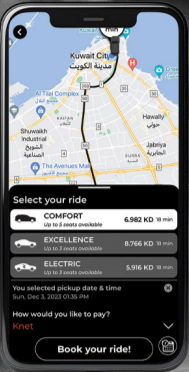



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Palestinian fans proud of team's Asian Cup progress



SAUDI ARABIA HONORS AMIR

Sheikh Mishal meets King Salman • Crown Prince Mohammed awards Amir King Abdulaziz Medal



RIYADH: (Left) HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud at Arqa Palace on Jan 30, 2024. (Right) Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman decorates HH the Amir with the King Abdulaziz Medal. — KUNA photos (See Page 2)

RIYADH: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and an official delegation accompanying him paid a landmark state visit to Saudi Arabia on Tuesday, where he was received by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud. HH the Amir then visited Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud at Arqa Palace with the attendance of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad. King Salman welcomed

HH the Amir and his accompanying delegation. During the visit, the deeply rooted ties between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were touched on. On behalf of King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammed decorated HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal with the King Abdulaziz Medal in recognition and appreciation for His Highness. Prince Mohammed then held a banquet in honor of HH the Amir and

his accompanying delegation. HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal, heading the Kuwaiti side, later engaged in official talks at Al-Yamamah Palace in Riyadh with Crown Prince Mohammed, the Prime Minister and head of the Saudi side. The meeting tackled a myriad of issues, including the deeply rooted ties between the two nations, modes of developing the already existing partnership and

furthering cooperation to support efforts of Gulf Cooperation Council member countries. The two also discussed issues of common interest, countering regional and international challenges as well as exchanging perspectives on developments and efforts made in this regard. HH the Amir was then seen off by Prince Mohammed and senior state officials before returning to Kuwait. — KUNA

Kuwait gains 14 spots on antigraft index

By Khaled Al-Abdulhadi

KUWAIT: Kuwait ranked 63rd globally with a score of 46 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index released by Transparency International, up 14 spots compared to the 2022 index, where it ranked 77th. Kuwait National Integrity Society extended its congratulations to HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the government on Kuwait's noteworthy advancement on the index.

Over the last five years, Kuwait has demonstrated substantial improvement in its ranking, progressing from 78th in 2018 to the current 63rd worldwide in 2023, reflecting a five-point increase in score over this period. Notably, Kuwait achieved its highest ranking in 2015, with a score of 49, placing it 55th globally.

Chairman of Kuwait National Integrity Society Muhammad Al-Otaibi emphasized that this progress in Kuwait's standing across the Gulf, Arab and global spheres is the result of dedicated efforts by all, guided by the directives of the country's political leadership. The leadership consistently emphasizes the importance of upholding the rule of law, combating all forms of corruption and aligning with international endeavors to address corruption.

Continued on Page 6

Zionists kill 3 Palestinians in hospital attack

JENIN: Zionist undercover agents, some disguised as medical staff, raided a West Bank hospital Tuesday and shot dead three Palestinian militants, in the first such operation in eight years. An AFP photographer saw a bullet hole on a pillow covered in blood following the raid at Ibn Sina Hospital in the northern city of Jenin, where Palestinians gathered around the bodies of those killed.

The Zionist military said forces entered the hospital — a major health

Zionists defile bodies in Gaza, remove organs

GAZA: Palestinians buried dozens of bodies in a mass grave in southern Gaza on Tuesday, after officials said the Zionist entity had returned remains it had exhumed from the territory. An AFP photographer saw Gazans moving the bodies in blue plastic shrouds from a truck towards the newly dug mass grave east of Rafah. Health ministry employees wearing white protective clothing lowered them into the ground, near the tents of people displaced by the Zionist-Hamas war.

A Palestinian source at the Rafah border crossing with Egypt told AFP the bodies returned had been "stolen by the occupation (Zionist) army during its incursion" into Gaza. A second source at Gaza's ministry of reli-

facility serving Jenin city and its adjacent refugee camp — to target a Hamas cell. Announcing the killing by Zionist forces of three people inside the hospital, the Palestinian health ministry stressed healthcare facilities are granted special protection under international law.

"The minister of health calls urgently on the United Nations General Assembly, international institutions and human rights organizations to end the daily string of crimes committed by the occupation against our people and health centers," a ministry statement said. The Palestinian foreign ministry said the "heinous" hospital killings were a "crime against humanity", in a statement on X, formerly Twitter.

Continued on Page 6



JENIN: Mourners march carrying the bodies of Muhammad and Basel Ghazawi, two of three Palestinian men who were killed by undercover Zionist agents at Ibn Sina hospital, during their funeral in the occupied West Bank on Jan 30, 2024. — AFP



GAZA: Civilians watch as Palestinian health ministry workers bury the bodies of unidentified Palestinians after they were returned by the Zionist entity in a mass grave east of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Jan 30, 2024. — AFP

gious affairs told AFP that the Zionist entity "stole them from Bani Suheila cemetery, east of Khan Yunis" around two weeks ago.

The Zionist military did not respond to a request for comment, although it has previously made remarks about exhuming bodies from Gaza graves in search of Zionist captives. The government media office in Gaza said the Zionist entity removed organs from the bodies, but the Zionist military spokesman denied this on Tuesday. In November and December, AFP journalists also witnessed the reburial of bodies which Gaza officials said had been exhumed by Zionist forces.

Meanwhile, deadly fighting and bombardment rocked Gaza on Tuesday as international mediators pushed for a new halt in the Zionist-Hamas war and a deal to release captives. Heavy Zionist strikes and urban combat across the besieged Gaza Strip killed 128 more people overnight, the health ministry in the Palestinian territory said. The epicenter of fighting has been the southern

city of Khan Yunis, where vast areas have been reduced to a muddy wasteland of bombed-out buildings.

Islamic Jihad, a Palestinian group fighting alongside Hamas, said it was battling Zionist troops near Khan Yunis and in other areas including Gaza

City. The Gaza war, now in its fourth month, has left much of the coastal territory in ruins and sparked a spiraling humanitarian crisis for its 2.4 million people, many of whom face the threats of hunger and disease.

Continued on Page 6

Amir receives a warm welcome in Saudi



RIYADH: On behalf of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud decorates His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah with King Abdulaziz Medal. — KUNA photos



Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud receive His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in Riyadh.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah arrives in Saudi Arabia on a state visit on Tuesday. His Highness the Amir was received by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud.



Amir's state visit to Saudi epitomizes close relations

RIYADH: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's inaugural visit since taking office will be to Saudi Arabia, a choice selection that a number of Saudi journalists hailed as a testament to the breadth of bilateral relations. It is only apropos that His Highness Kuwait's Amir has chosen Riyadh as his first destination for a foreign trip since taking office, Saudi-based Akath newspaper's chief editor Jamil Al-Thayabi told KUNA, underscoring such relations as based on a "mutual consensus" on issues ranging from political to social matters.

Riyadh and Kuwait are bound by "historic and brotherly" relations thanks in part to their "intertwined" fates, he added, citing such proximity as instrumental

in ushering in development and prosperity in the two Gulf Arab neighbors. Echoing his sentiments, Muafek Al-Nuwaisir, the chief editor of Saudi Makkah newspaper, agreed that His Highness the Amir's visit to the kingdom on Tuesday encapsulated the amity between the two countries, saying he was sanguine that the visit would set in motion more progress in relations.

The chief editor of Arab Middle East International, Zaid bin Kama, and Saudi political analyst Munif Al-Harbi both agreed that the visit by the Kuwaiti Amir would pay dividends in terms of pushing forward a number of bilateral agreements, all of which would prove beneficial to the wider region. — KUNA

Ministry of Defense, FM hail UK-Kuwait exceptional ties

KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defense (MoD) Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Meshal Al-Sabah underscored the longstanding and strategic Kuwaiti-British relationship, marked by consistent cooperation, particularly in security and defense. In a press statement released Tuesday, MoD quoted Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Al-Sabah as saying, after his participation in the ceremony at the British Embassy marking the 125th anniversary of diplomatic ties between both sides, that the Kuwaiti-British bilateral relations are founded on partnership, friendship, and collaboration across various domains, particularly in security, defense, investment, culture, and education.

Ongoing efforts to enhance collaboration in the defense sector, particularly in education and joint military training, highlight the exceptional military relationship between both nations, he explained. Assistant Undersecretary of the Kuwaiti MoD, Sheikh Dr. Shamayel Ahmad Khaled Al-Sabah, attended the celebration along with several military officers from the UK. On Tuesday, the British Embassy hosted a reception to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the establishment of historical ties between both countries, which was attended by senior officials from both sides and several heads of diplomatic missions.



Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defense (MoD) Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Meshal Al-Sabah underscores the longstanding and strategic Kuwaiti-British relationship.

Exceptional relations

In another development, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya affirmed on Tuesday that Kuwait was proud of its strong historical and exceptional relations with the United Kingdom, affirming that his country would seek all venues to bolster ties. This came during Minister Al-Yahya's reception of British Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden, who is visiting Kuwait to launch the Kuwaiti-British Partnership 2024. Minister Al-Yahya stated that this visit came within the framework of the commemoration of the 125th anniversary since the signing of the Anglo-Kuwaiti agreement in 1899.

Believing in the importance of reviving and celebrating this historical event, both governments signed an agreement to declare 2024 the Year of Kuwaiti-British Partnership during the visit of His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, then Crown Prince, to the United Kingdom last August.

The exceptional relations between the two nations have flourished over more than a century and branched out to include all fields. They were established through the historical and honorable positions of the two countries and through mutual solidarity and continued cooperation.

The minister recalled with gratitude the positions of British solidarity with Kuwait to ensure the independence and sovereignty of Kuwait, like the British position



The British Embassy celebrates the 125th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Kuwaiti-British bilateral relations. — KUNA photos

on the brutal Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Minister Al-Yahya pointed out that the Kuwait Investment Office's 71-year presence in London contributed to economic support for both countries and became one of the most important and largest sovereign funds worldwide.

He added that the number of Kuwaiti students on scholarships to study in the United Kingdom reached record levels — about 9,500 — as the United Kingdom is one of the first major destinations for Kuwaiti students. At the end of his statement, Minister Al-Yahya said that the two nations are committed to continuing to broaden and strengthen bilateral relations between Kuwait and the United Kingdom for more developments at all levels. — KUNA

Amiri Diwan lauds UK 'exemplary relations'

KUWAIT: Minister of the Amiri Diwan Affairs, Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, said on Monday that Kuwait takes great pride in its exemplary relations and cooperation with the United Kingdom. "The exemplary historical relations keep growing under the sovereign care of the political leadership of Kuwait, at the core of which is His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah," he said in a speech to a celebration marking the 125th anniversary of the relations.

The function, held by the British Embassy, gathered visiting UK Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office Oliver Dowden and Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, as well as heads of diplomatic missions in Kuwait. Sheikh Mohammad said the two countries decided to declare 2024 a year of the Kuwait-UK partnership as per a memorandum of understanding signed on August 29 during the visit to the United Kingdom by His Highness the Amir, the then crown prince.

"The relationship keeps growing and deepening thanks to the historic stances and solidarity in all areas, particularly when it comes to the protection of Kuwait's security and stability and the promotion of the prosperity of both countries," the minister noted. "The state-to-state and people-to-people exchanges also add momentum to the friendly relations," he noted. Sheikh Moham-

mad Al-Abdullah noted that economic cooperation between both countries has seen milestones since the establishment of the Kuwait Investment Office (KIO) in London more than seven decades ago.

KIO turned out to be one of the world's biggest sovereign funds, with a volume of investments amounting to nearly \$300 billion in Europe and the two Americas, including \$40 inside the UK, he said, noting that the Kuwaiti investments helped create up to 150,000 jobs in the UK so far. On the other hand, British companies are active in Kuwait in collaboration with the Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA) in such areas as information technology, insurance, and the oil and gas industry, he noted, adding that the British investments amount to KD 5 million (nearly \$16.2 million).

Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah recalled the UK's supportive stances on Kuwait's right to protect its security and independence since 1920, including during the incidents of 1961 and the honorable stance against the Iraqi brutal invasion of 1990. On his part, the UK Deputy Prime Minister expressed pleasure in designating 2024 as a year of Kuwait-UK partnership, saying that the partnership is one of the most important sources of strength and resilience for both sides in the face of challenges.

The diplomatic relationship doesn't tell the whole story, as the two countries have a friendship spanning over 125 years since



Minister of the Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah



British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis



UK Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office Oliver Dowden



Head of Kuwait National Cyber Security Center Eng. Mohammad Bouarki meets with Oliver Dowden, UK's Deputy prime minister.

the signing of the UK-Kuwait agreement, Dowden added in a similar speech to the celebration. Meanwhile, British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis said relations between the two nations have made headway in various fields, including the economy, politics,

culture, and society. Recalling the milestones of 1961 and 1991 in defense and security cooperation, she said the decades-long partnership has other wonderful aspects. Ambassador Belinda added that Kuwait offered great contributions to the UK.

Meanwhile, the head of the Kuwait National Cyber Security Center, Eng. Mohammad Bouarki, met with Oliver Dowden, UK's Deputy Prime Minister, on Monday to discuss boosting cooperation in cybersecurity and exchange experiences to develop IT infrastructure. NCSC-KW released a statement after the meeting where both sides discussed the relationship between Kuwait and the United Kingdom that dates back 125 years.

They stressed the importance of cooperation in qualifying national employees and strengthening partnerships in the academic field, which contributes to developing the skills and capabilities of the human element and achieving a secure cyberspace to protect state institutions. According to the statement, this visit came within the framework of cybersecurity efforts to enhance cooperation with friendly countries in relevant fields and was an embodiment of the level of cooperation and strategic relations between Kuwait and the United Kingdom. — KUNA

Local

Zain supports AU's smart net-zero bus stop project

Fostering innovative student projects that bring impactful, sustainable solutions



Professor Zabalawi and Al Khashti with Zain's team, AU officials, and the students.

KUWAIT: Zain announced its sponsorship of the smart net-zero bus stop project in collaboration with the Australian University (AU). The project, innovated by a group of students to facilitate transportation from and to campus, was designed to have net zero emissions by using renewable energy to power its facilities, achieving a positive social impact and serving sustainable goals at the same time.

Zain joined the project's inauguration ceremony, attended by President of the Australian University Professor Isam Zabalawi, Zain Kuwait Corporate Affairs and Relations Officer Waleed Al Khashti, Assistant to the President for Support Services Sager Al-Sharhan, Dean of the College of Engineering Dr. Mohammed Abdulniby, as well as AU officials and Zain Kuwait's Corporate Sustainability team. The company's support to this aspiring student project in

collaboration with AU embodies their joint vision to support effective and practical sustainable solutions, encourage creative young Kuwaiti engineers, and foster innovation to tackle infrastructure challenges related to climate change.

A group of students from AU's College of Engineering designed and executed the smart net-zero bus stop as a graduation project, winning last year's Civil Engineering category in the Exhibition of Engineering Students' Graduation Projects. The bus stop aims to make it easy for students to move from and to campus and encourages them to adopt public transportation to reduce the negative impact on environmental sustainability.

The bus stop was built from a modified and enhanced shipping container, supported with modern insulating materials. It was also supplied with solar



A discussion during the inauguration ceremony.

panels to power its facilities independently using renewable energy so that it achieves net zero emissions. Ultimately, the initiative embodies the intersection of innovation and sustainability in infrastructure projects. The bus stop offers students a cooled, comfortable space while waiting, where they can also charge their smartphones using the built-in USB ports. The generated solar power also feeds the integrated LED lights that automatically turn on at night.

Zain's support to this project reflects its eagerness to foster creativity and innovation in the community by empowering aspiring student projects under its Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility strategy. The company puts the support of education at the forefront of its priorities, and continues to collaborate with academic institutions, universities, schools, and colleges to invest in education and the

next generation of Kuwait's leaders. Zain is committed to building a comprehensive program that adapts the company's operational processes to align with its sustainable development goals.

The company has made addressing climate change one of the pillars of its corporate sustainability strategy and is dedicated to reducing its overall energy consumption and emissions across its entire value chain, enhancing the environmental performance of its workplaces, and promoting environmental care. Zain has established short and medium-term targets to lower its entire carbon footprint and aims to achieve net zero by 2050 to minimize its negative environmental effects. The company continues to conduct extensive research on cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence and renewable energy to reduce the ICT sector's carbon footprint.

Cabinet reviews details of terror plot and arrests

KUWAIT: The Cabinet held its weekly session on Monday and highlighted various issues, among them the Interior Ministry's successful operation of halting a terror cell plot to launch attacks on Shiite sites. A Cabinet press statement said the ministers held their weekly meeting at Seif Palace, headed by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah. After the meeting, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, Sharida Al-Maousherji, stated the Cabinet was informed of the departure of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his accompanying delegation on Tuesday to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The ministers were later briefed in detail by the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior, Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah, about the arrest and thwarting of a plan by a terrorist cell that was intended to target places of worship. The security operation was managed by the Interior Ministry and represented by the State Security Service, which foiled the attack, arrested members that belonged to a terrorist organization, and referred them to public prosecution to take legal action against them.

The ministers praised efforts exerted by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, the Acting Minister of the Interior, and all commanders of the Ministry of the Interior, including efforts by the security services to complete the task. On a different front, the Cabinet reviewed recommendations by the Ministerial Economic Affairs Committee regarding draft laws on connecting the budgets of ministries and government departments, including draft laws regarding connecting the budgets of attached bodies and draft laws regarding connecting the budgets of independent institutions for the fiscal year 2024-2025.

In this regard, the Council of Ministers reviewed a visual presentation presented by the Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Investment, Dr. Anwar Ali Al-Mudhaf, and officials of the Ministry of Finance regarding the aforementioned draft laws, in compliance with the text of Article (140) of the Constitution, and the Council of Ministers decided to approve the draft laws and submit them to His Highness the Amir in preparation for referring them to the National Assembly.

The Cabinet also expressed thanks and appreciation for the great efforts made by the Minister of Finance, the employees of the Ministry of Finance, and the relevant government agencies to prepare draft laws. Meanwhile, the Cabinet praised the Kuwaiti handball team's qualification for the 2025 World Cup, scheduled to take place in Croatia, Denmark, and Norway. In this regard, the ministers were briefed by the Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs, the Minister of State for Youth Affairs, and the Min-

ister of State for Communications Affairs, Dawood Maarafie, regarding the disbursement of financial rewards to the players for their efforts that culminated in achieving this achievement.

On another front, the Cabinet listened to an explanation presented by Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Yahya about the current developments in the political field, including Arab and international arenas. The Cabinet expressed the State of Kuwait's welcome for the decision by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued last Friday, which called on the Zionist occupation to take all the measures necessary to prevent the crime of genocide against the Palestinian people.

For its part, the Council of Ministers praised the step taken by the friendly Republic of South Africa in submitting that lawsuit, renewing its demands. The Cabinet also expressed deep concern regarding the decision of some donor countries to stop their aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), stressing in this regard the important humanitarian and vital role played by the agency in providing services and meeting the basic needs of approximately 5.7 million Palestinian refugees.

The Cabinet finally expressed Kuwait's condemnation of the terrorist attack launched Sunday on a site near the Jordanian-Syrian border, which resulted in a number of deaths and injuries among American servicemen, affirming Kuwait's firm position in its condemnation of all terrorist acts and to work collectively to stand against such actions to achieve stability in the region and the world. — KUNA

KU accepts 47 foreign students

KUWAIT: Kuwait University announced that 47 foreign students are accepted at their own expense at KU for the second semester of 2023-2024. In a press statement, dean of admissions and registration at Kuwait University, Dr. Fadel Aziz, said that 47 high school graduates are accepted at KU in the College of Business Administration at their own expense from different nationalities in accordance with admission rules.

Aziz stated that foreign students were accepted based on their desire and according to the required number of students accepted at the College of Business Administration. He revealed that they were also accepted according to KU policy for the 2023-24 semester, which allowed non-Kuwaiti students into any of the undergraduate majors of their choice in line with the percentages attained at their high school level.

The high school grade must not be equivalent to or less than that of Kuwaiti students who are admitted to the same major, he indicated. The university will send phone messages to all admitted students and the major that they are accepted. The admission approval will be done online via <http://portal.ku.edu.kw/admission>. Access to the Admission System website charges KD 10. — KUNA

Artificial intelligence 'helpful' in tackling medical challenges

Abdellatif Sharaa, KUNA

KUWAIT: Minister of Health Dr. Ahmad Al-Awadhi affirmed on Tuesday that digital medicine and artificial intelligence (AI) employed in the sector have become the basis for overhauling health systems and dealing with modern-age medical challenges. The grand development in artificial intelligence applications, particularly in the medical sector, is a major transformation that paves the way for limitless potential for improving the quality of life, the minister said.

Dr. Al-Awadhi was speaking at the inauguration of the 16th international conference of the Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences (IOMS), sponsored by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The conference is not only a platform for scientific and technical dialogue but also an opportunity for reflection regarding means of guiding the technology for humanitarian services and attaining goals of the Islamic Shariaa (law), the minister said, affirming that the AI's huge capacities will boost public health and safeguard human financial resources.

However, Minister Al-Awadhi cautioned that hazards resulting from AI cannot be ignored, mentioning immoral usage of the newest technology and threats against security and peace, according to warnings by the World Health Organization and AI experts. He has affirmed that the Islamic organization has become a main source of edict in religious quarters, in addition to the respect it has earned from the international community.

On his part, Dr. Mohammad Al-Jarallah, the IOMS chairperson, spoke at the convention, alluding to WHO's affirmation that artificial intelligence has proven quite significant for overhauling clinical and preventive medicines. Its role has also proven



Minister of Health Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi



Dr Mohammad Al-Jarallah, the IOMS chairperson

pivotal for updating health systems with respect to governance, management, financial transparency, developing the work force, enhancing public health, and combating emerging epidemics. He pointed out the significance of the convention, for it brought together medical consultants with information technology experts to find pathways for harmonizing digital medicine with Islamic Shariaa.

Dr. Al-Jarallah also indicated that the conference was held against the backdrop of international warnings, likening AI to nuclear power, implying both benefits and harms. Head of Al-Azhar University, Dr. Salama Dawoud, cautioned that employing AI in medicine haphazardly might lead to 'compromising patients'



Photo captures the audience during the inauguration of the 16th international conference of the Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences. — KUNA photos

rights and subjecting them to exploitation by commercial companies. He called for enacting an ethical code for governing AI usage in medicine.

Dr. Dawoud, pointed out the emergence of many benefits of AI in the medical field, adding that there are still fears with regards to the ethics. He said the spread of AI in medicine and the unregulated use of

it can lead to subjecting the rights and interests of patients to the commercial interests of technological companies especially in remote and poor areas. He calls for consolidating efforts to issue a regulation that takes its origins from Islamic teachings that always seek to preserve human interests while guaranteeing people's safety.

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Kuwait FM meets with KRCS chief

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Yahya met on Tuesday with the Chairman of the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), Dr. Hilal Al-Sayer, at the ministry's headquarters. During the meeting, they discussed the society's activities and projects, ways of promoting cooperation among officials of United Nations (UN) agencies, nongovernmental humanitarian organizations, and civil societies, and supporting joint efforts for responding to humanitarian emergencies and crises, including delivering humanitarian aid provided by Kuwait to war-torn and natural disaster-affected countries, with the most recent initiative being aiding Palestinians in Gaza.

The Foreign Minister hailed the KRCS' great contributions, projects, and activities in and outside Kuwait that aim to serve noble humanitarian goals and appreciated its fervent efforts to deliver humanitarian, medical, and relief aid to affected people around the world and to promote Kuwait's global status. — KUNA

Kuwait expresses concern, urges support for UNRWA

KUWAIT: Kuwait on Monday expressed deep concern over the decision by several donor countries to stop their aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), underscoring the agency's vital role and importance in providing services and meeting the basic needs of approximately 5.7 million Palestinian refugees. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated: "Kuwait urges the international community to continue its support for Palestinian refugees, especially in light of the continued Zionist occupation aggression against the Gaza Strip," indicating that "suspension of financial support will increase and exacerbate their suffering." The statement reaffirmed Kuwait's steadfast support for the Palestinian people, including support for UNRWA, as it constitutes a basic pillar of stability in the region and the importance of the noble work it does and the humanitarian services it provides to Palestinian refugees. — KUNA

Kuwait-India bilateral ties multifaceted: Ambassador

Indian Embassy hosts reception to celebrate 75th Republic Day



Sheikh Jarah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Dr Adarsh Swaika with Indian Embassy officials.



Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika jointly cut the cake to inaugurate the celebration.



Guests during the reception.

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: The bilateral investment cooperation between Kuwait and India is growing with greater Kuwaiti investments in India as well as an increasing presence of Indian companies in Kuwait, said Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika on Monday. Addressing a reception hosted by the Indian Embassy, Kuwait at the Crowne Plaza on the occasion of India's 75th Republic Day celebrations, the Ambassador said, the Kuwait-India bilateral relations cover a wide spectrum of areas and the leadership of both countries highly values the importance of this multifaceted relationship.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah attended the event as the chief guest in which a large number of Kuwaiti dignitaries, resident ambassadors and diplomats and members of Indian community participated. "When it comes to our bilateral relations with the State of Kuwait, they are indeed historical and time-tested. Trade and people-to-people linkages have been the edifice of our close ties," the Ambassador said. Dr Swaika said India is among the top three bilateral trade partners of Kuwait. He

also expressed gratitude to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Dr Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah for their patronage and support for a strong India-Kuwait partnership.

"We are seeing a diversification in our trade basket as well. Many Indian companies have executed, are executing and look forward to executing large-scale infrastructure projects in Kuwait," he pointed out. He also spoke about the collaboration in the field of education. "There are 26 Indian schools currently in Kuwait with an enrollment of over 60,000 students. The strong and vibrant Indian community in Kuwait of approximately one million is a living bridge between the two countries. We look forward to further strengthening of our special partnership with Kuwait under the guidance of the new leadership of Kuwait," the Ambassador said.

Jan 26, 2024 marked the diamond jubilee of India's Republic Day celebrations, a historic milestone in India's journey since it was on this very day in 1950 that the constitution of India came into effect, he said. "The Indian constitution embodies the principles of equitable development, democracy, pluralism, secularism, principles of natural justice etc for

which the country stands for," he added.

Giving a snapshot of the India's developmental story, he said India is now the world's most populous country with 65 percent of the population under 35 years of age. "It is the 5th largest economy and poised to become the third largest by 2027-28. It has a GDP of \$3.75 trillion with exports reaching \$776 billion in 2023. India has become a preferred foreign investment destination with \$615 billion FDI in the last nine years, including \$71 billion in 2023. India has world's 3rd largest startup ecosystem -- 111 unicorns with total valuation of \$350 billion. The country is also the global pharmacy of the world, the Ambassador said. He said India is on track to become \$1 trillion digital economy by 2025. Projecting India's economic growth, he said the country will become a \$32 trillion economy by 2047.

Talking about India's foreign policy, he said, India's 'Vishwa Mitra' initiative is designed to foster closer global cooperation and understanding and aligns with India's ancient belief of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family). "We were happy to welcome Kuwait in the SCO family as a dialogue partner during our G20 presidency, he added.



Prof. Dr. Meshari Lafi Al-Harbi meets Brigadier General Saad Al-Hamlan.



KU inaugurates Citizen Service Center in Sabah Al-Salem University City

KUWAIT: Under the patronage and in the presence of the Acting Director of Kuwait University, Prof. Dr. Meshari Lafi Al-Harbi, Kuwait University opened the Citizen Service Center in Sabah Al-Salem University City (Al-Shadadiya) in co-operation with the Ministry of Interior, based on the order of Interior Minister Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah. This is to boost the societal role played by Kuwait University.

The acting director of Kuwait University, Dr. Meshari Al-Harbi, stressed the need to harness all services in Kuwait University affiliates, explaining that the opening of the Citizen Service Center came to facilitate and save time and effort. He expressed his thanks to the Ministry of Interior. The Acting Secretary General of Kuwait University, Dr. Fayez Al-Dhafiri, indicated that these services came to complement other services available at the university, such as medical services and fire stations. He pointed out that cooperation with all state ministries aims to overcome difficulties facing Kuwait University employees, adding that Kuwait University will continue to provide all services to

students, faculty members, and employees.

For his part, the Director General of the General Department of Citizen Service Centers at the Ministry of Interior, Brigadier General Saad Al-Hamlan, stated that the opening of the Citizen Service Center came in accordance with the directives of the First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior to urgently open citizen service centers in all regions of Kuwait.

Al-Hamlan noted that the center will make it easier for all Kuwait University employees, students, and faculty members to complete their transactions without going outside the campus, which will save a lot of effort and time. Within the strategic plan of the Ministry of Interior, the center will contribute to facilitating the completion of transactions for the elderly and people with special needs. The Acting Director of the Security and Safety Department at Kuwait University, Yousef Al-Khamis, confirmed that the center will provide its various services to faculty members, students, and employees in one place.



Dr Meshari Al-Harbi



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North Korea
fires new round
of missiles

New mayor hopes trees will cool Athens down



PESHAWAR: Supporters and activists of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party shout slogans during a protest demanding the release of PTI leader Imran Khan, on January 28, 2024. — AFP

Imran Khan sentenced to 10 years jail

Ex-president urges Pakistanis to ‘take revenge for every injustice’ with their vote

ISLAMABAD: Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan was sentenced Tuesday to 10 years in prison, less than two weeks before the country votes in an election his party has been hamstrung from contesting. Pakistan goes to the polls next Thursday in a ballot already marred by allegations of pre-vote rigging, with Khan barred from running and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party subject to a massive crackdown.

“You have to take revenge for every injustice with your vote on February 8,” Khan said in a statement addressed to the electorate that was posted on his X profile. “Tell them that we are not sheep that can be driven with a stick.” Khan was disqualified from standing over a previous graft conviction, one of dozens of court challenges he says have been orchestrated to prevent his return to office after a campaign of defiance against Pakistan’s military kingmakers.

Tuesday’s conviction for leaking classified

state documents was handed down inside Adiala jail — where Khan has been confined for much of the time since his August arrest. The same sentence was given to Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the former PTI vice-chairman who served as foreign minister during Khan’s four-year premiership ending in 2022.

PTI lawyers said they were ousted from the proceedings, denying their leaders fair representation. “This is unconstitutional, this is against the principles of natural justice,” barrister Salman Safdar told AFP.

‘Murder of justice’

About 127 million Pakistanis are eligible to vote in nine days, with Khan and PTI at the center of debate despite being squeezed out of the limelight. “This is a murder of justice,” said Tauseef Ahmed Khan, a human rights activist and political analyst. “But his popularity among the people will grow in leaps and bounds as his sympathizers will

increase.” When Khan was first arrested in May last year, riots broke out in cities across the country. But his street power was killed by a subsequent military crackdown which saw thousands of supporters detained — 100 of whom are facing closed-door military trials — and dozens of senior leaders forced underground.

In Khan’s northwestern power base province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa voters remained bullish about his prospects at the ballot box. “Imposing a sentence will not affect Imran Khan and his party,” predicted 33-year-old welder Inayatullah Khan in Peshawar city. “If he were in a coffin instead of jail, I would still vote for him.”

Tuesday’s sentence “will only prompt voters to express their anger on the ballot paper,” added 37-year-old pharmaceutical worker Alif Rahman. Khan had accused the powerful military establishment — with whom he ruled in partnership for much of his

tenure — of orchestrating his ousting in a US-backed conspiracy.

He touted diplomatic cables at huge opposition rallies as apparent proof of his claim, prompting his prosecution under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act which resulted in Tuesday’s sentence. He also alleged the top brass plotted an assassination bid which wounded him but failed to provide any evidence of his claims.

Muted campaign

On Tuesday, officials said a bombing near a PTI rally killed four people and wounded six others in the Balochistan provincial capital of Quetta. Police said it was unclear whether PTI had been targeted, but the party said three of its activists had been killed in the blast, just hours after Khan was sentenced. Pakistan’s election commission said it was investigating. As a result of the ongoing crackdown, PTI has moved most of

its campaigning online, where it has been bogged down by state-imposed internet blackouts. The party founded by former cricket star Khan has also been stripped of its cricket bat election symbol.

In a nation where literacy lags, icons are vital for identifying candidates on ballot papers and the Supreme Court injunction has effectively forced PTI hopefuls to run as independents. When state media reported Khan’s Tuesday conviction they did not use his name, obeying strict censorship measures that have alarmed rights monitors.

Nawaz Sharif — head of one of the two dynastic parties that have historically helmed Pakistan — has returned from self-imposed exile and seen his myriad convictions dissolve in the courts. Analysts say it is a sign the three-time former prime minister is the favored candidate of the military, which has directly ruled Pakistan for roughly half of its history. — AFP

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon protest UNRWA funding halt

BEIRUT: Dozens demonstrated Tuesday outside the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees in Beirut against several countries’ decision to suspend funding for the body after the Zionist entity charged some staff participated in Hamas’s October 7 attack.

At least 12 key donor countries have said they will halt funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency following the accusations, while UNRWA has fired several employees and promised a thorough investigation into the claims.

“We are afraid for the future of UNRWA,” said Palestinian refugee Abu Mohammed, 65, who attended the protest. “All our children study in UNRWA schools and most of our medical care is covered by the agency,” he said, urging countries “to reverse their decision”. “The suspension of aid would be catastrophic from a social and humanitarian perspective,” he added.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is charged with providing humanitarian aid and protection for Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including east Jerusalem. Tiny Lebanon hosts an estimated 250,000 Palestinian refugees, according to UNRWA, while almost double that number are registered

for the organization’s services. Most live in poverty.

“Even though I have a job, UNRWA helps me pay my rent and buy food,” said Dima Dahouk, 40, a Palestinian and the sole breadwinner for her four children. “My son who dreams of becoming an engineer had to temporarily drop out of school” to help support the family, she said. “The situation is terrible,” she added, amid a four-year economic crisis in Lebanon that has plunged most of the population into poverty.

Aid groups on Tuesday condemned the countries that suspended funding to UNRWA, pointing to a “worsening humanitarian catastrophe” and “looming famine” in Gaza. The two dozen top charities, including Oxfam and Save the Children, stressed the United Nations Relief and Works Agency was the main provider of aid to millions of Palestinians in Gaza and the wider Middle East.

“The suspension of funding by donor states will impact life-saving assistance for over two million civilians, over half of whom are children,” the NGOs said in a joint statement. “The population faces starvation, looming famine and an outbreak of disease under the Zionist entity’s continued indiscriminate bombardment and deliberate deprivation of aid in Gaza.”

A total of 152 UNRWA staff had already been killed in Zionist strikes



BEIRUT: Palestinian refugees gather outside the offices of UNRWA on January 30, 2024 to protest against some countries’ decision to stop funding the organization. — AFP

and 145 of the UN agency’s facilities had been damaged by bombardment, according to the statement, issued in English by the Norwegian Refugee Council, on behalf of the aid groups. “If the funding suspensions are not reversed, we may see a complete collapse of the already restricted humanitarian response in Gaza,” they said.

Duty to Palestinians

The NGOs said more than a million displaced Palestinians were taking shelter in or around 154 UNRWA shelters, stressing that the agency has been working in “near impossible circumstances.” “Countries must reverse these funding suspensions, uphold their duties towards the Palestinian people and scale up human-

itarian assistance for civilians in dire need in Gaza and the region.”

The World Health Organization warned the funding row was distracting from the humanitarian disaster in the Palestinian territory. Raafat al-Murra, a Hamas official in Lebanon, said the UNRWA funding crisis had “dangerous repercussions for Palestinian refugees, particularly in Lebanon, where they depend mainly on UNRWA in the absence of aid from the Lebanese state”. “We have called on the United Nations to take urgent measures ... and look for more financing,” he said. Around 5.9 million Palestinians are registered with UNRWA and can access health care, social services, microfinance and emergency aid. — AFP

EU to give Ukraine aid ‘with or without Orban’: Polish PM

STOCKHOLM/WARSAW: Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said Tuesday, ahead of key talks on the Ukraine conflict, that the EU would find a way to provide aid to Ukraine “with or without” Hungary’s approval.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who maintained close ties to the Kremlin following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in December vetoed 50 billion euros (\$54 billion) in EU aid for Ukraine.

The bloc will hold a special summit on Thursday to seek a solution to the standoff as the war nears its second anniversary. “One way or another, we will find some solution, with or without Orban, to support Ukraine,” Tusk told journalists.

Separately, French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday called on European countries to back Ukraine “over the long term” and get ready in case Washington decides to stop supporting the war-torn country.

Tens of billions of dollars in US aid has been sent to Ukraine since the Russian invasion in February 2022, but Republican lawmakers have grown reluctant to keep supporting Kyiv, saying it lacks a clear end game as the fighting grinds on.

“We must organize ourselves in such a way that if the United States were to make a sovereign choice to stop or reduce this aid, it should have no impact on the ground,” he told reporters in Stockholm, alongside Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson.

“We Europeans must continue to support the Ukrainian people,” Macron said, stressing that Ukraine was a European country. “This is first and foremost our problem,” he added. “We have a strategic objective: Russia cannot win.” — AFP

New mayor hopes trees will cool Athens down

High temperatures, pollution, fires make city center ‘unbearable’ in the summer

ATHENS: Athens’ new mayor will plant 25,000 trees over the next five years to try to cool the sprawling Greek capital, he told AFP. Scorching summer heatwaves can make the city of tightly-packed concrete office and apartment blocks almost unbearable, with temperatures topping 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit).

Former energy professor Haris Doukas, who was elected in October, faces a daunting mix of pollution, soaring temperatures and traffic gridlock. His answer is to plant 5,000 trees a year to create “cool routes” of shade connecting Athens’ streets, parks and urban hills. “High temperatures, pollution and the loss of greenery create conditions where the city center is unbearable in the summer,” Doukas said.

Part of the total includes 3,000 trees at a new sports complex by the Panathinaikos club in the industrial district of Votanikos, slated to be completed in 2026. Last summer Athens baked through a sustained heatwave that saw temperatures consistently top 40C.

The National Observatory of Athens said July was the warmest on record since it began monitoring data in 1863. To make matters worse, nearly a quarter of the trees on the mountains surrounding the capital have been lost to forest fires over the past six years, the mayor said. Last year the EU court of justice condemned Greece for failing to take measures against nitrogen dioxide levels in Athens “systematically” exceeding limits over the past decade.

‘Scientific’ solutions

“I am here to state scientific findings and fight for solutions,” said Doukas, formerly a professor of mechanical engineering at the Athens Polytechnic, specializing in energy policy and management. Backed by the socialist PASOK party, Doukas caused an upset last year by defeating the incumbent mayor Kostas Bakoyannis, nephew of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who was widely expected to win a second term.

Athens in the past has toyed with campaigns to encourage residents to install solar panels on their roofs, or plant more greenery on their balconies. But these are expensive options at a time when many are struggling with rising prices and energy bills, Doukas said.

Instead, he wants to encourage businesses based in the capital to spruce up their buildings. The city will also put solar panels on municipal edifices such as schools, he said. “There is limited space, this is a city of cement, but there are a lot of possibilities,” Doukas said.

Athens municipality has around 650,000 residents, but some three million people commute in and out of the city center every day. Carpooling will be encouraged to cut the city’s notorious traffic congestion, the mayor said. And Doukas said he was also looking at saturation levels of short-term tourism rentals in some neighborhoods. “All of this we will look at calmly, in consultation with residents. We want them on our side,” he said.

In some areas near the Acropolis, Greece’s



ATHENS: Haris Doukas Mayor of Athens plants a tree during a tree-planting at a park in Athens on January 28, 2024. — AFP

most-visited site, residents are moving out and even rental platforms are advising visitors to seek accommodation elsewhere, he said. “Athens

must not become a boundless mall,” Doukas said. “Excessive touristification creates a problem for tourism itself.” — AFP

What’s at stake as China, US resume fentanyl talks?

BEIJING: The United States and China sit down in Beijing on Tuesday for their first talks in years on stemming the production of synthetic opioid fentanyl. Washington has long accused Beijing of complicity in the deadly fentanyl trade that has ravaged communities across the country. Beijing denies this, touting its “zero tolerance” drug policies and insisting the roots of the addiction crisis lie in the US.

Made in Mexico

The United States is facing an epidemic of deaths caused by fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is 50 times more powerful than heroin and much easier and cheaper to produce. It is responsible for 100,000 overdose deaths a year, making it the leading cause of death of people aged 18 to 49, US officials have said.

The US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has described China as “the main source for all fentanyl-related substances trafficked into the United States”. And while a report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) last year noted that direct supplies of the drug from China had been stemmed by stricter controls from Beijing in 2019, it said the move had simply shifted the supply lines.

Instead of the drugs being supplied directly via international courier services, it said, chemical components are instead shipped from China to Mexico — where they are then manufactured into fentanyl and smuggled across the border. These chemicals are pro-

duced by everything from clandestine laboratories to “legitimate chemical and pharmaceutical companies”, the CRS said.

Beijing, which previously insisted there is “no such thing as illegal trafficking of fentanyl between China and Mexico”, has since promised to crack down. In December, its foreign ministry said Beijing was “engaged in campaigns against fentanyl and its precursor chemicals”. Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said China had “cracked down on illegal and criminal activities involving the smuggling, illicit manufacturing, trafficking and abuse of fentanyl-related substances”.

US crackdown

Biden’s administration has made the fight against fentanyl a priority. In October, the US Justice Department slapped sanctions on over two dozen China-based entities and individuals alleged to be the “source of supply” for many US-based narcotics traffickers, dark web vendors, virtual currency money launderers and Mexico-based criminal organizations.

The group, which included a Wuhan-based company and a number of other firms based in Hong Kong and the mainland, was alleged to be responsible for the shipment of 900 kilograms of “seized fentanyl and methamphetamine precursors” shipped to the US and Mexico.

“We know that the global fentanyl supply chain, which ends with the deaths of Americans, often starts with chemical companies in China,” US Attorney General Merrick Garland said. China condemned the moves as part of a US campaign of “pressure and sanctions” against it.

Hopes for further control

China-US talks on drug control had long stalled in the face of some of their worst relations in years, with the powers clashing over everything from trade to

human rights and the self-ruled island of Taiwan. But following a summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping in San Francisco in November, Washington and Beijing agreed to restart talks. That meeting saw Xi say that China “deeply sympathizes” with victims of fentanyl, and China has vowed to crack down.

Since then, a senior Biden administration official said last week, Beijing has shut down one company, blocked some international payments and resumed sharing information on shipments and trafficking. Washington hopes to get China to take greater steps to tackle companies that manufacture the precursor chemicals needed to make the drug.

To that end, Tuesday’s meeting will include high-level US officials from the State Department, Treasury, Department of Homeland Security and Justice Department. China has not said who will attend the talks on its side.

Not ‘one snapshot’

The US has tried to remain clear-eyed about what it hopes to achieve, and cooperation on fentanyl is inextricably tied to the vicissitudes in relations between the two at-odds powers. Following US-China talks in Bangkok last week, a senior Washington official said that cooperation on fentanyl between the two countries “needs to be continuous and ongoing”. “It’s not just one snapshot in time.”

And a report by the Washington-based Brookings Institution this week warned that Chinese criminal networks, some of which are tied to the drug trade, were expanding their international footprint. “Beijing rarely acts against the top echelons of Chinese criminal syndicates,” its authors wrote. International pressure may push it to take steps to crack down on fentanyl, they added, but that action’s “robustness is a function of its geopolitical orientation and bilateral relations.” — AFP

New Hong Kong law to expand security control

HONG KONG: Hong Kong’s leader John Lee on Tuesday announced that the city would urgently create a new security law to crush pro-independence threats, nearly four years after authorities extinguished a huge democracy movement. The law will expand on legislation imposed by China in June 2020 to silence dissent, adding in crimes such as insurrection and external interference.

Critics of the existing security law have said it has affected Hong Kong’s status as an international hub, and culled freedoms the city had long enjoyed. The new law, which the Hong Kong government said it would open up to public consultation, will bolster the authorities’ ability to crack down on perceived threats.

“While the society as a whole looks calm and very safe, we still have to watch out for potential sabotage and undercurrents that try to create troubles,” Lee told a press conference. He also warned about the proliferation of “independent Hong Kong’ ideas”.

“The threats to national security are real... we don’t want to go through that painful experience again,” he said, adding that “some foreign agents may still be active in Hong Kong”. — AFP

Kuwait gains 14 spots on...

Continued from Page 1

Otaibi highlighted the impact of previous legislative, legal and judicial efforts at various levels on international perceptions of Kuwait. He asserted that Kuwait National Integrity Society remains vigilant in monitoring international portrayals of Kuwait and actively works to rectify misinformation, striving to achieve the highest standards in the fight against corruption.

Furthermore, the anti-corruption strategy implemented by Nazaha from 2019 to 2024 has yielded positive results in reducing corruption in Kuwait. Building on these achievements, a second strategy plan for the next five years holds the

potential for further advancements in raising Kuwait’s global ranking.

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Kuwait’s rankings in the past years are as follows: 2018: 78th worldwide with a score of 41; 2019: 85th worldwide with a score of 40; 2020: 78th worldwide with a score of 42; 2021: 73rd worldwide with a score of 43; 2022: 77th worldwide with a score of 42; 2023: 63rd worldwide with a score of 46.

It is noteworthy that in 2023, Denmark, Finland, and New Zealand secured the top ranks with scores of 90, 87 and 85 respectively. Conversely, Somalia, Venezuela and Syria occupied the lowest positions with scores of 11, 13 and 13 respectively. Regionally, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia performed well, securing 26th, 40th, and 53rd positions, respectively, with scores of 68, 58, and 52. In contrast, Somalia, Syria and Yemen ranked lowest at 180th, 177th and 176th respectively, with scores of 11, 13, and 16.

them in poverty. “The suspension of aid would be catastrophic,” said 65-year-old Abu Mohammed, urging governments “to reverse their decision”.

The Zionist entity’s relentless military offensive has killed at least 26,751 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the Gaza health ministry. In the latest efforts to broker a new truce, a meeting in Paris on Sunday between top US, Zionist, Egyptian and Qatari officials resulted in a proposed framework.

Hamas confirmed on Tuesday that it had received the proposal, saying on its Telegram account that it was “in the process of examining it and delivering its response”. Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, whose government helped broker a previous truce in November, voiced hope an initial deal might lead to a permanent ceasefire.

According to him, the current plan included a phased truce that would see women and children hostages released first, with more aid also entering Gaza. Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose office earlier also called the talks “constructive”, on Tuesday ruled out releasing “thousands” of Palestinian prisoners as part of any deal to halt fighting in Gaza. The Zionist entity’s top ally the United States expressed hope for a deal, with Blinken telling reporters that “very important, productive work has been done”. — AFP

Biden has decided on Jordan strike response, doesn’t want wider war

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden said Tuesday he had decided on a response to a deadly drone strike on US forces in Jordan but said he did not seek a wider war in the Middle East. Facing growing pressure in an election year, Biden said he held Iran responsible for supplying the weapons to the people who carried out the attack that killed three US troops.

Biden, who was hitting the campaign trail in Florida, has previously blamed Iran-backed militias for the first fatal attack on US troops in the region since the Zionist-Hamas war broke out in October. “Yes,” Biden told reporters at the White House when asked if he had decided on his response, but he did not give further details on what actions he would take. “I don’t think we need a wider war in the Middle East. That’s not what I’m looking for,” he added when asked about fears that taking on Iran could inflame a broader conflict.

Republicans have urged the 81-year-old Democrat to punish Iran for the drone strike on a US military facility

near the Jordanian-Syrian border Sunday, with some urging direct strikes on Iran itself. But Biden’s administration believes hitting Iranian territory could cause the region to erupt, with strikes on Iranian-backed militias and possibly on Iranian Revolutionary Guard facilities in other countries more likely, US media reported. The White House on Monday promised a “very consequential” response.

Asked whether Iran was to blame for the attack on Jordan, Biden replied: “I do hold them responsible, in the sense that they’re supplying the weapons to the people who did it.” Biden added that “we’ll have that discussion” when asked if a direct link to Iran had been established. Tensions have escalated sharply in the region following the Jordan attack, already unstable after the Oct 7 Hamas attack on the Zionist entity and the Zionist entity’s devastating response in Gaza.

The Kremlin, a close ally of Tehran, on Tuesday called for a de-escalation in the Middle East. “In our view, the overall level of tension is very alarming and, on the contrary, now is the time for steps to de-escalate tensions,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters in Moscow. “This is the only thing that can help us prevent further spreading of the conflict, especially the Middle East conflict, and somehow achieve de-confliction and de-escalation.” — AFP

director said.

The Ghazawi brothers were claimed as fighters by the Islamic Jihad militant group, while Hamas said Jalammah was a “commander” in its armed wing. Weapons were placed on the bodies of the Ghazawi brothers as they were carried through the streets of Jenin in a funeral procession.

The Zionist entity, which has occupied the West Bank since the 1967 Arab-Zionist war, has stepped up its incursions into Palestinian towns and cities since Oct 7. Jenin has been the focus of repeated Zionist raids, in which the army has demolished homes and ripped up streets as well as carrying out air strikes.

While Zionist troops frequently prevent paramedics from reaching those wounded in incursions, deadly raids inside hospitals are rare. The last one happened on Nov 12, 2015, when undercover agents pretending to bring in a pregnant woman raided a hospital in the southern West Bank city of Hebron. They detained a Palestinian and killed his cousin inside Al-Ahli Hospital. Since Oct 7, more than 370 people have been killed by Zionist troops and settlers in the West Bank, according to the health ministry in Ramallah. — AFP

Zionists defile bodies in Gaza...

Continued from Page 1

The Zionist entity has charged that around a dozen staff of the main UN aid agency for Palestinians took part in the Oct 7 attack, leading key donor countries including the United States and Germany to suspend funding. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who has pleaded for continued support to meet the “dire needs”, planned talks with donors in New York on Tuesday, his office said, as investigations into the Zionist entity’s claims continue.

The World Health Organization called the row over UNRWA “a distraction from what’s really going on every day, every hour, every minute in Gaza”. “As important as this discussion is, let’s not forget what the real issues are on the ground,” said spokesman Christian Lindmeier. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged UNRWA to address the allegations but also hailed the agency’s “absolutely indispensable role” in supporting Gazans.

In Lebanon, dozens joined a Hamas-led rally to protest the funding halts. UNRWA estimates 250,000 Palestinian refugees live there, most of

International

North Korea fires new round of missiles

Analysts believe weapons could be intended for export to Russia

SEOUL: North Korea fired another round of cruise missiles on Tuesday, Seoul's military said, extending a recent flurry of tests of weapons that analysts warned could be destined for Russia's war in Ukraine. This month, Pyongyang has conducted tests of what it called an "underwater nuclear weapon system", a solid-fueled hypersonic ballistic missile, and a new generation of strategic cruise missiles.

Relations between the two Koreas have sharply deteriorated, with Kim Jong Un declaring Seoul his principal enemy, as he pulls closer to Moscow, including, Washington says, sending weapons for use in Ukraine. South Korea's military said it had detected the launch of several cruise missiles early Tuesday, adding that it was "conducting a detailed analysis" while strengthening surveillance in cooperation with ally the United States.

Unlike their ballistic counterparts, the testing of cruise missiles is not banned under current UN sanctions on Pyongyang. Cruise missiles tend to be jet-propelled and fly at a lower altitude than more sophisticated ballistic missiles, making them harder to detect and intercept.

Despite rafts of UN sanctions, Seoul and Washington say Kim has been shipping weapons to Russia, possibly in exchange for Moscow's technical assistance for Pyongyang's budding spy satellite program.

Kim made a rare overseas trip to Russia in September to meet President Vladimir Putin at a cosmodrome, with Putin now set to pay a visit to Pyongyang in return. The North successfully put its first spy satellite into orbit in November. "It is believed that North Korea has commenced mass production of cruise missiles ordered by Russia," Ahn Chan-il, a defector-turned-researcher who runs the World Institute for North Korea Studies, told AFP.

"It looks like they are conducting ... experiments of these (ordered) missiles at sea, causing disruption to South Korea and the United States,"

Anh said, adding that all guided missiles needed to undergo a minimum of five tests before being deployed on the battlefield.

Hong Min, a senior analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification in Seoul, said one cannot "rule out the possibility" that North Korea is conducting test-fires of cruise missiles intended for export to Russia. "During the Ukraine war, cruise missiles have played a significant role for Russia in targeting strategic facilities in Ukraine," he told AFP. Chun In-bum, a retired South Korean army general, added that "North Korean weapons are for sale as long as the price is right."

Election disruption

In December, Seoul's spy agency issued a statement forecasting that Pyongyang would carry out military and cyber provocations in 2024, targeting election campaigns in the United States and South Korea. North Korean leader Kim late last year instructed his aides to "come up with measures to cause a big stir in South Korea early next year", according to the statement by Seoul's spy agency.

In recent weeks, Kim has declared the South his country's "principal enemy", jettisoned agencies dedicated to reunification and outreach, and threatened war over "even 0.001 mm" of territorial infringement.

He also said Pyongyang would not recognize the two countries' de facto maritime border, the Northern Limit Line, and called for constitutional changes allowing the North to "occupy" Seoul in war, the North's official Korean Central News Agency said.

"North Korea seems to indirectly support former US President Donald Trump by emphasizing the shortcomings of South Korea and (US President Joe Biden's administration) policy towards North Korea by increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula," Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies, told AFP.



SEOUL: People watch a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul on January 30, 2024. — AFP

Thae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat who defected to the South, said this month that Kim was not likely looking to trigger a war, given that Pyongyang was selling a "significant number" of weapons to Russia for its war in Ukraine.

"If Kim Jong Un intends to initiate a war this year, does it make sense for him to send a substantial quantity of his weapons to Russia in containers?" Thae

said in an interview with The Chosun Daily, adding that the North was aiming to deter Seoul and Washington by "creating the impression of a significant impending action". Pyongyang's latest launch comes after South Korea conducted a 10-day special forces infiltration drill off the country's east coast, "in light of serious security situations" with the North, which ended on January 25. — AFP



PRISTINA: Zana Hamiti, head of the Center for Protection of Women and Children, shows embroideries made by survivors of domestic violence, in Pristina on December 29, 2023. — AFP

Domestic violence kills Kosovo women despite efforts

PRISTINA: After more than a decade in an abusive marriage, Linda fled to a refuge in a suburb of Kosovo's capital Pristina, a safe space for survivors in a nation long ravaged by domestic violence. "Once he hit me so hard that he broke three fingers, while I bled all over," the 37-year-old told AFP. "He is insanely jealous. He treats me like a servant, repeating, 'You are mine and belong only to me.'"

The shelter — part of a government-backed network to help women get out of abusive relationships — gave sanctuary to roughly 150 victims last year alone, according to its director Zana Hamiti. Kosovo's patriarchal culture, post-traumatic stress linked to war, and a flimsy legal system has allowed domestic violence to sink deep roots.

It again hit the headlines late last year after the shooting of mother-of-two Liridona Ademaj, whose husband allegedly paid a hitman to murder her. The killing sparked outrage with protests across Kosovo calling for immediate action against gender-based violence. Ademaj's husband and three other suspects were later arrested and remain in custody. "We are still a patriarchal society where men's words dominate, but also a society that has gone through war, trauma, and difficult living conditions," said Hamiti.

But women keep dying, with 54 femicides in the country of just 1.7 million people since 2010. "I think that the femicide trend is increasing," said Luljeta Demolli from Kosovar Centre for Gender Studies.

'Sexism everywhere'

Last year the police recorded more than 1,100 cases of gender-based violence but human rights watchdogs are convinced that the number represents just a fraction of actual abuse. "These figures do not reflect the whole truth," said Leonida Molliqaj from the advocacy group Qika.

To combat the scourge, the government has launched an employment scheme for women who are victims of domestic abuse, with the finance ministry subsidizing 70 percent of their pay for six months. The move follows an uptick in women elected to top government posts in recent years, with two of the seven presidents since independence being women.

But women in Kosovo say the challenges remain steep, with men still owning most property and deeply ingrained traditions — especially in rural areas — where women are pressured to stay home with family. "Gender respect in Kosovo is at a zero, zero, zero (level)," said Merima, a 57-year-old housewife, on the sidelines of a recent protest, as she lambasted deep-seated prejudices that privilege men over women in Kosovo. "It is necessary to start fighting from kindergarten," she added.

Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani said "sexism is present almost everywhere" in her annual address to the parliament. "Almost every woman has experienced it, in one way or another," she said. But some programs are making headway, like the shelter in Pristina.—AFP

Iranian, Canadians indicted in dissident murder plot in US

WASHINGTON: An Iranian and two Canadians, including a member of the Hells Angels motorcycle gang, have been indicted for allegedly conspiring to assassinate Iranian dissidents on US soil, officials said Monday.

Naji Sharifi Zindashti, 49, Damion Patrick John Ryan, 43, and Adam Richard Pearson, 29, plotted to murder two residents of the state of Maryland, Justice and Treasury department officials said. Zindashti, who is based in Iran, is a narcotics trafficker who runs a network that has carried out numerous "assassinations and kidnappings across multiple jurisdictions in an attempt to silence the Iranian regime's perceived critics," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

Zindashti was indicted by a grand jury in Minnesota along with Ryan and Pearson for allegedly plotting the murder-for-hire of two unidentified individu-

Scandal-hit New York mayor fights for political survival

NEW YORK: New York Mayor Eric Adams is gripped by a slew of scandals, including a sexual assault allegation and claims of corruption — threatening to derail his ambitions and open the door to challengers. Once seen as a possible Democratic Party presidential contender, the city's second Black mayor is now fighting for his political life.

In one incident, FBI and local prosecutors are investigating whether a New York construction firm, alleged to have ties to the Turkish government, used fronts to donate money to Adams's mayoral election campaign that saw him take office in 2022.

Former New York state governor Andrew Cuomo, who resigned facing his own sexual misconduct accusations in 2021, has suggested to allies he could run for mayor if Adams is overwhelmed by scandal, news outlet Politico reported. Cuomo sexually harassed 13 current and former state staffers, a Department of Justice settlement document showed Friday.

Adams's standing in the polls has plummeted as he has sought budget cuts, including closing libraries on Sundays, which he blames on the influx of migrants to the city. New York is also facing a cost-of-living crisis, with prices for food, entertainment and accommodation in the city that never sleeps soaring to unprecedented levels.

But pollster Mary Snow, who found in a recent survey that just 28 percent of New Yorkers approve of Adams's performance, does not dismiss his chances of reelection next year. "History shows us that it's possible for Mayor Adams to rebound from his 28 percent job approval rating," she said. "In 2003, former mayor Mike Bloomberg received a 31 percent job approval rating — and he went on to win two more terms."

Opposition piles on

Opponents of Adams have reacted cautiously to the claim of sexual assault, filed at the eleventh hour under a special law that allowed those alleging misconduct to make civil claims that would normally have been considered too old to pursue.

The complainant, who was not named in the skeleton three-page legal submission, says Adams assaulted her in 1993, but few other details were disclosed. "It absolutely did not happen. I don't recall meeting this person. I'd never harm anyone in that magnitude," he told reporters.

But his opponents have been more outspoken on the claims around his campaign finances. Adams, 63, was raised by a single mother and served as a police

also who had fled to the United States from Iran. Ryan, identified in the indictment as a "full-patch member of the outlaw Hells Angels Motorcycle Club," and Pearson are currently incarcerated in Canada on unrelated charges, the Justice Department said.

According to the indictment, Zindashti recruited Ryan to carry out the murders, for which he was to be paid \$350,000 with another \$20,000 for expenses. Ryan allegedly hired Pearson to put together a team to carry out the murders. "Zindashti and his team of gunmen, including a Minnesota resident, used an encrypted messaging service to orchestrate an assassination plot against two individuals," said US Attorney Andrew Luger for the District of Minnesota.

"Thanks to the skilled work of federal prosecutors and law enforcement agents, this murder-for-hire conspiracy was disrupted and the defendants will face justice," Luger added. Zindashti allegedly communicated with Ryan between December 2020 and March 2021 through the SkyECC encrypted messaging service, according to the indictment. An unidentified co-conspirator allegedly sent Ryan information about the intended victims, including their photographs and a map with their address.

'Unacceptable threat'

The same day, the United States and Britain an-

officer in the city for more than 20 years, signing up after he reported experiencing police brutality. He went on to be a state legislator and president of the New York City borough of Brooklyn.

'Very complicated city'

In office, Adams has become known as much for his gaffes as his branded windbreakers and signature ear piercing. He raised eyebrows in December when he awkwardly suggested that the city is "very complicated," as residents could experience everything from the September 11 attacks to a new business opening in a single day.



New York City Mayor Eric Adams

He has made the issue of migration the centerpiece of his political pitch, attacking the Republican governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, for bussing migrants from the southern border to New York. Adams told media that the Big Apple's attractiveness to newly-arrived migrants was because the city was a "victim of its own success."

Local resources have been stretched to breaking point, despite a handful of measures intended to stem the migrant flow. At the same time, a policy to evict migrants with children from city shelters after 60 days sparked outrage from campaigners.

Columbia University politics professor Robert Shapiro said that "while it may be an opportunity for Adams to show his mettle in standing up to the Texas governor and others, without state and federal financial and other support, this issue may take a big toll on Adams politically." "This issue and corruption on the campaign funding front may do him in," he told AFP.

Snow, the pollster, warned that "there's a high level of concern among voters that New York City will not be able to accommodate the influx of migrants." She said "just 26 percent of voters approve of the way he's handling the crisis." The new year has, however, thrown Adams something of a lifeline, after projections emerged showing the city would benefit from a \$2.6 billion budget surplus in 2024 —potentially tempering the need for drastic cuts to services. — AFP

nounced sanctions against Zindashti's network, which they alleged is run "at the behest of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security." "Zindashti's network has been linked to murders in several countries," including the United Arab Emirates, Canada and Turkey, the US Treasury Department said.

"The Iranian regime's continued efforts to target dissidents and activists demonstrate the regime's deep insecurity and attempt to expand Iran's domestic repression internationally," US Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism Brian Nelson said.

The United Kingdom said in a separate notice that it would "sanction seven individuals and one organization, including senior Iranian officials and members of organized criminal gangs who collaborate with the regime."

They include members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Unit 840, over reported "plots to assassinate two television presenters from news channel Iran International on UK soil," said the British announcement.

"The Iranian regime and the criminal gangs who operate on its behalf pose an unacceptable threat to the UK's security," British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said in a statement. "The UK and US have sent a clear message — we will not tolerate this threat." — AFP

54 killed in clashes in area claimed by Sudan, S Sudan

JUBA, South Sudan: Fighting between rival communities in a disputed region claimed by both Sudan and South Sudan has killed 54 people, including two UN peacekeepers, the United Nations said on Monday, calling for calm. The clashes in Abyei, a contested oil-rich territory straddling the border of both countries, broke out at the weekend, according to local authorities.

The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) said it "strongly condemns these attacks against civilians and peacekeepers". "Currently, according to local authorities, 52 civilians have lost their lives, while 64 others are said to be gravely wounded," it said.

It said peacekeepers came under fire on Sunday "while transporting affected civilians from a UNISFA base to a hospital". A Pakistani peacekeeper was killed, and "four uniformed personnel and one local civilian sustained injury", it said.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres condemned the violence and appealed to the governments of both sides to investigate so those responsible could be brought to justice, said his spokesman Stephane Dujarric, with attacks on peacekeepers potentially constituting a war crime. A Ghanaian peacekeeper had been killed on Saturday, UNISFA added, calling for an investigation into the violence.

Located between Sudan and South Sudan, Abyei has been a flashpoint since the South gained independence in 2011. According to authorities in the Abyei Special Administrative Area, armed youths and a local rebel militia carried out a series of "barbaric coordinated attacks", starting on Saturday morning.

Rou Manyiel Rou, secretary general for the Abyei Special Administrative Area, said on Saturday that the violence was tied to a long-running "conflict between (the) Ngok and Twic" communities. In a statement published on Monday, Britain, Norway and the United States, the international "Troika" that sponsored South Sudan's independence, said they were "deeply concerned by the escalation of violence in recent months between communities living in and around" Abyei. "All leaders who have influence with involved communities and who fail to use it to support peace are demonstrating their disregard for the interests of their people," the Troika said. —AFP

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2024

Business

Shadow economy thrives in the presence of an illegal labor force

Kuwaiti economist discusses black money phenomenon with Kuwait Times

By Ghadeer Ghloum

KUWAIT: In today's global economy, the presence of "black money" and the informal economy cannot be ignored. The existence of unreported or unregistered activities, both legal and illegal, creates a shadow economy that operates outside the boundaries of official regulations. The motivations behind this phenomenon vary, from tax evasion to the desire to bypass complex regulations. However, in Kuwait, where taxation is absent, the shadow economy thrives on the presence of a shadow labor force and illegal immigrants.

The consequences of this informal economy can be far-reaching, affecting the state's gross domestic product (GDP), state revenues and even its reputation. Kuwait Times spoke to Salman Al-Naqi, a Kuwaiti PhD candidate in economics. He won the "Kuwait Economic Student Award" from the Central Bank of Kuwait in 2023 and is the research paper winner of the "Kuwait Economic Prize" in 2022.

Naqi explained to Kuwait Times the definition of the informal economy and its different terms and types of activities. "The phenomenon of black money is generated by sectors of the informal economy. Informal, shadow or underground economy - all these terms refer to activities or businesses that are either unreported or unregistered under the official economy. The taxonomy of the informal economy is of two types — legal activities that result in unreported income or work; and illegal activities such as trade in stolen goods, drug dealing, fraud and money laundering. Meanwhile, transactions within the informal economy sectors take either a monetary form, such as cash, or non-monetary form, such as bartering," he explained.

Naqi further elaborated on the factors driving the shadow economy and explained how it exists despite the absence of taxation in countries like Kuwait. "The existence of the shadow economy is driven by several factors. Broadly speaking, tax evasion



Salman Al-Naqi

or avoidance is often the main reason for the prevalence of informal economic activities. However, in the context of Kuwait, where taxation is entirely absent, the shadow labor force becomes a critical driving force behind the informal economy. The existence of this type of labor force can be attributed to individuals

working second jobs or to illegal immigrants participating outside the official framework," he said.

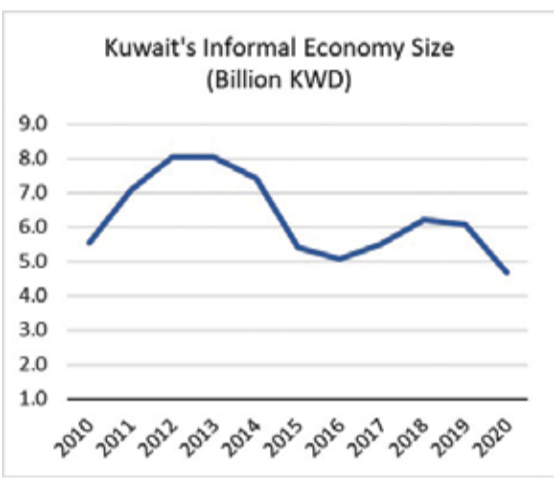
"Furthermore, the tendency to bypass complex regulations and rapidly changing restrictions in the business environment contributes to the acceleration of shadow activities. Weak and inefficient institutions contribute to an increase in these practices. Some individuals engage in the shadow labor market to retain their social welfare benefits, while others aim to evade the financial burdens imposed by the government or engage in money laundering activities," he added.

Naqi referred to World Bank statistics to address informal money in Kuwait. "According to recent statistics from the World Bank, the average relative size of the informal economy in Kuwait over the past 10 years is 16 percent of total GDP. This figure implies that billions of Kuwaiti dinars are not officially accounted for or observed within the official GDP index. These losses are not only statistical, but reduce state revenues and hinder any future steps to impose taxes. Additionally, the sectors of the shadow economy carry implicit costs for the state, as they introduce misleading indicators about the domestic size of the output and market. In turn, this affects the decisions of policymakers and investors in terms of



assessing the actual status of the economy. Likewise, the expansion of unregulated and unreported activities increases criminal activity levels and exhibits signs of explicit corruption," he pointed out.

Naqi emphasized on addressing the informal economy. "Addressing the informal economy requires numerous procedures. Firstly, measuring the extent of shadow activities can be achieved by expanding statistical surveys and financial auditing, identifying discrepancies between national expenditure and income and examining money demand. In the same vein, formalizing unregulated businesses and promoting cashless payment methods are critical factors in tracing unreported income or activities. This should be done in line with efforts to increase financial and social inclusion of broader segments of people," he advised.



Saudi Aramco halts plan to raise production capacity

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia has ordered energy giant Aramco to maintain its oil production capacity at 12 million barrels per day, abandoning a planned increase, the firm said on Tuesday. "Aramco announces that it has received a directive from the ministry of energy to maintain its maximum sustainable capacity (MSC) at 12 million barrels per day" instead of ramping it up to 13 million bpd, the firm said in a statement.

"The company will update its capital spending guidance when its full-year 2023 results are announced in March." Saudi Arabia is the world's largest crude exporter and Aramco is the jewel of the Gulf kingdom's economy.

Aramco's profits are expected to finance Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's sweeping economic and social reform program known as Vision 2030, which aims to lay the groundwork for an eventual post-oil future. Riyadh announced the planned production capacity increase in October 2021, the same month it pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2060.

Aramco said it planned to achieve production capacity of 13 million bpd by 2027. The decision



RIYADH: Aramco tower at the King Abdullah Financial District (KAFD) in Riyadh. — AFP

to drop the target "suggests Riyadh is not very confident that the world will need so much additional capacity and that the investment required to get to and maintain 13 million bpd is better spent elsewhere," said Jamie Ingram, senior editor at the Middle East Economic Survey. He noted that earlier this month Aramco more than doubled its funding for its venture capital arm, Aramco Ventures, from \$3 billion to \$7 billion.

Aramco has pledged to achieve "operational net-zero" carbon emissions by 2050. That applies to emissions that are produced directly by Aramco's industrial sites, but not the CO2 produced when clients burn Saudi oil in their cars, power plants and furnaces.

In the lead-up to the COP28 climate change talks in Dubai last year, Saudi Arabia was among the loudest voices calling for more investment in fossil fuel production, saying it was necessary to fight energy poverty in regions such as Africa.

Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman voiced staunch opposition to any agreement emerging from the talks that would have explicitly mentioned a "phase-down" or "phase-out" of fossil fuels. In the end, nearly 200 countries adopted a deal stating the world will be "transitioning away from fossil fuels" in order to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Prince Abdulaziz played down the significance of the text, insisting it would have "no impact on exports" and that it "doesn't impose anything" on oil-producing countries, allowing them to cut emissions "according to their means and interests". Tuesday's announcement was not expected to have an immediate effect on production or exports.

After a series of oil supply cuts dating back to October 2022, Saudi Arabia's daily production stands at approximately nine million bpd, far below its capacity of 12 million bpd.

Aramco reported record profits in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent oil prices soaring, allowing Saudi Arabia to record its first budget surplus in nearly a decade. Lower prices resulted in year-on-year profit drops of 23 percent in the third quarter, 38 percent in the second quarter and 19.25 percent in the first quarter of last year, with fourth quarter earnings yet to be announced. — AFP

India aspires to be \$7 trillion economy by 2030: Report

NEW DELHI: The Indian finance ministry on Monday released report titled 'Indian Economy — A Review', claiming that the Indian economy is expected to grow at a rate above 7% in coming years. The report released a few days ahead of Interim Budget 2024, said the country's economic growth will be riding on the strength of its financial sector and other recent and future structural reforms and can aspire to become a \$7 trillion economy by 2030.

"In the next three years, India is expected to become the third-largest economy in the world, with a GDP [gross domestic product] of \$5 trillion. The government has, however, set a higher goal of becoming a 'developed country' by 2047," said the report.

Importantly, the report indicates continuity in economic reforms if the Modi government comes to the power for a third-term. Accounting for the two terms of the Modi government, the report said, "This 10-year journey is marked by several reforms, both substantive and incremental. These reforms have also delivered an economic resilience that the country will need to deal with unanticipated global shocks in the future." India, which was the 10th largest economy in the world with a GDP of \$1.9 trillion at current market prices, is now the 5th largest with a GDP of \$3.7 trillion (est FY24), despite the COVID pandemic and "despite inheriting an economy with macro imbalances and a broken financial sector", it said.

"The strength of the domestic demand has driven the economy to a 7 percent plus growth rate in the last three years... the robustness seen in domestic demand, namely, private consumption and investment, traces its origin to the reforms and measures implemented by the government over the last 10 years," the report added. The government's policies also strengthened the supply side with investment in physical and digital infrastructure to boost output.

"Accordingly, in FY25, real GDP growth will likely be closer to 7 percent," it said. Despite global headwinds such as conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza and the Red Sea trade disruption, India's first advance estimates of growth released on Jan 5 projected a higher-than-expected GDP growth of 7.3 percent in FY24. The report further highlighted that finally, the overall investment climate is increasingly becoming more favorable with sustained enhancement in the ease of doing business.

Further, the ministry's report said the collaboration between the centre and states would help in accelerating India's growth and making it more equitable. "The reforms will be more purposeful and fruitful with the full participation of the state governments. The participation of the states will be fuller when reforms encompass changes in governance at the district, block, and village levels, making them citizen-friendly and small business-friendly and in areas such as health, education, land and labor in which states have a big role to play," it said. The report, however, pointed at some challenges, mostly external. "Only the elevated risk of geopolitical conflicts is an area of concern," it said. — Agencies

IMF lifts global growth forecast

WASHINGTON: The IMF announced Tuesday it has raised its 2024 global growth forecast to 3.1 percent, citing unexpected "resilience" in major advanced and emerging market economies around the world. The updated figure, released in the latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) report, is 0.2 percentage points higher than the International Monetary Fund's previous forecast in October.

"We had simultaneously less inflation and more growth," IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas told reporters ahead of the report's publication. "It's not just a US story. There was a lot of resilience in many, many parts of the world in the last year and going into 2024," he said, highlighting countries including China, Russia, Brazil and India.

Despite the upgrade, global growth is predicted to remain below its recent historical average of 3.8 percent this year and next due to continued impacts of elevated interest rates, the withdrawal of pandemic-related government support, and persistently low levels of productivity. Among the Group of Seven (G7) advanced economies, growth in European countries looks set to remain weak, reflecting ongoing challenges, while Japan and Canada are expected to fare slightly better.

The IMF's overall inflation outlook remained unchanged at 5.8 percent for 2024, but that masks a significant underlying shift between richer and



Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas

poorer countries. Inflation in advanced economies is now forecast to be 2.6 percent in 2024, down 0.4 percentage points from October, while emerging and developing economies are expected to hit an annual inflation rate of 8.1 percent, up 0.3 percentage points.

Much of the increase can be attributed to ongoing trouble in Argentina, where consumer price increases exceeded 200 percent last year amid an ongoing economic crisis. The United States and China, the world's two largest economies, both saw significant upgrades to their growth outlook for 2024, putting them on track for a less substantial slowdown than the IMF previously anticipated. The IMF now expects the US economy to grow by 2.1 percent in 2024 -- an election year in which President Joe Biden is seeking a second term—down slightly from an estimated 2.5 percent in 2023. This is largely due to the "statistical carryover effects from the stronger-than-expected growth outcome for 2023," the IMF said.

China's economy is meanwhile on track to hit 4.6 percent growth this year, down from 5.2 percent last year. The better-than-expected growth figures

are down to property sector "difficulties" having a less severe impact than the IMF had anticipated, and also because of the "significant fiscal support coming from the authorities," Gourinchas said.

An ongoing bright spot in the global economy continues to be India, which the IMF now expects to grow by 6.5 percent this year—up 0.2 percentage points from October—following an estimated growth rate of 6.7 percent in 2023. The Fund also increased the growth prospects for Russia, Iran and Brazil for the year ahead.

While many Asian economies remain buoyant, Europe continues to cast a long shadow over the global outlook, with the IMF highlighting "notably subdued growth in the euro area." Germany is once again set to be the slowest-growing G7 economy, expanding by just 0.5 percent this year after contracting by an estimated 0.3 percent in 2023. The United Kingdom, France and Italy are all also expected to see growth of 1.0 percent or less this year, while Spain's economy is forecast to fare slightly better, growing by 1.5 percent. The tepid euro area growth reflects "weak consumer sentiment, the lingering effects of high energy prices, and weakness in interest-rate-sensitive manufacturing and business investment," the IMF noted in the WEO report.

Despite some challenging forecasts, the overall picture in 2024 looks set to be less gloomy for many countries than it was in 2024: Every country cited in the WEO report save Argentina is set to have positive growth this year. This is an improvement from 2023, when four out of the 30 economies cited in the report are estimated to have contracted, according to the IMF. — AFP

Kuwait’s real estate prices fall on declining residential prices

Commercial segment witnesses sizeable deals in 2023

KUWAIT: Real estate activity ended last year on a more positive note, with sizeable deals in the commercial segment combining with a stable residential segment to lift total sales in Q4. Our overall property price index inched up in Q4 on rising valuations for investment buildings, which offset a decline in residential sector prices. Activity in the real estate market in 2023 overall was weak, dragged down by elevated interest rates, still-high residential prices, and more attractive returns in alternative assets classes. Prospects for 2024 seem more positive, however, with bank lending to the real estate sector picking up momentum, Fed interest rate cuts on the horizon and government efforts to address challenges in the residential market gaining traction.



Aggregate real estate sales in Q4 2023 registered the highest quarterly growth rate since Q2 2022 (+13.6 percent q/q) to come in at KD 771 million. This was driven by big ticket commercial sales in the Kuwait City and Al-Ahmadi governorates, an increase in investment sector sales as well as a deceleration in the rate of decline in residential sales (46 percent of total sales).

However, in year-on-year terms, activity in Q4 was down on the same quarter in 2022, though, at -8.3 percent, the drop was less acute than the -16.3 percent y/y recorded in Q3. For the year as a whole, 2023 saw the steepest decline (-22 percent) in sales since 2020 to reach KD2.8 billion, with double-digit declines observed in all sectors.

Residential sales fell in Q4 2023 (-0.4 percent q/q) for a fourth consecutive quarter, to KD 353 million. But the drop was marginal, helped by de-

mand ticking up from the summer lull: the volume of transactions increased at the fastest pace (+9.5 percent q/q) in more than two years. On a yearly basis, residential sales declined by a steeper 27 percent, though this was also a reflection of Q4 2022's high base. Last year's overall decline in residential sales could be attributed to weaker sentiment given still-high home and plot prices, relatively elevated interest rates, lagging project plans for re-development of inner-city areas, and the deferral of buying decisions due to the expected interest rate cuts by the Fed, given that this could subsequently lead to lower interest rates in Kuwait.

On the other hand, sales in the investment sector posted positive growth for the second consecutive quarter (+8.6 percent q/q) to reach KD 231 million. Sales (and transaction volumes) in October nearly doubled on September's, with big deals in the Mubarak Al-Kabeer governorate. Alongside the uptick in activity has been an expansion in bank lending to the real estate sector since September. The appetite for real estate investments looks to be recovering despite high interest rates, with a more positive outlook partly shaped perhaps by draft government amendments in the new residency law that could facilitate increased uptake by expatriates, the predominant users of apartments.

Finally, commercial sales were also supportive of overall sales in Q4 2023, with KD 187.1 million worth of transactions (+68 percent q/q; +105 percent y/y). The increase was mainly due to large deals in Kuwait City/Qibla (KD77.6 million) and Al-Ahmadi governorate/Sabah Al-Ahmad coastal area (KD 68.2 million).



Real estate prices

The real estate price index, which is based on Ministry of Justice weekly transaction data, declined by -1 percent q/q as residential prices dropped (-4.3 percent q/q) on the back of falls in the prices of residential homes and plots in most governorates. However, investment sector prices rose 3.5 percent q/q due to higher building prices

Table 1: Real estate sales

	Quarterly Average		Quarterly Sales/ Transactions					Change in 4Q23, %	
	2022	2023	4Q22	1Q23	2Q23	3Q23	4Q23	q/q	y/y
Sales (KD million)	907	709	840	714	672	678	771	13.6	-8.3
Residential	482	357	480	363	358	354	353	-0.4	-26.5
Investment	275	224	269	254	200	212	231	8.6	-14.2
Commercial	151	127	91	96	114	111	187	67.9	105.3
Number of transactions	1,473	1,074	1,368	1,085	1,029	1,045	1,137	8.8	-16.9
Residential	1,091	760	982	760	729	740	810	9.5	-17.5
Investment	342	285	364	306	280	254	300	18.1	-17.6
Commercial	40	29	22	19	20	51	27	-47.1	22.7
Average transaction Value (KD '000)	616	660	614	658	653	649	678	4.4	10.4
Residential property	442	470	489	478	491	479	436	-9.1	-10.9
Investment	803	787	738	831	715	836	769	-8.1	4.1
Commercial	3,745	4,348	4,142	5,061	5,704	2,185	6,929	217.1	67.3

Source: Ministry of Justice, NBK calculations

(+5.7 percent q/q), especially in Kuwait City and in Al-Ahmadi governorates. On a year-on-year basis, the real estate price index inched up by 1.7 percent from the previous quarter's decline of 0.7 percent, with the rise in investment prices (+5.4 percent y/y) more than offsetting the decline in residential prices (-1.0 percent y/y). Overall, the composite real estate price index increased by 1.8 percent in 2023, a much slower rise than the 7.7 percent gain in 2022, and this is largely a reflection of the muted gain in residential sector valuations.

Separately, the Public Authority for Housing Welfare (PAHW) ramped up its plot disbursement efforts during Q4 2023, distributing around 3,030 residential plots under the housing welfare program, according to announcements published on its website. This is a notable improvement on the 1,955 or so plots delivered in the previous quarter. PAHW tendered two infrastructure development contracts in Al-Salmi area (Al-Jahra governorate) for 3,345 houses while signing off on another for the South Saad Al-Abdullah residential project. Meanwhile, the volume of housing loans disbursed by the Kuwait Credit Bank surged by 32 percent q/q

housing continued to rise in Q4 2023, reaching about 95,281 (+4.6 percent q/q).

Housing initiatives

Real estate activity could pick up slightly in 2024, helped by 2023's low base and the possible cuts in interest rates later in the year that could support credit demand. High real estate prices, especially in the residential sector, and delays in the redevelopment of inner-city areas such as Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh could, along with heightened regional geopolitical risks and global macroeconomic uncertainties, act as a dampener to activity. However, the passing of the residential cities law (July 2023) and the 'white land' law (November 2023), which should empower the private sector to take on a more prominent role in resolving the housing crisis and accelerate the development of unused land, respectively, are welcome moves aimed at addressing supply-side constraints. Demand meanwhile could be boosted over the medium term by the eventual pushing through of the mortgage law (financing law) that remains currently in draft form.



FRANKFURT: President of the European Central Bank (ECB) Christine Lagarde addresses a press conference following the meeting of the governing council of the ECB in Frankfurt am Main. — AFP

Flatlining eurozone economy narrowly dodges recession

BRUSSELS: The eurozone economy narrowly avoided a technical recession in the second half of 2023 but stagnated in the final three months of the year, official data showed Tuesday. The single-currency area's economy has been hit by many factors including higher interest rates, a cost-of-living crisis battering household spending and weakening global demand.

The stagnation was driven by the dismal performance of the continent's powerhouse Germany, although southern European states helped the area avoid recession. The zero-percent quarter-on-quarter figure for the October-to-December period beat forecasts. Analysts for Bloomberg and financial data firm FactSet had predicted a contraction of 0.1 percent in the fourth quarter.

If the predictions had been correct, that would have meant two consecutive quarters of contraction—the threshold for a technical recession. The EU's Eurostat data agency also recorded no growth in the 27-country bloc—which includes members that do not use the euro—over the October-December period after a contraction of 0.1 percent in the third quarter.

Economists predict the economic stagnation will continue. "We think that it will flatline in the first half of this year too as the effects of past monetary tightening continue to feed through and fiscal policy becomes more restrictive," said Jack Allen-Reynolds of Capital Economics, an economic research firm.

He added that the eurozone economy facing a technical recession was "just semantics". "The big picture is that eurozone GDP has been flat since Q3 2022 when gas prices surged and the ECB (European Central Bank) started raising interest rates," he said. Energy prices soared after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and as Europe scrambled to shift to different energy sources after relying on Russia for many years. Germany's lackluster performance comes as its critical manufacturing sector reels from soaring power costs, with the situation compounded by slowing demand from key export destinations, such as China.—AFP

EU-S America trade deal totters as farmers revolt

BRUSSELS: Growing farmer protests in Europe and opposition from France have hit prospects for an EU-South America trade deal under negotiation for nearly a quarter of a century, though Brussels insisted Tuesday it was still trying to get it over the line. "The conditions required to conclude negotiations with Mercosur are not quite there yet," acknowledged European Commission spokesman Eric Mamer.

But talks are continuing with the South American trade bloc made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, he added. Farmers across Europe—including in France, Poland, Germany and Belgium—have been blocking roads to demand better revenues and conditions.

While the farmers have a list of demands, many single out the South America deal. They fear it would further depress their produce prices amid increased competition from exporting nations that are not bound by strict and costly EU environmental laws.

The French government rejects the trade pact, French President Emmanuel Macron reaffirmed during a visit to Sweden on Tuesday. "France is opposed to it because it's a deal going back several years that doesn't make Mercosur farmers and companies abide by the same rules as ours," he said.

Macron said he and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen would discuss the issue Thursday, on the sidelines of an EU summit. Von der Leyen's spokesman insisted however that the trade talks were not buried yet. "Technical" negotiations were held in Brazil last week and commission vice

president for trade, Valdis Dombrovskis, stood ready to go to South America "in the potential case where a Mercosur agreement would be reached," Mamer said.

"But on the basis of the last few meetings that we've had, that does not appear to be the case right now," he added. "The EU is continuing its objective of trying to reach an agreement which complies with our objectives when it comes to sustainability and which also takes into account our concerns when it comes to the agricultural sector," Mamer said. The EU and the South American nations have been negotiating since 2000. The contours of a deal were agreed in 2019, but a final version still needs to be ratified.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva last month slammed the "major resistance from Europe" on getting the accord done, and criticized what he viewed as French "protectionism". His neighbor, new Argentine President Javier Milei, has sharply criticized the Mercosur deal.

But in early January Milei told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that he wanted to see it swiftly concluded, according to Scholz's office. Berlin is in favor of the pact, despite the farmers' protests. The combined Mercosur GDP was around \$2.6 trillion in 2022, according to the World Bank. The EU, with a GDP of around 16 trillion euros, is Mercosur's second-biggest trade partner, after China.

Two-way trade between both blocs amounted to nearly 100 billion euros in 2021. The trade accord aims to cut import tariffs on—mostly European—industrial and pharmaceutical goods, and on agricultural products. The tensions from the farmers' revolt and within the European Union, accentuated by a cost-of-living crisis for many European companies and consumers, deal a tricky hand to Brussels. Von der Leyen last week kicked off a "strategic dialogue" with representatives from Europe's agri-food sector to try to overcome what she described as "increasing division and polarization". —AFP



ARGENTEUIL, France: A protester stands next to tractors blocking the A15 highway near Argenteuil, northwest of Paris, as French farmers maintain roadblocks on key highways into Paris for a second day, as part of nationwide protests called by several farmers' union over pay, tax and regulations.— AFP

News in brief

BoE fines HSBC for customer failures

LONDON: A regulatory arm of the Bank of England said Tuesday it had fined HSBC for "serious failings" linked to customer deposits, handing the major lender a penalty of 57.4 million (\$73 million). The BoE's Prudential Regulation Authority said in a statement that HSBC had for seven years through to 2022 failed to correctly identify customer deposits eligible for protection under the UK's Financial Services Compensation Scheme. Under the depositor protection rules, banks must put in place systems and controls to ensure vital information is logged correctly, which the compensation scheme relies on to make payments to savers should a company collapse. —AFP

Swiss watch exports report record year

ZURICH: Swiss watch exports set a record for the third year running in 2023, rising 7.6 percent to 26.7 billion Swiss francs (\$31 billion), an industry group said on Tuesday. Exports were boosted by sales in their largest market, the United States, where they rose 35.1 percent for the full year, the watchmakers' federation said. On the other hand, exports to China fell 6.9 percent even though there was a slight bounce at the end of the year. "Swiss watchmaking benefitted from steady demand in the luxury goods market," the federation said. It warned, however: "2024 looks calmer for both exports and the number of people employed in the sector, with results expected to remain high or only increase slightly." In 2023, exports also rose strongly to Hong Kong (up 15.2 percent), Japan (up 26.8 percent) and the United Arab Emirates (up 11.8 percent). — AFP

Italy accuses OpenAI of data breach

ROME: Italian authorities have accused OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, of breaching EU data protection law, giving the US firm 30 days to respond. Italy's data protection watchdog has "notified breaches of data protection law to OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT's artificial intelligence platform", it said in a statement on Monday. The watchdog blocked the popular chatbot last year for a few weeks, becoming the first Western country to take such action. After that temporary ban, the watchdog concluded that the "available evidence pointed to the existence of breaches of the provisions contained in the EU GDPR", the European Union's general data protection regulation, it said. — AFP

Business

KIB's RBD raises bar for Kuwait's digital banking offerings in 2023

Bank committed to its forward-looking digital transformation strategy

Cloud migration catalyst for AI success in Kuwait

By Alaeddine Karim

There is little doubt that 2023 was the year of Artificial Intelligence (AI). After a decade of rapid digital transformation that completely reshaped the way we work and live, breakthroughs in AI have fuelled the next wave of progress, driving widespread investment across the public and private sectors that pushed the global AI market to be valued at \$142.3 billion.

In the GCC, the contribution of AI to the economies of Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar is forecast to reach \$45.9 billion by 2030—equivalent to 8.2 percent of their GDP—underscoring the confidence that the visionary leaders in these progressive nations have placed in the technology to propel their missions and position the region at the forefront of the digital age. In Kuwait, the potential for AI to unlock new possibilities has long been a priority, with Vision 2035 emphasizing the technology's strategic importance to the country's national development strategy.

Already, we are seeing businesses across Kuwait increasingly investing into the promise of AI to automate repetitive tasks, optimize operations, enhance decision-making, personalize customer experiences, and unlock new avenues of productivity. Business leaders across industries are also exploring the latest advancements in generative AI, underpinned by a class of large-scale models that perform a wide range of tasks from describing images in natural human language to creating images based on a user's prompt, and even generating code.

Just recently, in fact, Kuwait Times unveiled an AI-powered news presenter called 'Fedha' to present the news bulletin to viewers in a new and innovative way. Microsoft has also developed an everyday AI companion called Microsoft Copilot to help organizations across Kuwait and the world liberate valuable time and resources by automating tedious processes and paving the way for enhanced productivity and creativity.

What's crucial to note about many of these latest AI advancements is that accessing them requires vast computing resources and specialized infrastructure—challenges that on-premises solutions simply cannot overcome. On-premises infrastructure often limits the ability to scale computing resources quickly and efficiently, which is crucial for training and running complex AI models. Additionally, the specialized hardware and software needed for advanced AI tasks can be prohibitively expensive and complex for many organizations to manage on their own. To ensure that they are taking full advantage of the latest AI tools and not falling behind in the ongoing productivity revolution, Kuwaiti organizations will need to move beyond cloud-on-premise solutions and shift to full cloud capabilities.

Cloud platforms offer readily available access to sophisticated infrastructure that empowers businesses of all sizes to leverage the power of AI without the burden of significant upfront investment or ongoing maintenance. The continuous evolution of AI technologies and the rapid pace of innovation are also best addressed in the dynamic and flexible environment offered by the cloud, allowing organizations to stay at the forefront of advancements without the constraints of static on-premises solutions.

To help organizations across Kuwait realize this tremendous potential, Microsoft delivers advanced cloud computing services that are empowering institutions across all sectors to accelerate their AI innovation journey. For example, we have partnered with the Central Agency for Information Technology (CAIT) on the Kuwait Digital Transformation Enterprise Skilling Programme to upskill Kuwait's government sector workforce in technologies such as cloud, AI, and the Internet of Things.

As organizations across Kuwait turn the page to a new chapter in 2024, I have no doubt that the future of business will belong to those who embrace the transformative power of cloud-based AI. As Microsoft, we will continue to democratize our breakthroughs in AI through our trusted cloud to help the government, businesses, developers, students, and startups across Kuwait access the latest cutting-edge tools and resources they need to build their own AI applications, drive innovation, and advance the nation's digital economy.

Note: Alaeddine Karim is General Manager, Microsoft Kuwait



KUWAIT: Kuwait International Bank (KIB) concluded another year that testifies to the Bank's relentless commitment to its slogan and institutional promise, "Bank for Life". As life continues to shift toward the digital sphere of everyday products and services, KIB remains at the forefront of the digital transformation journey that is redefining Kuwait's banking and financial sector. In 2023 alone, KIB successfully transformed numerous out-of-branch service touchpoints that its customers are accustomed to, including the Bank's retail banking application 'KIB Mobile', the Bank's network of automatic teller machines (ATMs), and the newly launched interactive teller machines (ITM).

"As a trusted financial partner for our stakeholders, lagging technologically is not an option—especially considering how pivotal the banking services are to our customers from across all market segments," stated Othman Tawfeq, General Manager of the Retail Banking Department (RBD) at KIB. "In a market where internet penetration is very high and 5G network is available to the majority of the population, it is not a question of whether KIB will adopt new fintech solutions, but how soon we can do so. To ensure that we are always among the earliest adopters of cutting-edge financial technologies that contribute elaborately to the elevation of customers' quality of life, we have dedicated the past few years to the reinforcement of KIB's digital infrastructure to ensure that the Bank continues to offer its customers the latest banking services and products available worldwide in a completely safe and secure manner."

However, it is very important to consider the market's readiness for such technologies, which is why, Tawfeq explained, KIB tactically introduces its latest innovations through familiar channels that the Bank's customers are comfortable using. "We understand that the best change is seamless and easy to adopt, that's why we are always thinking of ways to upgrade our existing touchpoints and embed the latest technologies within them, guaranteeing higher and faster adoption rates," he added.

This tactic has yielded exceptional outcomes in 2023, including an astounding 56 percent spike in the

subscribers of KIB Mobile's push notification in comparison with the number of subscribers in 2022, as well as a 75 percent growth in the deposits made via KIB Mobile compared to 2022. Moreover, KIB recorded a 40 percent increase in the banking accounts opened using the bank's mobile application in contrast with 2022, in addition to an 18 percent rise in the KIBPay transactions, which amounted to KD 204 million during 2023. Lastly, the Bank's contact center representatives registered a high number of Al-Dirwaza accounts, amounting to almost KD 37 million in balances.

KIB Mobile: More than meets the eye

Today, smartphones pack an endless range of functions that users can benefit from with a quick tap. In a bid to keep pace with the expanding reliance of users on their smart devices and their growing expectations for how much they can get done using smartphones and other smart devices on the go, KIB revamped its KIB Mobile application, upgrading it to a smoother and more comprehensive platform. The application allows users to access financing details, payment schedules, account management, banking cards, and investments, as well as make bank transfers, fulfill payments, and manage beneficiary lists—all in one place. Among its features and services, KIBPay allows users to request payments, top-up accounts, and split bills with ease.

Later in the year, KIB added the Financial Tracker feature to its mobile application, which came with numerous features that serve to add ease and convenience to the customers' e-banking experience—including the 'Quick Financial Overview', which provides users with instant snapshots of their spending and savings; 'Top Merchant Insights', which lists the businesses each user shops at the most frequently; 'Detailed Expense Tracking', which reveals detailed insights about the users' spendings, allowing them to exercise better financial control; 'Monthly Comparison' with its month-on-month spending comparisons; and 'Bespoke Budgeting' that allows customers to set a specific budget and measure real-time performance against this goal. All these insights are packed into the 'Advanced Analytics' feature, enabling customers to utilize the power of data

with a personalized analysis of their spending behavior, helping them make informed decisions.

That's not all: KIB also introduced a feature that allows customers to file complaints through the KIB Mobile application, guaranteeing a hassle-free process for reporting any inconveniences that customers may face and promising them to investigate the issue and return with the best course of action within 15 business days. Additionally, should customers struggle to remember their cards' safety PIN codes at any point, they can simply resort to the PIN reminder feature on the mobile application to proceed with their purchases without having to reset their PIN.

KIB ATMs: Redefining convenience

On its mission to digitally transform and elevate all its banking touchpoints, KIB set forth to equip its wide network of 123 ATMs, located across Kuwait, with advanced features that guarantee convenience and seamlessness with every interaction. The ATM upgrades include everything from providing a variety of banknotes to choose from upon withdrawal, with notes as little as KD 5, to installing a multi-currency ATM at the Kuwait International Airport - Jazeera Airways (T5) that offers four currencies—AED, KWD, USD and GBP—and allowing customers from other banks to request opening an AlDirwaza account using any of the available KIB ATMs.

However, the most prominent digital upgrade that KIB's ATMs received was activating the contactless near-field communication (NFC) service throughout that Bank's ATM network, enabling customers to withdraw cash or make numerous types of transactions using their NFC-enabled KIB Cards, mobile devices, or smart watches, for a faster and more secure experience.

KIB ITMs: At your service

Expanding its suite of innovative banking solutions, KIB introduced its latest service, the interactive teller machine (ITM), which utilizes all the traditional benefits of ATMs, such as depositing and withdrawing cash, and elevates them by integrating channels for personalized, in-person banking that is guided by a remote teller through high-definition video and au-



Othman Tawfeq

dio communication. To initiate the live assistance video-audio call, customers must first scan their civil ID cards followed by entering their bank signature or debit card PIN—if using one. Once the connection is established, customers can make any general inquiries as they would at the branch, or even deposit and withdraw cheques on the spot. Contact Center and Social Channels for Around-the-Clock Communication

Under the umbrella of its unwavering commitment to elevating customer service quality by reinforcing the Bank's channels of communication with its customers and ensuring that they are available 24/7, Tawfeq revealed that the KIB Contact Center received more than 645,000 calls during 2023, at a monthly rate of 54,000 calls, attesting to the service's convenience and efficiency. Furthermore, the Bank's social media channel @KIBPage witnessed a 100 percent increase in engagement rates in comparison to 2022. This comes in line with the Bank's release of several alternative digital communication channels including WhatsApp, which allows customers to get faster replies to their inquiries. Moreover, KIB designated a special customer service team at the Contact Center to serve the Black account customers around the clock and at a record speed.

As KIB marches into a new year, the Bank remains committed to its digital transformation strategy, which seeks to adopt and localize the latest banking and financial technologies available on the regional and international markets, ultimately serving its customers by remaining one step ahead of their needs and aspirations.

EU moves to tap profits from Russian assets for Ukraine

BRUSSELS: The EU has reached an agreement on a first step towards tapping profits from frozen Russian assets to help pay for rebuilding war-ravaged Ukraine, officials said. EU ambassadors agreed on a plan to set aside the profits from the assets in order for them to eventually be used to help pay for Ukraine's reconstruction, the Belgian presidency of the European Union said on X, formerly Twitter, late Monday.

The agreement moves forward a long and legally fraught debate about how to use Russian state assets that were blocked by Western institutions immediately in the wake of Moscow's all-out invasion of Ukraine nearly two years ago.

The EU has frozen some 200 billion euros (\$220 billion) of Russian central bank assets, with about 90 percent of those funds held by the international deposit organization Euroclear, based in Belgium.

Simply confiscating all that money and giving it to Ukraine's reconstruction efforts is not seen as an option, as that could rattle international markets and undermine the euro. Some countries, notably Belgium, had proposed a windfall tax on the frozen funds that could generate some three billion euros a year for Kyiv.

The European Commission made a cautious proposal that was put to all 27 EU member countries under which deposit holders like Euroclear would first have to separate interest or profits earned on the frozen assets and ring-fence them. A second proposal was to be put forward later on how the



BRUSSELS: The EU ambassadors reach an agreement on a first step towards tapping profits from frozen Russian assets to help pay for rebuilding war-ravaged Ukraine.

ring-fenced profits could then be shifted into a fund that would go to Kyiv.

Lithuania's ambassador to the EU, Arnoldas Prancickius, called the overnight preliminary agreement a "very important and long awaited decision". But, he said on X, it was "only the beginning of the road," adding: "Now looking forward to the 2nd step proposal from the European Commission on the use of profits for reconstruction of Ukraine and the start of discussion on confiscating assets themselves."

The issue goes beyond the EU. The bloc acted in concert with the G7 group of wealthy nations to freeze the Russian assets. The United States wants a collective G7 decision on how to tap the Russian money. Diplomats say Washington is increasingly in favor of outright confiscation of all frozen Russian funds, but that the Europeans have pushed back on

that. The movement on the frozen funds issue comes at an otherwise difficult time for Ukraine as continued Western support runs into political headwinds in both Washington and Brussels. In the United States, opposition Republicans are blocking further US funds and weapons for Ukraine in maneuvering over domestic issues, notably migration.

And in the European Union, Hungary—whose leader Viktor Orban is close to Russian President Vladimir Putin—has blocked a 50-billion-euro EU financial lifeline for Kyiv. A summit in Brussels on Thursday will again tackle that issue with hopes of persuading Hungary to drop its veto.

The estimated total cost of rebuilding Ukraine is at least \$411 billion (380 billion euros), according to a joint assessment put out in March last year by the World Bank, the European Commission and the United Nations. — AFP

Norway sovereign wealth fund hits record profit in 2023

OSLO: Norway's sovereign wealth fund, the world's biggest, said Tuesday it raked in a record profit of 2.2 trillion kroner (\$213 billion) last year, driven largely by US tech stocks. The 16.1 percent return on investments followed a huge loss in 2022 and took the fund's total value to 15.8 trillion kroner last year. Nicolai Tangen, the chief executive of Norges Bank Investment Management, said the equity market was "very strong" in 2023 despite high inflation and "geopolitical turmoil".

"I think it's fair to say that 2023 ended up a lot better than what we had expected a year ago," Tangen said at a press con-

ference. The fund's tech stocks gained 50 percent, accounting for 895 million kroner of the total profit, as the sector was boosted by enthusiasm around artificial intelligence and hopes that central banks will soon cut interest rates.

The biggest contributions came from the "Magnificent Seven" stocks: Apple, Amazon, Alphabet (Google's owner), Meta (Facebook and Instagram owner), Microsoft, Nvidia and Tesla. Fuelled by revenues from Norway's state-owned oil and gas companies, the fund is aimed at financing future spending in the generous welfare state. Around 71 percent of its portfolio was dedicated to equities, with stakes in 8,859 companies worldwide—or 1.5 percent of all listed stocks. The return on its equity investments last year was 21.3 percent.

Its investment in tech shares has grown, accounting for 22.3 percent of its total equity investments last year compared to 14.5 percent in 2019. The return on its bond holdings was 6.1 percent while real estate investments fell 12.4 percent amid higher interest rates. The fund also invests in unlisted renewable energy projects, which generated a return of 3.7 percent. — AFP



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Lifestyle

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2024

Ravers flock to dance floor in Jeddah



On a stage inside the historical centre of Jeddah, the main gateway for Muslim pilgrims heading to Jeddah, rapper Ty Dolla \$ign asked his screaming Saudi fans a few questions. "Where the hot girls at?" the dreadlocked 41-year-old American (real name: Tyrone William Griffin Jr) bellowed into the microphone during his set at the Balad Beast music festival. "How many of you trying to get lit after the show tonight? How many of you trying to get faded?"

It was an eyebrow-raising scene

lure for young Saudis and foreigners.

Under Vision 2030, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious plan to develop a post-oil economy in the world's biggest crude exporter, authorities are targeting 3,000 new hotel rooms in Al-Balad as they try to attract millions more tourists. Beyond events such as Balad Beast, the 2.5-square-kilometre (nearly one square mile) area is being transformed by an influx of cafes, museums, performance spaces and workshops for artists and craftspeople.

time I come to Saudi, it's a vibe," Ty Dolla \$ign said at one point, inserting an expletive for emphasis.

Historic city, modern vibes

Al-Balad came to prominence in the seventh century as a hub for pilgrims and traders. Saudi Arabia's founding ruler King Abdulaziz conquered Jeddah in the 1920s, and in 1947 fast growth prompted authorities to tear down the walls surrounding Al-Balad, the city's heart. Some of the gates still stand, however, as do Al-Balad's distinctive

The ever-expanding calendar of festivals and art exhibitions has enlivened the neighborhood, attracting people who might otherwise have little interest in it, said Ali Assi Loush, a Lebanese DJ who has lived in Jeddah for 20 years. "If Balad didn't have Balad Beast, or whatever events it has now, none of the new generation would come to Balad. They'd go to the beach," he said. "They're not interested in those old shops."

For some elderly residents, though, the new additions can be jarring, he said, likening this wariness to that of a grandmother who refuses to part with a beloved, if battered, chair. "She would never let you remove it, throw it away, even though it's broken into pieces... No, it's her chair. It's the same thing," Loush said. Abir Abusulayman, a Saudi tour guide, said most people were enthusiastic about Al-Balad's future, and that there was a clear solution for those who were not. "They can stay at home," she said. "Easy and simple."

'Extraordinary'

The debate about what's happening in Al-Balad is partly fuelled by broader changes in Jeddah, where an ongoing \$20-billion redevelopment project stands to displace half a million people. Authorities pitch the project as an upgrade that can replace "slums" with amenities like a stadium, an oceanarium and an opera house. But some affected residents have complained they don't know how to seek compensation, and seethe about official portrayals of their neighborhoods as dens of drugs and crime.

Abusulayman, the tour guide, said she did not mourn the neighborhoods that have been razed — most of them far from Al-Balad — predicting they would be replaced by something better. "I'm very happy that they are gone. These were unplanned districts... no schools, no gardens, no clinics, and some people just built their houses without having the land," she said. Instead she preferred to focus on new features of life in Al-Balad, as did those who partied late into the night during Balad Beast.

"Personally I like to dress in a vintage style and this is the same thing, it's the same vibe," said Abdulrahman Alhabshi, 20, as images of the performers were projected on nearby walls. Adnan Manjal, a Jeddah-born DJ known as AZM, was similarly effusive about Al-Balad's evolution. "To see it transform not only into a UNESCO heritage site but also a dance floor," he said, "is just extraordinary." — AFP



Jeddah-born DJ known as AZM, Adnan Manjal, answers questions during an interview in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad.



Lebanese DJ Ali Assi Loush answers questions during an interview in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad.



People attend a concert during the Balad Beast music festival in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad.



This picture shows people on a street in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad.



A picture shows a traditional old building in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad. — AFP photos



This photograph shows items displayed at the Tariq Abdulhaqim Centre, a music museum, in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad.



These photographs show items displayed at the Tariq Abdulhaqim Centre, a music museum, in Jeddah's oldest neighbourhood, known as Al-Balad.

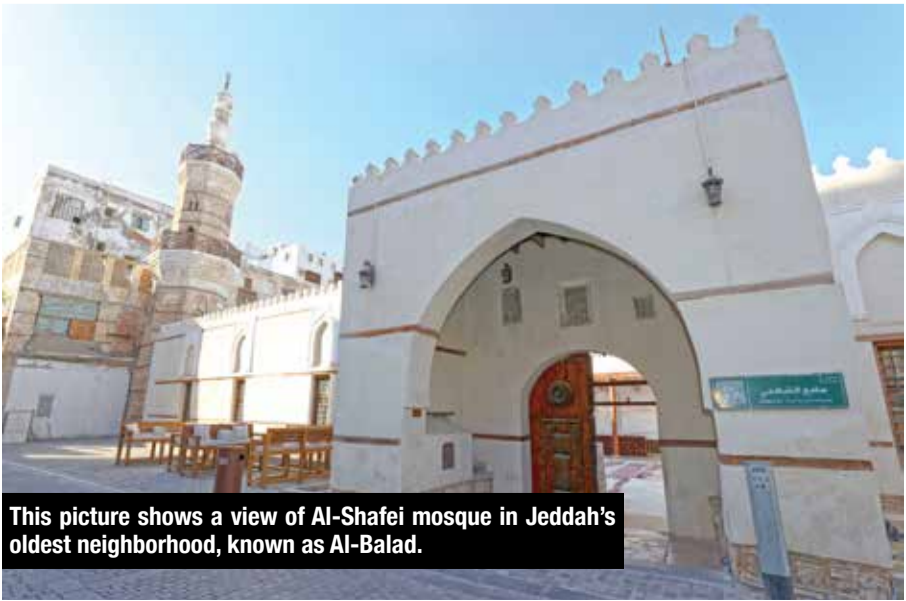


in conservative Saudi Arabia, which first allowed large-scale mixed-gender festivals only about five years ago, and maintains a strict no-alcohol policy. Yet Ty Dolla \$ign's performance in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad, alongside artists like Wu-Tang Clan and Major Lazer underscored efforts to revamp the UNESCO World Heritage site, expanding its al-

Jeddah residents acknowledge some anxiety about the changes in a neighborhood strongly associated with the annual hajj pilgrimage and traditional Ramadan markets. But that was hard to glean from the droves of ravers who crowded the four stages at Balad Beast, some with glittery face paint and glow sticks. Most of the women had their hair and faces uncovered. "Every

coral stone buildings, many with balconies built from latticed teak wood.

UNESCO granted Al-Balad World Heritage site status in 2014, and in 2018 "revitalisation" efforts overseen by the culture ministry began in earnest. Today, green barricades erected by the ministry protect restoration work on centuries-old villas, mosques and markets, known as souks.



This picture shows a view of Al-Shafei mosque in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad.



People pose for pictures during the Balad Beast music festival in Jeddah's oldest neighborhood, known as Al-Balad.



Egypt pyramid renovation sparks debate

A crane lifting stones is pictured behind camels resting with their trainers by the Pyramid of Menkaure (or Menkheres, built in the 26th century BC) at the Giza Pyramids Necropolis, west of Cairo. — AFP

A video showing renovation work at Egypt's Menkaure pyramid at Giza has triggered social media criticism, with one expert decrying its "absurdity". Mostafa Waziri, the head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, has in contrast dubbed it "the project of the century." In a video posted on Facebook on Friday, Waziri showed workers setting blocks of granite on the base of the pyramid, which sits besides the sphinx and the larger Khafre and Cheops pyramids at Giza.

When originally built, the pyramid was encased in granite, but over time lost part of its covering. The renovation

aims to restore the structure's original style by reconstructing the granite layer. Work is slated to last three years and will be "Egypt's gift to the world in the 21st century", said Waziri, who heads the Egyptian-Japanese mission in charge of the project.

But under the video, dozens of upset people left comments critical of the work. "Impossible!" wrote the Egyptologist Monica Hanna. "The only thing missing was to add tiling to the pyramid of Menkaure! When are we going to stop the absurdity in the management of Egyptian heritage?" she asked. "All international principles on renovations

prohibit such interventions, Hanna added, calling on all archaeologists to "mobilize immediately."

Other commentators reacted with sarcasm. "When will the project to straighten the Tower of Pisa be planned?" asked one. "Rather than tiles, why not wallpaper the pyramids?" said another. The issue of heritage preservation in Egypt — which derives 10 percent of its gross domestic product from tourism — is often the subject of heated debate.

Recent destruction of entire areas of Cairo's historic area led to powerful mobilizations by civil society, which is

largely banned from political activity and now concentrates the bulk of its fight with the government on urban planning and heritage issues. The debate has lately focused on the fifteenth-century Abu al-Abbas Al-Mursi mosque in the coastal city of Alexandria, Egypt's second largest. Local authorities announced an investigation after a contractor in charge of renovation decided to repaint in white the ornate, carved and colored ceilings of the city's largest mosque. — AFP

'Wizard of Oz' shoe thief avoids prison

An elderly US man who stole a pair of ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in the classic film "The Wizard of Oz" avoided prison time at his sentencing hearing on Monday. Terry Martin, now 76, was sentenced to time served and a year of probation for the 2005 theft as he is in hospice care with six months to live, according to the New York Times. The sequined shoes — indelibly associated with the character Dorothy clicking them together and saying repeatedly, "there's no place like home" — were stolen from the Judy Garland Museum in the actress' hometown of Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

Martin, who had tried to turn his life around after serving prison time for a previous theft, gave into pressure from an "old mob associate" to steal the shoes in what his lawyers described as "one last score." They said he mistakenly believed the slippers were adorned with real rubies, which he hoped to sell. He reportedly had never seen the beloved 1939 film. The footwear was recovered in an FBI sting in 2018 but no charges were filed at the time. A million-dollar reward for information leading to an arrest was offered. — AFP



Escaped monkey on the loose in Scottish Highlands

Thermal imaging drones have been deployed in the Scottish Highlands to try to capture a snow monkey that escaped from an animal park, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland said on Tuesday. The male Japanese macaque managed to get out of its enclosure at the Highland Wildlife Park in the Cairngorm National Park on Sunday. The RZSS said the animal was not thought to be dangerous to humans or pets but has advised locals not to approach him.



Keith Gilchrist, living collections operations manager at the park near the town of Kingussie, said they were responding to a reported sighting on Tuesday morning. "Throughout the day our expert team of animal keepers will be patrolling the local area using a variety of techniques to try and coax him in, as well as using our thermal image drone contractor to aid with the search," he added.

"Cairngorms Mountain Rescue has also kindly offered to support with their thermal imaging drone." Gilchrist said they hoped the animal would return to the park if he is unable to find food elsewhere. At the other end of Britain, locals in the village of Farringdon, near Exeter in southwest England, were trying to recapture a missing wallaby named Wes. — AFP

Activists may escape prosecution over Mona Lisa soup attack

Two protesters who were arrested after hurling soup at Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa painting in Paris may escape prosecution and instead be ordered to make a donation, prosecutors said on Monday. The two women on Sunday flung pumpkin soup at the bullet-proof glass protecting da Vinci's most famous painting at the Louvre art museum, demanding the right to "healthy and sustainable food."

A group called Riposte Alimentaire ("Food counterattack") claimed responsibility for the stunt. The two activists were arrested and temporarily placed in police custody. The public prosecutor's office said that the activists were accused of illegally entering the secure area around the painting, an offence carrying a maximum fine of 1,500 euros (\$1,620).

The two activists were to be brought before prosecutors on Monday afternoon with a view to making a "citizen's contribution" rather than facing a trial, the public prosecutor's office said. Under the French system, making such a donation to a victim's association is an alternative to prosecution. The amount is determined by prosecutors up to a maximum of 3,000 euros.

The Louvre museum said the painting had not suffered any damage, adding that the women had hidden the pumpkin soup in a thermos flask. The painting, which has been kept behind bulletproof glass since 2005, has been repeatedly attacked. In 2022, the masterpiece was targeted with a cream pie. — AFP



This image grab taken from AFPTV footage shows two environmental activists from the collective dubbed "Riposte Alimentaire" (Food Retaliation) hurling soup at Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" (La Joconde) painting, at the Louvre museum in Paris. — AFP

130 poisonous frogs seized at Bogota airport

Authorities in Colombia seized 130 poisonous frogs being trafficked through the Bogota airport on Monday and arrested the Brazilian woman carrying them. The woman was transporting the colorful harlequin poison frogs (Oophaga histrionica) inside film containers while traveling to Sao Paulo with a stopover in Panama.

She "claimed that a local community had given them as a gift," Bogota Environment Secretary Adriana Soto said in a video shared with media. Harlequin frogs are venomous, measure less than five centimeters (two inches) and live in damp forests along the Pacific coast between Ecuador and Colombia, as well as in other countries in Central and South America.

"This endangered species is sought after in international markets," said Bo-

gota Police Commander Juan Carlos Arevalo, adding that private collectors might pay up to \$1,000 for each.

The police reported that the woman carrying the frogs was arrested "for the crime of wildlife trafficking" before being handed over to the prosecutor's office. Animal trafficking is common in Colombia — one of the most biodiverse countries in the world — especially of amphibians, small mammals and marine animal parts, such as those of sharks. — AFP



This handout picture released by Bogota's Environment Secretary shows a member of the national police showing one of the frogs seized at the El Dorado international airport in Bogota.



Possible 'first' sighting of newborn great white shark

Drone footage of a young shark emerging to the ocean surface could be the first sighting of a newborn great white, according to new research, potentially revealing a birthing site for the threatened ocean predators. While juvenile great whites have been previously spotted in the wild, experts said footage of a newly born pup, believed to be just hours old because of its rounded dorsal fin, could shed light on a longstanding mystery in shark science and improve conservation efforts.

"Where white sharks give birth is one of the holy grails of shark science," said wildlife filmmaker and photographer Carlos Gauna, who captured the moment on camera. "No one has ever been able to pinpoint where they are born, nor has anyone seen a newborn baby shark alive."

In early July 2023, Gauna — known online as The Malibu Artist — and UC Riverside biology doctoral student Phillip Sternes observed an apparently heavily pregnant great white shark off the Californian coast near Santa Barbara. The shark appeared to dive deep into the water and not long after, a smaller shark emerged at the surface, and looked directly towards the camera hovering above.

Gauna said they initially thought the completely white little shark was an albino, because great white sharks — referred to only as white sharks by scientists — are actually grey on top and white only on their undersides. But then they saw the shark appear to shed the white

layer from its body as it clumsily swam around, he told AFP.

In an account of the sighting, published in the Journal Environmental Biology of Fishes on Monday, Gauna and Sternes said they now believe that this white "skin" was in fact an embryonic layer of intrauterine milk, which is secreted in utero to nourish shark pups and is shed soon after birth. They also gave an alternative explanation — that the five-foot (1.5 meter) long shark could have been suffering from a skin condition.

Protecting the predator

Southern California is known to be a nursing ground for young white sharks, while the central Californian coast has been tipped as a potential birthing spot and Gauna had seen pregnant and young white sharks in the area before this sighting. "This may well be the first evidence we have of a pup in the wild, making this a definitive birthing location," Sternes said in a press release, adding that more research would be needed to confirm the area more generally as a birthing ground.

If it is, Sternes said that would put pressure on lawmakers to protect the waters. "This paper rightly claims that it is the first immediate post-birth sighting of a white shark," said Heike Zidowitz, senior program officer for marine species conservation at the World Wildlife Fund in Germany, who was not associated with the study. — AFP



A July 2023 frame grab handout on January 29, 2024 by wildlife photographer Carlos Gauna, known as The Malibu Artist, shows a newly born great white shark pup, believed to be just hours old because of its rounded dorsal fin, filmed off the California coast near Santa Barbara. - AFP photos

Lifestyle



Gambian festival
revitalizes tradition
of initiatory rite

A man wearing a traditional kankurang mask stands by fire during the Kankurang festival. — AFP photos



A masquerade dances to drums along the streets during the Kankurang festival in Janjanbureh.



A man wears a traditional kankurang mask during the Kankurang festival.



Essamay, a masquerade that animates a Jola wrestling match walks along the streets during the Kankurang festival.



A performer wearing the traditional kumbo mask, a mythological figure of the jola tribe dressed with palm leaves, dances during the Kankurang festival.

By the light of the moon and a few spotlights, a figure almost completely obscured by bark and leaves makes his way through the frenzied crowd. Drums, whistles and shouts announce his entrance as he strides forward with machetes to hand. In the eastern town of Janjanbureh, on an island in the Gambia River, the annual festival celebrating the Kankurang, whose central character embodies almost mythical qualities, is in full swing.

The veiled figure is believed to ward off evil spirits from initiates to the Mandinka, a West African ethnic group historically from the kingdom of Mali. Onlookers offer money and call for his mercy as the initiate dances hypnotically through the crowd, swinging his arms and scaring off women and children. “We believe, supernaturally, the Kankurang is not human,” said spectator Nichol Ndey. “It has this mystical power... it protects the people.”

Guardian of tradition

The Kankurang—a combination of the Mandinka words “kango” and “kurango” which literally translate as “voice” and “enforce”—has been listed by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2005. The initiation rite is associated with circumcision ceremonies. It is seen as a chance for young men to learn about the rules governing their community and to pass on traditional knowledge, such as hunting techniques and on medicinal plants.

It is still performed in certain regions of The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and southern Senegal, particularly in the city of Mbour and in the Casamance region. But the gradual Westernisation of lifestyles, deforestation and the commercialization of the practice is threatening the traditional ritual.

The annual festival in Janjanbureh, around 250 kilometers (155 miles) east of the capital Banjul, has since 2018 attempted to breathe new life into Mandinka heritage, its director Muhammed Sardykh said.

For three days, the town organizes activities relating to the Kankurang, including a moonlit dance around a sacred baobab tree that attracts hundreds of spectators. The next day, the initiates stroll through the town under the watchful eye of frightened young children, who flee if they get too close. Janjanbureh describes itself as the guardian of tradition in The Gambia, a former British colony surrounded by Senegal that became continental Africa’s smallest independent country in 1965.

Under threat

“Most of these cultures are getting extinct because of education, Western influence,” said 30-year-old Nichol Ndey, a spectator originally from Janjanbureh who came to watch with her two children. “I want my kids to have this knowledge, to see what our culture is, to know where they come from,” she added.

providing a much-needed boost to the local economy.

James Goswell, 35, took the opportunity to sell a few traditional items and souvenirs such as miniature Kankurangs, soap and T-shirts. He sees the festival as a chance to make a bit of money in what he says is a difficult day-to-day life. Young people here lack



Fairy masquerade dances to drums along the streets during the Kankurang festival.



A man wears a traditional kankurang mask during the Kankurang festival.

ed. Lamin Jarjou, in his 40s, was also keen not to miss the festival, which he sees as a means of keeping the threatened tradition alive.

“People even cut the trees we use to make our masks. Preserving our heritage also means preserving our forests,” he said. For the last weekend in January, tourists and locals alike flock to Janjanbureh, filling hotels and

opportunities, and many choose to emigrate abroad illegally. But the annual ritual is a chance to show the rich heritage of the town. “It’s amazing, it’s unifying, and it’s cultural, and this is something that belongs to The Gambia and Senegal, so it’s important that we hold this every year,” said Jarjou. — AFP



A masquerade from the Fula tribe is seen during the Kankurang festival.

Jam Master Jay
murder fueled
‘by greed and
revenge’

Run-DMC member Jam Master Jay was slain in an ambush fueled “by greed and revenge,” US prosecutors told jurors Monday, as defense lawyers cast doubt on evidence in the trial over the alleged murder 20 years ago. The trial, to be decided by an anonymous jury in Brooklyn federal court, is centered on the events of October 30, 2002, when pioneering rapper Jason “Jay” Mizell, widely known by his DJ moniker, was fatally shot in the head in his Queens studio. He was 37 years old and a father of three.



Local resident Jacob Rosthein poses before a mural paying tribute to late Run-DMC’s Jam Master Jay in the Hollis neighborhood of the Queens borough of New York. — AFP

The murder remained a cold case until prosecutors in 2020 announced a 10-count indictment against suspects Ronald Washington, now 59, and Karl Jordan Jr., the alleged shooter, who is now 40. Both men appeared in court sharply dressed—Jordan in a blue vest over a white shirt with a striped tie, Washington in a black blazer—as the jury was sworn in and the prosecution opened.

Mizell, Jordan and Washington all hailed from Hollis, Queens, where the DJ kept a studio even as his fame soared with Run-DMC hits including “It’s Tricky.” Run-DMC famously railed against drug culture, but according to prosecutors, Mizell got involved as a middle man dealer to support his lifestyle and those close to him as buzz around the group’s music began to fade.

Witnesses

Prosecutor Miranda Gonzalez told jurors that following a drug deal dispute, Jordan shot a 40-caliber bullet into Mizell’s head, “killing him instantly” in a “brazen murder.” She said Washington, also armed, forced witnesses to the floor before fleeing with Jordan and an alleged accomplice who had let the men in through a back door. “He would be murdered in his own music studio, by people he knew,” she said.

Gonzalez added that many people, including Washington, relied on Mizell for money, prompting the artist’s lucrative side hustle in the drug trade. But John Diaz, representing Jordan, emphasized in his statement how “the narrative has changed over time” noting how witnesses refused to cooperate with authorities for months, and even years. Defense attorney Ezra Spilke told jurors the case was focused on “10 seconds, 21 years ago.”

He called the prosecution’s account of events “one version of many,” questioning the validity of memories dating back a generation. He also emphasized the friendship between Washington and Mizell, as well as the financial situation discussed by the prosecution: “Why bite the hand that feeds you?” Spilke said.

“Mizell was a beloved artist, but convicting the wrong person... does not solve the tragedy,” he said. “It just adds another one to it.” Jordan, who was 18 at the time of the alleged crime, and Washington face charges of murder while engaged in narcotics trafficking, and firearms-related murder. Prosecutors called James Lusk, a retired detective who was among the first on the scene, as their first witness in the trial is expected to last four weeks.

Along with LL Cool J and Public Enemy, Run-DMC were trailblazers of new-school hip hop—mixing rock elements, aggressive boasting and sociopolitical commentary—and its outgrowth, golden era hip hop, which included eclectic sampling. The seminal group were the first rappers featured on MTV, and established a new rap aesthetic incorporating street culture, a departure from the flashy, disco-inflected attire of their predecessors. — AFP

Sports

French human rights to probe Paris homeless clean-up before Olympics

French police secure Olympics pay-off as unions mobilize

PARIS: France's top state human rights body said Monday it would probe criticism of efforts to relocate the city's homeless population ahead of the Paris Olympics this year. Some charities have accused local authorities of carrying out a "social cleansing" operation in the capital region ahead of the Games by clearing away the homeless, as well as migrant camps and slums.

The transfer of people from Paris to temporary accommodation centres in provincial France has caused tensions and demonstrations in some towns and rural areas. French rights ombudswoman Claire Hedon said she had started an investigation into "the threat to rights and freedoms in the context of the Olympic Games."

She said she would look into "the manner in which homeless people are sent outside of Paris to accommodation centres, the way in which living areas are being destroyed." It posed the question of whether there was a policy "of making undesirable people invisible," she added.

The investigation would also look into the use of student accommodation in Paris to house members of the emergency services and other state employees during the Games, which will mean around

2,000 students will have to be re-housed. Hedon will also probe restrictions placed on demonstrations and the use of AI-assisted crowd monitoring software by the French police.

Her findings are set to be published in April at the earliest. France's Office for the Defence of Rights is an independent state institution, created in 2011, whose role is to investigate possible rights abuse and make recommendations to the government. The French government has denied having a "zero homeless" target for the Olympics, saying that additional accommodation for rough sleepers would be part of the legacy of the Games.

Authorities in China cleared an unknown number of beggars, hawkers and the homeless from the streets of China before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, with many shipped back to their home regions, reports said at the time. Brazilian campaign groups also said Rio de Janeiro's homeless were being forced out of tourist areas in the middle of the night as the city hosted the games in 2016.

The Paris Olympics are set to run from July 26-August 11 followed by the Paralympics from August 28-September 8. French police working on the Paris Olympics will receive a one-off bonus of up



Gerald Darmanin

to 1,900 euros (\$2,060), the interior ministry said Tuesday under a major public pay deal intended to placate trade unions. Public-sector workers from the security forces, to nurses to train drivers are pushing for extra pay for forgoing their holidays in July and August during the Games when millions of visitors are expected around the country.

The hard-left CGT trade union representing Paris metro staff announced Monday that it had given no-

tice of possible strikes, including over the summer, as part of its efforts to secure pay hikes and bonuses.

The maximum 1,900 euros agreed with the police follows two days of protests this month and is higher than the interior ministry had initially suggested, although many officers are expected to receive less. "The bonus will vary depending on each individual's situation," Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said in a letter to officers that was shared with AFP.

France is banking on its first Summer Olympics in 100 years to showcase the best of the country from the historic monuments of Paris to its role as a global centre of food, fashion and sporting excellence. Organizers are desperate to avoid street protests and industrial disputes that could mar the experience for ticket holders or TV spectators.

The country was shaken by so-called "Yellow Vest" anti-government protests in 2018, massive strikes against pension reform last year, as well as urban riots in June 2023. Around 35,000 security forces are expected to be on duty each day for the Olympics from July 26-August 11, with the taking of holiday banned for officers during this period. The Paralympics are set to take place from August 28-September 8. — AFP

Corruption trial begins on Norway's biathlon boss

OSLO: Fancy watches, hunting parties and suspicions of Russian influence-buying all figure prominently in the trial of Norway's biathlon honcho Anders Besseberg, accused of accepting improper gifts during his reign as the sport's global chief.

The 77-year-old Norwegian, who was head of the International Biathlon Union from 1992 to 2018, has been on trial near Oslo since January 9 on a charge of aggravated corruption, which he denies. The five-week trial has been extensively covered in the Norwegian media, with a parade of more than 20 witnesses called to testify including Grigory Rodchenkov, the whistle-blower at the origin of revelations about organized Russian doping in the early 2010s.

"Why did the Russians want to corrupt Besseberg?" prosecutor Marianne Djupesland asked on the first day of the trial. According to prosecutors, from 2008 to 2019 Besseberg was given three watches worth a total of more than 30,000 euros (\$33,000), invited on trips to hunt deer and wild boar, and offered services from sex workers, all paid for by Russian officials.

He admits to receiving some gifts, but rejects any charges of corruption. "I have no interest in watches nor any expertise about brands and their value," he said, describing himself a "simple farmboy." Asked about an Omega watch worth more than 17,000 euros he received in 2011 for his 65th birthday, he said: "I did not think it was undeserved."

Despite his love of hunting, he said the organized trips did not affect any IBU decisions, over which he claims to have had little influence. And he denies any contact with sex workers, acknowledging only what he said was a consensual affair with a 42-year-old Russian.

'Elephant in the room'

As head of the IBU when the Russian doping scandal exploded in the 2010s, Besseberg was accused of initially hiding cases of Russian doping in his sport in exchange for favours. Prosecutors dropped that line of attack, but in Norway, receiving improper favours, even if no services are provided in exchange, is enough to constitute corruption.

Russia remains the "elephant in the room", wrote the reporter from the Verdens Gang newspaper who is following the trial. The prosecution has presented evidence that Besseberg was suspiciously complaisant with Russians while running the IBU.

The evidence includes a wire-tapped telephone conversation in December 2017 with Norwegian biathlete Ole Einar Bjorndalen, where he defended the IBU's lack of reaction to the revelations about Russian doping.

During the same period, the IBU's secretary general, Nicole Resch of Germany — who was also accused of corruption in a 2021 report — was caught on tape saying that Besseberg was "insanely pro-Russian". According to an inquiry launched by Sweden's Olle Dahlin, who succeeded Besseberg as head of the IBU, Besseberg pushed to hold the 2021 biathlon world championships in Tyumen, Siberia, despite the Russian doping scandals. The contest was eventually awarded to Pokljuka in Slovenia.

Russia isn't the only shadow hanging over the trial. According to the accusation, Besseberg also went on fully paid hunting trips in Austria and in the Czech Republic, and for seven years drove a leased BMW X5, all paid for by Infront, a marketing company that held television rights to the sport. The trial, being held in Hokksund, a city 60 kilometres (37 miles) west of Oslo, will last until February 16. The charge of "aggravated corruption" carries up to 10 years in prison. — AFP

France eye Six Nations boost after WCup despair

PARIS: France hosted last year's World Cup having won over a nation backing Fabien Galthie's team for home glory and a first-ever Webb Ellis Cup. An opening, comprehensive 27-13 victory over New Zealand set alight patriotic fervour in the belief that skipper Antoine Dupont could lead France to victory on home soil.

But those hopes were cruelly dashed at the quarter-final stage, eventual winners South Africa sealing a nail-biting 29-28 victory to unceremoniously dump Dupont and his side out of the competition. The reaction in France was nothing short of desolation, mournful fans and pundits railing against perceived injustices in the refereeing display by New Zealander Ben O'Keefe that they argued had helped rob a nation of its chance of victory.

Some of the criticism crossed the line, as a nation reeled from the defeat. Springbok scrum-half Cobus Reinach, who plies his club trade at Top 14 club Montpellier, received death threats after praising O'Keefe and his assistants for coping well with the pressure cooker atmosphere of the match.

"No regrets," Galthie maintained after the loss to the Springboks. "We did everything we could to make the most of our potential." That potential must now be channelled into the Six Nations, with France kicking the tournament off with the World Cup final many a neutral observer wanted and even expected, against Ireland.

There had also been high World Cup hopes for the Irish, fresh from a Grand Slam in last year's Six Nations, but they went down to New Zealand in another gripping quarter-final, leaving coach Andy Farrell — as meticulous as Galthie in his planning — licking his wounds in disappointment.

"For us, it was a time of mourning," Galthie acknowledged. "It's a huge disappointment after four years of hard work, four years of successful work with 80 percent wins and all those records. "The

Messi, Suarez on target but Miami beaten in friendly

RIYADH: Luis Suarez bagged his maiden goal for Inter Miami and Lionel Messi scored a penalty but it was not enough to stop the Major League Soccer side falling to a 4-3 defeat against Saudi Pro League side Al Hilal in Riyadh on Monday.

An 88th-minute header from Brazilian forward Malcom settled an entertaining friendly at the Kingdom Arena after Miami fought back to 3-3 from 3-1 down early in the second half. The game was the latest leg of Miami's globe-trotting pre-season tour ahead of the start of the Major League Soccer season on February 21.

Former Fulham striker and Serbian international Aleksandar Mitrovic fired Al Hilal head in the 10th minute, coolly side-footing his finish beyond Miami goalkeeper Drake Callender after a well-worked move that split the defence wide open.

Saudi international forward Abdullah Al-Hamdan made it 2-0 after 13 minutes, punishing a botched clearance from Miami defender Noah Allen. Sergio Busquets should have pulled a goal back for Miami

Murray beaten by Paire in Montpellier

MONTPELLIER: Andy Murray suffered another early exit as the former world number one was knocked out of the ATP event in Montpellier by Benoit Paire in the first round on Monday. Paire came from behind to secure a 2-6, 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 win over the Briton. Three-time Grand Slam champion Murray said earlier this month that retirement may not be far away after a poor run, following a comprehensive first-round Australian Open defeat by Tomas Martin Etcheverry. Murray has now won only one of his last eight matches and slipped to 49th in the world rankings.

The 36-year-old cruised through the first set to



NANTERRE, HAUTS-DE-SEINE: Racing 92's French flanker Maxime Baudonne (C) is tackled by Toulouse's French scrum-half Antoine Dupont (L) and Toulouse's Italian wing Ange Capuozzo (R) during the French Top14 rugby union match between Racing 92 and Stade Toulousain Rugby (Toulouse) at Paris La Defense Arena in Nanterre, on the outskirts of Paris, on January 28, 2024. — AFP

only objective we wanted to achieve was to be world champions. There was no other."

France will be without Dupont for the Six Nations, the combative scrum-half having chosen to play for the national rugby sevens team ahead of this year's Paris Olympics.

Back to school

"It is like going back to school, just as is every Six Nations, but we are not starting from scratch," Galthie said of preparing for European rugby's showpiece tournament. "There's a bit of a feeling that it's a new start, but also carrying on the last four years' work."

"We've lost two matches in two years, we've won a lot and it's interesting to fall back on this common path." Gregory Alldritt takes over the captaincy from Dupont, but Anthony Jelouch, who deputized for the scrum-half when he was injured at the World Cup, will miss the Six Nations with a knee injury.

Galthie named several uncapped players in his new-look 34-strong squad, including Racing 92's

in the 26th minute but volleyed over from close range with just Al Hilal goalkeeper Hbib Alwotayan to beat.

On 34 minutes though Miami's pressure got its reward. A lofted pass from Jordi Alba over the top caught the Al Hilal defence square, and Julian Gressel latched onto the ball before sliding into the path of Suarez who finished into an empty goal at the far post.

The goal was initially disallowed for offside but a VAR check overturned the offside call and the goal stood. Al Hilal restored their two-goal advantage a minute before half-time however when Al-Hamdan crossed into the area for Brazilian forward Michael to nod home after Callender rushed off his line.

Miami responded strongly after the break, and drew level with two goals in two minutes soon after the restart. Messi made it 3-2 from the penalty spot in the 54th minute after Mohammed Jahfali was harshly adjudged to have brought down David Ruiz in the area.

Al Hilal were still regrouping from the penalty when Miami levelled. Messi swept a long pass into the path of Ruiz, and the winger cut in from the left and uncorked a ferocious strike that made it 3-3. The game seemed destined to end in a draw but Malcolm headed home two minutes from time to seal the win. Miami face Cristiano Ronaldo's Al-Nassr in their second friendly in Saudi Arabia on Thursday before heading to Asia for games in Hong Kong and Japan. — AFP



RIYADH: Hilal's Saudi defender #12 Yasser Al-Shahrani marks Inter Miami's Argentine forward #10 Lionel Messi during the friendly exhibition match between Saudi Arabia's al-Hilal SFC and the US Inter Miami CF at the Kingdom Arena Stadium in Riyadh on January 29, 2024. — AFP

one of the nine main tournaments on the ATP Tour, has been played at Bercy since 1986. It is the only one to be held indoors.

"It is one of the ATP's most prestigious tournaments, and we are proud that over the years it has become a key event on the French and international tennis scene," said FFT president Gilles Moretton. ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi welcomed the announcement, which came after months of speculation over a possible relocation.

"France is a key nation for professional tennis and today's announcement further strengthens one of our biggest events on the ATP Tour," said Gaudenzi. "We are continually looking for opportunities for our tournaments to grow, and to provide better experiences for our players, and most importantly the fans." — AFP

Sports

Ivory Coast stun AFCON holders Senegal, Cape Verde into quarters

Kessie nets decisive kick to take Ivory Coast through to last-eight on Saturday

ABIDJAN: Hosts Ivory Coast stunned Senegal at the Africa Cup of Nations on Monday, knocking out the reigning champions on penalties in the last 16 to keep their hopes of winning the title on home soil alive. A week ago it looked as if the Ivorians were set for a humiliating group-stage exit from their own AFCON, but now they are into the quarter-finals after beating Senegal 5-4 on penalties following a tie that finished 1-1 at the end of extra time.

The Elephants scraped into the knockout phase with the worst record of the four best third-placed sides to advance, after finishing the first round with a humiliating 4-0 loss to Equatorial Guinea, their heaviest ever home defeat. They followed that by sacking veteran French coach Jean-Louis Gasset and trying unsuccessfully to bring in former boss Herve Renard on a short-term deal.

But instead former player Emerse Fae was appointed on an interim basis, hoping to rouse a shell-shocked team for a daunting tie against the holders. It looked like being a trying evening for Ivory Coast in Yamoussoukro as Senegal went ahead in the fourth minute when Habib Diallo brought down Sadio Mane's cross from the left and finished emphatically.

Mane then escaped with a yellow card for a dangerous challenge on Ibrahim Sangare soon after, although Senegal also felt hard done by early in the second half. Ismaila Sarr went down in the box in a tangle of legs with Odilon Kossounou, but no penalty was given and the referee did not come across to review the incident on the pitchside monitor.

Kessie the hero

Instead, it was the Ivorians who won a late penalty of their own, a VAR review showing that Nicolas Pepe was chopped down by Senegal goalkeeper

Edouard Mendy. Franck Kessie of Saudi club Al Ahli, who was dropped to the bench at kick-off, converted the penalty to force extra time.

With no further scoring, it came down to penalties, and Senegal's Moussa Niakhate was the only player to miss, seeing his effort strike the post. Kessie then netted the decisive kick to take Ivory Coast through to a last-eight tie against Mali or Burkina Faso in the central city of Bouake on Saturday.

Neighbours Mali and Burkina Faso clash in the last 16 in the northern city of Korhogo on Tuesday. "We are feeling a lot of emotion," Ivory Coast striker Sebastien Haller told broadcaster Canal Plus Afrique.

"The last few days have not been easy but we had to believe in ourselves." Senegal go out after being the only team to win all three games during the group stage, and their elimination means no reigning champion has made it beyond the first knockout round of a Cup of Nations since Egypt won a third consecutive title in 2010.

Mauritania run ended

Earlier on Monday, Cape Verde won an AFCON knockout tie for the first time in their history as a late Ryan Mendes penalty gave them a 1-0 victory over Mauritania in Abidjan. The tie was drifting towards extra time when Cape Verde won a spot-kick as substitute Gilson Tavares Benchimol was brought down in the box by Mauritania goalkeeper Babacar Niasse.

Captain Mendes then converted with just two minutes of the 90 remaining to break the resistance of a Mauritania side appearing in the knockout phase for the first time. Cape Verde advance to a quarter-final on Saturday in Yamoussoukro against either Morocco or South Africa, who meet in the last 16 on Tuesday in San-Pedro.



ABIDJAN: Cape Verde's forward #21 Bebe (UP) jumps during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2024 round of 16 football match between Cape Verde and Mauritania at the Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium in Abidjan. — AFP

The tiny Atlantic Ocean island nation had got out of their group in two of their three previous appearances at the AFCON, but had never before won a knockout tie. "We are proud of everything we have done up to now. We always tried to win the game and we thoroughly deserved the victory," said Cape Verde coach Pedro 'Bubista' Brito, who believes his

side can go further still in the tournament.

"We have our objective, which from day one has been to get to the semi-finals. "We are one step away from that now and we are going to keep going, while obviously staying humble and respecting our opponents, but we believe. That is our focus and we are going to try and get there." — AFP

West Bank fans proud of Palestine's Asian Cup progress

AL-DHAHIRIYAH: Despite the war and whatever the result, the only thing that mattered in Al-Dhahiriya in the occupied West Bank on Monday was the number 7 jersey worn by Palestine's Musab al-Battat. For those in the team captain's native village, and despite the team's last 16 loss to Qatar in Doha, the game was 90 minutes of pure pride.

Hours before Monday's kick-off, the plastic chairs had already been drawn up in a semicircle. There were sweets, and black, green and red wigs in the national colours for the kids. For the men there were endless cigarettes. Four generations gathered together on a terrace under an awning to cheer for the Lions of Canaan.

Among them was Battat's 80-year-old grandmother, who held her hands to the sky and implored the football gods to bestow victory on the Palestine team. And Palestine opened the score in the 37th minute, causing an explosion of joy among those watching the game on television.

Qatar may be a political ally of the Palestinians, but on the pitch it's a different matter altogether. The game took place against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, and a brief moment's silence was held before Monday's kick-off. Some of the Palestinian squad have lost loved ones or have relatives trapped in Gaza. But for the first time in its history, Palestine had reached the knockout rounds of the Asian Cup.

Opening stunner

Oday Dabbagh stunned the Qatar crowd of almost

65,000 at the Al-Bayt Stadium with his opening goal, and the Palestinians celebrated by crossing their arms in a hand-cuffs gesture to symbolize the plight of their people.

The mood in the West Bank is not normally festive, Battat's mother Hanaa al-Hawarin told AFP. "The raids come every day," she said. On Monday alone, five Palestinians were killed in Zionist raids across the territory. Zionist entity has occupied the West Bank since the 1967 Arab-Zionist war, and its troops increasingly make incursions into Palestinian communities where faded national flags are flown.

Hours before Monday's match, the main shopping streets of Hebron, the nearest city to the village, showed little sign of excitement about the fixture. A few dozen kilometres (miles) away, the bombs are falling on Gaza in a war that has lasted for nearly four months.

It began when Gaza-based Hamas fighters launched an unprecedented attack on southern Zionist entity that killed around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of official Zionist figures.

Zionist entity's relentless military offensive in response has killed at least 26,637 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the Hamas government's health ministry in the territory. At the sporting level, things are complicated. Local football championships in the West Bank and Gaza have been suspended, and the Palestine team trains abroad. Khaled al-Battat, the captain's father, said his pride in seeing his son wear the national colours is mixed with anger.

'His passion'

Khaled worked in construction in the Zionist entity before his permit to do so was suspended because of the war. He said his son learned to control the ball in the village streets when he was a boy. Musab began playing when he was 11, and always loved football.

"If he didn't have a football he made one — he could turn anything into a ball, even a plastic bag," his father told AFP.

made a late cameo from the bench in the 4-2 victory for his first appearance since December 12 following a groin problem. Cameroon goalkeeper Andre Onana will also be available against Wolves after returning from the Africa Cup of Nations. Whether Marcus Rashford will feature after missing the Newport tie remains to be seen.

Rashford said he was ill on Friday after reportedly spending the previous evening at a Belfast nightclub, with Ten Hag declaring the issue an "internal matter" that he would deal with. But asked if the Wolves game could be the first time he played his strongest team, Ten Hag said: "It could be, potentially yeah. "Maybe for the first time as long as I was manager that we can pick a team from a squad that is probably the strongest." United are languishing in eighth place in the Premier League and were dumped out of the Champions League in the group stage. — AFP



AL KHOR: Palestine's forward #11 Oday Dabbagh celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the Qatar 2023 AFC Asian Cup football match between Qatar and Palestine at Al-Bayt Stadium in al-Khor, north of Doha. — AFP

"It's been his passion since he was small, and it just grew until he became captain of the national team," he said, eyes beaming with pride.

For the captain's mother Hanaa, "if there had been no occupation, he could have reached an even higher level" in the sport. She cited restrictions such as military roadblocks and the administrative red tape involved in him being allowed to go abroad to play — procedures that can take "weeks", and with no guarantee of success.

Just getting all of the players together from the West Bank and Gaza is a struggle in itself, she said. But once the kick-off whistle blows, such worries are sidelined, if only for the duration of play, as the spectators cheer the team on. Monday's final score was disappointing — a 2-1 victory for Qatar — but by no means was it an ignominious exit from the tournament. "I'm proud of my brother and the other players," said Ismail al-Battat. "Getting to the last 16 is a good result. It's not the end of the road." — AFP



Erik ten Hag

Iran 'following dreams' to win first Asian Cup since 1976

DOHA: Iran are "following our dreams" in trying to win the Asian Cup for the first time in 48 years, winger Alireza Jahanbakhsh said on the eve of Wednesday's last-16 clash with Syria. Three-time champions Iran face Syria in Qatar with a quarter-final against Bahrain or pre-tournament favourites Japan up for grabs.

Along with holders Qatar, Iran are the only team left in the competition who went through the group stage with a 100 percent record. "We know the importance of this tournament for the people of Iran and for ourselves," Feyenoord's Jahanbakhsh said on Tuesday.

"We are doing our best to follow our dreams." Syria are in the knockout rounds for the first time and Iran are clear favourites, but Jahanbakhsh warned: "It's going to be very difficult, they are very physical."

"They only conceded one goal in the group phase and are very good defensively. "It is all about details," the 30-year-old former Brighton player, who captained Iran in their 1-0 group-stage win over Hong Kong, added.

"The biggest difference between the group phase and the knockouts is that if you make one mistake, you can easily go out." Iran's coach Amir Ghalenoei identified his Syrian counterpart, the experienced Argentine Hector Cuper — who guided Egypt to the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations final — as a formidable opponent.

Cuper called Iran one of the strongest teams at the tournament while his men squeezed into the knockout rounds with one win, a 1-0 victory over India, in three games. It was the only goal Syria have scored, but they have also only conceded once, in a defeat to Australia.

"We are optimistic and have big ambitions," the 68-year-old Cuper said. "I want to make the long-suffering Syrian people happy and put a smile on their faces." Syria, ranked 91 in the world to Iran's 21, will look to soak up pressure and hit their opponents on the break. "My players have the spirit and talent to change the game at any moment," warned Cuper. — AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752

Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
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Russian figure skater Valieva suspended four years for doping

LAUSANNE: Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva received a four-year ban from the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) Monday for failing a doping test prior to the 2022 Winter Olympics. A Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) investigation had found the teenager bore “no fault or negligence” for a failed test before the Beijing Olympics, where she won team gold aged 15.

But on Monday, CAS upheld an appeal by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). “A period of four years ineligibility is imposed on Ms Valieva,” CAS said. “All competitive results of Ms Valieva from 25 December 2021 are disqualified, with all the resulting consequences.”

WADA welcomed the ban but took aim at those who had doped Valieva, now 17. “The doping of children is unforgivable,” WADA said in a statement, urging “governments to consider passing legislation — as some have done already — making the doping of minors a criminal offense”.

By contrast, the Kremlin slammed what it called a “politicised” decision. “Of course, we don’t agree with it... From my point of view, of course, it’s politicised,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian news agencies.

Russia’s Olympic Committee (ROC) said the decision proved that “war has been declared on Russian sport and, as we see, all methods are good”. Valieva’s positive test raised questions not just about her guilt but how she was treated as a minor, the way the test was conducted and the value of the drug involved for enhancing performance.

In her defence, Valieva blamed “contamination by cutlery” shared with her grandfather, who was treated with trimetazidine after receiving an artificial heart, and who drove her to training every day. However doubt surrounds the value of trimetazidine due in particular to its “numerous side effects” ranging from “gait disorders” to “hallucinations”.

In Beijing in February 2022, Valieva became the first female skater to land a quadruple jump in Olympic competition, helping Russia secure team gold. The next day, she was told she had tested positive before the Games for trimetazidine, a drug used to treat angina but banned for athletes.

Nearly two years later, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have still not organized a medal ceremony for this event, to the great dismay of the American, Japanese and Canadian skaters who were beaten by the Russians.

United States officials called the CAS decision a a victory for clean athletes, but said justice had been “denied” by the

two years it had taken to resolve the case. “While any sense of true justice has been

denied by the unbelievable and unnecessary delay in this case, we are incredibly pleased for clean athletes that this sad saga has finally come to an end and hope they can find joy and satisfaction in the fact that their long wait for justice is over,” United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) chief executive Travis Tygart said. “At the same time, our hearts hurt for yet another Russian athlete who the system has failed.”

‘Crucial step’

From the start, the case has presented a dilemma. Valieva’s age should have guaranteed her confidentiality under WADA rules for “protected persons” younger than 16. The ISU is raising the lower age limit for its senior category from 15 to 17 from this year, citing the “physical, mental and emotional health” of competitors.

RUSADA tested the skater on December 25, 2021, as she won the Russian championships. They sent the sample to the WADA-accredited laboratory in Stockholm. The lab found a minute concentration of trimetazidine but, delayed by the COVID pandemic, the result was not delivered until the middle of the Olympics.

Under the pressure of suspicion and attention, Valieva cracked in the individual event in Beijing, stumbling four times in the free skate and finishing in tears as she tumbled from first to fourth. At the end of the year, RUSADA ruled that Valieva bore “no fault or negligence” for the positive test.

After being cleared by RUSADA, returned to competition, taking second place in the Russian championships at 2022. Last November, she won the Russian Grand Prix in

Valieva won the Grand Prix in spite of falling twice in the free skate, and could only finish third in the 2023 national championships.

On Monday, the Canadian Olympic Committee welcomed the CAS decision, calling it a “crucial step in this matter which has lasted for years” and saluting the perseverance of Canadian athletes. However, the IOC, which must now decide the consequences of the CAS decision, is in a delicate situation.

Unlike other sports such as athletics, the regulations of the International Skating Union only provide for collective disqualification in case of positive doping control of one of the athletes during the competition, not eight weeks before.

CAS pointed out that “the consequences linked to the retroactive disqualification of Ms Valieva from past events, including from the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022, were not within the scope of this arbitration procedure and will have to be examined by the sports organizations concerned”. And the Valieva case is not over yet as the skater can appeal to the Swiss Federal Court within 30 days, only for limited legal reasons, before the CAS decision becomes final. — AFP

Nuggets down Bucks in Rivers opener, Wolves roll Thunder

LOS ANGELES: Nikola Jokic scored a 25-point triple double as the Denver Nuggets handed new Milwaukee coach Doc Rivers a 113-107 defeat Monday in his first game in charge. The heavyweight showdown between the reigning NBA champions and the 2021 champion Bucks did not disappoint, with two-time Most Valuable Player Jokic dominating at both ends of the floor.

The Serbian star finished with 25 points, 16 rebounds and 12 assists to seal his 14th triple double of the season while making three steals and two blocks. He was given scoring support from Jamal Murray, who led with a game-high 35 points.

The Bucks, who appointed Rivers last week following the shock sacking of Adrian Griffin, were led by 29 points from Giannis Antetokounmpo while Damian Lillard finished with 18 points. Despite the loss, Rivers was encouraged by Milwaukee’s performance.

“Overall I was very happy,” Rivers said. “That fight is there. That’s something really encouraging moving forward.” In the top-of-the-table clash in the Western Conference, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander’s 37-point display was in vain as the Oklahoma City Thunder fell 107-101 to the Minnesota Timberwolves.

The two sides went into Monday’s game with identical 32-14 records having spent most of the season battling it out for first place in the West. That sense of rivalry was on full display in a game that swung back and forth with 24 lead changes before Minnesota pulled away in the closing stages, outscoring the Thunder 34-24 in the fourth quarter.

“We did a really good job of finishing this game, which we haven’t been doing recently,” Minnesota head coach Chris Finch said. “Hopefully we can build on it.” Anthony Edwards topped the Wolves scoring with 27 points while Karl-Anthony Towns finished with 21. All five Minnesota starters finished in double digits.

Elsewhere on Monday, the Boston Celtics bounced back from their blowout defeat to the Los Angeles Clippers with a battling 118-112 victory over the New Orleans Pelicans. The Eastern Conference-leading Celtics improved to 36-11 for the season courtesy of 28 points from Jayson Tatum, with Jaylen Brown adding 22 and Jrue Holiday 20.



DENVER: Bobby Portis of the Milwaukee Bucks drives against Peyton Watson and Reggie Jackson of the Denver Nuggets at Ball Arena on Jan 29, 2024. — AFP

‘New ways to win’

The Pelicans led for long periods of the game and were up by 17 in the second quarter before Boston conjured a 37-point fourth quarter to sweep past them. Derrick White was instrumental in the fightback for Boston, nailing 13 of his 17 points in the fourth quarter to drag the Celtics over the line.

“Things weren’t going well for us for most of the game, but we stuck together,” White said after the win. “When things aren’t going well it’s good to get a win. “It’s not always going to be perfect. We just gotta find new ways to win each and every game, and we did that today.”

Brandon Ingram (28 points) and Zion Williamson (26) led the Pelicans scoring. In Miami meanwhile, the Phoenix Suns snapped their two-game losing streak with a 118-105 defeat of the Heat. Phoenix star Devin Booker finished with 22 points while Kevin Durant added 20.

But the standout Phoenix performance came from Eric Gordon with 23 off the bench which included five three-pointers. In Cleveland, the

high-flying Clippers were brought down to earth with a 118-108 defeat to the Cavaliers.

The Clippers arrived for Monday’s match-up on a five-game unbeaten streak following their rout of Boston on Saturday. But despite a 30-point performance from Kawhi Leonard, the Clippers were unable to stop a steady flow of scoring from the Cavs’ balanced offense while the home side’s defense contained the Los Angeles line-up. Seven Cleveland players posted double-digit scoring totals, with Donovan Mitchell the pick with 28 points.

In Houston meanwhile, LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers stumbled to a 135-119 defeat to the Rockets in a game that saw tempers flare late on. Houston’s Dillon Brooks was called for a flagrant foul after striking James in the eye during the fourth quarter. James was one of three Lakers players to finish on 23 points, along with Anthony Davis and D’Angelo Russell.

In Portland, the Trail Blazers took full advantage of the injury absence of Philadelphia’s Joel Embiid to post a 130-104 win against a depleted Sixers line-up. — AFP

Saudi envoy pained by criticism from tennis legends

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Washington on Tuesday said she was disappointed by recent criticism from tennis legends Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova about Saudi money flowing into the sport. The retired players, winners of 18 Grand Slam singles titles each, wrote an opinion column in The Washington Post last week saying the Women’s Tennis Association should back away from talks about staging the WTA Finals in the Gulf kingdom.

In a response posted on social media, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud, the Saudi ambassador, said the article had “pained me deeply” and overlooked recent advances for women in Saudi Arabia. Navratilova and Evert “have turned their back on the very same women they have inspired and it is beyond disappointing”, Princess Reema wrote. She wrote that women “own more than 300,000 businesses, and roughly 25 percent of small and mid-size start-up companies”, which she said was comparable to the US.

Sport is a major component of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 economic and social reform agenda. Princess Reema on Tuesday said it was “part of a comprehensive program to be the best version of ourselves”. “It is not about you. It is about us,” she wrote.

Last year, the kingdom hosted its first ATP Tour event — the Next Gen ATP Finals in Jeddah — along with exhibition matches pitting Novak Djokovic against Carlos Alcaraz and Aryna Sabalenka against Ons Jabeur. Earlier this month Rafael Nadal, winner of 22 singles Grand Slams on the men’s side, was named ambassador for the Saudi Tennis Federation. The world’s biggest oil exporter has also spent huge sums luring star footballers and is due to hold the 2034 World Cup. It already hosts F1 and heavyweight boxing, and is in talks to take a prominent role in world golf. — AFP