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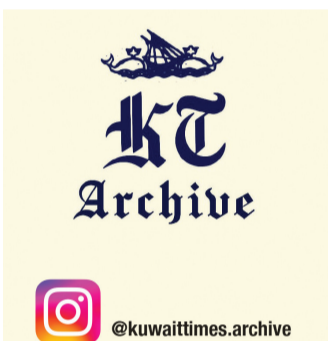


Part-time work permits launched

For nominal fees, expats can now apply to legally do outside work

Kuwait Times archives go social

KUWAIT: Kuwait Times opened up its archives on Thursday by launching a new account on Instagram — KT Archive (@kuwaittimes.archive), showcasing the rich history of Kuwait Times in documenting significant local and global events in Kuwait and around the world. Curating the account is Yousef Abu-Ghazaleh, the newest addition to the Kuwait Times team, who's in a niche of his own. Abu-Ghazaleh, a 25-year-old Kuwaiti, grew up in Kuwait before moving to the UK in 2016. (See Page 3)



By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Manpower on Thursday began issuing work permits allowing expatriate manpower to do part-time jobs officially on a wide-scale basis for the first time in the country, the authority said on its X account. The authority said that the issuance of the part-time work permit will be done through its Ashal platform, a Web-based online site of the manpower authority.

Based on the new program, expats living and working legally in the country are allowed to do part-time jobs, provided they obtain the approval of their official sponsors. It said part-time jobs must not exceed four hours daily, except for construction workers, who can work longer hours.

The authority said the main objectives of the program are "to develop the labor market, benefit businessmen and utilize the foreign labor force present in the country, thus contributing to addressing the demographic imbalances". Foreigners currently make up more than two-thirds of Kuwait's 4.5 million population and the government wants to reduce the number of expats to create a state of balance with native Kuwaitis.

The government has set up a ministerial committee to take and implement measures to achieve the demographic balance objective. The authority said expats must pay fees to obtain the work permits. They are required to pay KD 5 per month or KD 10 for three months, KD 20 for six

months or KD 30 for one year. Kuwaitis can do part-time jobs without any preconditions or fees, the authority added. The move is expected to dramatically cut the number of foreign workers recruited from outside the country.

Meanwhile, crackdowns in various areas including Farwaniya, Fahaheel, Mahboula, Mangaf, Kabd, Salmiya, Hawally, Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Jabriya led to the arrest of 559 violators of residency and work laws. The operation targeted a fake domestic helpers' office, resulting in the apprehension of three persons, along with six individuals managing two unlicensed warehouses. Legal actions are underway, with the offenders being referred to the appropriate authorities.

NEWS IN BRIEF

OPEC+ sticks to output cuts

VIENNA: An OPEC+ panel on Thursday reaffirmed the oil cartel's current output reduction strategy, supported by Saudi and Russian cuts, intended to boost flagging prices. In an effort to shore up prices, the OPEC+ oil alliance of 23 nations has implemented supply cuts of more than five million barrels per day since the end of 2022. In a statement following a meeting via videoconference, the Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee (JMMC) of OPEC+ stopped short of making any recommendations on its output policy. — AFP

UNRWA nominated for Nobel

OSLO: A Norwegian politician said Thursday that he has nominated the UN Palestinian refugee agency UNRWA for the Nobel Peace Prize. Labour MP Asmund Aukrust told the Dagbladet newspaper he had nominated the UN Relief and Works Agency "for its long-term work to provide vital support to Palestine and the region in general". "This work has been crucial for over 70 years, and even more vital in the last three months", said the politician who is vice-chairman of Norway's parliament's foreign affairs committee. — AFP

Cancer cases to soar 77% by 2050

GENEVA: The number of new cancer cases will rise to more than 35 million in 2050 — 77 percent higher than the figure in 2022, the World Health Organization's cancer agency warned Thursday. The WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) cited tobacco, alcohol, obesity and air pollution as key factors in the estimated rise. The most-developed countries are expected to record the greatest increases in case numbers, with an additional 4.8 million new cases predicted in 2050 compared with 2022 estimates, the WHO said. — AFP

Old-timer Facebook turns 20

SAN FRANCISCO: Founded 20 years ago as a simple hangout spot for young people, Facebook has since become a battle-hardened behemoth that — despite perceptions of being for boomers and parents — continues growing and growing. Launched as thefacebook.com by Mark Zuckerberg and three friends on Feb 4, 2004, the site was originally restricted to Harvard College students. — AFP

Mediators work for halt to Zionist genocide in Gaza

GAZA: Mediators pushed on with efforts for a Zionist-Hamas ceasefire as fighting raged in the besieged Gaza Strip on Thursday, deepening a dire humanitarian crisis. The Qatar-based leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, was expected in Cairo on Thursday or Friday for talks on a proposed truce. The group was reviewing a proposal for a six-week pause in its war with the Zionist entity and a hostage-prisoner exchange, a Hamas source told AFP, days after US, Egyptian and Qatari mediators met in Paris.

According to the health ministry in Gaza, 119 people were killed in the latest night of strikes, while aid and health workers have for days reported heavy fighting. "There is a massacre taking place right now," said Leo Cans of international aid group Doctors Without Borders. The UN also reported heavy bombardment across Gaza, particularly in Khan Yunis, while it said 184,000 more Palestinians from the city had registered to receive humanitarian assistance after fleeing their homes in recent days.

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GAZA: Relatives cry as bodies of Palestinians killed in Zionist bombings lie outside the morgue of the Al-Najjar Hospital in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Feb 1, 2024. — AFP

New blast off Yemen after US strikes Houthis

DUBAI: A new explosion was reported off Yemen on Thursday after overnight US strikes targeted 10 attack drones and a ground control station belonging to the Iran-backed Houthi rebels. The explosion, reported by the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations agency, happened near a vessel west of the port city of Hodeida. No damage to the ship or injuries to the crew was reported.

There was no immediate claim of

responsibility for the blast, which followed a flurry of missile strikes by the Houthis who have harassed Red Sea shipping for months, triggering reprisal attacks by the United States and Britain. Early Thursday in Yemen, US forces targeted a "Houthi UAV ground control station and 10 Houthi one-way UAVs" that "presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and the US Navy ships in the region", a CENTCOM statement said, using an abbreviation for unmanned aerial vehicles or drones.

CENTCOM earlier announced that the USS Carney had shot down an anti-ship ballistic missile fired by the Houthis towards the Gulf of Aden, and that three Iranian drones were downed

Continued on Page 6



SANAA: Armed supporters of Houthi rebels attend a rally in solidarity with Hamas' armed resistance against the Zionist entity on Feb 1, 2024. — AFP

Centuries-old mosque torn down in Delhi

NEW DELHI: Bulldozers have knocked down a centuries-old mosque in India's capital, a member of the building's managing committee said Thursday, during a demolition drive to remove "illegal" structures from a forest reserve. The demolition comes at a sensitive time in India with nationalist activists emboldened in their

long campaign for the replacement of several prominent mosques with Hindu temples.

The Masjid Akhonji in New Delhi, which its caretakers say is around 600 years old, was home to 22 students enrolled in an Islamic boarding school. It was torn down on Tuesday in a forest of Mehrauli, an affluent neighborhood dotted with centuries-old ruins from settlements predating modern Delhi.

Mohammad Zaffar, a member of the mosque's managing committee, told AFP that it had not received any prior notice before a demolition carried out "in the dark of the night".

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DELHI: People gather near barriers placed by police at an entrance point to the site of a mosque demolished by local authorities in the capital's Mehrauli area on Feb 1, 2024. — AFP



Mojo app: An embodiment of innovation, social commerce

Powered by BNK, Mojo teams up with Art N Dine to showcase inner beauty



Abdulaziz Al-Bahar making an artwork. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Art equipment prepared by Art N Dine at Volvo Studio for participants.

By Ghadeer Ghloum

KUWAIT: Yearning for a platform that seamlessly blends social interaction with the convenience of e-commerce? Look no further than Mojo, a revolutionary company that is passionate about skincare, makeup and haircare. Imagine being able to shop through videos, where you can see the products right before your eyes. As you browse through the Mojo application, not only will you find the products you love, but will also earn reward points and a percentage of every sale that comes through your reviews!

Powered by BNK, Mojo teamed up with Art N Dine to showcase its application and materialize inner beauty through painting with Art N Dine's artist Maha Mazen in an art event hosted at Volvo Studio on Wednesday.

Abdulaziz Mohammed Al-Bahar, founder and CEO of Mojo, explained to Kuwait Times that Mojo's mission is simple yet powerful, as it aims to connect consumers to products in the easiest and most enjoyable way possible. "While browsing through our application, you will earn reward points that are like money in your pocket, ready to be used in any purchase you make. No previous purchase or conditions are required. The points are automatically accumulated as soon as you access the application. As you explore, you can see your account balance growing in Kuwaiti dinar or Omani or Saudi riyals," he said. Bahar further elaborated that when a client makes a purchase, the product will be delivered on the same day or the next day, ensuring seamless and timely shopping experience for users of the Mojo app. Earning rewards is not limited to browsing through the app, as he added: "We offer additional opportunities for you to earn money by writing authentic reviews or recording videos about the products you have purchased. For every sale made through your video-recorded review, you not only receive a bonus reward, but also a percentage of the sale. Also, we understand the importance of privacy, thus, we offer an option to keep your reviews visible only to your friends on



Abdulaziz Mohammed Al-Bahar, founder and CEO of Mojo application



Komal Tak painting an artwork.

the application. Even in this setting, users can still earn a percentage of every single sale that happens based on their review."

Bahar concluded by saying the Mojo team is dedicated to collaborating with local brands such as Art N Dine to contribute to the development of the local community. "We understand the importance of self-care, and we believe that art and self-expression play a vital role in nurturing inner beauty. That's why with Art N Dine we provide a platform for those who join us today to blend their inner and outer beauty together through art," he said.

Mazen, a full-time abstract artist at Art N Dine, told Kuwait Times: "At Art N Dine we tend to do multiple events. Today, we are present the Mojo app event that is taking place at Volvo Studio. At such public events, we tend to go for a simplified kind of art in order to facilitate the experience for the participants and provide an enjoyable experience, as I go with them step by step showing them how lovely and enjoyable art is — anyone can

paint." She also emphasized the link between Mojo and Art N Dine, as she said beauty is the core element combining both parties.

Komal Tak, a doctor at Jaber Hospital and a participating member at the event, shared: "I find it a pleasure attending the Art N Dine event today. I am here because participating in such events gives me a sense of meditation while doing some work of art, as it is very soothing and calming."

Another participant Noura Al-Otobi, who is a dietitian, added: "I heard of this event from my friend Sara, who is also attending the event. I have always loved art, but did not give enough time, so I am here today to push myself forward as art is so relaxing to me." Sara Al-Jassar, a program coordinator, said: "I am here today firstly because my new year's resolution is to explore more options while I'm still young, because usually I go back home after work and waste my day without being productive. Hence, I decided to enjoy my youth and grow in different fields and artistic events like this one."



Maha Mazen, an abstract artist giving instructions during the event.



Volvo cars are displayed at Volvo Studio during the event.



Gifts from Mojo inside a Volvo car's trunk.

Weyay Bank sponsors GUST start-ups event

KUWAIT: Weyay Bank reaffirms its commitment to shaping Kuwait's financial landscape by championing the GUST Showcase Event, sponsoring start-ups, and fostering business opportunities.

This collaboration is a cornerstone in empowering the innovative endeavors of Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST)

students, reflecting Weyay Bank's dedication to nurturing young entrepreneurs and cultivating Kuwait's emerging talents. The GUST Showcase Event, made possible by Weyay Bank's unwavering support, serves as a platform for budding entrepreneurs to transform novel ideas into viable start-ups. Amal Al-Duwaisan, Deputy Head at Weyay Bank, served as a panelist, sharing insights into her impactful journey within Kuwait's digital banking entrepreneurial ecosystem, highlighting challenges faced, and strategies employed for overcoming them.

"Empowering aspiring entrepreneurs is at the core of Weyay Bank's commitment, and the GUST Showcase Event provides a pivotal platform for this purpose. I am delighted to have been part

of the event as a panelist, sharing my journey in Kuwait's digital banking entrepreneurial ecosystem. It's essential to shed light on the challenges we face and the strategies we employ to navigate them, fostering a supportive community for innovation and growth," said Amal Al-Duwaisan, Deputy Head at Weyay Bank. Weyay Bank exemplifies its dedication to Kuwait's youth, aiming to cultivate their capabilities and pave the way for future success in diverse career fields.

As Weyay Bank continues to champion the spirit of entrepreneurship, this collaboration with GUST is more than just sponsorship—it's a visionary investment in Kuwait's youth, ensuring they are well-equipped to lead and innovate both locally and globally.



Kuwait Times archives go social

Archivist Yousef Abu-Ghazaleh portrays significant moments in history, one post at a time



Kuwait Times archivist Yousef Abu-Ghazaleh at work in the newspaper's archive room. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



By Shakir Reshamwala

KUWAIT: Kuwait Times opened up its archives on Thursday by launching a new account on Instagram — KT Archive (@kuwaittimes.archive), showcasing the rich history of Kuwait Times in documenting significant local and global events in Kuwait and around the world.

Curating the account is Yousef Abu-Ghazaleh, the newest addition to the Kuwait Times team, who's in a niche of his own. Abu-Ghazaleh, a 25-year-old Kuwaiti, grew up in Kuwait before moving to the UK in 2016. He graduated from the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2020 with a BA in Politics & International Relations



and an MSc in Politics, Violence & Crime. He returned to Kuwait in Oct 2023.

Abu-Ghazaleh has always been passionate about history, largely owing to his Palestinian background, and aims to bring that passion to life through the archives of Kuwait Times. "I've always been a history buff, so when I heard about an opening at Kuwait Times, I applied and was accepted. I have been impressed for a while by Kuwait Times' content, so it's a match



made in heaven!" he enthused.

The new account will cover major historical events both in Kuwait and abroad. "Kuwait Times was founded in the same year as Kuwait's independence (in 1961), so it served as a mirror for not only society on the inside, but what was happening in the world around Kuwait," Abu-Ghazaleh said. "The headlines today are the same as in the past — violence in Palestine, corruption, etc. History is repeating itself. We also have our own



personal histories to reckon with," he added.

Abu-Ghazaleh believes newspapers serve as a country's journal, so having the archives properly looked after is important. "People should know where they've come from and where they are going. I want our readers to join me on a journey back in time to rediscover old stories. This is a place to celebrate history through storytelling, one page at a time. There are thousands of pages to go through, so let's get going!"

PAAET may enroll foreign students with tuition fees

KUWAIT: On the lines of admission of international students at Kuwait University with tuition fees, the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) is also planning to admit foreign students for the new academic year with tuition fees. A proposal has been prepared in this regard which will be presented to the Authority's board of directors for consideration and approval.

Informed sources said that in the PAAET's colleges and institutes, the turnout of Kuwaitis for some of its specialties is not very promising and therefore many seats remained vacant, indicating that these vacancies will be filled in the second semester. If the vacancies continue to remain, non-Kuwaiti students will be selected from applicants from Kuwaiti high school graduates.

"PAAET, according to its new proposal, believes that accepting international students for free is a burden on the authority's budget and public expenses, and international students can be accepted with tuition fees as that will help the authority's budget, similar to what is in force at Kuwait University and many Arab and international universities," they said.

The faculties of nursing and health sciences in the authority have a huge turnout of international students in the past. The proposal includes that a



fee of KD 100 for a semester and admitting international students with tuition fees will entail new organizational measures, including the allocation of seats for expatriates in each semester.

The sources pointed out that the faculties of basic education and business studies may not have seats for international students due to the presence of a large number of Kuwaiti students registered while seats can be allocated to international students in the College of Technological Studies along with the faculties of nursing and health sciences.

Kuwait Deputy FM meets German, Yemeni envoys

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah received on Thursday the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to

Kuwait Hans-Christian Freiherr von Reibnitz and Ambassador of Yemen to Kuwait Ali Mansour Bin Sefa'a. During the meeting with German ambassador, both sides discussed ways of strengthening bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and issues of mutual concerns.

During the meeting with Yemeni Ambassador, the officials discussed the brotherly relations between the two countries and ways of enhancing them, in addition to the latest regional and international developments. — KUNA



Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister with German Ambassador (left) and Yemeni Ambassador (right).

Municipality: 6 parks designated for national celebrations

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality said on Thursday that six public parks have been allocated to hold events and activities to celebrate the 63rd anniversary of the National Day and the 33rd anniversary of Liberation Day this month. The celebrations will be held in cooperation and coordination with the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources.

The municipality confirmed in a press release to the Public Relations Department that the continuation of daily work has started for cleaning departments to prepare places and sites designated for holding activities and events associated with the celebrations of national holidays.

It explained that the teams of public hygiene departments in the municipality carried out cleaning work for those public parks and distributed containers, in addition to raising the state's flag on the mast



of the main entrance to the parks where the events will be held during this February.

The municipality stated that its field teams continue cleaning work daily, in addition to carrying out several inspection tours during the month for cleaning teams. This is related to cleaning work and distributing containers at the sites and places for celebrations be it in front of the official buildings of the governorates, the coastal strip, Mubarakiya markets, the Red Palace and the city of Ahmadi, it added. — KUNA



KUNA chief, Bulgarian ambassador discuss media cooperation

KUWAIT: Director-General of Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) Dr Fatma Al-Salem received on Thursday Bulgarian Ambassador to Kuwait Dimitar Dimitrov and discussed means to boost media cooperation between the two friendly countries. Dr Al-Salem emphasized, during the meeting, the significance of media cooperation between the two countries, especially at the level of official media institutions, including news agencies of both countries. — KUNA

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: A pensive cat watches as pigeons feed and frolic in the backyard of a dilapidated building in Kuwait. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Awadhi: Significant rise in blood donation campaigns in Kuwait

Indian Embassy holds blood donation camp jointly with Blood Bank, IDF

KUWAIT: Minister of Health Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi said on Thursday that the percentage of blood from donation campaigns in Kuwait has increased from 15 percent to 24 percent. Compared to previous years, the number of blood bags collected in 2023 reached 93,000 blood units, an increase of 5 percent over the year 2022.

Minister Al-Awadhi expressed his appreciation in a press statement following the launch of a blood donation campaign held by the Blood Transfusion Services Department at the Ministry of Health in cooperation with the Indian Doctors Forum (IDF) in the presence of Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika at the Adan Hospital.

In addition to Dr Al-Awadhi and Dr Swaika, director of the Adan Hospital Dr Hussein Jasser, Director of Kuwait Central Blood Bank Dr Reem Al-Radwan, Medical Director of Kuwait Central Blood Bank Dr Hanan Al-Awadhi and IDF President Dr Diwakar Chaluvaiyah were also present during the campaign. Al-Awadhi said the ministry values the important humanitarian and community role being played by the Blood Transfusion Services Department, extending his thanks and appreciation to donors and those in charge of blood donation campaigns.

Al-Awadhi explained that this campaign is the second organized by the Indian Doctors Forum in Kuwait as it comes within the framework of joint

cooperation between the MoH, represented by the Department of Blood Transfusion Services on the one hand, and between ministries of state, official and civil institutions and civil society institutions on the other hand. This cooperation embodies the spirit of joint social responsibility, he said.

Director of the Blood Transfusion Services Department, Dr Reem Radwan, extended her sincere thanks, appreciation and gratitude to the citizens and all communities residing in Kuwait.

A large number of members from the Indian community participated in the event as donors. Every year, several thousand Indian citizens working in Kuwait selflessly donate blood. The camp showcased the readiness of the Indian community to contribute to Kuwait's requirements, according to a press release issued by the Indian Embassy.

The Indian Embassy, Indian Doctors Forum and various Indian community associations in Kuwait organize blood donation and free medical camps in Kuwait from time to time. In 2023, Embassy along-with IDF organized three free medical camps. Over 50 blood donation camps were held by various Indian associations in Kuwait in 2023. The event also highlighted the contribution of the Indian community in the medical field. Currently, there are a large number of Indian doctors, paramedical and nurses from India working in both government and private hospitals of Kuwait.



KUWAIT: Minister of Health Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi inaugurates the blood donation campaign as Dr Swaika and other officials look on.



Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi, Dr Swaika and other officials visit the donors.

Children's health top priority, says MoH official

KUWAIT: The Assistant Undersecretary for Public Health Affairs at the Ministry of Health Dr Al-Mundhir Al-Hasawi said that the ministry pays great attention to the health and rights of children, and this is evident in many of the achievements it has made including the establishment of an office concerned with child protection. Dr Al-Hasawi was delivering a speech during the opening of the First Kuwait International Multidisciplinary Pediatrics Conference on Thursday. The conference discusses the latest developments related to pediatrics and sub-specialties in this field. Al-Hasawi added that the conference includes 42 scientific lectures and six specialized scientific workshops. An elite group of doctors from around the world will deliver lectures to enhance benefit in the scientific and medical fields and discuss matters of common interest to develop medical performance.

He pointed out that the conference discusses the uses of artificial intelligence in the medical field due to its importance in improving the diagnosis of diseases, accelerating research, and improving the management of medical records. He pointed out that the conference represents an opportunity to exchange expertise and experiences and transfer knowledge between researchers and specialists in the field of pediatrics.

It also comes in line with the ministry's approach to encouraging training and developing intellectual capabilities with the aim of achieving sustainable development goals and Kuwait's plan to build human capabilities. With regard to child protection, Al-Hasawi said that the ministry has allocated a 24-hour hotline (147) to receive complaints, observations and reports related to violations of children's rights and deal with them confidentially



Dr Mohammad Al-Hamdan (right) honors Dr Al-Mundhir Al-Hasawi.

ly and immediately to ensure the protection of the informant's identity data. He stated that the ministry has opened the intensive care unit at the Amiri Children's Hospital and is also in the process of operating the maternity and childhood building in the Adan Hospital expansion project, which includes more than 600 beds to serve the southern region of the country.

For his part, the Pediatric Emergency Medicine Consultant and Head of the Faculty of Pediatrics at the Kuwait Institute for Medical Specialties, the Chairman of the Conference, Dr Mohammad Al-Hamdan, said in a similar speech that the conference aims to exchange experiences and modern and advanced means to develop the field of pediatrics among the elite of researchers and distinguished people.

Al-Hamdan explained that this conference is the result of cooperation between national competencies from various specialties concerned with child care, such as internal medicine, general surgery, and other supporting specialties. He pointed out that the conference program, which will last for five days, has been prepared to cover the latest developments and scientific developments in various specialties to enhance continuing medical education in an environment conducive to education and interaction. —KUNA



A group photo of the participants of the conference.



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Drought emergency declared in Barcelona

Myanmar enters fourth year of post-coup crisis

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BOHORODYCHNE, Ukraine: This aerial photograph shows a ruined church and other destructions in the village of Bohorodychne, Donetsk region, on January 27, 2024. — AFP photos

EU strikes €50bn Ukraine aid deal

Orban abruptly backs down from opposition without securing any promises

BRUSSELS: European Union leaders on Thursday overcame months of opposition from Hungarian leader Viktor Orban to agree 50 billion euros (\$54 billion) of aid for Ukraine, in a move hailed as a strong message to Russia. The deal to keep funds flowing to Ukraine comes as doubts over support from Kyiv's Western backers have buoyed Russian President Vladimir Putin, nearly two years into his invasion of the neighboring country.

"The message is clear," said French President Emmanuel Macron after the Brussels summit wrapped up. "Russia cannot count on any fatigue from Europeans in their support for Ukraine."

In an abrupt about-face at the start of the gathering, Orban agreed to drop his veto on the four-year package for Kyiv in the face of intense pressure from the EU's other 26 leaders. The Hungarian nationalist appeared to come away largely empty-handed — securing only the promise of a possible review on the spending in two years.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hailed the deal in a video address to the EU leaders as "a clear signal that Ukraine will withstand and that Europe will withstand".

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the EU decision could assist US President Joe Biden in convincing reluctant Republicans in Congress to pass Washington's own

\$60-billion proposal for support for Ukraine. "I hope that the message that we're sending out today and the discussions we're having today is helping him," Scholz said. The EU money will plug holes in the Ukrainian government's budget to allow it to pay salaries and services, as its outgunned soldiers battle to hold back Moscow's forces.

'Orban fatigue'

Orban — Russia's closest ally in the EU — had sparked fury from his counterparts in the bloc by thwarting a deal on the aid in December. Thursday's talks were expected again to see hours of protracted political arm-wrestling but a deal was swiftly announced after Orban met beforehand with the leaders of Germany, France, Italy and the EU institutions. "He gave some ground," said one European diplomat. "He saw that people were growing irritated, that there was a line not to cross."

Orban had been accused of holding Ukraine's future hostage in a bid to blackmail Brussels into releasing billions of euros for Hungary frozen pending reforms by Budapest. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said the answer was "a simple no" when asked if Hungary's prime minister had won any promises to get the blocked financing from the EU.

In an apparent face-saving measure,

Orban claimed he had instead got a guarantee that "Hungary's money would not end up in Ukraine". Orban's opposition over Ukraine had exasperated EU leaders long frustrated at dealing with his role as a spoiler in the bloc.

Warning of growing "Orban fatigue" in Brussels, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said ahead of the summit it was time for the Hungarian leader "to decide if he is a part of our community". Other leaders insisted that if Orban did not drop his opposition, they would club together as 26 countries to keep aid flowing to Ukraine's government. But with Kyiv facing possible budget shortfalls by spring, that option would have taken more time.

Farm protests

The latest EU showdown took place against the backdrop of swelling protests by European farmers, who clogged roads around the summit with 1,300 tractors in a show of strength, lighting fires and pulling down a city statue.

While the focus in the room was Orban, outside the nearby European Parliament angry farmers burnt tyres as they did their best to make sure their grievances were heard. Von der Leyen announced that Brussels would put forward plans to ease rules and red tape criticised



BRUSSELS: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (left), European Council President Charles Michel, France's President Emmanuel Macron, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (third right), Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz attend a meeting on the sidelines of a European Council meeting.

by farmers protesting across Europe.

Once the Ukraine aid was agreed, leaders turned more to the question of the future of EU military support for Kyiv. Accusations have been levelled that key EU nations such as France, Italy and Spain are not pulling their weight on arming Ukraine.

Scholz, whose country is the largest European donor to Ukraine, has called for others to lay out their military support and do more to help Kyiv. "We wanted to discuss the question: Does every member state do enough?" he said. "In my opinion, not all member states are doing enough." — AFP

Dior bag tests S Korean leader's election hopes

SEOUL: Hidden camera footage apparently showing South Korea's first lady accepting a luxury designer handbag has engulfed President Yoon Suk Yeol in controversy, threatening his party's April election prospects. Dubbed the "Dior bag scandal" by local papers, it has triggered a slump in Yoon's already low approval ratings and set off a firestorm in his party, just months out from the key polls where they hope to win back a parliamentary majority.

An expensive gift

A left-leaning pastor, who disapproves of Yoon's hawkish North Korea policy and claims to be concerned about the first lady's influence on the administration, used a wristwatch to record himself presenting Kim Keon Hee with a \$2,200 designer handbag.

The first lady, a self-professed animal lover best known internationally for her work pushing South Korea to ban dog meat, is heard telling the pastor: "Please don't buy an expensive item like this". But she is not seen returning the bag in the footage, first released last year by a left-wing YouTube channel critical of Yoon. The pastor has also claimed he presented her with expensive cosmetic items as a gift at a previous meeting.

The gift would violate South Korean law banning public officials and their spouses from accepting gifts worth more than \$750. The president's office declined an AFP request for comment. An official from Yoon's office has told the Yonhap News Agency that the gift was being "stored according to the relevant regulations".

Why now?

For weeks, the ruling party ignored the bag incident, and neither the president nor his wife have addressed it publicly. But a member of Yoon's party, Kim Kyung-yul, last month likened the situation to Marie Antoinette, the French queen known for her lavish lifestyle.

Local media reports speculated that Yoon was livid and wanted to remove the party's leader over it, even as other lawmakers lined up to defend the first lady, decrying a "smear campaign" and blaming the pastor's "foul intentions".

Concerns about power

Pastor Choi Jae-young, who is in favour of better ties with Pyongyang and has visited the North many times in the past, says he decided to film his meeting with the first lady after becoming concerned about her power within the president's office.

He claimed at a press conference to have seen Kim direct the appointment of a senior finance official in a phone conversation during an earlier meeting. "I was appalled from seeing Kim exercising power as if she were in charge of official appointments," Choi said.

The YouTube channel filmed the entire purchase of the Dior bag at a luxury store in Seoul, to demonstrate how much it cost, before the pastor presents it to Kim. Prosecutors have launched an investigation into Choi, local reports said, after he was sued for breaking and entering and obstruction of justice by a civic group.



SEOUL: In this file photo, South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol (center left) and his wife Kim Keon Hee (center right) cheer during a ceremony. — AFP

Not first time

While secret filming was used in "trapping" the first lady, she "received an item she should not have received", a column in the widely read Dong-A Ilbo newspaper said Tuesday. "I wonder whether there has ever been as much public interest in a Dior bag before," the column said.

It is not the first time Kim has faced public scrutiny. During Yoon's presidential campaign, she was forced to apologize over falsified credentials. She has also faced accusations of stock manipulation, with the opposition-controlled legislature passing a special bill mandating a probe that was later vetoed by her husband.

But those claims have failed to capture the public's imagination like the handbag video, attorney and political commentator Yoo Jung-hoon told AFP, likely because "stock manipulation by nature involves complex legal and

technical terms" not as easily grasped. "Everyone knows Dior and there's even direct footage of the meeting, making it very straightforward for the public to digest," he said.

Long silence

The "Dior bag scandal" has hit Yoon's already low approval ratings, which analysts say could hurt his party's prospects in April. About 70 percent of people believe he needs to address the issue, according to a recent survey by local broadcaster YTN.

The incident could have been contained if Yoon had explained it earlier, but it could now "chip away both at Yoon's and his party's approval ahead of the April elections", commentator Yoo said. The first lady herself has not spoken publicly for over a month, even when lawmakers approved in early January a dog meat ban — a significant PR victory for her, after her long campaign. — AFP

UN experts decry killing, silencing of journalists in Gaza

GENEVA: UN rights experts voiced alarm Thursday at soaring numbers of journalists killed in the Gaza war, decrying an apparent "deliberate" Zionist strategy to silence critical reporting. "Rarely have journalists paid such a heavy price for just doing their job as those in Gaza now," the five experts said in a statement. United Nations reports indicate that at least 122 journalists and other media workers have been killed and many others injured in the Gaza Strip since the Zionist entity launched its nearly five-month military campaign in the Palestinian territory.

Four Zionist journalists have also died on October 7 when Hamas attacked border Zionist communities and military bases, while Zionist shelling has killed three journalists on the Lebanese side of their border. "We are alarmed at the extraordinarily high numbers of journalists and media workers who have been killed, attacked, injured and detained in the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly in Gaza, in recent months," the experts said.

The independent experts, who are appointed by the UN Human Rights Council but do not speak on behalf of the United Nations, said they had received "disturbing reports that, despite being clearly identifiable in jackets and helmets marked 'press' or travelling in well-marked press vehicles, journalists have come under attack".

This, they warned, "would seem to indicate that the killings, injury, and detention are a deliberate strategy by Zionist forces to obstruct the media and silence critical reporting". "Targeted attacks and killings of journalists are war crimes." — AFP

International

Myanmar enters fourth year of post-coup crisis

Capital goes into 'silent strike' in display of unity against ruling junta

YANGON: Soldiers patrolled the deserted streets of Myanmar's largest city Thursday, three years after a coup ended a short-lived experiment with democracy and as the embattled junta faces growing challenges to its rule.

Streets and markets in commercial hub Yangon were largely empty, AFP reporters said, as opponents of the military called for people to stay indoors in a "silent strike" against the coup.

In the colonial-era downtown — which once thronged with huge democracy protests — there was a heavy military presence, with soldiers carrying machine guns on patrol and manning checkpoints. A procession of around 100 monks holding pro-military banners and religious flags passed down one road, stirring the largely quiet atmosphere in the city of eight million people. "I feel satisfied to see there are not many people out in the streets," one office worker in Yangon told AFP. "It is the proof of our unity against the coup," she said, requesting anonymity for security reasons.

On the eve of the anniversary of the coup, the junta extended by six months the state of emergency it declared on February 1, 2021 when it rounded up Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her party.

The military claimed widespread fraud had taken place during polls weeks before, when Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) had trounced a military-backed rival in a vote observers had concluded was largely free and fair.

Across the country, huge marches against the coup were met with a brutal and sustained crackdown that sent thousands of protesters seeking ways to fight back. Three years on, anti-coup "People's Defence Forces" have enlisted tens of thousands of young recruits and are taking the fight to the junta across swathes of the country.

The junta has torched villages, carried out extrajudicial killings and used air strikes and artillery bombardments to punish communities opposed to its rule, opponents and rights groups say. In the northern jade and ruby mining hub of Mogoke, the scene of recent fighting, the streets were almost deserted on Thursday. "Some residents left to other towns lately because of fighting. People are scared but still want to show solidarity," a resident said.

Bloody quagmire

Open dissent on the streets of major urban centers has been all but stamped out by the junta, but across swathes of the country the military is struggling to

crush PDF groups resisting its rule. And in late October, an alliance of ethnic minority fighters launched a surprise offensive in northern Shan state, capturing swathes of territory and taking control of lucrative trade routes to China.

A Beijing-brokered peace deal has paused the fighting in the north, but the alliance has largely kept its recent gains and clashes continue elsewhere. The success of the offensive and the military's failure to mount a counter-attack has dented morale among low- and mid-level officers, according to several military sources contacted by AFP, all of whom requested anonymity.

On Wednesday, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, who has been criticized by his supporters over recent battlefield failures, said the military would do "whatever it takes" to crush opposition to its rule. A joint statement from the EU, United States, Britain, Australia, Canada and several other countries condemned "the military regime's ongoing atrocities and human rights violations".

'Somber'

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called Thursday for an end to violence in Myanmar and a return to democracy on the "somber anniversary" of the putsch. More than 4,400 people have been



YANGON: An almost empty street is pictured near the Shwe Dagon Pagoda during a "silent strike" to protest and to mark the third anniversary of the military coup in Yangon on February 1, 2024. — AFP

killed in the military's crackdown on dissent and over 25,000 arrested, according to a local monitoring group.

The junta has also targeted media deemed critical of the coup and subsequent crackdown, revoking licenses and arresting and jailing dozens of journalists. With 43 journalists languishing behind bars

last year, Myanmar was the world's second-worst jailer of journalists in 2023, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, behind only China.

Diplomatic efforts to end the conflict led by the United Nations and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations regional bloc have made no headway. — AFP

Bhutto heir forging 3rd way in polarized Pakistan politics

BATKHELA, Pakistan: Brandishing an oversized arrow and rallying support in Pakistan's northern tribal region, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari claims he is the only candidate pointing a way out of polarized politics ahead of next Thursday's election.

The emblem of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) he inherited from his mother Benazir Bhutto — assassinated in 2007 — symbolizes "the self-respecting", "the trustworthy" and "victory", he told followers crammed in a rain-slick park.

"We are promising to end the traditional politics of hatred and division, and appealing to the people of Pakistan to choose a new way of thinking," he told AFP, presiding from a wooden throne over a campaign slated to finish third when ballots are cast on February 8.

"We accept that people have different points of view. But that doesn't mean that you have to develop a personal animosity," he said in northwestern Balochistan city — 130 kilometers (80 miles) from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.

'Vendetta' election

Around 127 million are eligible to vote in a fractious poll many analysts describe as heavily influenced by the military, who directly ruled Pakistan for decades and continue to act as political kingmakers. Popular former prime minister Imran Khan is in jail, barred from standing, and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party has been hamstrung by a

crackdown since he mounted a campaign of confrontation against the top brass.

Three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, meanwhile, returned from self-imposed exile and saw a myriad of convictions evaporate — a sign his party has been anointed by the generals to lead the next government.

With each side decrying the other as traitors, Bhutto Zardari is trying to position himself as a moderate outside the melee — pledging truth and reconciliation, release of political prisoners and an end to "the politics of vendetta". "Until we develop fundamental rules of the game, or a code of conduct for how politics should be done in this country, then we'll keep facing problems," he said.

Pakistan is enjoying one of its longest periods without direct army rule, but analysts say the military has been again intervening in civilian affairs at unprecedented levels in recent years. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto — Bilawal's grandfather and Pakistan's ninth prime minister — was deposed by an army coup and hanged in 1979. "The influence of the military establishment is something that is a reality in Pakistan", the 35-year-old grandson said. But, "if the politicians get their house in order", he believes the generals will retire to their barracks.

A reformist scion

The dynastic PPP and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) parties have historically held a duopoly on power since Pakistan's 1947 founding. While cricket star Khan benefited from military backing when his PTI party surged to power in 2018, his rise was also seen as a sea change by the youth bucking a tradition of dynastic politics.

Holding forth to followers, the millennial Bhutto Zardari stood at a podium plastered with the image of his mother Benazir — the first woman prime min-



MALAKAND: Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari waves to supporters during an election campaign rally on January 31, 2024. — AFP

ister of a Muslim nation, who was killed by a bomb blast as she campaigned for elections.

Bhutto Zardari was groomed for leadership after her death, but he sees no contradiction in being a privileged scion while also casting himself as a reformist. "The people of Pakistan don't see me as part of a dynastic movement, they see me as part of a tradition of a democratic movement," he insists.

Polling suggests the democratic movement is unlikely to carry him to office, with a December Gallup Pakistan survey putting him about 20 points behind both rivals in approval ratings. Limited support outside their powerbase southern Sindh province also suggests they are in danger of being relegated to a regional party.

PPP's last leadership stint started in 2008 — considered a sympathy vote after Benazir's assassination. More recently Bilawal Bhutto acted as foreign minister, with PPP the junior partner in a PML-N headed coalition which ousted Khan. — AFP

Indian state chief minister arrested in land scam case

NEW DELHI: Officers from India's financial investigation agency arrested a state chief minister Wednesday in an alleged land scam investigation that allies of the detained man said was politically motivated. Hemant Soren, the top elected official of eastern Jharkhand state, was detained by the Enforcement Directorate after hours of questioning. He is accused of money laundering in a case stemming from the alleged illegal sale of public land.

Rajesh Thakur, a lawmaker from a party in coalition with Soren's Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) party, told AFP the chief minister submitted his resignation to the state's governor late in the evening. A JMM lawmaker, who requested anonymity, told AFP that Soren was soon afterwards taken into custody by officials from the investigation agency.

Soren's arrest also followed raids on Monday by the Enforcement Directorate on his official residence in New Delhi. Local media reports said investigators seized two luxury cars and 3,600,000 rupees (\$43,360) in cash. Soren's party told journalists that their leader had been unjustly targeted by the agency at the direction of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. — AFP

Mediators work for halt to...

Continued from Page 1

More than 30,000 displaced people in schools around the city's Nasser Hospital are facing a lack of food, water, medicine and baby formula, said health ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra. As Qatari and Egyptian-led mediation efforts intensified, Haniyeh was due in Cairo to discuss a truce proposal thrashed out in Paris at the weekend with CIA chief William Burns.

A Hamas source told AFP the three-stage plan would start with an initial six-week halt to the fighting that would see more aid deliveries into the Gaza Strip. Only "women, children and sick men over 60" held by Gaza militants would be freed during that stage in exchange for Palestinian prisoners in the Zionist entity, the source said, requesting anonymity due to the sensitivity of the talks.

There would also be "negotiations around the withdrawal of (Zionist) forces", with possible additional phases involving more hostage-prisoner exchanges, said the source. The Zionist entity's widening offensive has killed at least 27,019 people in Gaza, most of them women and children. The UN Conference on Trade and Development said tens

of billions of dollars would be required to rebuild Gaza, which "currently is uninhabitable" as half its structures are damaged or destroyed.

Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ruled out withdrawing troops from Gaza and has repeatedly vowed to destroy Hamas. Netanyahu has also opposed releasing "thousands" of Palestinian prisoners as part of any deal. With scores of Zionist captives still trapped in Gaza, there has been mounting criticism of Netanyahu's government that has triggered street protests and calls for an early election.

For people in Gaza, access to aid has been further hampered by a controversy surrounding the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, after the Zionist entity accused several of its staff of involvement in the Hamas attack. The claims last week saw several donor countries, led by key Zionist ally the United States, freeze funding for the agency.

United Nations chief Antonio Guterres told a UN committee he had "met with donors to listen to their concerns and to outline the steps we are taking". Netanyahu told a meeting of UN ambassadors in Jerusalem that UNRWA had been "totally infiltrated" by Hamas and called for other agencies to replace it. UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said that "if the funding remains suspended, we will most likely be forced to shut down our operations by end of February not only in Gaza but also across the region". — AFP

New blast off Yemen after US...

Continued from Page 1

less than an hour later. It did not specify if the drones shot down by the destroyer were designed for attack or surveillance.

Maritime security firm Ambrey said a commercial vessel was reportedly targeted by a missile southwest of Aden after the Houthis claimed a missile attack on an American ship in the area that they say was heading towards the Zionist entity. Ambrey did not name the ship or mention its ownership, but Houthi spokesman Yahya Saree identified the ship as "KOP".

US forces also destroyed a Houthi surface-to-air missile on Wednesday that CENTCOM said posed an imminent threat to "US aircraft" — a deviation from past raids that focused on reducing the rebels' ability to threaten international shipping. It did not identify the type of aircraft that had been threatened or the location of the strike, saying only that it took place in "Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen".

While the United States has recently launched strikes on the Houthis and other Iran-supported groups in the region, both Washington and Tehran have sought to avoid a direct confrontation, and the downing of three

Iranian drones could heighten tensions. The Houthis began targeting Red Sea shipping in November, saying they were hitting Zionist-linked vessels as a way to support Palestinians in Gaza, which has been ravaged by the Zionist-Hamas war.

US and British forces have responded with strikes against the Houthis, who have since declared American and British interests to be legitimate targets as well. Some of the US strikes have focused on missiles that CENTCOM said posed an imminent threat to ships, indicating robust surveillance of Houthi-controlled territory likely to include military aircraft.

The United States also set up a multinational naval task force to help protect Red Sea shipping from repeated Houthi attacks in the transit route, which carries up to 12 percent of global trade. In addition to military action, Washington has sought to put diplomatic and financial pressure on the Houthis, redesignating them as a "terrorist" organization in January after previously having dropped that label soon after President Joe Biden took office.

On Wednesday, the Houthis said they fired missiles at destroyer the USS Gravelly — a claim that came after CENTCOM said the warship downed an anti-ship cruise missile launched "from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen toward the Red Sea". Anger over the Zionist entity's devastating campaign in Gaza has grown across the Middle East, stoking violence involving Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. — AFP



GAZA: Palestinians are seen at a makeshift camp set up on the beach for people who fled to Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Feb 1, 2024. — AFP

Centuries-old mosque torn...

Continued from Page 1

He said many graves in the mosque compound were also desecrated, and no one was allowed to take out copies of the Holy Quran or other materials from inside the mosque before it was razed.

"Many of our revered figures and my own ancestors were buried there. There is no trace of the graves now," Zafar told AFP. "The rubble from the mosque and the graves has been removed and dumped somewhere else." The Delhi Development Authority, the city's main land management agency responsible for carrying out the demolitions, did not respond to AFP's requests for comment.

A heavy police presence had barricaded roads outside the grounds on Thursday and refused access to

the site. The demolition took place barely a week after Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a grand new Hindu temple in the northern city of Ayodhya, built on grounds once home to the centuries-old Babri mosque. That mosque was torn down in 1992 in a campaign spearheaded by members of Modi's party, sparking sectarian riots that killed 2,000 people nationwide, most of them Muslims.

Hindu activist groups have also laid claim to the disputed Gyanvapi mosque in the Indian holy city of Varanasi, which they say was built over a

Hindu temple during the Muslim Mughal empire centuries ago. Hindu worshippers entered the Gyanvapi mosque on Thursday to pray after a local court gave them permission to do so. Calls for India to enshrine Hindu supremacy have rapidly grown louder since Modi took office in 2014, making the country's roughly 210-million-strong Muslim minority increasingly anxious about their future. — AFP

International

Drought emergency declared in Barcelona

Water-use restrictions to be imposed as Catalonia suffers 'worst drought in the last century'

BARCELONA: Spain's second city Barcelona and much of the surrounding region of Catalonia entered a drought emergency Thursday, clearing the way for tighter water restrictions after three years without significant rainfall. Catalonia's regional government chief Pere Aragonés declared fresh restrictions after water levels at reservoirs in the Mediterranean region fell below 16 percent of full capacity.

That is the benchmark set by the authorities for applying a new round of water-saving measures that will affect some six million people. "Catalonia is suffering the worst drought in the last century," Aragonés told journalists. "We have never faced such a long and intense drought since rainfall records began."

Rainwater levels in some reservoirs in Catalonia are so low that old bridges and a church bell tower have resurfaced. The emergency measures are designed to lower the daily amount of water that households and local councils are allowed to use: from 210 to 200 liters (55 to 52 gallons) per person.

If the drought worsens, the limit could be lowered to 180 liters, then 160 liters. The water-use restrictions will apply to the regional capital Barcelona and 201 surrounding local councils from Friday, affecting some six million people.

Measures include a ban on fresh-water in swimming pools, with some exceptions for recognized use in sports. Cars can now only be washed with recycled water, and public gardens irrigated with groundwater. Tighter restrictions, such as closing showers in gyms and totally banning watering in public parks, could be introduced if the drought persists.

'Catastrophic'

Farms and industries will also face greater cuts. Emergency measures aim to cut the amount of water used to irrigate crops by 80 percent, doubling the 40-percent reduction introduced last November. Industries must cut water use by 25 percent, whereas



GIRONA: This photograph taken on January 15, 2024 shows the dry soil next to the low water-level reservoir of Sau in the province of Girona in Catalonia. — AFP

previously it was 15 percent. "We will overcome the drought through cooperation, shared effort, planning and well-directed investments," said Aragonés.

Rainfall has been lower than the average in Catalonia for the past three years. The drought has lasted more than twice as long as the previous dry spell of 2008, the regional government says. "If it goes on for another year, the situation will be catastrophic," head of the civil and environmental engineering department at Catalonia's Polytechnic University, Xavier Sanchez Vila, told AFP.

As well as Catalonia, in northeast Spain, the southern region of Andalusia is also struggling with severe drought. The regional authorities there have warned

that water use restrictions will be needed in Seville and Malaga this summer if rain does not return.

Water supplies by boat

Andalusia and Catalonia are Spain's two most populous regions. Both are preparing to import fresh water by boat if needed, an expensive option that officials admit would not make up for the lack of rain. "We need 30 days of rain," the head of the Andalusia regional government, Juan Manuel Moreno, said recently. "But real rain, not just drizzle — at least 30 straight days of it." Several heatwaves recorded in Spain and wider Europe last summer aggravated the shortage because more water evaporated from reser-

voirs, and consumers used more to keep cool. Unseasonably warm weather has continued into 2024.

Temperatures rose to nearly 30 degrees Celsius (86 Fahrenheit) in some regions in January — something usually seen in June. Experts say climate change driven by human activity is boosting the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, droughts and wildfires.

Catalonia has built desalination plants and adopted other measures, but some campaigners say it is crucial to improve the use of both wastewater and groundwater resources. "The drought is not just due to a lack of rain, it is the result of bad management," Greenpeace said in a statement. — AFP

Indian Hindus begin prayers at disputed mosque

VARANASI, India: Hindu worshippers on Thursday began praying inside a disputed mosque in the Indian city of Varanasi just hours after a court order gave them the go-ahead at the deeply sensitive site, media reported.

The Gyanvapi mosque in the holy city of Varanasi is one of several Islamic houses of worship that Hindu activists, backed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, have sought for decades to reclaim. A Varanasi court ruled Wednesday that Hindu wor-

shippers could pray in the building's basement and ordered authorities to "make proper arrangements" for worshippers within a week.

Broadcaster NDTV reported that family members of Hindu priests started praying in the mosque's basement in the early hours of Thursday morning. The Gyanvapi mosque was built in the 17th century during the Muslim Mughal empire in a city where Hindus from across the country cremate relatives by the Ganges river.

Hindu worshippers believe the mosque replaced a temple to the Hindu deity Shiva. Last month, India's official archaeological agency said a survey of the site appeared to corroborate the belief that it was originally home to a temple, according to local news reports.

Emboldened right-wing Hindu groups have laid claim to several Muslim sites of worship they say

were built atop ancient temples during Mughal rule. Last week, Modi presided over a grand inauguration ceremony in the nearby city of Ayodhya for a Hindu temple built on grounds once home to the centuries-old Babri mosque.

Hindu zealots had torn down that mosque in 1992 in a campaign spearheaded by members of Modi's party, sparking sectarian riots that killed 2,000 people nationwide, most of them Muslims. The decades-long court battle that ensued over the future of the Babri site ended in 2019 when India's top court permitted the construction of a temple to the deity Ram, who according to Hindu scripture was born in the city. Calls for India to enshrine Hindu supremacy have rapidly grown louder since Modi took office in 2014, making its roughly 210-million-strong Muslim minority increasingly anxious about their future. — AFP

Americans pointing lasers at planes more than ever

WASHINGTON, United States: US authorities on Wednesday warned Americans to stop pointing lasers at planes after pilots reported a record number of incidents in 2023. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said the latest figure of 13,304 laser strikes is a 41 percent increase over the year before and by far the highest number since data collection began — posing a major safety threat to pilots, passengers and those on the ground.

"A laser strike can temporarily blind a pilot or cause severe eye injury, and the FAA takes this threat very seriously," Administrator Michael Whitaker said in a video. "Bottom line: lasers and aircraft don't mix. If you have a laser please use it responsibly and never point it at an aircraft," he added, encouraging citizens to report laser strikes to authorities.

Offenders can face FAA fines up to \$11,000 per violation, or \$30,800 for multiple infractions — in addition to criminal penalties from federal, state and local law enforcement. Most laser strikes aimed at cockpits happen at night during takeoffs and landings.

Authorities attribute the sharp increase to a greater abundance of devices available online at lower price points and higher power capacities, as well as the advent of green lasers, which are more easily visible. — AFP



VARANASI, India: Security personnel frisk Muslim devotees before they offer afternoon prayers at the Gyanvapi mosque (left) as Hindu petitioner Manju Vyas chants devotional hymns after offering prayers at the same mosque (right) on February 1, 2024. — AFP photos

'Diplomacy of fear': Russia pressures exiled dissidents

PARIS: The holding in detention by Thai authorities of an anti-war Russian rock band has exposed how criticizing President Vladimir Putin can be fraught with danger even outside the country. The seven members of the band Bi-2 had been detained by Thailand on immigration charges, raising fears they risked deportation to Russia and even a show trial, although all its members had by Thursday been allowed to leave for the Zionist entity after a week-long ordeal.

Last year, its lead singer Egor Bortnik, who is better known by his stage name Lyova, on social media accused Putin of "destroying" the country, adding: "I will not return to Russia." The band was detained on January 24 after it played a gig on Phuket, a southern island popular with Russian holidaymakers.

The band members were accused of performing without the proper papers and transferred to an immigration detention center in Bangkok. Bortnik had already left Thailand to fly to the Zionist entity earlier this week, with the rest of the band following to Tel-Aviv on Thursday. Human Rights Watch said that the rockers risked being victims of "transnational repression", with the Russian authorities pressuring Bangkok to send them home.

'Very strong pressure'

After Putin sent troops to Ukraine nearly two years ago, hundreds of thousands of Russians including many top cultural figures left the country. Tatiana Stanovaya, founder of the political analysis firm R.Politik, said Moscow authorities wanted to demonstrate that an anti-Kremlin stance of Russian cultural figures will have serious consequences.

"In the eyes of the Russian state, people who have left are not only traitors and enemies. They create risks for political stability inside Russia," Stanovaya told AFP. "This is a matter of national security." Self-exiled opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov, who has spearheaded efforts to win Bi-2's release, said Russian diplomats had put pressure on Thai authorities, demanding that

the rockers be deported to Russia. "The pressure has been very strong, we're surprised," Gudkov told AFP. He suggested that Moscow was concerned that anti-war performers had thousands of fans inside Russia and were seen as a potential threat, especially in the run-up to a March presidential election expected to extend Putin's grip on power.

Gudkov said US, German, Zionist and Australian diplomats had been involved in the talks with the Thai government for their release, although this could not immediately be confirmed. Nationalist Russian lawmaker Andrei Lugovoi, wanted in Britain for the murder of former Russian agent Alexander Litvinenko, said on social media that the musicians would go to prison if they got deported to Russia and should "get ready" to "tap dance in front of fellow inmates."

'Manic persecution'

The pressure on the band is far from an isolated case. Popular comedian Maxim Galkin said last week he had been denied entry into Indonesia for a planned concert in the island of Bali. Galkin, the husband of Russian pop legend Alla Pugacheva, said on Instagram that Indonesian authorities had shown him a copy of a Russian government letter. Last month Galkin's shows in Thailand were scrapped, also under pressure from Russia, he said, denouncing Moscow's "manic persecution of dissenting artists abroad."

Rapper Alisher Morgenshtern has said he had been denied entry into the United Arab Emirates where he set up base after leaving Russia under pressure from authorities. His lawyer said no official reason was given. The Bi-2 singer, Galkin and Morgenshtern have all been declared "foreign agents" in Russia.

VPI Event, which organized the Bi-2 gigs in Thailand, said that a "campaign" against Russian performers in the Asian country had begun in December "under pressure" from Russian diplomats. The organizers said performances of another stand-up comedian, Ruslan Bely, were also cancelled.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the difficulties of the anti-Kremlin figures abroad were not surprising, calling them "people who sponsor terrorism." Moscow has made numerous efforts to muzzle self-exiled critics, including issuing Interpol notices against them. In December, renowned Russian writer Boris Akunin was declared a "terrorist" over his criticism of the war. — AFP

The dark side of El Salvador's war on gangs

EL ROSARIO, El Salvador: El Salvador President Nayib Bukele's war on gangs is credited with slashing homicide rates and restoring security and dignity to citizens of what was once one of the world's most dangerous countries. The price, say observers and victims, is paid in arbitrary arrests, inhumane detention, even torture — and fear of a whole new kind. Under a state of emergency that suspended many fundamental rights, Bukele's regime has rounded up more than 75,000 suspected gangsters — some merely for sporting tattoos. About 7,000 have since been freed for a lack of evidence, but activists say many innocents — including minors — remain behind bars.

Innocent people dying

Sandra Hernandez, 36, says her husband Jose Medrano, a day laborer, was taken by police in May 2022. He never returned. Medrano was falsely accused of gang membership, Hernandez told AFP at her rickety, wooden home on a dirt road in El Rosario, some 50 kilometers (31 miles) from the capital San Salvador.

The last she heard from her husband was thanks to a covert call nearly a year after his arrest to tell her he had been taken to hospital for dialysis. She was later informed he had died, of kidney failure. "But at the funeral home I was told the body had bruises," Hernandez told AFP. "Innocent people are dying," she said. Hernandez lives with a son of 17 and a 13-year-old daughter in a shack with no water or electricity. The family depends on remittances sent by a relative in the United States and odd bricklaying jobs her son does. "People don't know what life is really like," she told AFP.

'One lives in fear'

Maricela Mendez, 35, was sleeping when police burst into her home in a suburb of the capital in July 2022. She was taken to prison and her children, 11 and seven, sent to stay with their grandmother. Mendez was accused of being a known local criminal, but insists she is innocent. "The police officer had a quota of five ar-

rests," she told AFP. A month after she arrived at prison, Mendez found out she was pregnant, and lived in fear of a miscarriage for all her five months of incarceration. "We were punished, we were beaten, we were not given water" and made to sleep on the floor, the beautician said of her experience in three different penitentiaries. She gave birth two months after her release. The bigger children are still traumatized, she said. "When they see a patrol car they cry, they are afraid they will take me away again ... One lives in fear," she said of life in Bukele's El Salvador.



EL ROSARIO: Salvadorean Sandra Hernandez, poses with a picture of her husband Jose Dimas Medrano, who was captured and later died of kidney failure while in prison. — AFP

Josefina Bonilla takes care of two toddler grandchildren. Their mother, Bonilla's daughter Stefany Santos, 24, was arrested in June 2022. "I have no news of her," the 63-year-old told AFP tearfully, showing off a photo of her daughter at her home in Soyapango in the San Salvador department.

She suspects Santos was falsely denounced by her in-laws, with whom relations are strained. "She is innocent. People are taken away and not investigated," said Bonilla, who is unable to work for having to take care of the little ones, and gets by on handouts. "My daughter is asthmatic and has psychological problems. I worry that she's not getting her medicine," added Bonilla. "Good people are paying for the sins of others," she said in reference to the now-diminished gangs that had for so long imposed a reign of terror on the country. "Mothers are without their children, and children without their parents." — AFP

Business

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2024

Egypt faces severe dollar crunch as debt explodes, inflation surges

Economic crisis squeezing high-street brands amid currency plunge

CAIRO: Egypt's economic crisis is squeezing high-street brands such as Starbucks and The Body Shop as experts ask how the Arab world's most populous nation will repay its soaring debt. Amid a severe foreign currency crunch, the US dollar has become hard to come by as the Egyptian pound is plunging and inflation is surging at 35 percent.

Egypt's highly import-reliant economy, dominated by military-linked enterprises and with a fondness for infrastructure mega-projects, has been hit hard by a series of recent shocks. The pandemic impacted its key tourism sector. The Ukraine war raised the cost of wheat and other imports. And recent attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels on Red Sea shipping have slashed vital Suez Canal fees.

Remittances from overseas Egyptian workers — the main source of foreign currency — slumped by as much as 30 percent in July-September 2023 alone, according to Central Bank of Egypt data.

The Egyptian state, highly indebted after years of heavy borrowing, including for a new capital city in the desert east of Cairo, has struggled to service its ballooning debt. The International Monetary Fund has stepped in with a \$3 billion loan facility but demanded painful austerity measures in the country of 106 million people, two-thirds of whom live on or below the poverty line. President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi recently explained that the state spends \$3 billion a month on commodities such as food and energy.

"We provide services to the Egyptian people in Egyptian pounds and have to pay for them in dollars," he said in a speech. Amid the crisis, everybody wants greenbacks, and no one wants to give them away. On the black market, the dollar is trading at 70 Egyptian pounds, more than double the official exchange rate of 31. Most of the time, banks simply refuse to give dollars to their customers.

Bank clients travelling abroad are only allowed to withdraw or transfer a maximum of \$100 from their Egyptian accounts. People with only a debit card, rather than a credit card, cannot pay online at all to an overseas account.

This applies even to a Netflix subscription, currently offered at a discount of three dollars per month in Egypt. Imported big-ticket purchases, such as a new car, are simply beyond the means of most middle-class families. Investors "who depend on dollars, as well as imported goods, will not be able to continue", said economist Mohammed Fouad.

Exploding external debt

Egypt's external debt has exploded to \$164.7 billion. The cost of servicing that debt this year will be \$42 billion. JP Morgan recently announced that, from January 31, it will exclude Egypt from its index of government bonds of emerging economies "due to issues related to reported difficulties in essential foreign currency convertibility by concerned investors". Ratings agency Moody's this month lowered the outlook on Egyptian government bonds to "negative" from "stable" in the face of foreign currency shortages, weak consumer confidence and borrowers increasingly unable to repay their loans.

James Swanston, emerging markets economist at Capital Economics, said that Egypt was "heading towards a fork in the road". One path could be a shift toward economic orthodoxy "which includes adopting a fully flexible exchange rate and keeping a tight grip on fiscal policy", he said. However, he warned, "if policymakers dither and crucially if they don't let the pound float, it could get messier".

Swanston said he expected a two-step solution — "an initial devaluation of the pound to 40 per dollar, and then the adoption of a flexible exchange rate re-



CAIRO: A man walks past a currency exchange shop displaying a giant US dollar banknote in downtown Cairo. — AFP

gime", which Cairo has promised the IMF for years but so far failed to implement. Economist Fouad said that "in the immediate term, the government has an interest in stability, because it is the biggest debtor in dollars and would therefore be hit hardest by a rise in the value of the greenback. "In the short term, I'm sure that Egypt will repay its debts," he said. "But if the current situation persists, with debt growing while economic growth is unable to compensate, then we'd need to be worried."

Capital Economics' Swanston said that "the solution in the short term is reaching an agreement with the IMF for its enhanced Extended Fund Facility, which seems increasingly likely". "This will provide crucial financing and also assure investors that Egypt is safer, which would lead to investments into Egypt's bond market and also help to reduce interest rates on Egypt's debt." — AFP

Facebook, the social network old-timer, turns 20

SAN FRANCISCO: Founded 20 years ago as a simple hangout spot for young people, Facebook has since become a battle-hardened behemoth that — despite perceptions of being for boomers and parents — continues growing and growing.

"I will never forget the day that I ran up to my high school's Mac lab and signed up for Facebook," Insider Intelligence analyst Jasmine Enberg told AFP. "You simultaneously felt that you were part of this small, exclusive community where your parents, grandparents and teachers weren't — but also part of something much larger." Launched as thefacebook.com by Mark Zuckerberg and three friends on February 4, 2004, the site was originally restricted to Harvard College students.

It became available to students at other US universities before opening to anyone in 2006. Facebook became a venue for connecting with just about anyone, anywhere and by 2023 reported being used by more than 3 billion people monthly — a three percent growth over the previous year. "Facebook, when it launched, was revolutionary," Enberg said. "It's hard to overstate the impact that Facebook has had on shaping everything from pop culture to politics to how we behave online." She noted Facebook's famous "feed" that served up photos, comments, or other "posts" its algorithm figured would grab the attention of users. — AFP

Highest in Kuwait banking sector

Praise be to Allah

Net Profit for Shareholders - 2023

بيت التمويل الكويتي
Kuwait Finance House

Record and Historic Profits

584.5
KD Million

63.4%

Net Profit for Shareholders
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	584.5	63.4
2022	357.7	

Earnings per Share
"Fils"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	38.49	29.6
2022	29.71	

Net Financing Income
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	965.9	20.7
2022	800.5	

Total Operating Income
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	1,460.9	36.2
2022	1,072.3	

Net Operating Income
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	945.4	30.7
2022	723.3	

Dividends to Shareholders

Cash Dividends

10% Cash dividends paid for half year 2023 and 10% proposed cash dividends on the remaining profit up to the end of the year 2023

Year	%
2023	20
2022	15

The proposed dividends for 2023 is subject to the approval of General Assembly and other regulatory entities.

Bonus Shares

Proposed Bonus Shares

Year	%
2023	9
2022	10

Total Assets
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	38,010	2.8
2022	36,969	

Financing Receivables
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	19,425	3.3
2022	18,801	

Depositors' Accounts
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	21,813	3.7
2022	21,030	

Shareholders' Equity
"KD Million"

Year	Value	% Change
2023	5,316	(0.8)
2022	5,358	

To Investors

Account Type	2023 (%)	2022 (%)
Investment Deposit "Al-Khumasiya"	5.000	4.000
Investment Deposit "Al-Mustamera"	4.500	3.500
Investment Deposit "Al-Dimah" 12 Months	4.250	2.725
Investment Deposit "Al-Dimah" 6 Months	4.125	2.225
Long Term Investments Plans	3.950	2.550
Investment Deposit "Al-Sedra"	3.850	2.325
Investment Saving Account	0.250	0.230

Profits will be credited to their bank accounts

kfh.com 180 3333

Business

Al-Marzouq: A record net profit for KFH shareholders at KD 584.5 million in 2023

Earnings per share reached 38.49 fils with an increase of 29.6%



Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq:
Proposed cash dividend distribution of 20% including 10% in H1 2023 and bonus share of 9%

- The largest bank in Kuwait in terms of assets, exceeding KD 38 billion and in terms of net profits
- Historic profits in the Kuwaiti banking sector
- Net financing income increased by 20.7% to KD 965.9 million



Abdulwahab Al-Rushood
KFH achieved the best profit rate and the highest ratios in all key indicators

- KFH leads the competition and achieves growth in terms of market share and customer base
- The Banker awarded KFH "Bank of the Year 2023 - Kuwait"
- Euromoney ranked KFH "Market Leader" for its excellence in digital transformation

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Finance House (KFH) Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq said that, by the grace of Allah, KFH has reported a record net profit of KD 584.5 million attributable to the shareholders of the bank for the year ended 2023, an increase of 63.4 percent compared to 2022. The historic profits are the highest-ever recorded in the Kuwaiti banking sector of which government and semi-government share represented KD 224 million, which is higher than the share during the pre-acquisition phase at KD 68.6 million, an increase of 50 percent.

Additionally, the share of the governmental entities in the Group market cap increased by KD 285 million compared to the pre-acquisition phase in 2021. This reflects a significant benefit for public funds due to the strategy set by KFH Board of Directors.

Earnings per share reached 38.49 fils for the year 2023 (after the distribution of the acquisition shares), an increase of 29.6 percent, compared to 29.7 fils in 2022. Net financing income for the year ended 2023 reached KD 965.9 million; an increase of 20.7 percent compared to last year. Net operating income for the year ended 2023 reached KD 945.4 million, an increase of 30.7 percent compared to 2022. Financing receivables increased to reach KD 19.4 billion, an increase of KD 624.7 million or 3.3 percent compared to 2022. Total assets increased to reach KD 38.01 billion, an increase of KD 1.04 billion or 2.8 percent compared to last year. Total shareholders' equity reached KD 5.3 billion in 2023. Depositors' accounts reached KD 21.8 billion, an increase of KD 782.4 million or 3.7 percent compared to last year. In addition, the capital adequacy ratio reached 18.18 percent for the year 2023 (17.66 percent in 2022), which is above the minimum requirement. This percentage confirms the solid financial position of KFH.

Al-Marzouq explained that the solid financial position of KFH Group has enhanced its ability to increase cash dividends to its shareholders this year and for the coming fiscal years. The Board of Directors has proposed cash dividends to shareholders of 10 fils per share for the remaining profits until the end of 2023, in addition to 10 fils in H1 2023, totaling 20 percent for the year 2023, compared to 15 percent in the previous year. The Board of Directors also recommended the distribution of bonus shares of 9 percent of the issued paid capital.

Remarkable performance

Al-Marzouq said that the unprecedented profits recorded by KFH in the first year show the success of the acquisition at all levels, transforming KFH into the largest bank in Kuwait in terms of total consolidated assets amounting to KD 38 billion as of 31 December, 2023, and the second largest Islamic bank in the world. He noted that the acquisition contributed to enhancing the profitability level, in which KFH successfully recorded the highest-ever profit rates in the local banking sector and the highest returns on the total key indicators.

"KFH successfully achieved the key goals of Group strategy, strengthened its leading position, and overcame different challenges and operating difficulties. Additionally, high liquidity ratios, solid capital base, and strong operating performance resulted in growth in operating income, profits, financings portfolio, and all key financial indicators," Al-Marzouq said.

He pointed out that the Group's market capitalization has increased and trading in KFH shares attracted record levels of high liquidity. KFH also ranked first on Boursa Kuwait in terms of market capitalization which reached KD 11.4 billion. This reflects the increase of KFH's capital value for KFH shareholders, a third of whom are governmental and semi-governmental institutions.

Al-Marzouq added that KFH's services expanded to include new strategic countries, including Britain, Egypt, and others following the acquisition of AUB-Bahrain, which proved successful during its first year. He pointed out the completion of converting AUB-Bahrain's conventional banking services to be compliant with Shariah principles. The bank officially received the approval as a licensed Islamic Bank from the Central Bank of Bahrain (CBB). Since last December, the Bank has offered an integrated range of products and services that are compliant with the provisions and principles of Shariah, including retail and corporate services, saving and investment products, in addition to trade finance and wealth management solutions.

"The acquisition has resulted in dividend and accretion value of 17.9 percent for the dividend share of each shareholder at KFH as of 31 December, 2023 (before synergies)", added Al-Marzouq. "It is expected to increase while achieving synergies in the coming periods, particularly after the completion of the merger with AUB-Kuwait."

Return on average tangible shareholders' equity reached 20.5 percent (before synergies) as of 31 December, 2023. It is the highest return on shareholder's equity in the banking sector.

Foreign investment contribution increased to reach 12.92 percent as at the end of 2023 compared to 10.34 percent at the end of 2021 and 7.44 percent at the end of 2019. This is an increase of 73.6 percent compared to 2019 end, reflecting the strength of KFH's share following the acquisition and indicating the trust confided of investors.

Al-Marzouq pointed out that KFH is currently in the process of completing the merger by amalgamation with the Ahli United-Kuwait, one the final acquisition stages leading to numerous benefits for both parties and the overall banking industry in Kuwait.

"The new entity has become a source of strength for KFH's financial position, solidifying its ability to deal with financial challenges, boosting its standing as a leading bank locally, regionally and internationally and supporting the country's endeavors in transforming Kuwait into a financial hub and a leader of Islamic finance industry in the region taking into account the new employment opportunities offered to nationals," said Al-Marzouq.

Supporting corporate and mega projects

Al-Marzouq pointed out that KFH's new position as a banking entity is spread across 11 countries and contributed to boosting its role in the national economies as one of the dominant banks in the Middle East. This also enabled KFH to enter new markets and expand its financing contributions with high efficiency at the regional and local levels. It is worth noting that KFH participated in financing deals for electricity, petrochemical and aviation projects, amounting to approximately \$10.5 billion, in addition to many local and regional financing deals. These mega deals confirm the high financing capability and financial strength KFH enjoys.

Meanwhile, he confirmed that KFH has played a vital role for the micro and SME community and succeeded in growing its SME portfolio, ascending as a strategic partner of society.

\$7.5 billion sukuk transactions

Al-Marzouq said that KFH Group expanded its leading role in the international sukuk market and managed and arranged, through Group investment arm, KFH Capital, over \$7.5 billion in sukuk issuances for different corporate and sovereign issuers in different sectors and geographies.

Sustainability and CSR

Al-Marzouq said that KFH continued its efforts in sustainability and promoting green financing

products, at both the retail and corporate levels. It also played an important role in ESG by linking its financial transactions to sustainability. He noted KFH's participation in the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai.

Al-Marzouq said that KFH crowned its sustainability efforts in 2023 by earning several prestigious awards, notably Euromoney "Best Islamic Bank for ESG-global category" award. He explained that KFH's social initiatives in 2023 were purposeful and comprehensive as it succeeded in implementing strategic activities with added value and positive impact on all segments of society. Also, KFH was recognized as the "Market Leader" in social responsibility in Kuwait by Euromoney magazine.

Solid financial position

KFH's Acting Group Chief Executive Officer, Abdulwahab Iesa Al-Rushood, said that KFH maintained its solid balance sheet, enhanced the Group's financial position, and maintained a strong capital reserve thanks to the following elements: abundant liquidity, continuous diversification of financing, flexible business model, wide geographical spread and the Group's harmonious performance, among many other elements of strength. He pointed out that KFH reported the best profit rate and the highest ratios in all key indicators, improved asset quality, developed operating profits, and diversified the revenues, all of which helped achieve financial solidity and sustainable growth.

Digital transformation

Al-Rushood said that KFH leads the competition and expands its customer base and market share in the retail banking sector. He added that KFH is moving forward with its digital transformation strategy, launching innovative digital financial solutions through KFH (mobile application and website), XTMs and KFH-GO. He pointed out that KFH launched Tam, the first Islamic digital bank in Kuwait and Zaheb digital platform, in addition to several innovative banking solutions.

Al-Rushood said Euromoney Magazine ranked KFH as a Market Leader - Kuwait in

digital solutions in recognition of its outstanding digital solutions.

Empowering local talents

Al-Rushood said that KFH successfully empowered local talents and creative thinking at work through its massive recruitment efforts. In 2023, around 400 employees were hired with a noteworthy 99 percent of the total 2023 hires. The Kuwaitization rate exceeded 81 percent. In addition, the top positions have been filled during the year with national competencies. Additionally, KFH offered over 83,000 hours of training to 3,116 employees.

Sukuk transactions

Al-Rushood said that KFH Group Treasury investment transactions exceeded \$13 billion in the Primary and Secondary markets. KFH also continued to expand its short-term Sukuk trading in the ILM program. Group Treasury maintained its position as a Main Market Leader in the short-term ILM Sukuk market.

26 prestigious awards

Al-Rushood said that KFH won 26 prestigious awards such as the "World's Best Islamic Financial Institution 2023" award from Global Finance and "Bank of the Year - Kuwait" from The Banker. The awards were in appreciation of KFH's excellence, innovation, and its advanced services and products. He pointed out that the awards confirm KFH's pioneering role in digital transformation and the new level KFH reached in banking experience and achieving customers' aspirations. They also confirm KFH's strength of financial performance and leadership in the Islamic finance industry.

In conclusion, Al-Rushood expressed his appreciation for the support of the Board of Directors and thanked the Central Bank of Kuwait and the regulatory authorities for supporting the banking sector. He also praised the efforts of Executive Management, employees, all partners, and stakeholders for their key role in expanding KFH's leading position and maintaining its excellence.



Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq:

- Net operating income increased by 30.7% to KD 945.4 million
- KD 224 million share of governmental entities from 2023 net profits, an increase of 50% (KD 74.5 million) compared to the pre-acquisition phase in 2021
- KFH tops all listed companies on Boursa Kuwait with a market cap currently reaching KD 11.4 billion
- Remarkable performance and historic financial results
- High liquidity ratio and solid capital base
- Consistent leading role in providing corporates and mega projects financing
- Leading and arranging Sukuk issuance exceeding \$7.5 billion
- Prominent efforts in sustainability and green finance products

Business

French farmers stick to barricades

Orban met with protesting farmers in Brussels

PARIS: France's farmers showed little sign on Thursday of abandoning their protest despite government concessions in response to a movement that has spread nationwide and elsewhere in Europe. Seven blockades were in place on motorways around Paris, throttling access to the capital as farmers in tractors were running a go-slow on the A9 motorway linking to Spain.

Long-standing complaints about squeezed pay, heavy regulation and tax were first inflamed by an agricultural fuel duty rise, whose reversal by the government last week has failed to calm tempers. "We're still in action because the measures that have been announced are not up to our expectations or the stakes," said Bruno Vila, a union chief in the southwestern Pyrenees-Orientales department.

While President Emmanuel Macron is in Brussels for an EU summit, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal's office said he would hold a midday press conference after days of talks with rural unions. A group of 79 farmers were released after being held in custody for a Wednesday incursion into the Rungis wholesale food market near Paris, a vital distribution hub for the capital region's 12 million people. Truckloads of police backed up by armored vehicles were controlling access to Rungis early Thursday, an AFP journalist saw, slowing traffic.

"Our plan will certainly be taking a break and coming back," said Frederic Ferrand, who led a farmers' convoy that reached the food market on Wednesday. Another convoy of tractors heading for Rungis from southwestern France was searching for a new route after being held up by police.

Around 200 tractors blocked 50 supermarkets in the Haute-Loire department in southern France, the local union said, criticizing "inappropriate behavior by major retailers" who "put crazy pressure on our farmers with suffocating margins".

In a sign of the pressure on Paris, Macron has scheduled one-on-one talks with European Com-

mission chief Ursula von der Leyen before the EU leaders' summit later Thursday. His office said the two would discuss "the future of European agriculture", after more than a week of farmers' protests.

Initial gestures from the bloc have failed to calm demonstrations and road blockades that have dogged major agricultural powers, especially France. Hundreds of Portuguese farmers were also blocking roads Thursday, including two border crossings to Spain.

"We find it very hard to survive," said Rui Souza, 58, who joined a demonstration in Golega in central Portugal. Some of the country's farmers have not been mollified by Lisbon's announcement of 500 million euros (\$540 million) of aid to deal with headwinds including a recent drought.

"We won't copy the French... the actions we run will be peaceful," said Nuno Mayer, one of the spokesmen of the Portuguese movement. Brussels' concessions have so far included a temporary exemption from rules requiring some farmland to be left fallow. The EU could also limit imports of some Ukrainian agricultural products, on which tariffs were dropped following Russia's 2022 invasion.

France's government hailed the moves as a victory for its lobbying, but they have not been enough to soothe the farmers' grievances. "We want fewer restrictions and especially to be able to fight on the same terms as our competitors," Nicolas Galopin, a farmer from south of Paris, told broadcaster France Inter as he manned a blockade on the A6 motorway. Paris has said it will not accept a contentious free-trade deal with Latin American bloc Mercosur in its current state, caught between other EU nations determined to press ahead and some farmers who want it dropped altogether.

French and Belgian farmers had blocked a border crossing point together late Wednesday to condemn trade bargains they say "distort competition". France's second-largest farmers' union Coordination



CHILLY-MAZARIN: French CRS police officers walk towards a banner reading "Paris, let our farmers pass" in front of tractors blocking the A6 highway near Chilly-Mazarin, south of Paris, on Feb 1, 2024. — AFP

Rurale (CR) suggested members gather at the National Assembly parliament building.

"Given that a lot of farmers want to come to Paris, we're telling them... go to the National Assembly, so that all the MPs and senators can come and meet the farmers." CR's president Veronique Le Floch told RMC radio.

Meanwhile, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has met with protesting farmers in Brussels ahead of a crunch summit on Ukraine aid, in support

of what he called the "voice of the people". The latest Brussels summit is taking place against the backdrop of swelling protests by European farmers. "The voice of the people of the streets are not taken seriously by the leaders. It's a democratic deficit," said the nationalist leader in a video posted on his Facebook page. In the video from Wednesday night, Orban could be seen strolling among tractors blocking the streets of Brussels and shaking hands with a demonstrator. — AFP

News in Brief

Deutsche Bank to cut jobs

FRANKFURT: Germany's biggest lender Deutsche Bank on Thursday announced plans to slash 3,500 jobs as part of a major cost-cutting drive after its net profit fell in 2023. The group reported a net profit attributable to shareholders of 4.2 billion euros (\$4.5 billion), a 16-percent drop on the year before when profits were boosted by a one-off tax benefit. Costs related to the company's savings and efficiency program—first announced in 2019—also weighed on net profit, with Deutsche spending 566 million euros on restructuring and severance expenses. Revenues, however, jumped six percent year-on-year to 28.9 billion euros thanks to the European Central Bank's higher interest rates. — AFP

Sweden holds key interest rate

STOCKHOLM: Sweden's central bank left its key interest rate unchanged on Thursday as stubbornly high inflation has come down, and said an earlier-than-expected cut in the first half was possible. The Riksbank joins the US Federal Reserve and European Central Bank which also held their rates steady at their latest policy meetings. The Swedish central bank kept its policy rate at four percent, the highest level since 2008. It said its successive rate hikes since February 2022 had "contributed to lower inflationary pressures and to inflation expectations being firmly anchored around the 2 percent inflation target." — AFP

ING net profit doubled in 2023

THE HAGUE: Dutch banking giant ING said Thursday its net profit nearly doubled to 7.3 billion euros (\$7.9 billion) in 2023 on the back of higher interest rates and a "benign economic environment". "In many respects 2023 was a challenging year, as geopolitical and economic shocks affected many of our clients and the societies we operate in," ING chief executive Steven van Rijswijk said in a statement. "At the same time, most economies proved resilient with low unemployment, inflation coming down, and rates turning positive at an unprecedented pace," he said. ING said it added 750,000 customers in retail banking, bringing the total to 15.3 million, with the growth driven by Germany, Spain and the Netherlands. — AFP

Shell profit halves to \$19.4bn

LONDON: Shell said Thursday that profit more than halved in 2023 on lower oil and gas prices, after rocketing to a record the previous year on the Ukraine conflict. Post-tax profit slumped to \$19.4 billion last year from \$42.3 billion in 2022, when prices had soared on key energy producer Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine. "Full year 2023 income... reflected lower realized oil and gas prices, lower volumes, and lower refining margins," the British energy major said in a results statement. Revenue dived almost a fifth percent to \$316.6 billion. The group will nevertheless return \$3.5 billion to shareholders. — AFP

Brazil cuts rate another half-point

BRASILIA: Brazil's central bank cut its key interest rate by half a percentage point for the fifth straight time Wednesday, as inflation continues to ease in Latin America's biggest economy. In line with analyst forecasts and its own statements, the bank's monetary policy committee said it had lowered the benchmark Selic rate to 11.25 percent in its first meeting of the year. Going forward, the bank said it would continue to reduce the Selic "in the same magnitude in the next meetings." Wednesday's decision is a new boost for President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has pushed hard for interest-rate cuts he says are needed to spur economic growth. — AFP

India's Paytm shares dive 20% after central bank blow

NEW DELHI: Shares in Indian mobile payments giant Paytm nosedived Thursday after regulators ordered its banking arm to stop accepting fresh deposits, dealing a fresh blow to the fintech firm after years of losses.

The company collapsed 20 percent at the open of trade in Mumbai before a trading halt, the day after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) reported "persistent non-compliances" at Paytm Payments Bank.

The RBI said it would not be able to accept new deposits, offer fund transfers or help facilitate credit transactions from March, although customers will be able to withdraw cash already deposited.

Paytm said in a statement Thursday that it was

China overtakes Japan as world's biggest vehicle exporter

TOKYO: China's global dominance in electric cars helped it overtake Japan as the world's biggest vehicle exporter last year, official data confirmed Wednesday.

Japanese giants such as Toyota and Nissan have been much more cautious than their Chinese counterparts like BYD on electric vehicles (EVs), banking instead on hybrid models. Figures released Wednesday by the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association showed shipments of cars, trucks and buses rising 16 percent to 4.42 million last year. But China exported almost 500,000 more -- 4.91 million vehicles in total, as reported by the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers this month.

China's customs bureau put the number even higher at 5.22 million, a huge year-on-year rise of 57 percent, with one in three fully electric vehicles. The country had already been shipping more vehicles than Japan on a monthly basis, but Wednesday's data confirmed that it was also number one for a whole year.

Unlike Chinese firms, Japanese automakers including Toyota—re-confirmed on Tuesday as the world's largest company by unit sales—also make huge volumes of vehicles in other countries. In 2022, vehicle production in Japan excluding motorcycles totaled 7.84 million units, but overseas production was almost 17 million.

Japanese manufacturers have long bet on hybrids that combine battery power and internal combustion engines, an area they pioneered with the likes of the Toyota Prius. But they have vowed to up their game, with Toyota aiming to sell 1.5 million EVs annually by 2026 and 3.5 million by 2030.

The company is also hoping to mass-produce

Geopolitics to boost 'haven' gold in 2024

LONDON: Gold demand will win a "pronounced" boost from geopolitical uncertainty this year, an industry report predicted Wednesday, after the precious metal and haven investment hit a record-high price in 2023.

The World Gold Council said the commodity would in 2024 continue to benefit from strong buying by central banks, which would help to off-

set a slowdown in consumer demand owing to elevated prices and weaker economic growth. The price of gold hit an all-time high at \$2,135.39 an ounce at the end of 2023, which sent demand sliding.

Gold demand retreated 12 percent in the final quarter—and by five percent over the year to 4,448 tons, WGC said. The record price reached in December was in large part owing to the Zionist entity war on Gaza, according to analysts.

It gained also from traders increasingly betting on the Federal Reserve cutting US interest rates this year, which dented the dollar. A weaker greenback makes dollar-denominated gold cheaper for holders of other currencies.

"Unwavering demand from central banks has been supportive of gold," noted Louise Street, senior markets analyst at WGC.

"In addition to monetary policy, geopolitical uncertainty is often a key driver of gold demand and in 2024 we expect this to have a pronounced impact on the market. "Ongoing conflicts, trade tensions and over 60 elections taking place around the world, are likely to encourage investors to turn to gold for its proven track-record as a safe haven asset."

Unearthing gold can be far from safe, however. More than 70 people were killed after a tunnel collapsed at a Malian gold mining site earlier this month, local sources told AFP.

taking "immediate steps" to comply with the RBI's demands. It said the order would have an annual "worst case impact" of between 3-5 billion rupees (\$36-\$60 million) on earnings but added that it "expects to continue on its trajectory to improve its profitability". The decision is the second major regulatory action against the bank, after the RBI asked it to stop adding new customers in 2022.

Paytm's platform was launched in 2010 and quickly became synonymous with digital payments in a country traditionally dominated by cash transactions. Indian shop owners, taxi and rickshaw drivers and other vendors accept payments as low as 10 rupees (\$0.13) using Paytm's ubiquitous blue-and-white QR code stickers. Paytm holds a 49 percent stake in the payments bank, a separate but connected business, while founder Vijay Shekhar Sharma holds the remaining 51 percent.

The firm listed in Mumbai in November 2021 but its shares have since been hammered and are down more than 70 percent since the initial public offering as investors fret over its profitability and grow wor-



NEW DELHI: Shares in Indian mobile payments giant Paytm nosedived Thursday. — AFP

ried about regulatory rows. Analysts said the RBI order effectively stalled the bank.

"For all practical purposes, the above notifications end the operations of Paytm Payments Bank," brokerage firm Bernstein said in a note. "This is a definite negative development and adds to the already heavy regulatory overhang on the business." — AFP



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

solid-state batteries that charge faster than conventional ones and give EVs more range. Helped by strong government support, Chinese EV firms have stolen a march on more established rivals such as General Motors, Volkswagen and Toyota.

BYD in the fourth quarter of 2023 even snatched Tesla's crown for most sales of all-electric vehicles, data this month showed. On Tuesday BYD—it stands for "Build Your Dreams"—which also sells batteries to the likes of Tesla, BMW and Mercedes, said it expects net profit for last year to reach 29-31 billion yuan (\$4.1-4.4 billion). But China's success in EVs has also landed its firms in hot water with regulators in Western markets worried

about unfair competition for local automakers.

The European Commission is investigating Chinese state subsidies in a probe that could lead to the European Union imposing import duties. To soothe concerns, BYD is planning to build more factories abroad including a \$600 million plant in Brazil and another in Hungary. "It's kind of reminiscent of what happened to Japan in the 1980s, when they started exporting a lot of automobiles," said Christopher Richter, an auto analyst at CLSA. "So the Japanese solved it by starting (to build) a lot of factories overseas... They build overseas four times more than what they export," he said in October. — AFP

Two years ago, at least 59 people were killed in southwestern Burkina Faso after the explosion of a stockpile of dynamite at an artisanal gold mining site. WGC said mine production rose one percent last year. Recycling of the metal increased nine percent, which was lower than expected given the high price. Despite record-high prices, "the global jewelry market proved to be remarkably resilient... as demand inched up by three tons year-on-year," said WGC. "China played an important role, recording a 17-percent increase in demand for gold, as it recovered from COVID-19 lockdowns." This offset a nine-percent decline in India's demand for gold jewelry, it added. — AFP

NBK ECONOMIC REPORT

Kuwait domestic credit growth at a multi-year low of 1.7% in 2023

Outlook better for 2024 amid sharp pick up in project awards

Table 1: Credit growth

Credit	Dec-2023	% growth			
	KD billions	q/q	YTD	y/y	2022
Business	23.2	0.3	0.9	0.9	6.8
of which Real Estate	9.6	1.3	1.4	1.4	5.6
Household	18.8	0.6	1.5	1.5	9.1
Securities	3.4	4.9	6.9	6.9	14.3
Banks & financial instit.	2.3	4.3	4.6	4.6	-3.1
Total domestic credit	47.7	0.9	1.7	1.7	7.7
Non-resident credit	5.9	5.8	5.7	5.7	17.2
Total credit	53.6	1.4	2.2	2.2	8.6

Source: Central Bank of Kuwait

Table 2: Deposit growth

Deposits	Dec-2023	% growth			
	KD billions	q/q	YTD	y/y	2022
Private sector	37.3	-0.2	1.2	1.2	7.1
of which Time dep.	20.7	0.0	12.1	12.1	19.8
of which CASA dep.	14.9	-1.3	-11.0	-11.0	-4.1
Public Institutions	6.8	18.3	2.0	2.0	-8.9
Government	4.6	9.4	37.2	37.2	19.4
Total resident dep.	48.7	2.9	3.9	3.9	5.3
Non-resident deposits	4.3	4.4	-0.7	-0.7	-1.7
Total deposits	53.0	3.0	3.5	3.5	4.6

Source: Central Bank of Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait's domestic credit growth was a relatively decent 0.9 percent in Q4, resulting in a 1.7 percent increase in 2023, down from 7.7 percent in 2022. The growth in Q4 was boosted by solid credit for securities purchase (+4.9 percent q/q) and to banks and financial institutions (+4.3 percent). Business and household credit growth weakened sharply in 2023, but both should witness an improvement this year given the sharp pick up in project awards in 2023, ongoing job gains among Kuwaitis, steady-to-falling interest rates, and a very weak 2023 naturally opening-up growth opportunities this year.

Business credit inched up by 0.3 percent q/q, bringing 2023 growth to 0.9 percent, down from a multi-year high of 6.8 percent in 2022. Sectors showed wide differences with "construction" and "trade" up 14.5 percent and 6.8 percent, respectively, in 2023 while "oil/gas" and "industry" fell by 8.1 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively, essentially reflecting a similar sector leadership as in 2022. Real estate, the heavyweight sector with a 41 percent share, increased by 1.4 percent in 2023. Looking ahead, growth should improve with the very weak 2023 naturally opening room for a bet-

ter performance this year, especially with the major rebound in project awards, which soared to KD 2.5 billion in 2023, the highest since 2017, and more than double the 2018-2022 annual average of KD 1.2 billion.

On the other hand, household credit edged up 0.6 percent q/q, resulting in growth of 1.5 percent in 2023, a sharp deceleration from 9.1 percent in 2022. However, trends have slightly improved given that nearly all the 2023 increase occurred in the second half of the year, and where the last six-month annualized growth rate stands at a more decent 3 percent. For 2024, household credit growth should improve given ongoing job gains among citizens (+1.5 percent YTD in 1H2023), salary increments, and as the pressure on debt burden ratios from higher rates is somehow absorbed. Finally, credit for securities purchase and to banks and financial institutions supported headline growth in 2023, as they expanded by 6.9 percent and 4.6 percent, respectively, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the increase in credit despite constituting only 12 percent of total credit.

Deposits rebound in Q4
Resident deposits jumped by 2.9 percent in Q4

driven by soaring public-institution (+18 percent) and government deposits (+9.4 percent), putting 2023 growth at 3.9 percent. Government deposits were the growth driver in 2023, soaring by 37 percent (KD 1.26 billion) and accounting for 69 percent of the total increase in deposits in the year. Private-sector deposits remained muted (falling in six of the last seven months) to inch up by just 1.2 percent in 2023, down from 7.1 percent in 2022. Within private-sector KD deposits, CASA fell 11 percent in 2023 while time deposits rose 12 percent. However, the peak divergence between their growth is likely behind us given a limited drop of 1.3 percent in CASA in Q4 while time deposits were flat, recording the weakest quarterly growth in two years.

Finally, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) has hiked the discount rate by a cumulative 2.75 percent since March 2022, compared with a cumulative 5.25 percent increase by the Fed. While the Fed's most recent dot-plot (December 2023) pointed to three 25 bps rate cuts in 2024, current futures market pricing is indicating a more aggressive five to six cuts in the year. While it is uncertain whether the CBK will follow suit, any cuts to the discount rate in Kuwait will likely be positive for credit growth.

Sri Lanka price hike after tax rises for IMF bailout

COLOMBO: Prices spiked more than six percent in Sri Lanka last month after it hiked taxes in line with IMF conditions to maintain a \$2.9 billion bailout loan, official data showed Thursday. The 6.4 percent reading was well up from the 4.0 percent seen in December, according to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, though it is still less than a tenth of the levels seen at the height of the island's financial crisis just over a year ago.

"Inflation accelerated in January 2024 mainly due to tax adjustments implemented at the beginning of the month and weather-related disruptions to food supply," the bank said. Food inflation in January rose to 3.3 percent, up from 0.3 percent in the previous month, as the levy on goods and services kicked in. The government raised value added tax from 15 to 18 percent from January while an exemption on a large number of goods and services was also removed, further fuelling prices.

The country is still emerging from its worst ever economic crisis in 2022, which saw the government default on its \$46 billion foreign debt and inflation peak at almost 70 percent. The upheaval led to months of protests that eventually forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down in July of that year. The International Monetary Fund revived its \$2.9 billion bailout for Sri Lanka in December after Colombo clinched a debt restructuring deal with China, its biggest official lender. The IMF had wanted Sri Lanka to raise its revenue to stabilize the economy. — AFP



شركة الصفاة للاستثمار
AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 01 FEBRUARY 2024

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No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance										Valuation Multiples *				
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	986	973	1,004	964	40	32,807,061	-14	-1.42%	8.84%	958	974	14.3	1.85	3.4%	1.02
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	296	288	299	287	12	21,696,093	-9	-3.03%	2.49%	285	294	14.0	1.33	3.3%	1.28
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	164	161	165	160	5	28,723,420	-3	-1.83%	7.33%	160	164	16.9	0.61	2.3%	1.10
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	191	191	195	188	7	25,461,949	1	0.53%	11.05%	185	191	20.0	0.72	4.0%	1.36
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	787	770	788	760	28	54,704,994	-16	-2.04%	6.06%	764	778	19.1	1.98	2.2%	1.16
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	639	619	641	611	30	14,818,536	-20	-3.13%	3.17%	616	644	37.9	2.47	0.9%	1.16
201	Kuwait Investment	Financial Services	176	197	197	176	21	63,869,232	22	12.57%	55.12%	178	197	11.1	0.88	2.6%	2.02
204	National Investments	Financial Services	268	271	279	265	14	36,783,921	3	1.12%	13.39%	267	283	87.7	1.25	10.3%	2.02
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	112	107	113	107	6	29,330,860	-6	-5.31%	1.90%	107	110	27.3	0.63	0.0%	1.00
212	Arzan Financial Group	Financial Services	227	229	232	221	11	56,573,967	1	0.44%	9.05%	228	239	33.5	1.56	1.7%	1.17
222	Aayan Leasing and Investment	Financial Services	188	186	191	185	6	37,497,064	-2	-1.06%	6.90%	180	190	9.7	1.31	3.9%	1.57
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	62.5	54.2	65.9	54.0	11.9	36,773,613	-7.8	-12.58%	-4.07%	53.0	56	NM	0.36	0.0%	1.31
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	242	242	261	236	25	58,318,027	0	0.00%	18.05%	237	245	19.4	1.61	1.2%	1.13
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	777	770	789	757	32	29,439,432	-8	-1.03%	-8.66%	769	778	16.0	1.67	1.7%	0.94
418	The Commercial Real Estate	Real Estate	107	107	108	105	3	12,730,652	-1.0	-0.93%	4.90%	105	108	21.2	0.65	2.7%	0.62
501	National Industries	Financial Services	234	232	243	232	11	71,732,025	-2	-0.85%	13.73%	226	232	21.9	1.13	2.0%	1.65
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	1,480	1,441	1,493	1,435	58	1,273,278	-15	-1.03%	10.00%	1,390	1,450	15.1	1.33	4.2%	1.03
506	HEISCO	Industrials	854	850	860	840	20	2,307,264	-7	-0.82%	3.66%	846	858	23.7	2.16	2.4%	0.90
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	616	590	616	588	28	4,149,003	-20	-3.28%	0.85%	580	604	12.8	1.24	10.1%	0.93
603	Agility	Industrials	569	576	583	558	25	25,540,089	6	1.05%	13.16%	566	583	17.6	0.83	0.0%	1.54
605	Zain	Telecommunications	531	516	534	516	18	18,880,705	-14	-2.64%	1.78%	512	528	10.5	1.83	6.7%	0.63
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,479	3,336	3,480	3,313	167	432,346	-110	-3.19%	-1.85%	3,315	3,350	10.2	3.80	11.1%	0.64
642	ALAFSCO	Industrials	200	205	210	200	10	2,050,378	4	1.99%	13.89%	198	206	NM	0.88	0.0%	1.21
654	JAZEERA	Consumer Discretionary	1,220	1,158	1,244	1,131	113	1,419,850	-61	-5.00%	-16.63%	1,100	1,204	19.9	7.50	6.8%	1.29
813	GFH Financial Group	Financial Services	81.4	80.0	81.8	79.7	2.1	21,483,766	-1.4	-1.72%	4.85%	79.7	81.1	8.7	0.92	6.1%	1.37
821	Warba Bank	Banking	192	190	193	189	4	14,511,515	-2	-1.04%	2.15%	188	196	26.1	1.02	1.5%	1.10
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	601	618	618	600	18	2,693,642	17	2.83%	7.48%	605	618	15.1	1.78	2.0%	0.50
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	546	525	550	524	26	3,094,796	-25	-4.55%	2.94%	520	546	37.6	2.18	2.8%	0.71
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	173	167	173	167	6	8,361,700	-6	-3.47%	-3.47%	167	173	13.2	1.42	7.1%	0.21
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	2,033	2,023	2,068	2,018	50	1,099,209	-32	-1.56%	17.34%	2,005	2,070	26.3	6.68	4.2%	1.39
830	AL GHANIM	Consumer Discretionary	1,182	1,134	1,182	1,130	52	1,749,700	-46	-3.90%	7.39%	1,123	1,140	12.4	4.26	5.9%	0.72

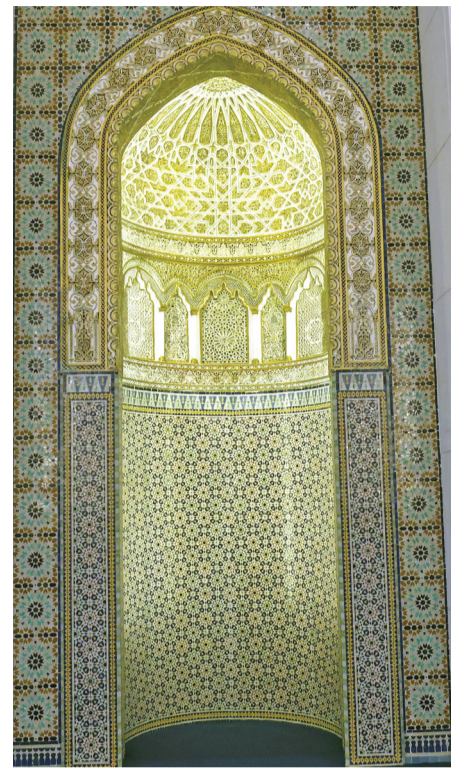
* As of end of week closing

Weekender

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2024



Divine by design



By Faten Omar

Traveling in a foreign country sparks a natural curiosity to delve into its culture and religion. In Kuwait, the Grand Mosque beckons those eager to understand the intricacies of Islamic design. Offering informative tours, the Grand Mosque provides a gateway for visitors to immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of Islamic architecture, fostering a deeper appreciation for the country's cultural and religious heritage. Kuwait Times spoke with Mariam Aldiahani, a tour guide at the Grand Mosque, to learn more.

Kuwait Times: Can you provide some historical background on the Grand Mosque?

Mariam Aldiahani: The mosque was built on the orders of former Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to accommodate a larger number of people in Kuwait City. Construction of the mosque began in 1979, and it was officially opened in 1986. The mosque was designed by engineer Mohammed Makia.

KT: What architectural features make the Grand Mosque unique?

Aldiahani: The dome is one of the largest domes in the Middle East to be held up by only four pillars. It is 43 meters in height, which is equivalent to a 14-storey building.

KT: Tell us more about the tours held at the Grand Mosque.

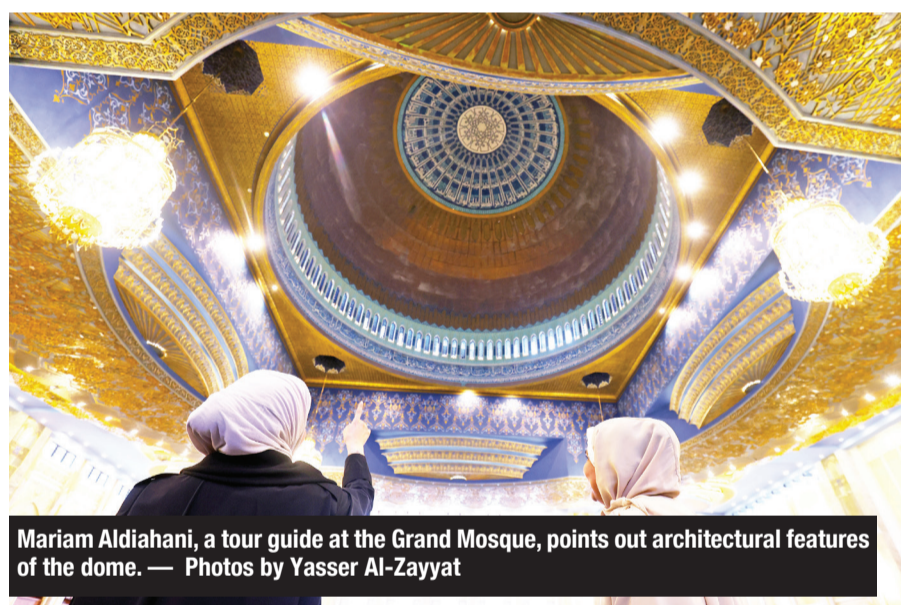
Aldiahani: The mosque holds guided tours in the morning and the evening, while also offering self-guided tours.

KT: How many tourists do you usually receive?

Aldiahani: We get more than 10,000 guests a year from all over the world — the number of guests a day varies.

KT: How has the Grand Mosque evolved. Are there any recent renovations or additions?

Aldiahani: The mosque undergoes



Mariam Aldiahani, a tour guide at the Grand Mosque, points out architectural features of the dome. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

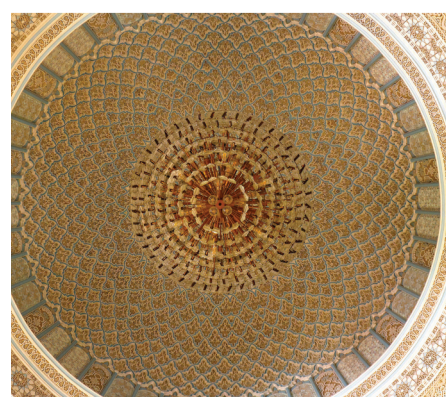
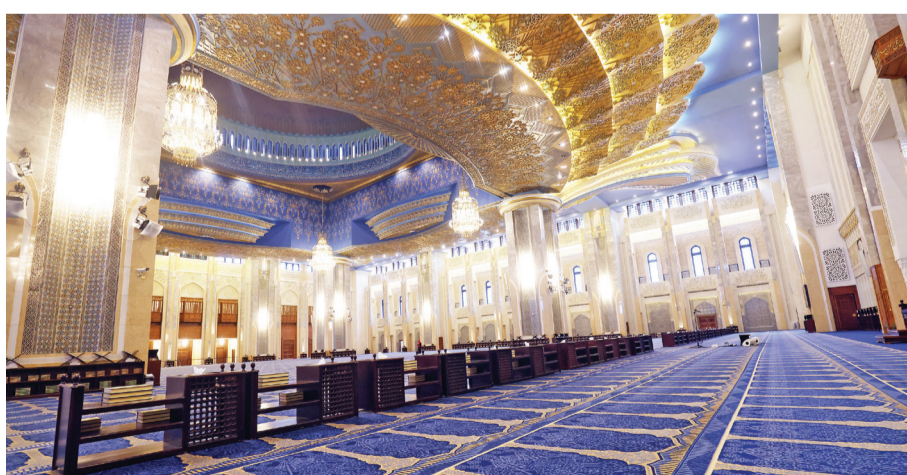
minor maintenance routinely. However, in 2013, the main hall underwent major renovations to the design by French architect Paul Victor.

KT: Can you share information about the calligraphy and inscriptions found within the mosque?

Aldiahani: Part of what adds beauty to the design of the mosque is the calligraphy — there are five fonts used (Thuluth, Kufic, Royal, Diwani and Fatimi) by calligrapher Mohammed Haddad. The mosque also has an Islamic art calligraphy exhibition with many different pieces that one can see through a guided or self-guided tour.

KT: When are the guided tours available and what can visitors expect to learn during the tour?

Aldiahani: Tours are available from Sunday to Thursday from 9 am to 12 pm and 4 pm to 6 pm. Guests will learn about the different parts of the mosque and their functions while seeing the beautiful Andalusian designs throughout the mosque. Guests will also get to visit the Amir's Hall, which holds a replica of one of the oldest Qurans. People or organizations can book a tour by sending a WhatsApp message to +965-22342367.





PROOF OF IDENTITY

Kuwait-born artist captures history, suffering of Palestinian people

By Nebal Snan

From awareness campaigns to photo exhibitions, Ghassan Hamadeh, a Jordanian artist of Palestinian origin, has dedicated his talent to highlighting the plight of the Palestinian people. "Being Palestinian put me in a position where I feel more responsible," Hamadeh told Kuwait Times in an interview. "Artists must funnel their works through a political or social lens that resonates with them. Otherwise, they're only someone with a canvas — just another number without direction or purpose."

Driving down the Arabian Gulf Road over the past few months, it's hard to miss one of Hamadeh's most recent Palestine-centric works adorning billboards. The awareness campaign, which features a traditional keffiyeh wrapped around the word "WiyakUm", Arabic for "with you", on a bright yellow background, has also spread like wildfire on social media. On Instagram, people have set their profile pictures to a photo with the iconic black and white scarf wrapped around their names written in Arabic. The multi-platform campaign is the brainchild of Hamadeh's marketing and advertising agency.



The logo for the "WiyakUm" awareness campaign, which features a traditional keffiyeh wrapped around the word "WiyakUm", on a bright yellow background.

The concept behind the campaign is powerful, yet straightforward. The word "Wiyakum" carries meanings of solidarity and kinship, characteristics for which the Kuwaiti people are known. The two other symbols accompanying the word were not random choices, either. The keffiyeh serves as an emblem of Palestinian identity, and the shaddah, one of the diacritics used with the Arabic alphabet to indicate a doubled consonant, emphasizes the importance of coming together for the Palestinian cause.



A photo of the cover of Al-Watan newspaper commemorating the first anniversary of the first intifada in the late 1980s.

Hamadeh said it felt rewarding to see people across the world embracing the campaign. "I felt that I was doing something for my people who were being subjected to injustices and being murdered every day," he said.

Preserving oral history

Hamadeh was born in Kuwait and has called it home all his life. He only visited Palestine once when he was six years old. "I remember the smallest details. I can still smell Palestine, the scent of the groves and the smell of the earth when farmers are turning the soil," he said.

But his connection to the homeland remains strong, owing to stories he's always heard from his 90-year-old mother. "Her memory of Palestine is so vivid. She tells us stories of the land, the traditions and customs, the names of things..." Hamadeh's children see their heritage through their

grandmother's eyes. They also see their father creating art to honor Palestine, which he hopes deepens their attachment to the Palestinian cause.

In another recent work, Hamadeh channeled his love for photography into documenting stories of Palestinian resilience, similar to his mother's. Over the course of four years, he got behind the camera to capture the tales of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The project, called "White Memory", serves as an oral and visual record of the early lives of 20 Palestinian men and women before they were forcibly displaced from Palestine. The black and white portraits were on display at the Contemporary Art Platform (CAP) accompanied by audio recordings of the refugees' accounts, adding another layer to the narrative constructed by the photographs. Hamadeh plans



Ghassan Hamadeh, a Jordanian artist of Palestinian origin, poses for a photo on the opening night of his photography exhibition "White Memory" on Dec 6, 2023. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

to eventually collect these stories in a book.

"It's important to document this oral history. The stories of these 20 people are a small part of the Palestinian village geographies and family histories carried with forcibly displaced Palestinians into the diaspora," he said.

"Our issue with the (Zionist entity) for example is that they're stealing our culture. How do we prove that we're the rightful owners of this culture? Through tatreez, dabke, photography ... any means of expression that prove our identity."

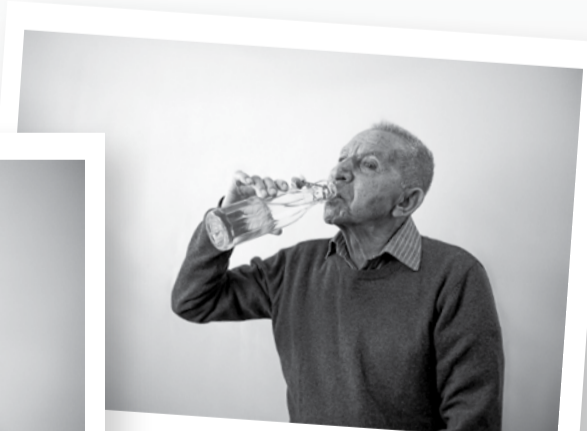
Everything counts

Art has always been Hamadeh's weapon of choice in the face of the Zionist entity. One of his first major works was a cover for Al-Watan newspaper commemorating the first anniversary of the first intifada, a yearslong series of protests, civil disobedience and riots that erupted in December 1987.

As one of few artists talented in airbrushing in Kuwait at the time, Hamadeh was asked to design and execute the newspaper cover page using the technique. Hamadeh visualized the Palestinian struggle using a bleeding map of Palestine. "If art wasn't a form of resistance, Ghassan Kanafani wouldn't have been assassinated," he said. "You may be unable to fire a bullet or carry a rifle, but a word, photo, artistic work or melody can have the same effect of a bullet. Every little thing counts," he said.



A man views a portrait of a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon taken by Ghassan Hamadeh.



Portraits of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon captured by Ghassan Hamadeh as part of his "White Memory" project.

Gen Z's favorite haunts in Kuwait

Stars in the Salmi desert.
— Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Ghadeer Ghloum

Man oh man! What a wonderful place it is!" said Abdulrahman, expressing his excitement for one of the places he mentioned to Kuwait Times. In a country that seamlessly blends tradition with modernity, youths of Generation Z have discovered exciting destinations to explore in Kuwait. From the bustling streets of Kuwait City to the serene beauty of the desert, this generation is redefining where to go in Kuwait. To dive into the favorite places Gen Z loves to explore in Kuwait, uncovering hidden gems and igniting the spirit of adventure, Kuwait Times joined a group of youngsters that leave one inspired!

Abdullah, a 22-year-old college student, said he does not like going to regular places for fun in Kuwait, like malls. Instead, he enjoys doing things that keep him physically active, like going to the shooting range, which is his favorite place. He also enjoys watching intense car races at Kuwait Motor Town. Another place he likes to go to is

Al-Shaheed Park. He goes there with friends or sometimes by himself to enjoy the open spaces, walk around and relax amidst the greenery, especially in the morning. When Abdullah wants to eat out or go for coffee, he prefers local places that are not too crowded and are standalone rather than in malls.

Abdulrahman, a 20-year-old college student, said he tends to go on getaways with his friends to explore Kuwait's desert. "I love to go on group trips to Salmi desert. Man oh man, what a wonderful place it is there! I recommend going there at least once to see the stars, which you can actually see with the naked eye!" he enthused. Like Abdullah, Abdulrahman prefers to be physically engaged. "I also go to paintball fields and water parks. I sometimes go to horror-themed escape rooms," he said.

Awrad, a 16-year-old high school student, has a mix of outdoor and indoor places she loves to go to in Kuwait. "I am obsessed with animals, so most of my time is spent exploring farms in Kuwait. We also have our own private farm in Wafra. I spend most of my holidays in Wafra, as the new farms and fun stuff being built there leaves me no time to get bored or feel the need to go back to the city," she said.

However, Awrad says that staying in Wafra is inconvenient during school days, hence, she has to move back to her house. When in town, she goes to places like Warehouse mall, Sabahiya amusement park and The Avenues for leisure.



Hour shares pictures of her books with Kuwait Times.



Wafra farms



Abdullah at Shaheed Park.



Abdullah at the shooting range.



The Avenues, the largest mall in Kuwait.

WHAT'S ON IN KUWAIT

- Event: Nawal and Mutref Al-Mutref concert
Place: Arena
Date: February 2, 2024
Time: 9:30 pm
- Event: Great Gatsby Painting Experience
Place: Art N dine
Date: February 5, 2024
Time: 5 pm to 8 pm
- Event: Strawberry Harvest Basket Workshop
Place: Al Bohayra Farm
Date: February 9 & 17, 2024
- Event: The City Vibes Expo
Place: Arraya Complex
Date: February 3, 2024
- Event: Hand Building Ceramic Mug
Place: State of Art
Date: February 8, 2024
- Event: Tours in Sadu House
Place: Sadu House
Date: From Saturday to Thursday
Time: 6:30-7 pm, 7:30-8 pm
- Event: Al-Mikshat
Place: North Island on Jaber Causeway
Date: January 12 to April 12, 2024

Sports

'Chill' and confident India ready to bounce back against England

Batsmen Sarfaraz Khan, Rajat Patidar in line for Test debuts

VISAKHAPATNAM: India are "chill" and confident in their bench strength to deliver a second Test bounce-back against England despite missing Virat Kohli and other key players, wicketkeeper K.S. Bharat said Thursday. Batsmen Sarfaraz Khan and Rajat Patidar are in line for Test debuts from Friday with the hosts trailing the five-match series 1-0.

Kohli pulled out of the first two Tests due to unspecified personal reasons and injuries to K.L. Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja after the opener have added to India's worries in Visakhapatnam. But hometown hero Bharat, 30, said the team's younger members were ready for the challenge.

"Everything is chill and everything is relaxed at the moment and looking to do well as a team. That's the message from captain and coach. We are confident," he said. "Our bench strength is always ready for a challenge on these kind of tracks. And the guys walking in, I am sure they will definitely do well and take it forward," he added.

"We are very good at bouncing back after 1-0, but that's a long Test series. We definitely want to play some good brand of cricket." India got a taste of their own medicine on home turf when England batsman Ollie Pope turned

the match on its head with his 196 to blunt the Indian spinners.

Rohit Sharma's men flubbed a first-innings lead of 190 to lose by 28 runs on the fourth day, but Bharat said the team has kept calm. "After the game, the atmosphere is absolutely relaxed. They just told us not to panic, which we are not," said Bharat.

Bharat had the best seat in the house when Pope used the unorthodox reverse sweep to good effect in his marathon knock as England posted 420 and handed the hosts a target of 231. Bharat said the home batsmen have a plan to counter the opposition bowlers.

"We play a lot of cricket on these tracks," said Bharat. "It's not that we don't know how to sweep, reverse sweep or paddle, but on that particular day depending on the situation of the team we as batters take our calls," he added. "It is very clear to us to bat with freedom."

The pitch remains in focus with the hosts expected to dish out a turning track in their bid to level the series. "I haven't look at the wicket to be very honest," Bharat said. "Whatever situation, whatever condition it is, you still have to play a good five days of Test and we are looking forward to it." — AFP



VISAKHAPATNAM: England's captain Ben Stokes (R) and James Anderson stretch during a practice session on the eve of their second Test cricket match against India at the Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy cricket stadium in Visakhapatnam on February 1, 2024. — AFP

KASF chief hails Kuwaiti shooters

KUWAIT: President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations (KASF) Engineer Duajj Khalaf Al-Otaibi hailed the outstanding results of Kuwaiti shooters during the Asian Shotgun Shooting Championship that was held recently in Kuwait.

Eng Al-Otaibi spoke during the honoring ceremony of shooter Mohammad Al-Daihani who qualified for the Paris 2024 Olympics, as well as the shooters who won medals in the individuals, teams and juniors categories in both skeet and trap during the championship.

He said Kuwait Shooting Sport Club will work on preparing Al-Daihani and his teammate Khalid Al-Mudhaf who qualified earlier for the Olympics in order to achieve the sought after results during the Olympic games.

Al-Otaibi said the Asian Shotgun Championship hosted by Kuwait was a success as testified by the delegates of 26 countries who participated in it, and was highly competitive, and he appreciated the co-operation of International Shooting Sport Federation and the Asian Shooting Confederation and participating delegations with the organizing committee which contributed to the championship success.

He said the continued success of Kuwait shooting sport is due the support of the political leadership and appreciated the generous support that contributed to the clubs efforts to keep Kuwait's name in promi-



KUWAIT: President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Duajj Khalaf Al-Otaibi (standing from right, fifth) with other officials.

nence in various regional and international arenas.

Meanwhile, shooter Mohammad Al-Daihani who will compete in Paris in the skeet event said the Asian Shotgun Championship being held in Kuwait helped him in qualifying for the Olympics for the first time. He said he will exert all efforts to prepare for the Olympic games to get the best possible result.

Al-Daihani dedicated the qualification to HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, government, and Kuwait people. The ceremony was attended by Public Authority for Sport Deputy Director General for All Affairs Hamid Al-Hazem, Olympic Committee member Fatima Hayat, KSSC board members and shooters' families.

Salwa Al-Sabah women's volleyball team win friendly

KUWAIT: Salwa Al-Sabah Sports Club's women's volleyball team won the friendly championship that concluded on Wednesday under the patronage and presence of Sheikha Naema Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Salwa Al-Sabah team defeated Iraq's league champions Akad Anka 25-20, 25-16, 25-15 meanwhile Lebanon's Byblos club came third.

Sheikha Naema congratulated Salwa players, technical and administrative officials for winning the championship, adding that the win was the result of hard work and support of the club's board of directors which removes all obstacles the team faces and provides them with the right atmosphere in order to prepare for events.

She said playing with Iraq and Lebanon will have a positive effect during upcoming events adding that the team's ambitions will not stop here rather it will participate in upcoming events.

Iraq's head of delegation Muneer Ishaq thanked Sheikha Naema and Salwa Club administration for the hospitality, adding that this is not strange for Kuwait. He said the tournament's organization was excellent and "we benefited a lot from the championship."



Sheikha Naema (center sitting) with the winners.

Hamilton could switch to Ferrari for 2025 season

PARIS: Seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton could be about to make a surprise switch to Ferrari for the 2025 Formula One season, according to several reports on Thursday. The Italian team want the 39-year-old Briton to partner current driver Charles Leclerc, according to the BBC, Sky, Autosport, Italian newspaper Gazzetta dello Sport and other media.

The BBC reported that Mercedes team members were called to a briefing with boss Toto Wolff on Thursday at which it was likely he would announce Hamilton is leaving. It would be a surprise move given that Hamilton has signed a two-year contract with his current team Mercedes for the 2024 and 2025 seasons, but the deal reportedly contains a clause allowing him to leave after one season.

Hamilton won the last of his world titles in 2020 but lost the 2021 championship in controversial fashion to Max Verstappen when the race director ignored the safety car rules, effectively blocking the Briton's route to victory in both that grand prix and the championship.

The Dutch Red Bull driver, who is 13 years younger than Hamilton, has dominated ever since. Hamilton finished sixth in the drivers' standings in 2022 and third in 2023. Ferrari, who have admitted they held discussions with Hamilton in 2019 about joining them in the future, declined to comment on the reports they were negotiating a switch for the 2025 season. A Ferrari spokesman said: "We do not comment on rumours."

Mercedes did not reply when contacted by AFP. Hamilton has never hidden his anger at the 2021 incident, believing he was robbed of an eighth title that would have put him on one more than Ferrari legend Michael Schumacher. He has made clear his frustration with the performance of his Mercedes car in the last two years and might believe a move to Ferrari would enable him to reignite his challenge for that elusive title.

However Ferrari have also suffered patchy form in the last few seasons although they seemed to find momentum towards the end of the 2023 season. That improvement was not enough to prevent Mercedes beating them to second place behind Red Bull in the constructors' championship. — 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
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300

Change of Name

I, **MURTAZA ALI**, holder of Indian passport no. Z5426575 having permanent address H No 78 Rasoolpura Po Bohra Wadi Dhan Mandi, Udaipur, Pin: 313001, Rajasthan, India residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (given name) MURTAZA and (surname) AMAR. (#5153 2/02/2024)

I, **Sakina Yunus Fida Husein**, holder of Indian passport no X5367581 issued in Kuwait on 07/05/2023 permanent address being Mohammadi Pura Temba, VPO Sagwara, Dung-

arpur-314025 and presently residing at Kuwait, do here by change my name from Sakina Yunus Fida Husein (given name) with immediate to Sakina Hatim (given name) Jabla (surname) vide Affidavit No.-410/24, Dt, 22/01/2024 (#5152 2/02/2024)

I, **Shaima Sultana** D/o. Mohammed Saheb R/o. 19-2-21/11/F/25, Indiranagar, Tadban, Bahadurpura, Hyd-T.S, have changed my name as SHAIMA given name and SULTANA surname. (#4600 31/01/2024)

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Iran survive penalty drama to book Asian Cup clash with Japan

Qatar to play Uzbekistan as Iran eyes first Asian Cup crown since 1976



DOHA: Iran's forward #18 Mehdi Ghayedi (C) fights for the ball with Syria's defender #24 Abdul Rahman Weiss and forward #25 Mahmoud al-Aswad during the Qatar 2023 AFC Asian Cup football match between Iran and Syria at the Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium in Doha. — AFP

DOHA: Iran will meet pre-tournament favourites Japan in the Asian Cup quarter-finals after surviving extra time with 10 men before defeating Syria 5-3 on penalties on Wednesday. Japan beat Bahrain 3-1 despite another mistake from goalkeeper Zion Suzuki, as Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma made his first appearance in Qatar after injury.

Skipper Ehsan Hajsafi scored the winning penalty for Iran, who are ranked 70 places above Syria and were comfortably the better team for much of the game. Iran played the last 30 minutes with 10 men after Porto striker Mehdi Taremi was sent off for a second yellow card with the game 1-1 at the end of normal time.

Goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand was the penalty hero for Iran, saving Syria's second spot-kick from Fahd Youssef. Iran coach Amir Ghalenoei said he was "not happy with two or three" of his players, without saying who. "We could have scored five goals up until the 70th minute," he said. Along with holders Qatar, Iran came into the game as the only team left in the competition with a 100 percent record. They are pursuing a first Asian Cup crown since 1976.

Taremi was a central figure, winning a first-half penalty and putting it away to give Iran a deserved lead. Syria had barely been in the game but equalized just after the hour, also from the spot, before Taremi was sent off in second-half injury time. The two teams could not be divided in extra time, even with Iran playing with a man fewer. Iran will meet Japan on Saturday.

Syria's wily Argentine Hector Cuper praised his players' "sacrifice", adding: "I can't ask more of them." The 68-year-old refused to commit his future to Syria, saying: "Next week we will sit together (with football officials) and talk and see if I will stay or I have other options."

Japan wobble but win

Captain Wataru Endo warned that Japan's rivals will "exploit" their weaknesses after they wobbled before defeating Bahrain to book their place in the last eight. Japan looked to be cruising after goals either side of half-time from Ritsu Doan and Takefusa Kubo, but an own goal from error-prone goalkeeper Suzuki let Bahrain back in the game.

Ayase Ueda restored Japan's cushion with his

fourth goal of the tournament, but Liverpool midfielder Endo warned that their quarter-final opponents might not be so forgiving. "In football, teams are analyzing you and trying to find out where there are gaps that they can exploit," he said.

"Teams have looked at us at the tournament so far and it's not easy to defend against. It's important that we don't let our concentration drop for the full 90 minutes." Mitoma came off the bench for Japan in the second half to play his first game since injuring his ankle on December 21.

But questions remain for Hajime Moriyasu's side, who are yet to keep a clean sheet in four games in Qatar. Suzuki has made a string of mistakes and he was again at fault for Bahrain's goal. The 21-year-old misjudged a punch before getting tangled up with Ueda and fumbling the ball over the line.

The quarter-finals begin on Friday when surprise-package Tajikistan, the lowest-ranked team left at the tournament, face Jordan. Australia play Son Heung-min's South Korea later the same day. In the fourth quarter-final, Qatar play Uzbekistan, on Saturday. — AFP

Blazers spoil Lillard's return to Portland

LOS ANGELES: Damian Lillard's emotional return to Portland opened with an ovation and ended in defeat as the Trail Blazers held off the Milwaukee Bucks 119-116 on Wednesday. Lillard was playing his first game in Portland since the September trade that sent him to Milwaukee after he spent his first 11 NBA seasons as a Blazer.

Greeted by a massive standing ovation and feted with a video tribute, Lillard felt the love, but the Bucks endured a second straight defeat under new head coach Doc Rivers, who was brought in after the abrupt dismissal of Adrian Griffin despite their position at second in the Eastern Conference behind the Boston Celtics. Anfernee Simons, once mentored by Lillard in Portland, led the Trail Blazers with 24 points and made a floater that gave them the lead for good with 17.6 seconds to play. Lillard had thrown down a dunk and fed Giannis Antetokounmpo for alley-oop dunk that put Milwaukee up 116-115 with 37.9 seconds remaining.

Antetokounmpo led the Bucks with 27 points and Lillard added 25, but after Simons' go-ahead basket the Bucks couldn't find a way to score and Jerami Grant sealed it at the free-throw line. "It was kind of weird, first time ever playing in an actual game against him," Simons said. "But it was fun. Obviously he plays the same way against anybody, he's got the same demeanor. But I'm pretty sure it felt a little bit different tonight."

Kevin Durant made a triumphant return to Brooklyn, scoring 33 points to lead the Phoenix Suns to a 136-120 victory over the Nets. Durant received a warm welcome in his first game in Brooklyn since the blockbuster trade that sent him to Phoenix last season. Fans cheered his introduction and the Nets played a video tribute. The cheers turn to boos as Nets fans got frustrated but the Suns, up by three at halftime, quieted the Barclays Center crowd with an explosive fourth quarter. Durant scoring 11 points in the period as Phoenix outscored Brooklyn 42-26 to take control.

Jusuf Nurkic scored 28 points and grabbed 11 rebounds for the Suns and Devin Booker added 22. "It was cool," Durant said of being back in Brooklyn, where the dream that he would combine with Kyrie Irving and James Harden to take the Nets to a title, fizzled. Now the Suns are hoping a big three of Durant, Booker and Bradley Beal can help them contend for a title, and Durant said his experiences in Brooklyn—like those of his current teammates elsewhere—can only help their cause. — AFP

Liverpool thrash sorry Chelsea to stretch EPL lead

MANCHESTER: Premier League leaders Liverpool stepped up their title bid with a 4-1 rout of Chelsea, while Erling Haaland made his Manchester City comeback as the champions beat Burnley 3-1 on Wednesday.

Jurgen Klopp's shock revelation that he will step down as Liverpool boss at the end of the season has done nothing to stop the momentum of a team challenging for silverware in four competitions. The Reds crushed Norwich 5-2 in the FA Cup fourth round on Sunday and were equally ruthless when Chelsea visited Anfield for the second game of Klopp's long goodbye. First-half goals from Diogo Jota and Conor Bradley put Liverpool in control. Dominik Szoboszlai scored Liverpool's third and, although Christopher Nkunku replied for overwhelmed Chelsea, Luis Diaz capped the hosts' dominant display.

Liverpool sit five points clear of second-placed City, who have a game in hand as they try to spoil Klopp's bid to bow out with the second Premier League title of his nine-year reign. Unbeaten in their last 11 games in all competitions, Liverpool head to third-placed Arsenal on Sunday for another test of their title credentials.

"You have to play outstandingly well to keep Chelsea calm. But the way we started the game was really strong," Klopp said. "We put them under pressure. Counter pressing was top, putting them in areas where they didn't want to be. It was a great night."



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Uruguayan striker #09 Darwin Nunez shoots a penalty kick but the ball bounces on the post and back in the pitch during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Chelsea at Anfield in Liverpool. — AFP

Klopp's men will meet Chelsea again in the League Cup final at Wembley on February 25, with the Reds also still competing in the FA Cup and Europa League. Chelsea will have to improve significantly to win the rematch after a limp display that underlined why they are languishing in 10th place. Haaland had been sidelined for nearly two months by a foot injury, but City barely missed the presence of the Norwegian as they won nine and drew one of the 10 games when he was absent.

Julian Alvarez again stepped up in Haaland's absence as the Argentine struck twice on his 24th birthday to effectively end the game at the Etihad as a contest inside 22 minutes. The Argentine headed in

from Matheus Nunes' cross and then finished off a clever free-kick from Kevin De Bruyne.

Rodri made it 3-0 inside the first minute of the second half, but Pep Guardiola made the expectant home crowd wait until 19 minutes from time for Haaland's introduction. Rather than a goalscoring return from last season's Golden Boot winner, it was the Claretts who struck next to end a run of 22 consecutive City goals in league meetings between the sides. Ameen Al Dakhil struck four minutes into stoppage time, but it was no more than a consolation for the Claretts, who remain second bottom and seven points adrift of safety. "Today the game was not close. There are games with this score that feel closer, this was not," Guardiola said. — AFP