person in a managerial position or within the same team. Instead, Al-Marzouq recommended having a well-thought-out plan and goals, rooted in personal decisions, as circumstances may change, presenting unforeseen opportunities. The key is to be fully prepared to seize these opportunities when they arise.

Al-Marzouq advocated prioritizing the enhancement of skills that contribute to swift and accurate work completion. He encouraged individuals to regularly seek advice from those in their surroundings on the most effective and efficient approaches to completing tasks. Emphasizing the importance of accumulating ample experience and acquiring the necessary skills, he underscored that such efforts are essential for securing higher positions and deserving promotions in one's career.

Emphasizing that career advancement at NBK is contingent on skill and achieving work with excellence, Al-Marzouq highlighted that the career path doesn't conclude solely with promotion or attaining a higher rank. He pointed out that several factors should be considered, with a primary focus on the added value one can contribute to the new role or position.

Charting an exceptional career path

Al-Marzouq recommended that participants in the "TAMAKAN" program seize the valuable opportunity offered by NBK. He encouraged them to leverage this exceptional experience to enhance their skills and readiness for the job market. The program, he emphasized, serves as a crucial steppingstone for newly graduated university students, facilitating their transition into a dynamic and active workforce within the Kuwaiti economy.

Al-Marzouq further counseled them to focus on honing essential skills and gaining the requisite experience, positioning themselves to meet the demands of a highly competitive labor market across various sectors. He underscored that acquiring these capabilities not only prepares them for employment but also empowers them to potentially establish their own

businesses. Al-Marzouq emphasized that the program aligns with NBK's strategy, dedicated to supporting Kuwaiti youth, paving the way for them to forge a bright and successful future.

Program of exceptional empowerment

The TAMAKAN program aims to cultivate essential personal skills for active participation in professional life. Moreover, it strives to inspire Kuwaiti youth to discover their hidden potential and capabilities, while also fostering the creativity of emerging talents. The program adopts a blended learning approach, combining in-person sessions with online training through electronic platforms and interactive tools for remote learning. It covers various subjects and workshops, delving into creativity, innovation, design thinking, business model design, career exploration, and the development of solutions to mitigate risks.

The program adopts a blended learning approach, combining in-person sessions with online training through electronic platforms and interactive tools for remote learning. It covers various subjects and workshops, delving into creativity, innovation, design thinking, business model design, career exploration, and innovative de-risking solutions. NBK is dedicated to supporting Kuwait's strategic agenda, particularly in fostering economic growth through backing the private sector and alignment with the state's development plans. This commitment is in line with the long-term national goals outlined in New Kuwait Vision 2035.

Navigating a successful career path: Insights shared by Al-Marzouq

In his session with TAMAKAN program's participants, Al-Marzouq shared a set of guidance, following which could aid those entering the job market in excelling, progressing, and forging a successful career path. Clearly define your goals and align your job choices accordingly; Equip yourself with ample experience and the necessary skills; Don't fear making mistakes; learning often stems from them; Prioritize continuous self-development to stay prepared for opportune moments; Pursue your passion and find joy in your work; Always consider the added value you contribute to the organization; Recognize that an employee's reputation is intertwined with the workplace's overall reputation.

stc, KTECH sign MoU to empower youths

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company – stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Kuwait Technical College (KTECH) for the year 2024. The collaboration will focus on organizing a range of activities for students including workshops, training sessions, and seminars. Additionally, stc in collaboration with KTECH will be hosting a coding competition using Python for students in Kuwaiti public schools in the Month of March 2024.

stc and KTECH officially announced the collaboration during a signing ceremony held at stc's head office attended by executives from both parties. Signing the MoU comes as an additional program organized by stc under the umbrella of its educational 'upgrade' initiative, with the core objective of empowering students through various ways and activities.

The objectives defined under the MoU strongly align with the goals that stc aims to achieve for the community under its strategic CSR pillars. Through flagship programs such as the educational 'upgrade' initiative, stc envisions a future where its efforts ripple through the Kuwaiti economy, fostering innovation, driving growth, and most importantly, empowering the nation's future leaders to steer Kuwait towards unparalleled success and prosperity.

As part of its collaboration with KTECH, stc will be supporting the various initiatives launched by the college to empower and educate students. stc will



of integrated sustainability."

Abdulrahman Al Ajeel, Vice President of Kuwait Technical College added, "Partnering with a pioneer in the telecom and digital solutions space in Kuwait strongly serves the objectives behind the various programs and activities that we aim to organize for students. We are proud to partner with stc in this initiative, as well as the coding competition, which we believe will present a great and challenging learning curve for all participating students. As a premier institution focusing on providing technical and vocational education of the highest standard, KTECH believes in the necessity of equipping students with the technical know-how to excel in the evolving digital world."

It is worth to mention that supporting the students and youth community in various ways has been a longstanding commitment under stc's extensive and

sustainable corporate social responsibility (CSR) program. Considering its role as a pioneer in Kuwait's telecom market, stc leveraged its resources and expertise to launch or participate in community driven initiatives that have a far-reaching and positive impact on the community.

stc has implemented programs that aim to foster long-term growth and development in the community under the umbrella of the "Weyak" initiative, which was designed to support small and medium-sized Kuwaiti companies and startups, as well as the "upgrade" educational initiative in collaboration with governmental entities, non-profit organizations, and institutions within the private sector. Through these efforts, stc has established itself as more than just a telecom provider, but a strong contributor to the social and economic fabric of Kuwait.

Cousin marriages? Yes I do! No I don't!

Report explores the merits and demerits of consanguine marriages

By Ghadeer Ghloum and Chidi Emmanuel

KUWAIT: Cousin marriage is the union between individuals who share a common set of grandparents. It has a long and complex history that varies across cultures. While it is practiced and accepted in certain regions of the world, it is viewed with skepticism and even outright disapproval in others. In this report, the Kuwait Times explores the controversy surrounding cousin marriage, looking at both its historical context and the ethical, cultural, and genetic arguments for and against its practice.

In Kuwait's rich culture, cousin marriage has become a long-standing practice. While cousin marriage has its advantages, such as strengthening family connections, it also has some potential drawbacks. Exploring this, the Kuwait Times interviewed a therapist and psychologist, Jumanah Mohammad, a psychologist and consultant, Ali Taresh, and Zainab Ibrahim, a woman who married her cousin and other experts.

According to Mohammad, several studies indicate that marrying relatives based on customs and traditions may spark problems due to its complexities. Both Jumanah Mohammad and Ali Taresh pointed out that studies have shown that the likelihood of genetic diseases occurring through marrying relatives increases the likelihood of problems. This is due to the psychological discomfort, tension, and anxiety experienced by both parents.

Keeping it within the family

Jumanah also spoke about the motives behind marrying relatives. "It may be due to customs and traditions or to material goals - regarding family wealth and their inheritance, keeping that wealth within the family cycle. It could also be due to a sense of reassurance for both parties that they have complete knowledge and understanding of each other's ethics due to proximity," she added.

She mentioned a few examples of things individuals should consider when planning for a future family in the event of marrying a relative. "Individuals should have full freedom in choosing their life partner without being forced into a relationship with a relative. The choice should be based on complete conviction without oppressive interventions, following the proper principles of marriage, whether it is marrying relatives or others. Third-party inter-



Ali Taresh



Jumanah Mohammad



ference should be avoided when conflicts arise between spouses. The couple should undergo medical examinations before marriage to avoid the possibility of children inheriting any genetic diseases," she emphasized.

On his part, Taresh pointed out some questions people have to ask themselves before proceeding. "When considering such marriage, the individuals should ponder other things to ensure their full understanding of the potential challenges and benefits," he said. He pointed out some of the issues and critical questions, which include:

Personal compatibility: Do you feel comfortable and compatible with the potential partner on a personal level? **Cultural compatibility:** Are there significant cultural differences between you, and how can they be addressed? **Goals and values:** Do you share common goals and values? **Communication:** Can you speak openly and have mutual understanding?

Family support: Is there support from both families for this marriage, or are there reservations? **Readiness for challenges:** Are you both prepared to face potential challenges, whether social, psychological, or otherwise? **Future considerations:** How do you envision the future of the relationship? Are there shared plans for the future?

Genetic health: Are you aware of potential health challenges due to genetic similarities, and how will you deal with them? "These are the general questions, but additional ones may arise based on culture and individual circumstances. Open dialogue and honesty in addressing these questions can help build a strong foundation for the relationship," he added. Taresh further elaborated that psychologically, some individuals may experience social pressures due

to familial expectations, leading to psychological stress, while others may find support and security in a close-knit family environment.

Zainab Ibrahim shared her experience of marrying a relative. Despite having children together, she is no longer a wife to her cousin. "After years of conflict, the involvement of our families in every issue only exacerbated the problems, leading to our divorce. Yet, the divorce did not provide a solution to the problems like it often does for couples who decide to part ways after finding it impossible to fix their issues. In fact, in my case, the problems grew bigger and beyond him and me. The divorce affected my relationship with the entire family. I strongly advise people to avoid cousin marriages," Zainab lamented.

Contrary to Zainab's view, Dalal Yousef explored the merits of consanguine marriage. "It preserves family ties and strengthens familial bonds. Even though there are disadvantages, I believe the advantages outweigh the disadvantages," Dalal insisted.

"Actually, there are several benefits associated with cousin marriage that should be explored and understood apart from cultural preservation and social cohesion. Kuwait is a family-oriented society. We hardly mixed up with people we don't know. So,

is it easier to deal with a familiar face than a total stranger. When you marry within the family circle, it ensures the preservation and consolidation of wealth, land, or other resources, thus maintaining bonding and economic stability," Sasah Rashid told the Kuwait Times. "Marrying within the same family circle reinforces social ties, communal identity, and gives you a sense of belonging," she added.

Clement Edward, a medical practitioner, talked about the health challenges associated with consanguine marriages. "Cousin marriages can increase the risk of inherited genetic disorders and health complications in offspring. It is essential for the couples to examine their health concerns objectively. Consanguine marriages are associated with a higher likelihood of offspring inheriting genetic disorders due to the sharing of a common gene pool. It can heighten the risk of disorders such as cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anemia, thalassemia, and various metabolic disorders," he said.

"It is critical to weigh these advantages against society standards, individual autonomy, health and genetic risks, and other factors. In order to maintain cultural diversity and the general well-being of families, societies need to have candid and educated conversations about cousin marriage," Clement said.



KUWAIT: Kuwaitis play games at the sports villages. The Kuwait Federation for Sports has launched a 12-week sporting activity under the auspices of the General Authority for Sports. The program is distributed to all governorates.

Sports villages: Improving the quality of life

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Federation for Sports has launched a 12-week sporting activity in the sports villages under the auspices of the Public Authority for Sport. The program is distributed to all governorates. Member of the board of directors and chairman of the media and Public Relations Committee at the Federation, Walid Saqabi, said in a press statement that the establishment of sports villages came as a result of a continuous effort for several months and mutual coordination with the

Public Authority for Sport and the private sector to achieve the desired goals.

Al-Saqabi explained that the activities of the Kuwaiti Sports Federation are "non-profit," and its goal is to create a healthy society in a comprehensive and interactive manner with the sports activities held across the country. The aim is to eradicate chronic diseases and obesity. The program will last for 12 weeks. The activities will be on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays of each week.

Sports villages contain a lot of sporting activities for all categories of people. Among these activities are football, table tennis, chess, hockey, archery, boxing, volleyball, floor tennis, basketball, and electronic games. There are also public health areas and children's areas. He stated that one of the most important tasks is to spread awareness of the importance of sports in improving the quality of life and



provide opportunities to encourage the community to exercise regularly. Al-Saqabi called on all people to visit the sports villages. — KUNA



News in Brief

Egyptian man dies in vehicle rollover

KUWAIT: An expatriate of Egyptian nationality died in a car accident near Wafra Farms. The man was riding in the passenger seat of a pickup truck when the vehicle rolled over, leaving the driver, who is also Egyptian, with serious injuries.

23 people arrested in massive drug bust

KUWAIT: The General Administration for Drug Control has seized 23 people of different nationalities in 17 drug-related cases. The people were found in possession of about 19.5 kilos of various narcotic substances, including chemical drugs, shabu, hashish, marijuana and cocaine, in addition to 5200 tablets of various psychotropic substances, firearms and unlicensed ammunition and sums of money from the sale. The suspects confessed that the seized items were in their possession with the intention of trafficking and abuse. The suspects and the items were referred to the competent authority to take all necessary legal measures against them.

MoI enhances measures to tackle financial fraud

KUWAIT: The General Directorate of Criminal Investigations at the Ministry of Interior (MoI) has announced the activation of the virtual room (Aman) in collaboration with the Public Prosecution and Kuwait Banking Association (KBA)—24 hours throughout the week—to confront financial fraud and money laundering. In a news statement, the Ministry's general directorate for media security and relations said that it works on opening channels to receive complaints regarding financial fraud from all local banks and react to them immediately.

It added that the directorate takes action as soon as it receives any complaints and freezes the money from the accounts of thieves immediately. Some 285 complaints have been dealt with through the "Aman" from December 7, 2023, until January 9, it said. It indicated that the value of these complaints is estimated at KD 495,973 (about \$1.62 million), and these sums have been kept to send them back to their owners. The Ministry called on people whose bank accounts have been deducted or transferred without their knowledge to hastily contact their bank and submit a complaint without any delay. — KUNA

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Kuwait University to maintain fees for foreign students

KUWAIT: Kuwait University (KU) has completed its procedures to receive applications from international students to join its colleges for the second semester of the current academic year, where at least 300 students will be accepted. The university decided to maintain the previous fees without an increase, which is KD100 for each unit of study, and the application fee is KD10.

The KU administration has listed the majors in which international students can register and be accepted, including the faculties of law, arts, Sharia and Islamic studies, social sciences, administrative sciences, and the kindergarten program in the College of Education. International students can also be admitted to the majors of the faculties of Science, Engineering, and Petroleum, Allied Medical Sciences and Education, and Life Sciences. According to sources, the total number of admitted students can be more than 300 or less based on seat vacancies in colleges that are not occupied by Kuwaiti students.

The plan for accepting international students was developed by Kuwait University to improve its global ranking, as international ranking institutions, including QS set the percentage of foreign students studying as a criterion for raising the classification of universities, expecting to improve the ranking of Kuwait University in the list in 2024.

KDIPA announces establishment of 2 new companies

KUWAIT: As part of its plan to attract international companies to Kuwait to operate directly and without relying on agents, Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA) announced the establishment of two new companies in Kuwait: Amazon for data processing and web hosting with a capital of KD1 million and Johnson & Johnson Healthcare with a capital of KD20,000, for the purpose of promoting products. With the entry of the two companies into the Kuwaiti market by establishing their own entities, the share of foreign companies' investment in Kuwait through Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority is expected to increase. At the end of 2023 KDIPA recorded investments amounting to about KD 29.5 million.

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: Myna birds perch on a twig at a beach in Kuwait City on January 13, 2024. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KU and Zain launch robot competition

KUWAIT: The Department of Computer Science announced the launch of the Kuwait National Robotics Competition 2024, which will be held from March 2-4 at the campus of Kuwait University Al-Shadadiya. The program will attract students from the intermediate to the university stage and aim to develop their creative and digital skills. This competition is a symbol of innovation and technological progress.

This event is the result of cooperation between Kuwait University, represented by the Department of Computer Science, the Ministry of Education, and the strategic partnership with Zain-Kuwait, and the Sabah Al-Ahmad Center for Giftedness and Creativity, one of the centers of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, which confirms the concerted efforts to promote educational excellence and innovation.

The Kuwait National Robotics Competition is an



Dr Hussein Al-Mahri



Dr Noura Al-Jeri

integrated program in which the (youths) energies of innovators and future leaders are enhanced. The competition offers students a unique opportunity to apply their academic knowledge in a competitive and collaborative environment, enhancing skills such as teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking. The competition qualifies the winning teams to represent Kuwait in a competition, which will be held in the United States of America at the end of April 2024.

Acting Head of the Computer Science Department at Kuwait University, Dr Hussein Al-Mahri, said that the department embraces scientific innovation in various fields of artificial intelligence with the presence of experienced academic staff in the field and distinguished students. Al-Mahri added that the Department of Computer Science organizes the Kuwait Robotics Competition so as to enhance skills in the field of artificial intelligence for computer science students and others. This is in line with its vision to contribute to driving social growth towards an advanced knowledge economy in Kuwait.

For her part, Dr Noura Al-Jeri, Chairman of the Organizing Committee of the competition, stressed the effective contribution of the Department of Computer Science in shaping the future of technology by developing the capabilities of young technical pio-



neers. Waleed Al-Khashti, Chief Corporate Relations Officer at Zain Kuwait, said: "We are pleased with our strategic partnership with Kuwait University to support the Kuwait National Robotics Competition, which aims to refine and develop the technical skills of middle, secondary, and university students. This is the result of effective cooperation between public and private sector institutions to enhance the next generation of innovators in our country."

Al-Khashti added: "This partnership comes under the umbrella of our 'Innovation Homeland' initiative, which includes all Zain's programs and efforts to support the fields of technology, engineering, science, and mathematics (STEM), through which we work to promote creativity, refine technical skills, build digital capabilities, and others, which are in line with the objectives of this competition, with our wishes of success for the participating students. We are waiting for their creativity, and we look forward to seeing them represent Kuwait in the World Championship in the United States soon."

Arab League urges united efforts to tackle illiteracy

CAIRO: The Arab League has called for a united effort to eradicate illiteracy and exert more hard work and concerted efforts to confront it in the Arab world. This came in a speech delivered by the director of the Department of Education and Scientific Research at the university, Minister Plenipotentiary Dr Faraj Al-Ajmi, during the launch of the celebration of Arab Literacy Day at the headquarters of the General Secretariat, held under the slogan "For a decent life, read and write" in coordination and cooperation with the General Authority for literacy and adult education in Egypt.

Al-Ajmi said that despite the great efforts made by the Arab countries and the national projects, programs, and campaigns they have implemented over the past period, illiteracy is still one of the most important challenges facing the Arab world. He added that the economic, social, and political conditions that the Arab world is going through, in addition to conflicts and armed conflicts, affect the educational situation in general.

He stressed that it requires continuous cooperation between the governments of the Arab countries, the private sector, and civil society organizations to address these complex challenges that hinder literacy in the Arab world. He pointed out the importance of working to improve the educational infrastructure,

investing in literacy and digital literacy programs, spreading the culture of reading and lifelong education, and promoting female literacy.

Al-Ajmi explained that the Arab League is working in cooperation with the authorities concerned with literacy and adult education in the Arab world to make every effort to eliminate illiteracy, pointing out that the challenge is not to work on alphabetic literacy and literacy principles only. "This challenge includes work on digital and cultural literacy," he said.

He pointed out that in this context, the Arab Summit adopted the initiative launched by Egypt during the 25th session of the Arab Summit, which was held in Kuwait in 2014, by declaring the current decade—a decade to eradicate illiteracy all over the Arab world—through the adoption of an action program aimed at eliminating this phenomenon within ten years (2015–2024).

The Arab League also held meetings in cooperation with its companies from Arab countries, regional and international organizations, as well as civil society organizations. Al-Ajmi reiterated the call for all its member states and regional and international organizations to cooperate jointly to strengthen efforts to combat the phenomenon of illiteracy in the Arab world, "which is the biggest obstacle to achieving comprehensive and sustainable development."

The ceremony included the holding of a dialogue session with the participation of university professors and experts who specialized in the field of adult education. It is noteworthy that the Arab world celebrates Arab Literacy Day on the eighth of January every year, which comes as an opportunity to recall this challenge that hinders Arab efforts towards progress. — KUNA



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AKROTIRI, UK: A handout picture released by the British Ministry of Defense (MOD) shows the return of RAF Typhoon aircraft at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, after striking military targets in Yemen, early on Jan 12, 2024. -- AFP

Biden takes election year gamble

Yemen strike could inflame Middle East further and weigh heavily on president

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden is balancing political rewards and risks after launching air strikes on Yemen right as the 2024 US election campaign ramps up. The 81-year-old Democrat will hope the strikes on Houthi rebels project an image of strength at home and abroad, countering criticism of his leadership by Republicans led by Donald Trump.

But the risk of further inflaming the Middle East will weigh heavily on a president who had vowed to extract America from its "forever wars" in the region. The immediate tone from Biden was tough, saying Washington and its allies had sent a "clear message" that they "will not tolerate" further attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, one of the world's most important sea lanes.

"We will make sure we respond to the Houthis if they continue this outrageous behavior," Biden told reporters on an election campaign trip in the battleground state of Pennsylvania. "I don't think the strikes will politically help or hurt Joe Biden as long as they remain limited," Garret Martin, who teaches at Amer-

ican University in Washington, told AFP. "Joe Biden does not want to be dragged into another conflict in the Middle East and that was the same for many of his predecessors. But if he doesn't do anything, the credibility of the US will be viewed as being challenged."

Republicans have however repeatedly called into question Biden's personal credibility on the international stage as campaigning escalates for one of the most polarizing elections in memory. Despite the foreign policy chaos of his own time as president, Trump used the Yemen strikes to remind voters of the disastrous 2021 US military withdrawal from Afghanistan on the watch of his likely rival in November. Trump—who launched air strikes on Syria in 2018 and was at the helm of the US-led coalition against the Islamic State jihadist group—attacked Biden for "dropping bombs all over the Middle East. AGAIN."

The Yemen strikes also came a day after Trump's rivals for the Republican nomination, Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis, had called Biden weak on foreign policy during a debate. Haley said Biden was "slow" in

taking on Iran and the Houthis, and of "hiding in a corner," while DeSantis accused Biden of "kneecapping" the Zionist military campaign against Hamas.

Republicans have also zeroed in on Biden's age—he is America's oldest ever president—to suggest that he's unfit to be commander in chief. A further factor in the mix is the row over US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin keeping his hospitalization for cancer treatment secret from Biden for days as the crisis in the Red Sea mounted. White House said Austin was fully involved in the planning for the attack, but that has not stopped critics from suggesting Biden has lost his grip on his own cabinet.

Driven by animosity towards Iran, many Republicans have backed the strikes on Yemen but, like US House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson, suggested they were "long overdue." "America must always project strength, especially in these dangerous times," Johnson tweeted. Biden faces opposition too from the left-wing of his own Democratic Party, which also opposes his support for Zionist-Gaza of-

fensive. Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian American in Congress, accused Biden of violating the US Constitution by carrying out air strikes in Yemen without congressional approval.

"The American people are tired of endless war," she added. Biden was quick to stress on Friday that he didn't think there were any civilian casualties from the strikes.

Ultimately Biden's calculus may have depended on two issues that tend to concern US voters—boots on the ground, and money. With US troops in Syria and Iraq repeatedly coming under attack from Iranian proxies, failure to act against the Houthis could have sent a bad sign. But a bigger issue may have been the Red Sea's status as a global economic chokepoint.

Continued Houthi attacks could cause prices of food and gasoline to spike for US consumers at the worst possible time for Biden's reelection hopes. "It's an election year, it's no surprise that the Biden administration is particularly nervous about this subject," said Martin. --AFP



URBANDALE, United States: Florida Governor and 2024 Republican presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis speaks to the press outside of his campaign headquarters in Urbandale, Iowa, on January 12, 2024. -- AFP

'Intense' blizzard derails Iowa caucus campaigning

DES MOINES, United States: Plunging temperatures, whipping wind and buckets of snow derailed the final stretch of caucus campaigning in the US state of Iowa Friday as Republican presidential hopefuls delivered their last pitches to voters.

Forecasters warned of "fairly intense blizzard conditions" throughout much of the Midwestern state, as the National Weather Service (NWS) said gusts of 50 to 55 miles (80 to 89 kilometers) per hour, paired with blowing snow, could reduce visibility down to a quarter of a mile.

The extreme weather was making life difficult for White House hopefuls Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley, who both canceled events just days before Monday's caucus in Iowa—the first vote of the 2024 White House race. "We want everyone to be safe," DeSantis told reporters in the state capital Des

Moines. The wind was howling very strongly in the city, where the temperature had fallen to 7 degrees Fahrenheit (-14 Celsius).

The storm will be followed by an "Arctic outbreak" of "bitter cold," according to the NWS, which warned of "dangerously cold wind chill" falling as low as -45 degrees Fahrenheit (-43 Celsius) in Iowa and across the region over the weekend. Another two or more inches of snow was also predicted for the state, for a total of up to 10 inches in some areas, creating white-out conditions. Dozens of cars and trucks were seen overturned in Des Moines, and the Iowa State Patrol said on social media they had performed 436 "motorist assists" Friday before 10 pm. "Traacherous driving is expected to continue through the rest of today and into tonight," the state's local NWS posted on social media. "Travel is highly discouraged!" In an update, it said blizzard conditions would continue into Saturday "followed by dangerous cold and wind chills through the weekend & early next week."

The weather raised serious concerns over caucus turnout as Haley and DeSantis seek to overtake former president Donald Trump, who is leading polls for the Republican presidential nomination by a wide margin nationally and in Iowa. "We're going to get

people to the polls on caucus night" regardless of the weather, the state's Republican Governor Kim Reynolds promised. Former UN ambassador and South Carolina governor Haley moved all of Friday's events online, even as she had implored Iowans to not let the weather stop them from showing up Monday. "I'll brave anything we need to," DeSantis told reporters standing outside in the snow.

"We want to win, we're here to get every vote we can," said the 45-year-old hoping to face President Joe Biden in the general election later this year. But Trump, who pledged to his supporters that he'd make it to Iowa ahead of the vote despite the weather, is counting on a resounding win in the state to help him quickly bag the nomination as his four criminal indictments loom.

"It's gonna be a little bit of a trek. Nobody knows how exactly we're gonna get there, but we're gonna figure it out," Trump said in a video posted to his Truth Social platform. "We wouldn't miss it for anything," he added. Flights carrying thousands of reporters and political observers to Iowa were canceled or rerouted to neighboring states, also facing fallout from the massive storm. More than 2,000 flights were canceled across the country, including more than 400 at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, according to flightaware.com.—AFP

The coal miner's son wins power in Taiwan

TAIPEI: Pugnacious, stubborn and a "pragmatic worker for Taiwan's independence", veteran politician Lai Ching-te will step into the international spotlight as the democratic island's next president. The 64-year-old Harvard graduate rode to victory in Saturday's election on the promise that he would defend Taiwan's democracy. His win delivers an unprecedented third consecutive term for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and in his victory speech Lai hailed it as a "victory for the community of democracies".

"We are telling the international community that between democracy and authoritarianism, we will stand on the side of democracy," he said. He has vowed to continue outgoing President Tsai Ing-wen's policies of building up Taiwan's military capabilities as a defense deterrent.

Unlike most of Taiwan's political elite, Lai rose from humble origins. Born in 1959, Lai was raised by his mother alongside five other siblings in a rural hamlet in New Taipei city, after his coal miner father died when he was a toddler. After he graduated from Harvard University, he returned to work in a hospital in southern Taiwan before turning his attention to politics in 1996 during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. "I decided I had a duty to participate in Taiwan's democracy and help protect this fledgling experiment from those who wished it harm." He served as a lawmaker, a mayor of the southern city of Tainan and a premier before he was tapped to be vice president to President Tsai Ing-wen, whom he will now succeed. Under Tsai's two-term tenure relations with China plummeted—with all high-level communications cut off—as she defended the island's sovereignty and refused to acknowledge Beijing's claim over it.—AFP



TAIPEI: Taiwan's President-elect Lai Ching-te (left) and his running mate Hsiao Bi-khim attend a rally outside the headquarters of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taipei on January 13, 2024, after winning the presidential election. — AFP

International

New French FM visits Kiev, renews support to Ukraine

Russia launches 40 missiles and drones over Ukraine overnight

KIEV: France's new foreign minister Stephane Sejourne on Saturday renewed his country's support to Ukraine, choosing Kyiv for his first official visit abroad, as the war with Russia nears a second anniversary. Sejourne arrived in Kyiv as Ukraine saw another wave of overnight strikes from Russia, which has intensified its aerial attacks recently.

The visit took place as allies struggle to secure funding, with some worrying that Kyiv could be forgotten amid new conflicts, including between Zionist entity and Hamas. "Despite the multiplying crisis, Ukraine is and will remain France's priority," Sejourne said.

The freshly-appointed foreign minister explained that "the fundamental principles of international law and the values of Europe, as well as the security interests of the French" were at stake in Ukraine.

Sejourne, 38, who unlike his predecessor Catherine Colonna has no background as a professional diplomat, had already pledged continued support. Aid promised to Ukraine between August and October 2023 fell almost 90 percent from the same period in 2022, reaching its lowest point since the start of the war, according to a Kiel Institute survey from December. An EU aid package worth 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) has been stuck in Brussels, while the US Congress remains divided on sending additional aid to Ukraine.

"Russia hopes Ukraine and its supporters will get tired before it does. We will not falter," Sejourne added. But Russia, bolstering its arsenal, has geared up for a long war and reoriented its economy. It has in recent weeks intensified its aerial assaults on the war-torn country. Russia launched 40 missiles and

drones over the country in an overnight barrage, the Ukrainian air force said.

It destroyed eight missiles and disabled over 20 devices. "Either they fell in the fields, they were detonated in the air, or they were affected by means of radio-electronic warfare of our defence forces," air force spokesman Yuri Ignat said on television. Russia said it targeted places producing ammunition and drones and had hit "all designated facilities."

Ukrainian authorities did not report any dead in the latest barrage but one civilian was wounded in the Sumy region.

In a press conference alongside Sejourne, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba praised the minister's "important" visit immediately after his appointment, and despite the Russian strikes.

"I am grateful to you for your courage, for the fact that he did not turn around on the way," Kuleba said. He added that they had "discussed the further supply of systems and missiles to protect the Ukrainian sky, as well as the supply of drones to Ukraine."

France's military support to Ukraine amounts to 3.2 billion euro, according to a parliamentary report published in November. France has provided artillery and air defence means to Ukraine, Sejourne said.

"We are entering a new phase of defense cooperation" aiming to "strengthen Ukraine's capacity to produce the weapons it needs on its own soil," he added. Kuleba confirmed that the two countries had agreed to "work on creating the most favorable conditions for the interaction of our defence companies" including legally. The day before, Kyiv had seen the visit of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who



KYIV: Newly-appointed French Foreign and European Affairs Minister Stephane Sejourne (center) visits with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba (right) "The Wall of Remembrance of the Fallen for Ukraine", a memorial for Ukrainian soldiers, in downtown Kyiv, on Jan 13, 2024.—AFP

announced a new multibillion-dollar aid package for Ukraine and pledged London's support for a decade. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hailed the

"unprecedented" 10-year security cooperation agreement as well as the £2.5 billion (\$3.2 billion) in new military aid earmarked for 2024. — AFP

US urges China to maintain cross-strait stability

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken asked Beijing to maintain cross-strait stability on Friday during a meeting with a senior Chinese official.

Blinken, briefly back in Washington between his latest Middle East crisis tour and a trip to the World Economic Forum in Davos, met with Liu Jianchao, who heads the international division of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee.

"The two sides had a constructive discussion on a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, including areas of potential cooperation and areas of difference," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said in a statement. "The Secretary reiterated the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea."

Beijing did not mention Taiwan in its statement following the talks, instead saying the two sides agreed to "continue to strengthen dialogue and co-operation". "Liu...elaborated the Chinese position on relevant issues, stressing that the two sides should move towards each other to promote stable, healthy and sustainable development of China-US relations," according to a readout his office shared on WeChat. The United States, while recognizing only Beijing, provides weapons to Taiwan to ensure its defense, as China has not ruled out using force to "reunify."

President Joe Biden's administration plans to send an "unofficial" delegation to Taiwan after the election, a move it announced in advance and described as routine.

Support for Taiwan is especially strong in the



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with Chinese International Liaison Department Minister Liu Jianchao (5th right) at the State Department in Washington, DC, on January 12, 2024. — AFP

US Congress, where the Senate on Thursday unanimously passed a resolution commending Taiwan, hailing the "example it has set for self-governance, not just for the Pacific region, but for the world."

Blinken also met with Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa of close ally Japan at the State Department on Friday. The two discussed preserving stability over the Taiwan Strait as well as "enduring support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," Miller said.

Kamikawa had visited Ukraine on Sunday during a global tour and announced new deliveries of defense equipment, which is officially pacifist. Japan has also invited Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmygal for a conference next month on reconstruction of the

country following Russia's invasion two years ago. The trip by Liu, seen as a rising figure in Chinese policymaking, comes as the United States and China step up dialogue to ease tensions that have soared in recent years.

The two powers' presidents, Biden and Xi Jinping, met in November in San Francisco where they agreed to restore military dialogue, seen by Washington as critical to preventing mishaps. Liu, speaking Tuesday at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, took a conciliatory tone with little criticism of the United States. He declined to say how China would respond to Taiwan's elections and said Beijing noted US statements that it does not back Taiwanese independence. — AFP

Swedes spooked as govt, military say to prepare for war

STOCKHOLM: Realism or fear mongering? Calls from Sweden's government and military urging Swedes to be ready for war has triggered panicked buying, frightened children and a fierce debate in the Nordic country.

While Sweden has contributed troops to international peacekeeping missions, the country has not been directly involved in an armed conflict since the Napoleonic era.

The realities of war are therefore foreign to most Swedes. "There could be war in Sweden," Minister for Civil Defense Carl-Oskar Bohlin told an annual defense conference on Sunday, warning Swedes against complacency. Days later, the sentiment was echoed by the commander of Sweden's armed forces Micael Byden, who showed pictures of burnt out and bombed houses from Ukraine.

"Do you believe that this could be Sweden?," Byden asked the audience, later explaining that the question was not a rhetorical one. "Russia's war against Ukraine is a step, not an end goal, for the ambition to establish spheres of influence and tear down the rule-based world order," he added.

Ending two centuries of neutrality and military non-alignment, Sweden applied to join NATO in May 2022, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, though its bid is currently held up by Turkey and Hungary. In early December, Stockholm and Washington signed a pact paving the way for US forces to operate in Sweden. — AFP

Kuwait 'deeply worried'...

Continued from Page 1

"All American-British interests have become legitimate targets" following the strikes, the rebels' Supreme Political Council said. Hussein Al-Ezzi, the Houthis' deputy foreign minister, said the United States and Britain would "have to prepare to pay a heavy price". The rebels have controlled much of Yemen since a civil war erupted in 2014 and are part of an Iran-aligned "axis of resistance" against Zionist entity and its allies. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all sides "not to escalate" in the interest of regional peace and stability, his spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Regional concern

The United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting on the strikes Friday, days after adopting a resolution demanding the Houthis immediately stop their attacks on ships. At the meeting, US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield warned that no ship was safe from the Houthi threat in the Red Sea. Russian Ambassador Vassili Nebenzia denounced the "blatant armed aggression" against the entire population of the country.

Washington last month announced a maritime security initiative, Operation Prosperity Guardian, to protect maritime traffic in the area but the Houthis kept up attacks despite several warnings. With the strikes on Friday, the United States and Britain targeted nearly 30 locations using more than 150 munitions, US General Douglas Sims said, updating earlier figures. President Joe Biden said he did not believe there were civilian casualties.

Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said the raids "led to the deaths of five martyrs" and wounded six rebels. Biden called the strikes a successful "defensive action" after the "unprecedented" Red Sea attacks and said he would act again if the Houthis continued their "outrageous behavior". British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the Houthis' breach of international law warranted the "strong signal", which he described as "proportionate".

But Nasser Kanani, spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, said the Western strikes would fuel "insecurity and instability in the region" while "diverting attention from Gaza. The Houthis fired "at least one" anti-ship ballistic missile in retaliation on Friday but it caused no damage, according to Sims. Washington said it did not seek conflict with Iran, and National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told MSN-BC there was "no reason" for an escalation.

Middle Eastern leaders voiced concern, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan describing the strikes on Yemen as disproportionate and saying: "It is as if they aspire to turn the Red Sea into a bloodbath." Saudi Arabia said it "is following with great concern the military operations" and called for "self-restraint and avoiding escalation". The kingdom is trying to extricate itself from its nine-year war with the Houthis, though fighting has largely been on hold since a truce in early 2022.

Economic cost

Hamas said it would hold Britain and the United States "responsible for the repercussions on regional security". However, Fabian Hinz, a research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, discounted the risk of escalation, "as big players like Iran are keen on avoiding a regional war." Oil prices rose four percent Friday on fears of an escalation before falling back. Denmark's Torm became the latest tanker firm to halt transit through the Red Sea.

Dryad Global, a maritime security risk group, advised its clients to suspend Red Sea operations for 72 hours, citing the threat of Houthi retaliation. Hundreds of thousands of people, some carrying Kalashnikov assault rifles, gathered in Yemen's capital Sanaa on Friday to protest, many waving Yemeni and Palestinian flags, an AFP journalist reported. "Death to America, death to Zionists," they chanted. In Tehran, hundreds rallied against the United States, Britain and Zionist entity, burning the three countries' flags outside the UK embassy while voicing support for Gazans and Yemenis, an AFP reporter saw. In Gaza City, some Palestinians lauded Houthi support and condemned Britain and the United States. "No one is standing with us but Yemen," said Fuad Al-Ghalaini, one of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced by bombardment of the besieged territory. — Agencies

Trump ordered to pay New York Times \$400K in legal fees

NEW YORK: Former US president Donald Trump was ordered to pay nearly \$400,000 in legal costs to the New York Times and multiple journalists Friday after a lawsuit he brought against them was dismissed. Trump had filed a complaint against the newspaper in September 2021, accusing three journalists of engaging in an "insidious plot" to obtain his tax documents as part of an investigative report that was published in 2018 and ended up winning a

Pulitzer Prize.

A judge in the commercial division of the New York state Supreme Court dismissed the case in May 2023, ordering Trump—who is seeking a return to the White House in this year's election—to pay the defendants' costs.

The decision issued Friday said the Times' estimation of having spent \$392,638 in attorney's fees appeared "reasonable," and ordered Trump to reimburse them in full. The paper's investigation revealed how Trump—a real estate mogul who has boasted for decades about building his own business fortune—had in fact received the equivalent of \$413 million, adjusted for inflation, from his father over several years, much of which was transferred through a shell company to avoid taxation. — AFP

Two US Navy sailors missing off coast of Somalia

WASHINGTON: Two US Navy sailors have been reported missing at sea while conducting operations off the coast of Somalia, the US military said Friday. The two sailors went missing Thursday evening, US Central Command said in a brief statement.

"Search and rescue operations are currently

ongoing to locate the two sailors. For operational security purposes, we will not release additional information until the personnel recovery operation is complete," it said. The sailors were "forward-deployed" to the US 5th Fleet area of operations "supporting a wide variety of missions."

The 5th Fleet's area of operations covers about 2.5 million square miles of water and includes The Gulf, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman and parts of the Indian Ocean, according to the military's website. — AFP

'We love life': Gaza couple...

Continued from Page 1

Mustafa Shamlakh, 26, want to make the most of their rare chance to celebrate. They dance and laugh as guests spray white mousse around the room. But eventually they have to face reality. Zionist relentless military campaign, triggered by attacks by Palestinian militants, has killed at least 23,843 people, mostly women and children, in Gaza, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

The war began when militants launched an un-

precedented attack on October 7. The newlyweds make up part of another grim tally - those displaced by the violence, which UN estimates put at 1.9 million Palestinians out of a total population in Gaza of 2.4 million. "The house where the groom was supposed to live was destroyed," Ayman Shamlakh, the groom's uncle, told AFP.

As the war went on, both families felt there was nothing to be gained from waiting and they agreed to the marriage. After the school celebration, the couple head for a ceremony set to take place in a tent. As they dive into a waiting black SUV, surrounded by a massive crowd of well-wishers, it almost looks like any other wedding day. "We are all living through the same tragedy," said Ayman Shamlakh. "However, we must continue to live, and life should go on." — AFP

International

India flexes maritime muscles by boosting Arabian Sea force

Indian commandos scuttle hijacking attempt of a merchant carrier on Jan 5

NEW DELHI: Dramatic drone footage showing Indian commandos hunting pirates after an attack in the Arabian Sea illustrates New Delhi's "significant" expansion of a muscular maritime force reflecting global ambitions, analysts say.

The commandos, deployed this month from an Indian-built warship after an attempted hijacking of a merchant bulk carrier, are part of a major increase of naval forces in seas.

"It's significant given the geopolitical context" and the aggressive "use of naval assets", said Uday Bhaskar, head of the New Delhi-based Society for Policy Studies think-tank. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, expected to be re-elected later this year, is looking to raise the global heft of India, the world's fifth-largest economy.

"As India continues to rise in the international great power hierarchy, it envisions to project itself as a leading and responsible power," said Don McLain Gill of De La Salle University in the Philippines. Its naval deployment is part of its "desire to play a larger and more proactive role as a responsible security and development partner", Gill told AFP.

Indian combat operations against pirates are not new. The navy has been deployed continuously off Somalia since 2008 as piracy surged, bombarding and sinking pirate "motherships" ranging from just off India's coast to the Gulf of Aden, boarding boats by helicopter and capturing dozens of gunmen.

But the navy's deployment in December of a far larger force—including three guided-missile destroyers and P-8I reconnaissance aircraft to "maintain a deterrent presence" after a string of ship-

ping attacks—marks a rapid ramping up of forces. Defense Minister Rajnath Singh—speaking at the launch of India's latest own-built warship, joining an indigenous-made fleet including an aircraft carrier and submarines—vowed shipping would be protected "from the sea to the heights of the sky".

The response followed a Dec 23 drone attack on the MV Chem Pluto tanker 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) off the coast of India, which Washington blamed on Iran—claims Tehran dubbed "worthless". Yemen's Houthis have launched scores of Red Sea attacks targeting Zionist-linked vessels in response to Zionist entity war on Gaza. India, which has close trade ties with Iran, has not joined the US-led force battling the Houthis.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden said US and British forces had launched air strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen in a "defensive action" following the recent attacks on Red Sea shipping vessels. The United States and nine allies said in a joint statement that their aim was to stabilize the crucial shipping lanes, and "protect the free flow of commerce" there. But with international naval forces diverted north into the Red Sea—sparking fears of resurgent pirates exploiting the gap, with the first successful case of Somali piracy since 2017 recorded in December—New Delhi remains worried about the impact on trade. One report, by New Delhi-based Research and Information System for Developing Countries, warned India could lose \$30 billion in exports this year—a six percent drop—if more shipping has to reroute via South Africa. But India was taking "very proactive action" to ensure pirates "don't venture



LONDON: India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh (center), accompanied by Britain's Defense Secretary Grant Shapps, inspects an ceremonial Guard of Honor at Horse Guards Parade in central London on January 9, 2024. — AFP

into the India Ocean region", Admiral Hari Kumar, chief of naval staff, told reporters on Wednesday at an event showing off an Indian-made long-range reconnaissance drone.

On Jan 5, after the Liberian-flagged MV Lila Norfolk reported an attempted hijacking around 450 nautical miles off Somalia's coast, an Indian destroyer and surveillance aircraft tracked the vessel giving a "forceful warning", the navy said. By the time the elite commando force boarded for so-called "sanitization" operations, the pirates had fled—but the footage was shared widely by the

navy as evidence of their "swift response" capabilities. It showed India "can mount a credible naval presence in the Indian Ocean region when required at short notice", said Bhaskar, who is a retired naval officer. India has also expanded its force into the Arabian Sea. Former navy spokesman DK Sharma insisted the deployment was targeted only at "miscreants taking advantage of the Middle East" by attacking shipping. "India believes in maintaining peace in the global commons," Sharma said. "We have no ambitions to say that the Indian Ocean is India's ocean." —AFP



GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador: Members of a special sniper unit of the National Police stand guard while participating in a manhunt following the escape of several prisoners from the Litoral penitentiary in Guayaquil, Ecuador on January 13, 2024. — AFP

Five inmates escape in new Ecuador prison break

GUAYAQUIL: At least five inmates escaped Friday evening from Ecuador's vast Guayaquil prison complex, with two of them caught shortly afterward during a vast search operation, police sources said.

Shortly after their escape, two helicopters, as well as drones, were seen flying over the surroundings of the huge prison, on the northern outskirts of the city. They used powerful searchlights aimed at the ground to try to locate the fugitives, with two of them recaptured, according to officers at the scene.

Authorities and the prison administration have not made an official statement so far. Following the incident, dozens of police officers supported by soldiers could be seen patrolling around the prison, where Ecuador's most dangerous criminals are held. A cordon of around 10 men, equipped with bullet-proof shields, took up position at the main entrance to the penitentiary. Traffic on the nearby highway was not interrupted. Since Sunday, the small South American country has been plunged into an unprecedented security crisis sparked by

the escape from Guayaquil prison of one of the country's most powerful narco bosses, Jose Adolfo Macias, known by the alias "Fito."

His escape was followed by prison riots, hostage-taking and attacks on the police. At least 18 people have been killed while 178 guards and prison employees remain hostage. President Daniel Noboa declared a state of emergency and ordered the army to neutralize the "terrorist" criminal gangs.

More than 22,400 soldiers were deployed, with land, air and sea patrols, searches and raids carried out in prisons, while a curfew was imposed. Once a bastion of peace situated between major cocaine producers, Ecuador has been plunged into crisis after years of growing control by transnational cartels that use its ports to ship the drug to the United States and Europe.

Criminal gangs in the country of about 17 million people are thought to have more than 20,000 members. According to the latest official report, 859 suspects have been arrested, 25 escaped detainees have been recaptured, five "terrorists" shot dead and 57 kidnapped people have been released. A chilling video filmed in Machala prison in the southwest of the country and confirmed by police shows the corpse of a prisoner wrapped in plastic being thrown into the street from inside the jail, which is under the control of inmates. Other images have emerged over the past two days showing arrested suspected gang members being ridiculed, forced to sing, hitting each other or being mistreated by soldiers. —AFP

Travel dispute halts trade at Afghanistan border with Pakistan

KABUL: The busiest frontier crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been closed to trade in the latest row over document rules for commercial vehicle drivers crossing the border. Crossings between the two countries have been temporarily shut in recent months after Islamabad last year launched a massive operation against undocumented Afghans living in Pakistan and tightened document requirements for Afghans entering the country. Both sides blamed the other for the latest shutdown at the Torkham crossing, which started late Friday night, according to officials on either side of the border.

"Torkham is closed to commercial truck drivers without visas from Pakistani authorities," Afghan border official Abdul Jabbar Hekmat said in a statement on Friday. Pakistani officials on Saturday denied a visa requirement had been imposed, saying the border had been shut when Afghan counterparts were informed truck drivers could only cross with a valid passport, a document many Afghans do not have.

"Following our updated policy, Afghan officials were informed last night that cargo drivers will only be allowed to enter our side if they possess a passport," a Pakistani customs official told AFP.

He said this regulation had been agreed in past meetings between Afghan and Pakistani authorities on border rules. "However, rather than adhering to the previously agreed-upon regulations, the Afghan border officials opted to close down border trade." Hundreds of trucks had been stranded at the crossing, a Pakistani security official told AFP, adding that the border was still open to pedestrians.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have had increasingly fraught relations in recent months, with Islamabad accusing the Taliban government of failing to root out militants staging attacks on Pakistan from Afghan soil—a claim Kabul has denied. The Torkham crossing—equidistant between the capitals Islamabad and Kabul—was frequently shut last year, with tensions sometimes spilling over into armed clashes between border guards across the frontier. —AFP

10 dead in China mining accident

BEIJING: At least 10 people were killed and six are missing after an accident at a coal mine in central China's Henan Province, state media said Saturday. The accident, a likely coal and gas explosion described as an "outburst", happened around 2:55 pm (0655 GMT) on Friday in Pingdingshan, state broadcaster CCTV said.

Search and rescue efforts were continuing, CCTV said. State news agency Xinhua said 425 people were working underground when the blast took place. Those in charge of the mine have been taken into custody by authorities, Xinhua said. Mining safety in China has improved in recent decades, as has media coverage of major incidents, many of which were once overlooked. However, accidents are still common in an industry with a poor safety record and where regulations are not necessarily enforced.

In 2022, 245 people died in 168 accidents, according to official figures. Last month, 12 people were killed and 13 injured in a mining accident on the outskirts of Jixi city in northeastern Heilongjiang province. Eleven people were killed in November in an accident at another coal mine in the same province. And in September, at least 16 people were killed in a coal mine fire in southwest China's Guizhou province. —AFP

US prosecutors seek death for shooter in racist murders

WASHINGTON: Federal prosecutors said Friday they will seek the death penalty for a man convicted in the racially motivated murders of 10 Black people in a New York supermarket in 2022. The move was a first for the administration of Democratic President Joe Biden, who is running for re-election in November and who pledged during his 2020 campaign to work towards abolishing capital punishment at the federal level. White supremacist Payton Gendron, 19, was sentenced to life in prison in February 2023 by a court in the state of New York after pleading guilty to racially motivated murders and acts of terrorism.

In the federal case against him for hate crimes, prosecutors said the intentional and premeditated nature of the killings, as well as its racist motivations, justified the death penalty. "Payton Gendron expressed bias, hatred, and contempt toward Black persons and his animus toward Black persons played a role in the killings," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Since the start of Biden's presidency, the Justice Department has only sought the death penalty twice, but those were proceedings initiated under his Republican predecessor Donald Trump. Attorney General Merrick Garland also decreed a moratorium on federal executions in May 2021. Federal executions in the United States are rare, with the last taking place in January 2021. US states carried out 24 executions in 2023, according to the Death Penalty Information Center.

Gendron planned the attack for months, targeting Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, near the Canadian border, because of the surrounding neighborhood's large African-American population. On May 14, 2022 the then-18-year-old drove from his hometown of Conklin, more than 200 miles (322 kilometers) away, with the intention of killing as many Black people as possible, prosecutors said. Wearing heavy body armor and wielding an AR-15 assault rifle, he shot four people in the parking lot, three fatally, before entering the grocery store. Gendron wore a helmet with a video camera attached and live-streamed the two-minute attack on the platform Twitch. Police arrested Gendron within hours of the attack and investigators found a 180-page document on his computer laying out his racist motivations for the massacre. —AFP

India finds apparent wreckage from 2016 military plane crash

NEW DELHI: India said Friday it had likely found wreckage from an Indian Air Force transport plane that went missing over the sea almost eight years ago with 29 people aboard. A Russian-built Antonov An-32 was carrying service personnel and six crew members during a routine courier service to India's remote Andaman and Nicobar Islands in July 2016.

It last made contact with air traffic control 15 minutes after taking off from an air force base near the southern city of Chennai. Search and rescue efforts at the time failed to find any trace of the aircraft after its disappearance. The ministry of defense said a deep-sea drone surveying the ocean floor in the Bay of Bengal had found debris from a crashed aircraft at a depth of 3,400 meters (11,150 feet) around 140 nautical miles (310 kilometers) south of Chennai.

The images were "found to be conforming with an An-32 aircraft", the ministry said in a statement, adding that the discovery "at the probable crash site" pointed to the debris as "possibly belonging to the crashed IAF An-32". No other aircraft have been reported missing in the area.

The An-32 is capable of flying for up to four hours without refueling and is the Indian Air Force's workhorse transport aircraft. But the IAF, which relies heavily on Russian-made equipment, has been blighted by a poor safety record. An IAF source told AFP in 2016 that radar data from the missing aircraft showed it



SRINAGAR, India: An Indian Air Force Antonov An-32 transport aircraft is pictured as rain falls at an air force base in Srinagar on September 6, 2014. -- AFP

making a sharp left turn before rapidly losing altitude.

India's defense chief General Bipin Rawat was killed in 2021 alongside 12 other people when their Russian-made Mi-17 chopper crashed in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Two pilots were killed the following year when their Soviet-era MiG-21 fighter jet crashed during a training sortie in Rajasthan.

And last year a Russian-made Sukhoi Su-30 and a French-built Mirage 2000 collided in mid-air during

exercises south of the capital New Delhi, killing one of the pilots. An-32 in India, 20 people onboard died and three civilians were burnt to death on the ground when one of the planes crashed near a New Delhi airport in 1999. The air force has gradually been getting rid of some of its older aircraft, some of which date back to the 1960s. Experts have warned that India's delay in revamping its outdated military aircraft threatens national security. —AFP

Business

SUNDAY, JANUARY 14, 2024

Zain successfully renews six ISO certifications

Renewal reflects commitment to global standards and best practices

KUWAIT: Reflecting its unwavering commitment to operational excellence and market leadership, Zain announced the successful renewal of six ISO certifications, attesting to the company's adherence to the highest standards and its compliance with the best global practices. This step reinforces Zain's leadership position in the Kuwaiti market, through which it serves the nation's biggest family of subscribers.

Zain successfully renewed the following certifications: Quality Management System (ISO 9001:2015), Environmental Management System (ISO 14001:2015), Information Security Management System (ISO/IEC 27001:2022), Business Continuity (ISO 22301:2012), IT Service Management (ISO/IEC 20000-1:2018), and Occupational Health and Safety Management (ISO 45001:2018).

The certifications were successfully renewed after a thorough audit process was completed by an independent certifying body. Teams from Zain's various departments and divisions were visited to assess compliance with the required practices and standards. The company's systems and infrastructure were also evaluated. The Quality Management System certification attests Zain's commitment to delivering reliable, efficient, and satisfactory products and services that meet customer requirements and comply with applicable regulations. The Environmental Management System certification affirms the company's compliance with applicable legal and regulatory requirements, pollution prevention, and continual



"Quality", "Environmental", "Business Continuity", "IT Service Management", "Occupational Health & Safety" and "Information Security"

improvement of environmental performance.

The Information Security Management System certification shows Zain's commitment to managing sensitive company information, ensuring its confidentiality, integrity, and availability. It also ensures that Zain regularly conducts risk assessments to identify threats, vulnerabilities, and po-

tential impacts on information security, while also implementing risk treatment plans to mitigate or manage these risks effectively. This ensures the protection of customer data, network security, regulatory compliance, maintaining service continuity, adapting to technological advancements, and preserving reputation and trust. The Business

Continuity certification attests Zain's commitment to establish, implement, maintain, and continually improve processes to enhance its resilience and ensure continuity of operations in the face of disruptive incidents or disasters. The IT Service Management certification assures the company's commitment to the best practices for effective management and delivery of IT services. Lastly, the Occupational Health and Safety Management certification shows that Zain is committed to a safe and healthy work environment for its employees and other stakeholders.

Zain is proud to be one of the Kuwaiti private sector's first companies to prioritize quality management and operational excellence, including obtaining ISO certifications throughout the past three decades to ensure its commitment to international standards.

In the beginning of its journey, Zain Kuwait obtained its first ISO certification for its Quality Management System (QMS), marking the company's pledge to maintaining high-quality standards. Over time, and as Zain expanded its services and operations, it continued to be certified across various other areas such as information security, business continuity, environmental management, and more. This announcement reflects Zain's leadership in offering the best digital services, as well as its relentless pursuit of excellence and innovation. The company aims to provide its customer base, the largest in Kuwait, with a superior digital lifestyle experience.

US regulator keeps Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes grounded

WASHINGTON: The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said Friday that all 737 MAX 9 planes would remain grounded until Boeing provides further data following a near-catastrophic incident on an Alaska Airlines-operated aircraft.

"For the safety of American travelers the FAA will keep the Boeing 737-9 MAX grounded until extensive inspection and maintenance is conducted and data from inspections is reviewed," the FAA said in a statement.

In the dramatic January 5 incident, Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 from Portland executed an emergency landing after a panel known as a "door plug" blew out mid-flight. There were no fatalities or serious injuries. The FAA has launched a safety probe into the incident, the first major in-flight safety issue on a Boeing plane since fatal 2018 and 2019 737 MAX crashes that led to a lengthy grounding of the aircraft. "We are working to make sure nothing like this happens again," FAA administrator Mike Whitaker said.

"Our only concern is the safety of American travelers and the Boeing 737-9 MAX will not return to the skies until we are entirely satisfied it is safe." The FAA said it needed additional information from Boeing before approving the manufacturer's proposed inspection and maintenance instructions.

The regulator said it "will not approve the inspection and maintenance process until it reviews data from the initial round of 40 inspections," but added that it was "encouraged by the exhaustive nature of



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

Boeing's instructions for inspections and maintenance." Earlier Friday the FAA said it was planning to increase its oversight of Boeing production and manufacturing, including auditing its 737 MAX production line and suppliers.

The regulator said it was also exploring the use of an independent third party to oversee Boeing's inspections. "It is time to re-examine the delegation

of authority and assess any associated safety risks," Whitaker said. "The grounding of the 737-9 and the multiple production-related issues identified in recent years require us to look at every option to reduce risk." The FAA action has affected hundreds of flights. Alaska Airlines, which operates 65 737-9 MAX planes, said it was cancelling around 110-150 flights a day through Tuesday due to the grounding. — AFP

Oil prices rise on Red Sea escalation

NEW YORK: Oil prices climbed Friday after US and UK forces launched strikes against Houthi rebels, while global stocks were mixed following the kickoff of corporate earnings season. Crude prices spiked more than four percent before ebbing somewhat after the allies launched deadly strikes following weeks of disruptive rebel attacks on Red Sea shipping.

"The fear in the oil market is that the region is on an unpredictable escalating path, where at some point down the road, supply of oil will indeed in the end be lost," noted Bjarne Schieldrop, chief commodities analyst at SEB bank. He noted that if the US-UK attacks were unsuccessful in destroying Houthi weapons, and oil tankers need to go around Africa, then up to 80 million barrels will be locked in transit—sending prices up as much as \$5-10 per barrel. The Houthis have carried out a growing number of strikes on vessels in the Red Sea, a key international shipping route, since the Gaza war erupted in October. The attacks have affected trade flows at a time when supply strains are putting upward pressure on inflation globally.

In Friday trade, the Dow dipped while the S&P 500 edged higher as investors digested corporate earnings and a surprise drop in wholesale inflation.

Leading banks were mostly lower following a deluge of quarterly results, while airlines were hammered after Delta's forecast disappointed investors. "The market is optimistic as it can be about (interest) rate cuts," said Steve Sosnick of Interactive Brokers, adding that investors want to see solid earnings. Tokyo and European stock markets ended the week with strong gains.

The luxury sector was in focus after British

fashion brand Burberry posted a profit warning, sending its share price sliding more than nine percent at one stage in London. Investors are keenly waiting for a drop in interest rates, which central banks hiked in 2022 and 2023 in a bid to cool decades-high inflation. While rates of price rises have slowed, inflation remains above target for the US Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank and the Bank of England. —AFP



Morgan Stanley to pay \$249m to settle US fraud charges

NEW YORK: Morgan Stanley will pay \$249 million to settle civil and criminal charges connected to stock trades where it disclosed key information that it promised to keep confidential, US authorities announced Friday.

The conduct concerns large equity trades in which Morgan Stanley trading staff between 2018 and 2021 leaked information to hedge funds, resulting in some \$72.5 million in improper profits, according to a US Department of Justice press release that announced a deferred prosecution agreement with the New York giant. Morgan Stanley also reached a civil settlement with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Both agencies also charged Pawan Passi, the former head of its equity syndicate desk, with fraud. Passi faces a \$250,000 civil penalty and reached a parallel deferred prosecution agreement with the Justice Department.

Morgan Stanley had marketed its processes as "less prone to leaks and therefore less risky" than those at other banks that offered similar services, according to a DOJ statement. "Contrary to these promises" of privacy, two Morgan Stanley trading staff members "shared highly specific information ... with certain hedge funds." In one of the cases cited by the DOJ, the would-be sell-



WASHINGTON: Morgan Stanley CEO James Gorman testifies during a Wall Street oversight hearing by the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, December 6, 2023. — AFP

er of shares of Star Bulk Carriers canceled a plan for a sale in May 2021 after growing suspicious of leaks when the stock fell 6.8 percent, though peer companies did not experience losses.

"The head of the desk lied, falsely assuring the seller that no Morgan Stanley employees had disclosed the upcoming block to the buy side," the DOJ statement said. In reaching the settlement, the DOJ said it made "a careful weighting of factors," noting that while Morgan Stanley had not voluntarily disclosed the conduct, it had no prior criminal history, provided "extraordinary cooperation" with authorities and "has accepted full responsibility for its conduct."

Morgan Stanley said in a statement it was "pleased to resolve these investigations" and "confident in the enhancements we have made to our controls around block trading, including strengthening our policies, procedures, training and surveillance." "The core of this matter is the misconduct of two employees who violated the firm's policies, procedures and our core values, as outlined in the settlement documents," it added. Shares of Morgan Stanley fell 0.8 percent in Friday's trading. — AFP

Business



LAS VEGAS: Genesis Systems co-founder Shannon Stuckenberg discusses the inner workings of a WaterCube device that extracts water from the air during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada, on January 12, 2024. -- AFP

Green tech pumps water from thin air

CES gadget extravaganza shows its green side

LAS VEGAS: Tech aimed at battling climate change and even pumping fresh water out of thin air attracted crowds as the annual CES gadget extravaganza showed its green side. With calls to fight climate change escalating, technology firms are finding ways to help, according to organizers of the Consumer Electronics Show, which wraps up in Las Vegas on Friday. Genesis Systems was on the show floor with a first of its kind WaterCube—about the size of a central air conditioning unit—that pumps water from the air so effectively it could supply all the water needed by a home.

“Our first mission is to sustainably solve global water scarcity,” said David Stuckenberg, who founded Genesis with his wife, Shannon. “Once you have this plugged into your house...you can turn yourself off (from) the city water.” In places where wells and aquifers have dried up, WaterCube can extract water from the air using its unique process, he explained.

The decision to become a “water entrepreneur” sprang from hearing farmers complain of wells running dry and from serving in the US military in the Middle East as nations there sought new sources of precious water, according to Stuckenberg. “One of the challenges that we’re facing in terms of making humanity sustainable is the stuff we need for life,” he told AFP.

“Next to air, water is the most important thing.” Trillions of tons of untapped water are in the air, and one of the effects of a warming planet is more water vapor in the atmosphere, Stuckenberg said. Water in the air is quickly replenished, creating “an infinite water source” that WaterCube taps into at scale, he explained. “We’re democratizing the water supply,” Stuckenberg said. His Florida-based company is also looking to incorporate carbon-capturing features into WaterCube, since a step in that process already includes drying out the air stream, he said.

Small companies like MolluScan from France were at CES with their own innovative approaches

to protecting the environment. MolluScan wires sea mussels or clams with sensors to detect pollution in waterways or oceans, sharing findings with companies or regulatory authorities—saving the time and expense of water sampling. “You are pushing industries to improve the environment,” MolluScan co-founder Ludovic Quinault told AFP.

The mollusk-based pollution detectors, known as molluSCAN-eye, have been deployed at the North Pole, Tahiti and elsewhere, according to Quinault.

Companies at CES also touted increased use of recycled or sustainable materials products and power-saving features along with more efficient batteries and solar power generation systems.

French auto equipment supplier Forvia explained how it uses hemp, wood, pineapple and other organic material in its designs. Meanwhile, Britain-based Matter—whose backers include Hollywood stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Ashton Kutcher—debuted filtration technology to catch the harmful flood of minuscule plastic fibers typically released in wastewater from washing machines.

Ambient Photonics, whose early investors included Amazon’s Climate Pledge Fund, demonstrated a solar cell capable of charging from indoor lighting, eliminating the need for batteries in devices.

“Connected electronics require ongoing power, which too often derives from disposable or rechargeable batteries,” said Photonics chief executive Bates Marshall. South Korean conglomerate SK Group devoted its exhibit to playfully showcasing how environmentally friendly technologies could bring about a happier future. Visitors could ride on a train capable of being powered by hydrogen or go for a “magic carpet ride” in a clean energy vehicle guided by artificial intelligence.

The idea is for the influential telecom, chip and energy company to encourage others in the industry to join its mission to be carbon neutral, according to Ah Cho at the SK booth. — AFP

Sri Lanka says debt restructure to be finalized by April

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka’s bankrupt government said Friday that a foreign debt restructure would be finalized by the beginning of April, after signs the economy was emerging from its worst crisis on record. The island nation defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt in 2022 after a foreign exchange wipeout left it unable to import food, fuel and other essentials. It secured a \$2.9 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout last year which is conditional on a debt deal that satisfies foreign creditors.

“The target for the completion of the debt restructuring would be within the first quarter of the year,” President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s office said. The IMF released a \$337-million second tranche of its four-year loan last month after Colombo secured an “in principle” debt agreement with China, Sri Lanka’s biggest bilateral lender.

Neither Colombo nor Beijing have disclosed details of the offer, but the IMF said it was sufficient to ensure the island’s debt sustainability. Official sources in Sri Lanka said the Chinese deal included a mix of extending the tenure and reducing interest on bilateral loans, instead of a haircut on its loans.

Wickremesinghe’s government has this week hosted visiting Japanese finance minister Shunichi Suzuki, representing Sri Lanka’s second-largest bilateral creditor. The president’s office said Suzuki expressed “optimism” about Sri Lanka’s economy and noted its modest 1.6 percent growth in the September quarter, the first expansion since the debt default. There was no immediate comment from the Japanese delegation. Sri Lanka had hoped to secure a debt agreement with bilateral lenders as well as international sovereign bond holders within months of its default.

But the process had been repeatedly delayed, reportedly in part by China’s refusal to consider a haircut on its existing loans, which account for 10 percent of the island’s total foreign debt.

Sri Lanka saw months of civil unrest at the peak of the economic crisis, culminating with the ouster of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa when thousands of protesters stormed his home. Wickremesinghe, his successor, has doubled taxes, withdrawn generous energy subsidies and raised prices of essentials to shore up state revenue in line with the IMF bailout deal. — AFP



IMF board approves disbursement of \$700m for Pakistan

WASHINGTON: The IMF’s executive board approved an immediate disbursement of around \$700 million for Pakistan Thursday as part of a program to support the cash-strapped South Asian country through an economic crisis. The funds were unlocked after the International Monetary Fund board approved the first review of a nine-month, \$3 billion loan agreement reached in July 2023 to help Pakistan weather a balance-of-payments crisis and service crippling external debt.

Thursday’s disbursement brings the total released under the agreement to around \$1.9 billion, the Fund confirmed in a statement. Pakistan’s advancement under the program “has supported significant progress in stabilizing the economy following significant shocks,” IMF Deputy Managing Director Antoinette Sayeh said, according to the statement. “There are now tentative signs of activity picking-up and external pressures easing,” she said, adding that “continued strong ownership remains critical to ensure the current momentum continues and stabilization of Pakistan’s economy becomes entrenched.” The IMF said that macroeconomic conditions in Pakistan had “generally improved” since the program was implemented, and predicted economic growth of two percent this year.

The fiscal position has been strengthened, with foreign reserves increasing and a “broadly stable” exchange rate, it added. Despite the progress cited by the IMF, consumer inflation in Pakistan remains elevated, rising by 29.7 percent in the year to December, according to the country’s statistics bureau.—AFP



Warning Against Fraudulent Ads

Mobile Telecommunications Company (K.S.C.P.)- “Zain” would like to warn against fraudsters and impersonators who are exploiting Zain’s name and logo, by associating it with photos and videos that feature misrepresented statements attributed to members of the company’s Board of Directors and executive management.

These fraudulent ads have been manipulated from statements made by the Board and executive management members at official events and conferences, using the false content in a misleading manner by circulating fraudulent material on websites and social media networks. Fraudulent ads have included calling for investment opportunities in Zain that provide financial returns.

Zain reiterates that these are fraudulent opportunities that are not real and are not generated by the company or any of its affiliates and warns the public to take precaution vis-à-vis these fraudulent electronic ads by not entertaining nor engaging with them.

Zain is a public joint stock company listed on the Boursa Kuwait, and there is no way to invest in, trade shares, or obtain investment information about the company except through accredited investment entities licensed by regulatory bodies.

Zain disclaims any responsibility for these misleading invitations for investment, and advises caution when receiving any such material. Zain will not be held responsible or liable for any actions or invitations that call for financial investment in the company through registering on sham websites that are in no way associated with the company, and Zain confirms that it will take all legal measures to protect its name and brand image against these fraudulent ads.

zain.com

A Wonderful World



FREITAL, Germany: Dairy cows feed in a barn belonging to dairy farmer Marc Bernhardt (not pictured) in Freital, eastern Germany, on January 10, 2024. — AFP

German far right seeks to exploit farmer protests

DRESDEN: Brandishing suspect flags and even posters calling for opponents to be sent to the gallows, the conspicuous presence of far-right protesters at week-long tractor blockades by farmers has sparked fears that extremists are seeking to exploit the protest movement. During a rally this week by German farmers angry at cuts in subsidies, police separated several dozen far-right supporters from the main demonstration. The extremists from the “Freie Sachsen” group were brandishing royalist flags and mocked-up pictures of German politicians dressed as prisoners during the Dresden protest.

They are among radical groups that German authorities increasingly fear are seeking to co-opt the demonstrations, which began in December and have spread nationwide. Chancellor Olaf Scholz issued a warning on Saturday against the “extremists”, “When the protests, legitimate by themselves, turn into anger and contempt for democratic procedures and institutions, we all lose,” Scholz said in a statement and a video. “Disagreement is a part of democracy,” he said, adding however that “anger is stirred up in a targeted way”. “The extremists... show contempt for any compromise and poison democratic debate. It’s a toxic mix which should concern us and which also concerns me greatly,” Scholz said.

The protests escalated last week, when tractors blockaded roads and caused widespread disruption. Another major rally is planned for Monday in Berlin. The farmers and some of their supporters have sought to distance themselves from the far-right groups. But the extremists seem determined to latch on to the protest

movement. The “Freie Sachsen” group, which brings together monarchists, conspiracy theorists and the far right, has posted messages of support for the farmers online. Other groups, like neo-Nazi outfit “Third Voice” and nationalist movement “Ein Prozent” (One Percent), have called for strikes and riots, according to the interior ministry.

They are accused of being behind controversial stunts such as setting up gallows on the side of motorways and stopping Economy Minister Robert Habeck from disembarking from a ferry.

Habeck, from the Green party, has been a favorite target of the protests. Stephan Kramer, intelligence service head in the eastern state of Thuringia, accused the far-right groups of “constantly and systematically seeking to subvert any form of legitimate public protest”. Since the start of the protests, farmers’ federation leader Joachim Rukwied has repeatedly insisted: “We don’t want right-wing and radical movements in our demonstrations.” The farmers’ anger stems from a government decision to cut subsidies and tax breaks on diesel and agricultural vehicles. The move was part of efforts by Scholz’s coalition to find savings after Germany’s top court ruled in November that the government had broken debt rules.

The ruling blew a huge hole in the government’s spending plans. As well as fringe groups, the country’s main far-right force, the AfD (Alternative for Germany), has sought to capitalize on the protests, which have won widespread public sympathy. The party says it intends to make the defense of rural areas a central plank of its campaign for key elections this year in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg.

According to a recent opinion poll commissioned by broadcasters RTL and NTV, the AfD currently enjoys over 30 percent support in the three eastern states. Created in 2013 as an anti-euro outfit before morphing into an anti-immigration party, the AfD is enjoying a resurgence as Germany struggles with an upsurge in illegal migration, as well as a weak economy.—AFP

US banks report mixed results, see consumers as still healthy

Citigroup posts a fourth-quarter loss of \$1.9 billion

NEW YORK: Large US banks reported mixed results Friday, dented by exceptional costs connected to job cuts and to replenishing a federal fund tapped during last year's crisis involving midsized lenders. But while consumer credit quality has diminished somewhat, executives continued to describe a relatively solid US economy, with talk of a recession replaced by a "soft landing" of slower growth.

"We think the soft landing is a core thesis," Bank of America Chief Executive Brian Moynihan said on a conference call with analysts, adding that consumers are "still in the game" even as consumption has shifted from retail goods to going out and experiences. "The consumer credit narrative broadly is that the consumer is fine," said JPMorgan Chase Chief Financial Officer Jeremy Barnum, who characterized an uptick in charge offs for bad loans as reflecting a "normalization" of the credit market, rather than a "deterioration."

JPMorgan, the biggest US lender by assets, reported a drop in fourth-quarter profits from the year-ago period, due to costs of \$2.9 billion for a Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) special assessment after the failures of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank. Bank of America, Citigroup and Wells Fargo all paid assessments of around \$2 billion for the FDIC fund.

But JPMorgan's profits still topped analyst estimates. Overall, its profits were \$9.3 billion, down 15 percent from the year-ago period, while revenues rose 12 percent to \$38.6 billion. Operating profits were boosted by higher net interest income following several Federal Reserve rate increases that enabled JPMorgan to charge more for loans.

"When thinking about consumer credit... what

really matters is the strength of the labor market," Barnum told reporters on a conference call. "And obviously the labor market remains quite strong."

JPMorgan's increase in net interest income was not matched at other leading banks, which reported decreases in that area to the shifting balance of deposits and loans. Overall, Bank of America reported profits of \$3.1 billion, down 56 percent, reflecting lower net interest income, as well as the hit from the FDIC special assessment. Wells Fargo reported profits of \$3.5 billion, up nine percent, the only one of the four banks to see an increase compared with the 2022 period, reflecting lower expenses.

Besides the FDIC fee, Wells' results included a \$1 billion hit for severance costs due to job cuts. As with JPMorgan and Bank of America, Wells Fargo saw an increase in charge offs compared with the prior quarter. But Chief Executive Charlie Scharf characterized credit quality as a "modest deterioration" that is "consistent with our expectations."

Chief Financial Officer Michael Santomassimo told analysts that lower-income cohorts "are feeling much more stressed" than suggested by aggregated totals due to mounting toll of inflation over a longer period. Citigroup was the only one of the large banks to report a fourth-quarter loss of \$1.9 billion compared with profits of \$2.5 billion in the 2022 period. Revenues fell three percent to \$17.4 billion.

The results were weighed down by costs including \$780 million for severance and other expenses connected to a reorganization. The bank has also significantly shrunk its global consumer banking footprint, divesting assets in China, Vietnam and other markets.

Once the restructure is completed, "we will



NEW YORK: The JPMorgan Chase & Co world headquarters are pictured on April 17, 2019 in New York City. — AFP

have a simpler firm that can operate faster, better serve our clients and unlock value for our shareholders," Citi Chief Executive Jane Fraser said.

Overall, Citi plans to trim 20,000 jobs over the medium term. The move will put headcount at about 180,000 in the 2026 time period, down from

240,000 at the end of 2022 -- while also reflecting the expected spinoff of Citi's Mexico subsidiary, Banamex. Shares of Citi rose 1.3 percent in afternoon trading, while JPMorgan was flat. Bank of America dropped 0.7 percent while Wells Fargo lost 3.2 percent. — AFP

News in Brief

Russian inflation slows in Dec

MOSCOW: Russia's annual rate of inflation unexpectedly slowed in December after ticking up continuously for seven months, official data showed Friday, in a boost for the Kremlin ahead of elections. Inflation had been predicted by economists to rise in December 2023 but instead edged down to 7.4 percent year-on-year, compared with 7.5 percent in November. Friday's figure is still well above the four percent target of the central bank, which hiked interest rates to 16 percent last month in a bid to tame further price increases. Inflation has been a major concern for the central bank and Kremlin, which hopes to present the economy as an area of strength ahead of presidential elections this March. Worker shortages in the wake of mobilisation, when thousands of men were called up to the army or fled abroad, have also put further upwards pressure on prices. — AFP

French inflation cooled in 2023

PARIS: French inflation slowed slightly on average last year as a sharp fall in energy prices offset the soaring cost of food, official data showed Friday. Consumer prices rose by 4.9 percent in 2023, down from 5.2 percent the previous year, according to statistics agency INSEE. But it remained much higher than in 2021, when it reached 1.6 percent. French inflation reached 0.5 percent in 2020. Inflation accelerated across the world following the COVID pandemic and jumped higher after Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent energy and food prices soaring in 2022. Energy prices slowed sharply in France last year "due to the partial downturn in petroleum product prices", rising by 5.6 percent after reaching 23.1 percent in 2022, INSEE said. But food prices accelerated to 11.8 percent in 2023 after rising by 6.8 percent the year before. — AFP

UK economy rebounds in Nov

LONDON: Britain's recession-threatened economy rebounded in November from the previous month, official data showed on Friday. Gross domestic product expanded 0.3 percent in November after contracting by 0.3 percent in October, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. "GDP bounced back... led by services with retail, car leasing and computer games companies all having a buoyant month," noted ONS chief economist Grant Fitzner. "The longer-term picture remains one of an economy that has shown little growth over the last year," he added in the release. Separate recent data showed Britain's economy shrank in the third quarter of last year, raising fears of a recession before UK elections expected in 2024. — AFP

ECB interest rates at peak: Lagarde

BERLIN: European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said Thursday that interest rates in the eurozone had reached their peak after rising rapidly in response to high inflation last year. "I think that we are at the highest point and barring additional shocks... rates are very probably not going to continue to rise," Lagarde said in an interview on French broadcaster France 2. "I think they have reached their peak," she said, but refused to be drawn on a possible cut to borrowing costs. "I cannot give you a date," she told her interviewer. "If we win the battle against inflation, if we are sure inflation will be at two percent, then the rates will start to go down," Lagarde said, referring to the ECB's inflation target. — AFP



KUWAIT: Participants with the officials during the executive education program.

KIBS holds executive education program in partnership with HBS

KUWAIT: Under the patronage of the Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait and Chairman of the Board of the Kuwait Institute of Banking Studies (KIBS), KIBS launched the executive education program to support the development of senior leaders in the banking and finance sector in the GCC, in collaboration with Harvard Business School (HBS) under the title "Navigating the Future: Leading Financial Institutions in an Era of Innovation and Transformation" on Jan 13 - 18, 2024.

This program is the latest in a series that has been presented for the last 14 years in different GCC countries. This year, the program's 15th session will be held in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. This program is a part of the Kafa'a initiative undertaken by the Central Bank of Kuwait in collaboration with Kuwaiti banks and managed by the

Venezuela kills off petro cryptocurrency

CARACAS: Venezuela is putting an end to the petro cryptocurrency that President Nicolas Maduro launched six years ago to sidestep US sanctions, but which never took off and became embroiled in a graft scandal. All crypto wallets held on the Patria Platform—the only website where the petro was tradeable—will be shut down on Monday, January 15, according to a message displayed on the platform's site.

Any remaining petros are being converted to bolivars, the ailing local currency. The cryptocurrency was launched with great pomp and ceremony in February 2018, backed by Venezuela's vast petrol reserves, and priced at US \$60 per unit. With Caracas strangled by Washington's economic sanctions, Maduro vowed the petro would "allow new forms of international financing."

However, citizens struggled to understand how to use it and it was labeled a "scam" by some risk rating bodies. In 2020, Maduro tried to revive the coin by ordering airlines flying from Caracas to use it to pay for fuel, and making it mandatory to pay for state ser-

VICES such as getting a new passport.

Ultimately however, its use remained limited to some state operations such as the payment of taxes. Traffic fines were handed out in petros, but it was not possible to actually pay them using the cryptocurrency. The government forced banks to present their balances in both bolivars and petros.

On the Patria Platform, mainly used by government to dole out subsidies to the population, users could only exchange petros for bolivars via an auction system. "The petro (PTR) is officially dead," the private platform CryptoLand and Venezuela wrote on social media last week. The death knell was a corruption scandal that erupted last year over irregularities in the management of funds from oil operations carried out with crypto assets. The case led to the resignation of once-powerful petroleum minister Tarek El Aissami and the detention of dozens of officials including top management of the Sunacrip crypto regulator. It also led to a crackdown on bitcoin mining operations in the country where other cryptocurrencies like bitcoin have been a hugely popular guard against hyperinflation and the deflation of the bolivar. According to a survey presented in 2022 at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 10.3 percent of Venezuelans own crypto, compared to 8.3 percent of Americans and 5 percent of Britons. — AFP

US Fed records largest ever loss in 2023

WASHINGTON: The US Federal Reserve posted its biggest ever operating loss last year, it announced Friday, as the impact of higher interest rates caused its interest expense to surge. The Fed began rapidly raising the benchmark lending rate in March 2022 as policymakers looked to puncture a surge in prices that pushed inflation well above its long-term target of two percent.

Policymakers swiftly lifted rates to a 22-year high, and have held them steady since then, leading to a sharp rise in the cost of interest the US central bank pays out to banks that store their money at the Fed. As a result, the Fed's expenses exceeded its estimated earnings by 114.3 billion, the central bank announced in a statement. However, although the Fed incurred its worst-ever operating loss in 2023, it does not need to ask the Congress—or the Treasury Department—for more money to make ends meet. In normal times, the Fed's 12 regional banks transfer their earnings from holding securities to the Treasury Department, after deducting costs like the interest they pay to banks.

But when the Fed loses more than it earns, as has been the case since September 2022, it simply books these losses as a "deferred asset," and broadly stops paying money to the Treasury. Once the Fed starts earning more than it spends again, as will likely happen once interest rates fall, it will only begin paying profits to the Treasury once they exceed these deferred assets. Given the size of the Fed's losses last year, and its cumulative "deferred asset" of 133 billion since it started losing money in September 2022, this is likely to take some time. — AFP

SUNDAY, JANUARY 14, 2024

NOLAN'S 'OPPENHEIMER' LEADS SAG NOMINATIONS AS GALA MOVES TO NETFLIX

Fresh from its wins at the Golden Globes, Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer" on Wednesday topped the nominations for the influential Screen Actors Guild Awards, which are key to Oscars success. The SAG Awards, voted on by Hollywood actors, are likely to enjoy a profile boost of their own this year as they are broadcast globally on Netflix — an awards show first for the world's biggest streamer.

"Oppenheimer," which tells the story of the inventor of the atomic bomb, earned nods for Cillian Murphy, Robert Downey Jr. and Emily Blunt, as well as "outstanding performance by a cast" — the SAG Awards' top prize.

Nolan's three-hour epic, which earned nearly \$1 billion and received rave reviews from critics, is rapidly becoming the clear favorite for the Academy Awards in March. "Barbie" — the other half of last summer's "Barbenheimer" box office phenomenon, and the year's highest grossing film — picked up nominations for Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling and overall cast.

The surreal comedy based on the wildly popular doll also picked up a nomination for its stunt performers. The other films with three acting nominations were historical epic "Killers of the Flower Moon" — despite its leading man Leonardo DiCaprio missing out — and scathing satire "American Fiction," starring Jeffrey Wright. Both movies are nominated for best cast, with musical remake "The Color Purple" rounding out that category.



Statues of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Award known as 'the Actor' are displayed for the media at the American Fine Arts Foundry in this file photo. — AFP photos

'Colossal'

This year's SAG Awards gala, held on February 24, will be streamed on Netflix, as the platform slowly moves into hosting live events. The Screen Actors Guild will bestow a lifetime achievement award on Barbra Streisand.

In a statement, SAG-AFTRA president Fran Drescher praised the EGOT — Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony — winner as "a colossal icon with a relentless work ethic, evolving with each stage of her remarkable journey."

Speeches at next month's gala are certain to feature multiple references to last year's Hollywood strikes,

which saw the industry shut down as SAG-AFTRA — along with the writers' guild — went head-to-head with studios. A deal was finally reached to end the actors' strike in November.

While Netflix will host the gala, none of its films were nominated for the night's biggest prize. But the streamer did land five movie nominations, including Bradley Cooper and Carey Mulligan for Leonard Bernstein biopic "Maestro," and Jodie Foster and Annette Bening for "Nyad."

Elsewhere, Globes winners Paul Giamatti and Da'Vine Joy Randolph picked up nods for "The Holdovers," as did Emma Stone and her co-star Wil-



(From left) Cillian Murphy, winner of the Best Performance by a Male Actor in a Motion Picture - Drama for "Oppenheimer," and Robert Downey Jr., winner of the Best Performance by a Male Actor in a Supporting Role in any Motion Picture award for "Oppenheimer," pose during the 81st Annual Golden Globe Awards on Jan 7, 2024.

lem Dafoe for "Poor Things." All four films missed out on nominations for outstanding cast. The winner of that prize has gone on to win best picture at the Oscars in three of the past four years ("Parasite," "CODA" and "Everything Everywhere All at Once").

Actors represent the biggest branch of the membership of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which votes for the Oscars. The SAG Awards also honor television, with "Succession" on top with five nods, followed by "The Bear," "The Last of Us" and "Ted Lasso," all on four.

DGA nominations

Hollywood's directors' guild also announced its own nominations Wednesday. Both Nolan's "Oppenheimer" and Greta Gerwig's "Barbie" again made the shortlist of five nominees for the Directors Guild of America's best film. They were joined by Martin Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon," Alexander Payne's "The Holdovers," and "Poor Things" from Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos. The DGA Awards will take place on Feb 10. — AFP

This handout picture by Christie's New York on Jan 11, 2024 shows Elton John's grand piano (estimate \$30,000-50,000).



Giant statue of rapper Kid Cudi appears in Paris

A giant statue of US rapper Kid Cudi appeared without warning in central Paris on Friday to mark the release of his new album "Insano". The 10-metre (33-foot) statue at the Place de la Bourse depicts Kid Cudi in a demonic posture with red glowing eyes staring down at his hands.

The rapper's management said it was due to start blaring out his new album later in the day. Two more statues are due in New York and Los Angeles over the weekend.

Kid Cudi celebrated the release of his album with a listening party at the Hollywood Palladium in Los Angeles on Thursday night. "Insano" features collaborations with some of hip-hop's biggest names including A\$AP Rocky, Travis Scott and Pharrell Williams.

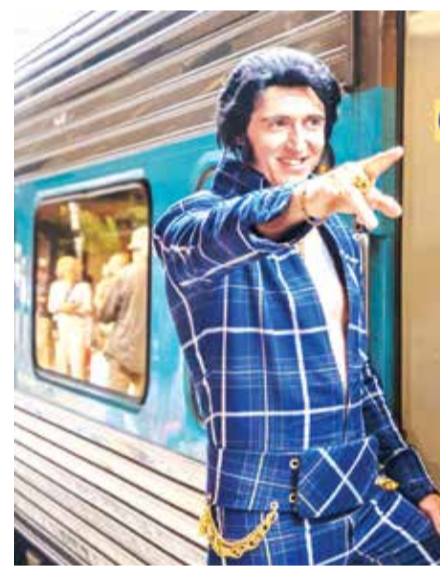
It also includes a sample from the 1990s pop hit "The Sign" by Ace of Base, on "Electrowavebaby". Kid Cudi, real name Scott Ramon Seguro Mescudi, turns 40 this month and recently cast doubt on his future, posting on X that he had only "1 more album and then im done w my deal and not sure what ima do after that".

The rapper has been a distinctive figure in rap since emerging around 2008 with hit mix tape "A Kid Named Cudi" that launched him into a close collaboration with Kanye West.

From the start, he challenged the macho trappings of hip-hop, speaking openly about his problems with depression and attacking misogyny, including with an appearance in a floral dress on "Saturday Night Live" in homage to similar statements by Nirvana's Kurt Cobain in the 1990s. Kid Cudi is also creative director of the fashion brand Members of the Rage and a regular at Paris Fashion Week, and has appeared in multiple films and TV shows including "Don't Look Up", "Westworld" and "We Are Who We Are". — AFP



A large statue depicting US rap singer and actor Scott Ramon Seguro Mescudi, aka Kid Cudi, is installed in front of the Palais Brongniart in Paris, on Jan 12, 2024.



An Elvis impersonator gestures as he boards a train to travel to the annual Parkes Elvis Festival, at Central Station in Sydney on Jan 11, 2024. — AFP photos



Performers and Elvis impersonators board a train to travel to the annual Parkes Elvis Festival.



Two men dressed as Elvis sit on a bench at Central Station in Sydney.

Boots, Banksy, piano: Elton John puts up items for auction

Music icon Elton John has put a variety of personal items up for auction at Christie's in New York, including monogrammed silver leather platform boots, a grand piano and a triptych by street artist Banksy.

Most of the items come from John's former home in Atlanta, a condo on Peachtree Road that was recently sold, the auction house said Thursday.

Beginning on Feb 21, Christie's is organizing a series of eight sales, both in person and online, for the collection of the 76-year-old's belongings. They include a vast array of Versace shirts and home decor to a Julian Schnabel portrait of John.

John, who wrapped up his farewell tour last year, is also offering an ivory and gold glam rock jumpsuit from the early 1970s designed by Annie Reavey, and photographs from the likes of Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton.

John bought the Atlanta home shortly after getting sober in 1990, Christie's said, as the singer found "solace and support in the warm community and recovery facilities" there.

"This extraordinary collection not only showcases a diverse array of remarkable objects that encapsulate Elton's unique life, work, and art but also provides our clients with a glimpse into the profound impact that the city of Atlanta had on him," said Tash Perrin, deputy chairman of Christie's Americas.

John built the collection with his husband David Furnish. It also features works by Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe and Damien Hirst.

The Banksy work, "Flower Thrower Triptych," is the most expensive piece on offer during the sales, with an estimated price of \$1-1.5 million. The personal collections of pop culture icons have become a regular feature at the world's top auction houses.

Last September, thousands of items that belonged to late Queen frontman Freddie Mercury sold for 40 million pounds (\$50.4 million), Sotheby's said. — AFP

Sideburns, sweat, blue suede shoes on Australia's Elvis train

Elvis impersonators swaggered through Sydney's Central Station on Thursday, boarding the "Blue Suede Express" on an unlikely annual pilgrimage paying homage to the King. The train shakes, rattles and rolls out of the city and towards the small farming town of Parkes, which hosts around 25,000 die-hard fans at its Elvis Festival every year.

Those with suspicious minds might point out Elvis Presley never sung a note in Australia, let alone Parkes, which lies about 350 kilometers (217 miles) inland from Sydney. But impersonator Taz "Funky Elvis" Dimtsis said he would latch on to any excuse to dust off his bright red jumpsuit. "He thought he'd be forgotten, that's the thing. And look at him, he's bigger than ever," he told AFP as a tribute act crooned Elvis hits on a nearby stage. "It's fantastic," he added before showing off his best hip swing.

The excited Elvis lovers primped their pompadours and mopped sweat-soaked fake sideburns as they waited

for the train in Sydney's muggy summer humidity. Sporting an eye-catching costume adorned with glittering blue sequins, Jenny Dollin said she could barely contain her excitement. "When you get to Parkes, the whole town is just out there to meet you. Makes me cry," the 45-year-old told AFP.

The first Elvis Festival was held in Parkes in 1993, the brainchild of local restaurant owners Bob and Anne Steel. Today, the town of around 10,000 people proudly wears its moniker: "The Elvis capital of Australia". Held across five days, this year's event will feature lookalike competitions, Elvis poetry, art exhibitions, and dozens of musical tributes.

Hundreds of fans had all this to look forward to as their Parkes-bound train pulled out of Sydney on Thursday morning, just two minutes behind schedule. "We can confirm, Elvis has left the building," the platform announcer said. — AFP

Lifestyle



Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah (second left) pours scented oil on the hands of Prince Abdul Mateen during the royal powdering ceremony at Istana Nurul Iman, ahead of his wedding as Queen Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Hajah Saleha (left) looks on.



Brunei's Prince Abdul Mateen's bride Yang Mulia Anisha Rosnah (left) during the royal powdering ceremony at Istana Nurul Iman, ahead of their wedding.

Brunei's 'Instagrammer' prince gives royal family a fresh look



This handout picture by Brunei's Information Department shows Brunei's Prince Abdul Mateen (right) touching his forehead on his father's hand, Brunei's Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah (second left) after his solemnization.



People wave to a car carrying Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah after his son Prince Abdul Mateen's solemnization as part of the royal wedding.

In real life he's a prince of an Islamic sultanate steeped in centuries-old traditions, but on Instagram Brunei's Abdul Mateen is more Hollywood than royalty as he flies in fighter jets, drives speed boats and poses bare-chested after workouts.

Mateen, 32, was one of Asia's most eligible bachelors until he married his 29-year-old fiancée on Thursday in a male-only ceremony at a mosque in the capital Bandar Seri Begawan. As the 10th child and fourth son of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, he is unlikely to ever ascend the throne of the oil-rich country on the northern edge of Borneo island.

Yet, Mateen's matinee idol looks, rippling six-pack and sense of adventure — captured in photos and videos that are carefully curated on Instagram — have turned him into a public relations asset for the royal family, which has been battered by scandals and global censure over the years. "He's a breath of fresh air," said Bruneian snack store worker Amyra Syahira Awang Ahmad, 20, who is among Mateen's 2.5 million Instagram followers. A pre-wedding photo of Mateen and his fiancée, Yang Mulia Anisha Rosnah, posted on Instagram on Dec 31 shows him wearing an open-neck white shirt under a dark, double-breasted blazer, while she is in a cream pantsuit and no hijab.

It drew more than 11,000 comments with some smitten followers lamenting that 2024 was starting with "heartbreak" — a reference to their own rather than the prince's. The photo appears to be part of an effort to burnish a more modern image of the conservative country — and make the royal family relevant to a younger generation of Bruneians that has grown up on social media.



BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Brunei: Brunei's Prince Abdul Mateen waves from his car as he leaves following his solemnization as part of the royal wedding at Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque in Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei on Jan 11, 2024. — AFP photos

"Prince Mateen would be what I describe as an important youth change-maker in Brunei society," said Mustafa Izzuddin, a visiting professor of international relations at the Islamic University of Indonesia. "You can call him a cultural Instagrammer because he is adept at connecting with the younger folk," he told AFP. "The current generation have different interests, values and preferences."

Winning hearts and minds

After more than five decades on the throne, the 77-year-old sultan needed to "refresh the social contract" between himself and his 450,000 subjects, said Izzuddin. The absolute monarchy has seen its reputation tarnished in recent decades.

There was a spectacular falling out between the sultan and his playboy younger brother Prince Jefri Bolkiah over allegations that Jefri had embez-

zled billions during his time as finance minister in the 1990s.

The country also faced a global backlash in 2019 when sharia law was added to its penal code, allowing for death by stoning and amputations of limbs for certain crimes. The code, however, has not been actively enforced after an outcry from celebrities, the United Nations and rights campaigners.

Mateen, who often accompanies his father on official visits abroad wearing Western-style suits, appears to be leading the way in winning over young hearts and minds. His public profile has exploded on Instagram with posts showing him playing polo, boxing in a ring, dabbling in photography, and posing in military uniform.

One video shows the prince — who is a helicopter pilot in his country's air force and also trained in the special forces — flying in a F/A 18 Super Hornet warplane. It generated more than 250,000 likes and a comparison to "Top Gun" star Tom Cruise.

Other photos of Mateen's well-chiseled upper body have drawn as many as more than half a million likes — and countless heart and lovestruck emojis. "Hi James Bond 007!" one admirer commented on a photo of Mateen walking bare-chested on a beach, with a jet ski and speedboat visible in the background.

University student Nazatul Izzati Saifulrizal, 19, proudly showed AFP a selfie she took with the prince, who she described as down-to-earth. "He asked me about my studies ... he asked about my family background," she said, adding she felt "touched" by the gesture. — AFP

Don't blame me: Taylor Swift attracts conspiracy theories

A Fox News host suggested this week that Taylor Swift is a "front for a covert political agenda," echoing disinformation that has percolated in right-wing circles for months — and which experts say will likely get worse before the 2024 US election.

The Jesse Watters segment warning Swift could be a "Pentagon asset" offered the latest conspiracy theory exploiting the singer-songwriter's fame and her past support for Democrats such as President Joe Biden. Attacks targeting Swift in recent months have ranged from personal barbs to accusations of witchcraft and speculation about her political involvement.

"Have you ever wondered why or how she blew up like this? Well, around four years ago, the Pentagon psychological operations unit floated turning Taylor Swift into an asset during a NATO meeting," Watters said Tuesday, resurfacing a clip from a 2019 summit by NATO's cyber defense hub.

But the video's only mention of Swift comes during a presentation on how social influence could counter misinformation, when a researcher unaffiliated with NATO cited the singer as an example of a popular celebrity. "As for this conspiracy theory, we are going to shake it off," Pentagon deputy press secretary Sabrina Singh told AFP, referencing one of Swift's hits.

Watters also brought up a reported traffic surge on Vote.org in September — immediately after Swift posted an Instagram story encouraging fans to participate in National Voter Registration Day — to posit that someone "got to her from the White House or from

wherever." Reached by AFP, Swift publicist Tree Paine pointed to the nonprofit CEO's response to Watters's claims. "Our partnership with @taylorswift13 is helping all Americans make their voices heard at the ballot box," Andrea Hailley said on X, formerly Twitter. "Not a psy-op or a Pentagon asset."

Watters — whose primetime show is the second-most watched cable news show in the United States, drawing an average audience of nearly 2.5 million viewers — conceded later

far-right radio host Stew Peters accused her of witchcraft at concerts and claimed she was "responsible for murder" after Kelce appeared in a vaccine ad.

Doctored images shared online falsely linked her to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, while several conservative commentators have insulted her private life and appearance. Activist Charlie Kirk asked on one podcast if she has "any eggs left."

"The way in which it is happening is very gendered because it is relatively



during the segment that he "obviously has no evidence" for the claims. Fox News declined to comment on the record for this story.

Exploiting celebrity

Already a megastar, Swift's stature grew in 2023, as she broke music records, performed the highest-grossing music tour in history and began dating American football player Travis Kelce. Time magazine named her Person of the Year.

As Swift's star rose, so did attacks against her. Fringe influencers such as

easier to attach incredulous disinformation claims to female celebrities," said Swapnil Rai, an assistant media professor at the University of Michigan.

Claims that Swift is a Democratic operative were bubbling up online before Watters mainstreamed them. "I SAID IT FROM THE BEGINNING," a top promoter of the QAnon conspiracy theory said after Watters's segment. "Not only is Taylor ADMITTEDLY a satanic witch, but she's also being used as a PENTAGON PSYOP ASSET to swing MANY THOUSANDS of youth votes over to the Democrats."



Italian blogger Chiara Ferragni poses prior to the Fendi catwalk show for the Women Fall/Winter 2022/2023 collection on Feb 23, 2022. — AFP

Italy to increase regulation of social media influencers

Italy will expand regulation of social media influencers by placing their activities under the same authority that oversees television and other audio-visual media. The decision by Italy's communications authority AGCOM follows a growing scandal involving Chiara Ferragni, a leading Italian fashion blogger.

AGCOM said its oversight will apply to influencers with more than a million followers on social media, with at least 2 percent of them interacting with the content. An audio-visual media law adopted in December 2021 calls for fines of up to 600,000 euros (\$660,000) for violating data protection laws, especially for minors.

AGCOM said in a statement that its measures will concern "commercial communication, and the protection of fundamental rights of people, minors and sporting values." In the case of product placement, "influencers are required to insert a warning about the advertising nature of the content," the statement said.—AFP

Models walk the runway at the Gucci collection show during the Milan Fashion Week Menswear Autumn/Winter 2024/2025.



Gucci designer blends elegance, fantasy with men's Milan debut



Italian designer Sabato De Sarno walks the runway at the end of the Gucci collection show.



Gucci's new creative director Sabato de Sarno kicked off Men's Fashion Week in Milan Friday, blending elegance with fantasy in his first menswear collection for the iconic Italian label as it seeks to revive sales. The 40-year-old Neapolitan playfully embellished a classic wardrobe with glittering chokers, sequined tank tops and satin bomber jackets.

The autumn/winter 2024-25 program, which runs until Tuesday, also marks the return of Fendi, which last June selected to present its men's collection in its new leather workshops near Florence. De Sarno, who spent 14 years at Valentino after stints at Prada and Dolce & Gabbana, took over at Gucci in January 2023.

He was brought in by French owners Kering to help relaunch the iconic but struggling luxury brand. Gucci models strutting their stuff inside a huge hangar in Milan's outskirts showed off ultra-long ties hanging down to their thighs, worn like scarves over double-breasted suits — or even over a bare torso.

'Joie de vivre'

"It's a story of joie de vivre, passion, humanity, people, real life, irreverent

glamour, provocation, confidence, simplicity, feelings and immediate emotions," the designer said in the show notes. The color palette is on the sober side, ranging from grey to royal blue, black to white, burgundy red and olive green, echoing the shades used in his first women's collection, presented in September.



Both collections confirm the break with former star designer Alessandro Michele, who was known for his eccentric designs and off-beat shows. De Sarno's women's collection has only been on sale since the beginning of 2024

after Gucci — which represents more than half of Kering's sales — saw its revenue fall 13 percent in the third quarter of 2023, in a slowing luxury market.

"The Gucci brand is in a transition phase," said Luca Solca, analyst at Bernstein. "The creative reinvention under Alessandro Michele brought great results but after a while, as with everything, it got tired. Today, Gucci must find a new energy and new ideas to excite customers." He added that in his opinion, the classic look of De Sarno's first women's line was not enough, particularly for Chinese buyers.

Younger audience

"Gucci works when it's over the top," he said, pointing to previous collections under Tom Ford and Michele, whose designs reached out to a younger and more diverse audience. The brand was also hit last November by its first ever strike. Around 40 artisans from Gucci's design studio downed tools for four hours, saying plans to move much of the team from Rome to Milan was a "mass redundancy in disguise".

A trade union representative, Chiara Giannotti, told AFP that no collec-

tive agreement had been reached since the walk-out but said production had not been affected by the dispute. Armani, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Fendi are among the other big names showing their men's collections in Milan, although Valentino is returning to showing in Paris.

Men's fashion has for a long time been in the shadow of women's collections, but Solca said this was changing as big names paid more attention. After a strong rebound from the difficulties sparked by the coronavirus pandemic, with growth of 20.3 percent in 2022, the Italian men's fashion industry recorded more modest growth of 4.9 percent in 2023.

Turnover in the wider Italian fashion sector rose by four percent last year but performance was uneven, with strong growth in the first quarter falling away as geopolitical tensions rose later in the year. "These are not years of frenetic growth but at this moment it is important to hold on and we are holding on," said Carlo Capasa, head of the Italian chamber of fashion. — AFP



Women's health on show, a little, at CES

Among the more than 3,500 booths at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, only a few focus exclusively on women's health, including a cervical cancer screening device and a wristband to anticipate hot flashes. South Korea's Aidot presented Cerviray AI, which enables remote screening for uterine cancer with the help of artificial intelligence.

According to the World Health Organization, it is the fourth most common cancer in women with around 570,000 new cases and around 311,000 deaths reported worldwide in 2018. Yet uterine cancer is one of the easiest forms of cancer to prevent and treat, if detected early enough and treated effectively.

But if the diagnosis is made too late, the outcome is usually fatal. Aidot hopes to boost screening worldwide with its device, based on a technique known as "VIA" — for visual inspection with acetic acid — described as "simpler, faster and less expensive" than the usual tests, such as the pap smear.

The test "is conducted by a specialist with the naked eye," the company said, underlining that the result is immediate, whereas lab tests require several days or even weeks. The Cerviray AI, developed in collaboration with gynecologists and South Korean hospitals, also offers the possibility of telemedicine, which could be useful in developing countries, where medical infrastructures are often deficient.

Cooling mattress

"I've seen a little more about babies and women's health, but 70 percent of what you see is targeted at men," said

analyst Carolina Milanese of Creative Strategies. This should change soon: "The women's digital health industry is forecasted to reach \$1.2 trillion by 2027," said Jessica Boothe, Director of Market Research at the Consumer Technology Association. "This area is ripe for the technology industry."

US company Amira Health is one of the pioneers. It focuses on menopause, a period in a woman's life that can sometimes lead to significant discomfort, such as hot flashes. Amira has designed the Terra System, which "predicts and preemptively counteracts hot flashes" during the night, allowing

women a better night's sleep with a cooling mattress.

Terra, which works with a sensor-equipped wristband, tracks biometric data that is analyzed by artificial intelligence that establishes the body's natural rhythms and anticipates the onset of hot flashes. At night, "within seconds of a hot flash being detected, the cooling mattress pad cools down ... almost instantly — ensuring you experience shorter, less disruptive episodes for a more restful sleep," the company explained. The device is due to go on sale in March. — AFP

Sports

France's Siao Him Fa retains Euro figure skating title despite banned backflip

Estonia's Selevko grabs silver with Rizzo of Italy claiming bronze

KAUNAS: France's Adam Siao Him Fa successfully defended his European figure skating title on Friday despite a fall and pulling off a banned backflip. Leading from the short program, the 22-year-old totalled 276.17 points after his free skate.

Estonia's Aleksandr Selevko, with 256.99 points, took silver with Matteo Rizzo of Italy claiming bronze on 250.87 points. Bordeaux-born Siao Him Fa is the first man to retain the European title since Javier Fernandez won his seventh consecutive gold in 2019.

Siao Him Fa's free program on Friday, performed to the music of German-born British composer Max Richter, featured four quadruple jumps compared to three last year. He even attempted an audacious backflip at the end of the program despite the jump being outlawed by the sport's federation.

"You help all of us push ourselves to our limit. I did this backflip for you, and it's a little French touch," the French skater told the crowd after incurring a two-point penalty. His title triumph on Friday capped

his steady progress over the past two seasons. After finishing 14th at the 2022 Winter Olympics, last year he became European champion for the first time. This season, he has secured two Grand Prix victories. Italian ice dancers Charlene Guignard and Marco Fabbrini got their title defence off the mark by leading the rhythmic dance section.

Decked out in pink and turquoise sequined costumes, the reigning champions scored highest, performing to Bonnie Tyler's 'Holding Out for a Hero' and Phil Collins' 'Against All Odds'. They scored 86.80 points to edge British pair Lilah Fear and Lewis Gibson, silver medalists last year, who were 1.60 points behind.

The rivalry has been tight between both couples this season with the British beating the Italians at the NHK Trophy and the Italians ahead at the ISU Grand Prix Final. Lithuanian duo Allison Reed and Saulius Ambrulevicius are in third position (80.73) to the delight of home fans. — AFP



KAUNAS: (L-R) Second placed Estonia's Aleksandr Selevko, winner France's Adam Siao Him Fa and third placed Italy's Matteo Rizzo pose for a selfie after the men's free program during the ISU European Figure Skating Championship 2024 in the Zalgiris Arena in Kaunas, Lithuania. — AFP

Shooters aim at 8 quota places for Paris 2024 Olympics

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Asian Shooting Championship 2024 continues at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex as today there will be the first qualification rounds for men, women and juniors at 75 clay targets. The tournament was officially declared open last night (Saturday evening) during the opening ceremony.

Meanwhile, President of Asian Shooting Confederation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah, along with the President of the International Shooting Sport Federation Luciano Rossi and President of Arab and Kuwait Shooting Federations Engineer Duaij Khalaf Al-Otaibi made a tour of the ranges to check the latest preparations by officials and shooters.

The ASC executive committee held a meeting chaired by its President Sheikh Salman Al-Humoud after which Kuwait Shooting Federation Secretary General, tournament director Obaid Al-Osaimi said the meeting discussed committees reports and made plans aiming at the development of work through increasing efforts in this regard. Al-Osaimi said Kuwait

Asian Championship will be highly competitive as shooters will aim at the 8 quota places for the Paris 2024 Olympics as he wished participants all success.

Al-Osaimi lauded the efforts of the Higher Organizing Committee and its Sub-committees for the efforts made along with volunteers to ensure its success just like previous tournaments.

Meanwhile, Jordan's head of the delegation Khalid Naghaway said Jordan is participating with six shoot-

ers 3 trap and 3 skeet, adding that Kuwait shooting sports officials are highly successful in organizing major tournaments with large number of participants which makes teams participate in championships held in the land of friendship and peace.

Naghaway appreciated the efforts of Kuwait Shooting Federation under the leadership of engineer Duaij Khalaf Al-Otaibi and board members for their continued work to develop the Asian shooting sport.



Kuwaiti swimmer wins bronze in 400m freestyle

DOHA: Kuwaiti national team swimmer Hamad Al-Ghaith secured the bronze medal Saturday in the 400-meter freestyle race for the age category 13-14 during the fourth day of the Second Arab Aquatics Age Group Championships in the Qatari capital, Doha, bringing the team's total to 10 medals.

In a statement to KUNA, Faisal Abu Al-Hassan, head of the delegation and board member of Kuwait Swimming Association, expressed joy for the swimmers' various medal achievements, with the team obtaining 10 medals. He commended both players and coaching staff for spotlighting Kuwaiti swimming talents, showing notable success with players reaching the podiums. Al-Ghaith won the silver medal in the 200-meter backstroke race in the age category 13-14 yesterday, Friday, while another Kuwaiti swimmer Mohammad Zubaid also claimed the silver medal in the 50-meter freestyle race in the age group 15-16.

Kuwait's swimming team triumphed the day before yesterday, Thursday, with three medals, including a gold and two silvers, in the second day of competitions, notable victories include Zubaid securing gold in the 50-meter backstroke race for the 15-16 age category and the silver in the 100-meter freestyle race for the same category. The Kuwaiti team in the age group 13-14 years, composed of Al-Ghaith, Hasan Al-Suaileek, Saud Al-Enezi, and Hassan Rajab, won the silver medal in the 4x100-meter freestyle relay event. On the championship's first day, Kuwait won four medals: Gold in the 50-meter butterfly by Al-Suaileek, silver in the 200-meter freestyle by Al-Ghaith, and two bronzes in the 50-meter butterfly and 4x200-meter freestyle relay by Al-Enezi. The championship kicked off last Wednesday and is set to make waves until January 15th. — KUNA

Canada's McIntosh wins 200m free at Knoxville Pro Swim

WASHINGTON: Canadian Summer McIntosh cruised to victory in the women's 200m freestyle Friday, clocking 1min 55.41sec to notch her second win in two days at the Pro Swim meeting in Knoxville, Tennessee.

The 17-year-old made an aggressive start and was briefly ahead of Australian Mollie O'Callaghan's world record pace on the way to a comfortable win. American Erin Gremmel was second in 1:58.23 and Simone Manuel was third in 1:58.87.

McIntosh, a four-time individual medley world champion who took 200m free bronze at last year's worlds, followed up her victory in the 200m butterfly on Thursday. She called the 200m free her "favorite event" but was noncommittal when asked if it would feature on her Paris Olympics program.

"Right now I'm just focused on the next few meets," the versatile teenager told broadcaster NBC. "After this meet I'm going to be doing a really big training block, so just kind of focusing on where I am in training and kind of figuring out what events to prep for the Games," she said.—AFP

Kuwait beat Oman in Asian Handball Championship

MANAMA: The Kuwaiti handball team began its campaign in the 21st Asian Championship by defeating the Omani team 27-26 on Friday. The Kuwaiti team snatched the victory in the last second of the match, held at Khalifa Sports Hall in Manama, capital of Bahrain. The first half of the match ended with the Kuwaiti team leading by a score of (13-11).

Kuwait national team player Hassan Safar was chosen and honored as the best player in the match. The Qatari national team, the defending champi-

on, won over Chinese Taipei with a score of 33-26 for the first group, which also includes Kuwait and Oman, and the Iranian national team defeated New Zealand with a score of 40-13 among the teams in the second group of the tournament, which also includes the Chinese and South Korean teams.

The Kuwaiti national team is scheduled to play against its Chinese counterpart, Taipei, next Sunday at one o'clock in the afternoon local time. Sixteen teams are participating in the tournament, which began yesterday, and were divided into four groups. The first includes the teams of Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and China Taipei, and the second group consists of the teams of Iran, South Korea, China, and New Zealand. The third group includes the teams of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, India, and Japan, and the fourth consists of Bahrain, the Emirates, Hong Kong, and Kazakhstan. — KUNA



Japan's 'Throwing Philosopher' eager to join MLB Cubs

CHICAGO: Japanese pitcher Shota Imanaga said Friday he is confident he can handle Major League Baseball changes and challenges after signing a four-year deal worth \$53 million with the Chicago Cubs.

The 30-year-old left-hander, who spent the past eight seasons with Japan's Yokohama BayStars, donned his number 18 Cubs jersey for the first time and delivered a message in English to supporters. "Hey Chicago. What do you think? Cubs going to win today," he said.

"I'm very happy to be here and be a Cub. I'm very excited to pitch at Wrigley Field. I'm looking forward to meeting fans and teammates. Go Cubs Go."

Nicknamed "The Throwing Philosopher" for his studious approach to baseball, Imanaga helped Japan capture last year's World Baseball Classic, where he said facing MLB talent inspired a desire to play in North America. "The WBC helped me think there's more to baseball, more I can improve on and experience," Imanaga said through a translator.

"Facing the hitters—there are players of unimaginable talent over here—gave me confidence and made me want to apply myself and face the challenge over here."

"That includes throwing every five days or so as part of the Cubs starting rotation. "It's a novel experience for me so I want to keep an open mind and seek advice from a lot of people... figure out what works for me, give everything a try and see as we go," Imanaga said.

"I'm by no means a finished product. There's a lot for me to learn. I'll study day in and day out."

He will also face MLB's pitch clock, forcing him to hustle his pace when on the mound. "It's a change, but sometimes I think too much on the mound," he said. "So, it might help my game." Imanaga struck out a league-leading 174 batters last year in Japan with a 2.80 earned-run average over 148 innings. He also had seven strikeouts with no walks over six innings in the WBC for Japan.

Over his career with the BayStars, Imanaga had a 3.18 ERA in 1,002 2/3 innings. "He has had a fantastic career in Japan," Cubs director of baseball operations Jed Hoyer said. "We're very excited to bring Shota on board. He wants to continue to get better and that sounds like a perfect match for the Cubs."

The Cubs had not won a World Series title since 1908 until capturing the 2016 MLB crown, but they have won only one playoff series since and have missed the post-season in four of the past five campaigns.

"I'm going to do my best to contribute to the Cubs winning the World Series," Imanaga said.

Imanaga said he selected the Cubs after being impressed with team executives following their initial meeting. "Their strong words of encouragement really resonated with me and showed me the endless possibility of the player I could become," Imanaga said.

"They believed in my potential to do what I do best, but at the same time I realize there's a lot of room for me to grow and I really look forward to talking to the Cubs pitching coaches and teammates and try to reach that potential." —AFP

Sports

Arnold wants more as Australia swat aside India at Asian Cup

Japan's Yoshimi Yamashita first woman to referee at an Asian Cup

DOHA: Graham Arnold warned his Australia team that they must be better despite launching their Asian Cup title charge with an ultimately comfortable 2-0 win over India on Saturday. In front of a vocal pro-Indian crowd of 36,253 at the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium in Doha, Australia made hard work of the first half, squandering a few decent chances while the underdogs defended raggedly and eyed opportunities on the break.

Jackson Irvine opened the scoring just after the restart, the moustachioed midfielder driving home from 10 yards after India goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu came for a cross only to flap it back into the danger zone. And 2015 Asian champions Australia were in full control from then on, as Indian legs tired and Arnold took advantage of the depth in his squad. Jordan Bos deservedly doubled Australia's advantage shortly after the 70th minute.

A matter of seconds after coming off the bench, the 21-year-old slotted home from six yards after fellow substitute Riley McGree fizzed the ball hard and low across the box from the byline. A mostly unremarkable contest offered one moment of regional football history, as Japan's Yoshimi Yamashita became the first woman to referee at an Asian Cup.

Australia were among the pre-tournament favourites but Arnold said there was room for improvement ahead of their next match, against Syria. The Socceroos coach was especially disappointed with

their set pieces, which a physically imposing Australia have made a trademark threat.

"I can honestly say that we have got to improve a lot more than that," said Arnold, who took Australia to the knockout phase of the World Cup in Qatar, where they lost 2-1 to eventual champions Argentina.

"One disappointment was set pieces... it's something we need to improve on, and we will." Australia's goalscorer Irvine said he was "really pleased with the players' mentality" in chiselling away at stiff early resistance.

"They kept pushing, stayed patient, did all the right things and came out in the second half and got the important goals that got us the win," he said. In a host country with a massive Indian population, Igor Stimac's unfancied side can be sure of a rowdy following for all of their games in Group B.

They face Uzbekistan on Thursday. "Now our competition starts," Stimac said after a tough opening fixture, voicing overall satisfaction with his team but lamenting lapses in concentration which led to both goals from close range.

"These goals didn't come out of Australia's brilliant display or action, just because of our irresponsibility at certain times," he said. With Uzbekistan coming up fast, the Croatian vowed not to dwell on defeat. "We don't have time for disappointment," he said. "There's another game in (five) days' time. So what are we going to do, cry?" — AFP



AL-RAYYAN: Australia's defender #04 Kye Rowles, India's defender #21 Nikhil Poojary and India's forward #11 Sunil Chhetri jump to head the ball during the Qatar 2023 AFC Asian Cup Group B football match between Australia and India at the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium in Al-Rayyan, west of Doha on January 13, 2024. — AFP

Qatar put World Cup heartache behind to win Asian Cup opener

DOHA: Two-goal Akram Afif said Qatar had "forgotten about the World Cup" after the defending champions got their Asian Cup campaign off to a winning start in the tournament's opening game on Friday.

The hosts beat Lebanon 3-0 at the 88,000-capacity Lusail Stadium, where a Lionel Messi-inspired Argentina beat France on penalties in the World Cup final 13 months ago. Qatar suffered a disastrous 2022 World Cup on the pitch, making a first-round exit after losing all three games, the worst performance by a host in the history of the competition.

But Afif said they were ready to make a fresh start at the Asian Cup, five years after they won the continental title for the first time. "It was disappointing but we are proud that we played at the World Cup," said the forward.

"We have forgotten about the World Cup, we have forgotten about 2019 -- we are living today in a new day. Every day is a chance to compete and to fight for a chance to hold the cup." Qatar stunned Japan in the 2019 final in the United Arab Emirates, lifting the trophy after winning every game they played at the tournament.

They went into this year's competition only one month after changing their coach, with Tintin Marquez replacing Carlos Queiroz. Everything clicked



LUSAIL: Lebanon's forward #11 Omar Chaaban leaps to head the ball during the AFC Qatar 2023 Asian Cup Group A football match between Qatar and Lebanon at the Lusail Stadium in Lusail. — AFP

into place against Lebanon, with Afif rifling in a shot on the stroke of half-time to put them ahead. Almoez Ali doubled Qatar's lead after the break before Afif bagged a late third. "I'm very glad because the players gave 200 percent," said Marquez. "I was very satisfied but we have to maintain the same level of performance for the rest of the tournament."

The official attendance was given as 82,490 but spectators began leaving as soon as half time, even with the home side leading. Only a smattering of fans was left to see Afif's deft finish for Qatar's third. Afif, one of the stars of Qatar's Asian Cup-winning side

five years ago, urged the fans to support the team throughout. "It is very important for us when we are at home in front of our fans to give a performance that makes them proud," he said. "We want them to stay with us because they are our backbone."

Lebanon are appearing at the Asian Cup for only the third time. Coach Miodrag Radulovic said his team had conceded the first goal "at the worst time". "In the first half we played quite well and we had our chance but we didn't score," he said. "It's an old football rule—when you don't score, you concede." —AFP

Morris strikes late as Luton earn controversial draw

BURNLEY: Carlton Morris scored a controversial stoppage-time equaliser as Luton salvaged a 1-1 draw in their crucial clash with relegation rivals Burnley on Friday. Zeke Amdouni netted late in the first half at Turf Moor to give Burnley the lead, but Morris headed Luton level in the closing minutes. Burnley were furious Morris's goal was allowed to stand after a VAR check as Luton's Elijah Adebayo appeared to deliberately block Claret's keeper James Trafford as he tried to catch Alfie Doughty's cross.

Trafford was booked for his protest after the goal was allowed to stand, with Luton's celebrations underlining their relief at avoiding defeat against their fellow strugglers in such dramatic fashion.

Luton remain third bottom, behind fourth bottom Everton on goal difference, while Burnley are second bottom and four points from safety. It was a devastating blow for Vincent Kompany's men, who were just seconds away from only their fourth win this term in a battle between two clubs promoted from the Championship last season and fighting to preserve their top-flight status.

"My view is the same as anyone who has played the game. Fair play to the Luton player, he tries his luck, he blocks the goalkeeper. You think surely not. VAR will sort this out," Kompany said. "It's quiet. Everyone is ready to move on with the game and then he gives it."

"This can't decide a game. Something done by a bit of magic but not this. I don't know what to say to my players. It's ridiculous." Luton boss Rob Edwards added: "If I'm being honest if it's against me I'd be very disappointed like they are."

"I'm pleased they made that decision clearly because it got us a point but I understand their frustrations. I do feel for Vinny. That's the fault if there is one with VAR, that it comes down to opinions."

Beaten in their previous three matches, Burnley had managed only 20 goals in their first 20 games this season, a woeful lack of cutting edge that threatened their top-flight status. Their profligacy showed no signs of ending when Johann Gudmundsson sprinted clean through on goal, only to shoot straight at Luton keeper Thomas Kaminski.

Luton tried to make the most of that early escape as Chiedozie Ogbene picked out Ross Barkley, whose curler forced a fine save from Trafford. Ogbene tested Trafford himself, cutting inside for a powerful strike that almost went in at the near post.

Chelsea striker David Fofana was watching in the stands ahead of a reported loan move to Burnley after recently cutting short his temporary spell at Union Berlin. The need for a clinical finisher was apparent when Wilson Odobert completely miskicked when the ball fell to him in the Luton area.

But Kompany's men finally showed they knew where the goal is, with the help of a little good luck in the 36th minute. Odobert's step-over bought him room for a cross that fortuitously deflected into the path of Amdouni, whose shot hit Gudmundsson on the line before going in. — AFP

Hosts Ivory Coast target winning start as Cup of Nations kicks off

ABIDJAN: The first Africa Cup of Nations to be held in Ivory Coast in four decades gets underway on Saturday as the hosts, without their star forward Sebastien Haller, take on minnows Guinea-Bissau at the newly-built Ebimpe Olympic Stadium.

Ivory Coast have been African champions twice before, most recently in 2015 with a team captained by Yaya Toure, and are hoping to thrive under the pressure of playing at home. However, they can expect intense competition over the next four weeks with a strong field notably featuring 2022 World Cup semi-finalists Morocco, Mohamed Salah's Egypt, and Sadio Mane's Senegal, who are aiming to successfully defend the title they won in Cameroon two years ago.

"We feel the expectation every day but we just need to live with it," Elephants coach Jean-Louis Gasset, the 70-year-old Frenchman, told reporters in the country's economic capital Abidjan on Friday. "My job is to transform the pressure into something positive, to make sure that gives the players strength and confidence."

Sitting alongside him, midfielder Franck Kessie, formerly of Barcelona, acknowledged: "We are all aware of what is expected of us." This Ivory Coast team lacks a superstar like former hero Didier



ABIDJAN: Ivory Coast's National Football team players take part during a training session at the technical's highschool stadium of Abidjan, on the eve of the 2024 Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) football match between Ivory Coast and Guinea Bissau. — AFP

Drogba and is without Borussia Dortmund striker Haller for at least the opening match as he continues to recover from an ankle injury.

A fit Haller—whose face appears regularly on billboards lining Abidjan's traffic-choked streets—would be a certain starter for the Elephants against Guinea-Bissau, who have never won a game in three previous appearances at the AFCON.

The West African nation last hosted the AFCON in 1984, when just eight teams took part and Roger Milla's Cameroon emerged victorious. This edition was initially supposed to take place last June and

July in order to avoid a clash with the middle of the season in Europe, where so many leading African players are based.

However, fears over staging it during the rainy season led to the tournament—which is the third edition to feature 24 teams—being pushed back to its more traditional January and February slot. The main focus for local organisers, and for the Confederation of African Football (CAF), is to make sure the competition unfolds without anything like the awful events that marred the last edition in Cameroon. —AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707	Nuzha	22526804
Rawda	22517733	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Adaliya	22517144	Qadsiya	22515088
Khaldiya	24848075	Dasmah	22532265
Kaifan	24849807	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shamiya	24848913	Shaab	22518752
Shuwaikh	24814507	Qibla	22459381
Abdullah Salem	22549134	Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
		Mirqab	22456536
		Sharq	22465401
		Salmiya	25746401

Change of Name

I, Kalpana Lama , holder of Indian Passport No. Z3680248 having permanent address, Shalak Vita, New Rangia, Darjeeling, Pin - 734013, West Bengal, India, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as Kalpana (Given Name) Rai (Surname). (#4591) 14/1/2024	I, Pramsewar Reddy , holder of Indian Passport No. X5356390 having permanent address of Reddippalle (V), Pullampet Mandal, Annamayya District, Andhrapradesh (AP) Pin- 516107 residing in Kuwait present, hereby declare that henceforth my son name will be read as Parameswar Reddy (given name) and Mannuru. (surname) (#4590) 14/1/2024	I, Meena Parvat Ambalal , holder of Indian Passport No. M2309188, having permanent address M F Dilima house, Barnawada, Shar, P.O. Andheri, Mumbai, Pin - 400099, Maharashtra, India, residing in Kuwait hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as Maria (given name) Santan Francis D'souza (surname). (#4589) 14/1/2024
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Cole Palmer fires Chelsea to a 1-0 win over rivals Fulham

Blues have a chance to overturn the League Cup deficit



LONDON: Chelsea's Albanian striker #19 Armando Broja (L) fails to connect with a cross during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Fulham at Stamford Bridge in London on January 13, 2024. — AFP

LONDON: Cole Palmer fired Chelsea to a 1-0 win over west London rivals Fulham on Saturday as the inconsistent Blues bounced back from their League Cup embarrassment at Middlesbrough. Palmer converted a penalty late in the first half at Stamford Bridge to erase the bitter taste from Chelsea's shock 1-0 loss to second-tier Middlesbrough in the semi-final first leg on Tuesday.

That League Cup calamity was just the latest disappointment in a troubled season for Mauricio Pochettino's side. Chelsea were hardly much more dynamic against Fulham, but Pochettino will take heart from the way they ground out a third successive Premier League victory.

After a 10-day winter break, the Blues will have a chance to overturn the League Cup deficit when they return to action against Middlesbrough in the second leg on January 23. Chelsea are still a work in progress in Pochettino's first season, with his decision to go with a largely youthful team inevitably producing highs and lows.

"The first half was really tough but we played really well in the second half. We deserved our victory, we were the better team," Pochettino said. "People suppose that Chelsea should be in a different position, but we are in a realistic position that we deserve because we weren't clinical enough."

"We'll get what we want. We are in a process to

build and fighting to do our best." Fulham boss Marco Silva claimed Chelsea defender Malo Gusto should have been sent off for a first half foul on Willian that only earned a booking after a VAR check.

"We have to talk about the red card for Gusto, it was clear. In 10 of those moments, nine times it is a red card," he said. In the circumstances, Fulham were ideal opponents for Chelsea to lift the gloom, given they are without a win at the Bridge since 1979.

The clubs are separated by just two miles in west London, but they have traditionally been light years apart in success on the pitch. Chelsea's recent struggles had allowed Fulham to dream of a rare victory on enemy turf and there was audible frustration among Blues fans as soon as passes started to go astray from their spluttering team.

Palmer keeps cool

Nicolas Jackson's absence on Senegal duty at the Africa Cup of Nations and Christopher Nkunku's latest injury have diminished Pochettino's attacking options. Armando Broja was deputising for Jackson, but he wasted a good chance when he headed wide from Enzo Fernandez's cross.

Looking to capitalise on Chelsea's woes, Fulham launched an incisive break that ended with Harry

Wilson's close-range effort forcing a good save from Djordje Petrovic. Despite their lethargic display, Chelsea rallied to take the lead in first-half stoppage time.

Issa Diop conceded a penalty with a rash challenge on Raheem Sterling and Palmer stepped up to smash the spot-kick past Bernd Leno. It was the 21-year-old's nerveless fifth successful penalty for Chelsea showed why team-mates have nicknamed him "Cold" Palmer.

With nine goals since signing from Manchester City in September, Palmer has been one of the few bright spots in Chelsea's troubled campaign. "We believe in him, even when he didn't score with the three big chances in Middlesbrough. He has the quality to play," Pochettino said. Driving forward with intent, Palmer curled just wide early in the second half. Chelsea lost their way again as the half wore on and Fulham striker Raul Jimenez headed over before testing Petrovic with a dangerous low strike.

Conor Gallagher hit the woodwork with a clever effort using the outside of his foot, but Fulham finished strongly and only some last-ditch defending stopped the Blues suffering fresh indignity. With Chelsea just about holding on, there was good news in the closing minutes when England left-back Ben Chilwell made his return from four months out with a hamstring injury. — AFP

Warriors rally to beat Bulls, Spurs rout Hornets

LOS ANGELES: Golden State stars Klay Thompson and Stephen Curry shook off slow starts to power the Warriors to a much-needed 140-131 NBA victory over the Chicago Bulls on Friday. Coming off two blowout losses to cap a 2-5 homestand, the Warriors got off to another ugly start in Chicago.

Trailing 75-62 at halftime, the Warriors turned it around with 48 points in the third quarter. Thompson connected on five-of-five from three-point range on the way to 17 points in the period, the shooting guard's highest-scoring quarter of the season.

"I think we got off-track emotionally, spiritually, the last couple games," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "Our fans could feel it. We got booed for the first time since I've been here, and as I said both nights, we deserved it because our energy and our competitive spirit was not there."

"We found that again tonight," Kerr said. Golden State led by 15 going into the fourth, but the Bulls, who honored their 1995-96 championship team before the game, cut the deficit to four with less than three minutes to play before the Warriors pulled away again.

Thompson finished with 30 points and six assists and Curry added 27 points despite another tough shooting night that saw him make just eight of 24 shots from the field. "Klay was brilliant," Kerr said. "When he keeps it simple like that and just shoots when he's open and keeps moving the ball, that's when he's at his best."

Curry added nine assists and Jonathan Kuminga added 24 points off the bench for the Warriors, who had just five turnovers and withstood a 39-point performance from Chicago's DeMar DeRozan. In San Antonio, rookie star Victor Wembanyama scored 26 points and pulled down 11 rebounds in the Spurs' 135-99 rout of the Charlotte Hornets.

In less than 20 minutes on the floor, French prodigy Wembanyama connected on nine of 14 shots—including a pair of alley-oop dunks and a one-handed jam to start the second half. The Spurs spoiled the return from a 20-game injury absence of Hornets star LaMelo Ball, who had 28 points, five assists and five steals in his first game since November. Houston guard Fred VanVleet scored 17 of his 20 points in the second half to help the Rockets edge the Pistons 112-110 in Detroit. The Pistons dropped their seventh straight since snapping their record-equalling 28-game losing streak. — AFP

Djokovic zeroes in on all-time record 25th Slam crown



MELBOURNE: Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return during a practice session in Melbourne on January 13, 2024. — AFP

MELBOURNE: A "pain-free" Novak Djokovic begins his Australian Open defence against a teenage qualifier on Sunday as he bids for an unprecedented 25th major crown, but women's top seed Iga Swiatek faces a much trickier assignment.

The opening Grand Slam of the year gets under way as a 15-day event for the first time, aimed at cutting down on late-night finishes. World number one Djokovic is an overwhelming favourite, with a sore wrist that cast a shadow over his build-up no longer troubling him.

He should have few problems progressing from his evening clash on Rod Laver Arena against 18-year-old Croat Dino Prizmic, who is making his main draw Slam debut. "It's exciting to be a part of another Slam," said the 36-year-old Djokovic, who has not lost at the Australian Open since 2018.

"I'm just hoping I can start the season in a way that I have been starting my seasons, most of my seasons, throughout my career, with a win here in Australia, in Melbourne. My favourite place, no doubt."

The Serbian's first real test could come in the third round, with a potential showdown against fellow veteran Andy Murray. Scotland's Murray, a five-time Australian Open finalist, begins against Argentine 30th seed Tomas Martin Etcheverry. Djokovic surged to the title last year with a three-set victory over this year's seventh seed Stefanos Tsitsipas, who faces a tough first-round test from former top 10 Italian Matteo Berrettini. If the Serb wins again, he will pass Australian Margaret Court's all-time Slam record and join Court

(Australian Open) and Rafael Nadal (French Open) as the only players ever to win 11 times at a single major.

Adding to the intrigue, the number one ranking is at stake, with Djokovic, Carlos Alcaraz and Daniil Medvedev all in contention. Alcaraz, who beat Djokovic in the Wimbledon final last year, is a different player from the one who last graced the Australian hard courts as an 18-year-old ranked outside the top 30.

After missing last year's event with a hamstring injury, he is now a two-time major champion and world number two. "I am looking at reaching the final and hopefully playing a final against him (Djokovic)," said the 20-year-old Spaniard, who will meet French veteran Richard Gasquet first.

Russia's Medvedev, a Melbourne finalist in 2021 and 2022, kicks off against qualifier Terence Atmane, vowing to turn over a new leaf and tone down the on-court tantrums. "I want to change, I want to mature," he said.

Former champions Naomi Osaka and Caroline Wozniacki make their return to Grand Slam tennis after having babies, among a clutch of mothers in the women's draw. But world number one and top seed Swiatek is clear favourite, having been a dominant force since Ashleigh Barty's surprise retirement after winning the 2022 tournament. The Pole is on a 16-match win streak, gunning for a fifth Grand Slam title and first in Australia. She opens with a rematch of the 2020 Roland Garros final against Sofia Kenin that earned her a first major title.

"I know she's been playing some solid tennis. It's not going to be easy. I'll just get prepared the same way as usual," said Swiatek of the American, now ranked 38. Defending champion Aryna Sabalenka, who last year became the first woman since Serena Williams in 2016 to reach at least the semi-finals of all four Grand Slams, will be a huge threat. She is gunning for a second title after beating Elena Rybakina in the 2023 final and faces German qualifier Ella Seidel in an evening match on centre court Sunday. "I did really a great pre-season. We worked a lot. — AFP