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Amir honored on Bahrain visit

King Hamad awards Sheikh Mishal Order of Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa



MANAMA: Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa awards HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah the Order of Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa and the Bahraini Sword after official talks at Sakhir Palace during the Amir's state visit on Feb 13, 2024. — KUNA photos (See Page 3)

MANAMA: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and an official delegation accompanying him arrived in Manama on a state visit to the Kingdom of Bahrain Tuesday. Fighter jets of Bahrain's Air Force accompanied HH the Amir's aircraft when it entered Bahraini airspace. HH the Amir was received at the airport by Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa and senior state officials.

An official reception was held at Sakhir Palace for HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal on the occasion of his state visit. The motorcade of HH the Amir and King Hamad headed to Sakhir Palace accompanied by cavalry, with students on sides of the road hold-

ing flags of Kuwait and Bahrain as well as performance by traditional bands. A 21-gun salute marked the arrival of HH the Amir, then national anthems of the two countries were played.

Official talks between the State of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Bahrain were held at Sakhir Palace, in which HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal chaired the Kuwaiti side, while King Hamad chaired the Bahraini side. During the discussion, they reviewed the distinguished relations linking Kuwait and Bahrain, bilateral cooperation and ways to boost the established strong relations.

Discussions also addressed the pursuit of more partnerships to expand frameworks of action to sup-

port and enhance the progress of the Gulf Cooperation Council, highlighting issues of common interest, as well as the latest regional and international developments. HH the Amir congratulated the King of Bahrain on the 23rd anniversary of the National Action Charter of Bahrain and wished perpetual development and prosperity for the Kingdom of Bahrain and its people under the leadership of King Hamad Al-Khalifa.

King Hamad then awarded HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal the Order of Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa at Sakhir Palace in recognition and appreciation for his efforts to reinforce bilateral ties between the two nations. The Bahraini king also dedicated to HH the Amir the Bahraini Sword on this occasion. Poet

Mohammad Hadi Al-Halwaji recited a poem that was appreciated by the attendees.

King Hamad also held a lunch banquet in honor of HH the Amir before he departed Bahrain. He was seen off at the airport by King Hamad, Crown Prince Salman and senior officials. As he returned home, HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal sent on Tuesday a cable of appreciation to King Hamad, thanking him for his hospitality and warm welcome during his visit to the country, showing the deep brotherly ties between the two countries. HH the Amir stressed the value that Kuwait holds for the relationship with Bahrain and affirmed the keenness to strengthen cooperation that benefits both sides. — KUNA

CONDOLENCES

Kuwait Times management and staff convey their deepest condolences to

**Deputy Editor-in-Chief
Abdullah Boftain**

on the sad demise of his grandfather
and dean of the Boftain family

Abdullah Ahmad Sultan Boftain

May Allah Almighty bestow His mercy on him

Local

Zain, SACGC continue to support KU Computer Science initiative to foster youth's digital skills

Kuwait National Robotics Competition's practice sessions continue



From the scrimmage practice sessions.



KNRC targets students of all age groups.



Initiative aims to invest in youth's digital capabilities.

KUWAIT: The Kuwait National Robotics Competition (KNRC)'s scrimmage practice sessions continue to prepare the participating students for the anticipated contest that will take place in 2-3 March. The competition is organized by the Computer Science Department, College of Science, Kuwait University in strategic partnership with Zain and Sabah Al Ahmad Center for Giftedness and Creativity (SACGC) – a center of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS).

KNRC embodies the joint vision of the three partners to continue fostering the digital skills and capabilities of young Kuwaitis by presenting a world-class, empowering, and informative environment to embrace the youth's creativity and fuel their passion for technology. This will ultimately contribute to draw their future career paths in

STEM areas and prepare them for today's technology-driven market.

The Kuwait Technical College (KTECH) recently hosted one of KNRC's scrimmage practice sessions, where students from across the participating schools got a chance to experience a simulation of the actual competition. The workshops and practice sessions continue in the upcoming weeks to up-skill students in planning and executing strategies, building robots, coding and programming, using teamwork and critical thinking skills, and making use of the available tools to produce the best design to win the competition.

The Kuwait National Robotics Competition targets middle school, high school, and university-level students, and features a rich and comprehensive program to develop various technical skills related to building, assembling, and program-

ming robotics. The initiative uses a unique combination of theoretical lessons and practical exercises, and also focuses on invaluable personal skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

The competition features three levels, each designed for a specific age group. The middle school level centers around the basics of robotics and programming and encourages young minds to explore and innovate. The high school level brings a more advanced platform that pushes the boundaries of creativity, technical skills, and teamwork. The university level is the most advanced, with theoretical and practical skills put to the test. Each level has its special rules and challenges for a unique and informative experience for everyone. KNRC represents an important step towards fostering creativity and empowering Kuwait's next generation of technology

leaders and innovators. In addition, the winning teams in the Kuwait National Robotics Competition will represent the State of Kuwait in the upcoming global VEX World Robotics Competition to be held in the United States in April.

The competition kicks-off on 2-3 March at Kuwait University's Conferences Center in Shadadiya. It is organized by the Computer Science Department, College of Science, Kuwait University in strategic partnership with Zain and Sabah Al Ahmad Center for Giftedness and Creativity (SACGC) – a center of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS). It comes in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Kuwait Technical College (KTECH), and private sector supporters.

The initiative is a successful result of direct and active collaboration between the public and private sectors to empow-

er the next generation of innovators in Kuwait. This partnership comes under the umbrella of Innovation Nation, the initiative under which all of Zain's innovation and entrepreneurship programs fall, with a focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas. The initiative mainly targets young people and entrepreneurs and aims to foster a digitally capable generation.

This announcement adds to the long list of programs and initiatives presented and supported by Zain and Sabah Al Ahmad Center for Giftedness and Creativity under their strategic partnership that kicked-off last year. The partnership focuses on a number of strategic pillars and sustainable goals like supporting tech innovation, empowering entrepreneurs and startups, encouraging creativity, investing in the digital skills of young people, and more.



KUWAIT: Kuwait-UK joint steering group holds talks on Tuesday. — KUNA

Kuwait-UK joint steering group promotes ties

KUWAIT: A joint steering group linking Kuwait and the United Kingdom (UK) met for fresh talks focusing on bilateral relations some 125 years after their establishment, the foreign ministry said on Tuesday. The talks were presided over on the Kuwaiti side by Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarah Al-Sabah.

The topics discussed ran the gamut from healthcare and defense to security and trade, the statement underlined, while more cybersecurity cooperation in line with relevant agreements was

also among the topics discussed by the ministers, according to the statement. On bilateral trade, they agreed on the need to ramp up exchange and volume, subsequently paving the way for a steady flow of two-way investment, a matter scheduled to be discussed during talks in London next month.

In the wake of a new British visa scheme for Kuwaitis and other Gulf Arab nationals, they agreed that the measure would be instrumental in boosting the number of Kuwaiti tourists visiting London, which has long been a hotspot for them. The talks also yielded a number of judicial agreements, in addition to other similar deals on healthcare cooperation and common efforts to boost cybersecurity cooperation. — KUNA



Kuwait envoy, Riyadh gov hold talks

RIYADH: Kuwait Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Sheikh Sabah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Riyadh Region Governor Prince Faisal bin Bandar bin Abdulaziz discussed bilateral ties on Tuesday. In remarks to KUNA, Sheikh Sabah said that the two sides touched on the bilat-

eral ties between the two countries and ways of boosting them in various fields. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's Cabinet stressed Tuesday the need to end the ongoing Zionist war in the Gaza Strip and remove obstacles impeding the entry of humanitarian aid into the Strip.

The Saudi Press Agency quoted a statement as saying that the Cabinet underscored the need to take steps toward implementing the two-state solution and recognizing the State of Palestine within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. — KUNA

IBS students visit Kuwait Times and Kuwait News

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Students from International British School (IBS) embarked on an educational excursion to Kuwait Times and Kuwait News on Tuesday, eager to delve into the realm of journalism and gain firsthand insight into the news industry. Throughout the tour, students had the opportunity to witness news-making at the Kuwait Times newsroom, studio and printing house. PR and CSR Manager Jana Alnaqeeb gave students a glimpse into the history of Kuwait Times, the first English-language daily in the Arabian Gulf, established in 1961.

Deputy Managing Editor Faten Omar highlighted the importance of journalism, revealing that journalists play a vital role in uncovering and reporting issues that affect the public while fostering an informed citizenry that is essential for a thriving democracy and a well-informed society.

Meanwhile, digital creator Yousef Abu Ghazaleh took students on a captivating journey through Kuwait's history in the archive room of Kuwait Times. Drawing from the extensive archives, Abu Ghazaleh transported the students back in time, unraveling significant moments and events that have shaped Kuwait's narrative. He offered students the opportunity to discover news and noteworthy occurrences that coincided with their birthdays, providing a personalized connection to Kuwait's rich historical tapestry.

At the end of the visit, students played a fun game with content creator Zainab Dashti at Kuwait Times' studio, while enlightening them about Kuwait Times' endeavors to adapt to the rapidly evolving social media landscape. Dashti's insights shed light on the newspaper's efforts to leverage visual storytelling techniques and engage with audiences across digital platforms, underscoring the importance of agility and innovation in the ever-changing media landscape.



PR and CSR Manager Jana Alnaqeeb welcomes students to Kuwait Times.



Digital Creator Yousef Abu Ghazaleh with the students at the archive room.



Students at Kuwait Times' studio.



Students of International British school pose for a group photo with Kuwait Times and Kuwait News team. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



MANAMA: King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa welcomes His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the official delegation. — KUNA photos

Joint Kuwait-Bahrain statement highlights states' 'historic bond'

Leaders affirm need to reach just settlement of Palestinian cause



MANAMA: King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa awards His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah the Order of Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa at Bahrain's Sakhir Palace on Tuesday, in recognition and appreciation for his efforts to reinforce the bilateral ties between the two nations. The Bahraini King also dedicated His Highness the Bahraini Sword on this occasion. Poet Mohammad Hadi Al-Halwaji recited a poem that was appreciated by the attendees.



KUWAIT: A joint statement released on Tuesday after talks between HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa put much emphasis on the "historic bond" shared between the two Gulf Arab neighbors. The talks, ahead of a pan-Arab summit hosted by the Gulf Arab kingdom in May, are part of efforts to ensure a "united Arab stand" in the face of "conflict and challenges" gripping the region, a measure they both agreed was necessary to protect peace and security.

On bilateral cooperation, HH the Amir and the Bahraini King collectively underscored that there remains room for progress in bilateral trade and investment, which entails exploring investment opportunities. They discussed a joint security committee linking the two Gulf Arab neighbors. They said that talks on security cooperation held in July 2023 led to the formation of "working groups" between the two sides aiming to keep intact peace and security in the two countries, which would be a step forward towards "preserving the unity" of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council bloc.

In recent happenings around the region, Kuwait and Manama called on Iraq to "respect the sovereignty" of Kuwait, which entails a total commitment to relevant United Nations agreements and conventions over the "complete demarcation" of Kuwaiti-Iraqi maritime borders. They urged Baghdad to commit in equal measure to an agreement signed by the two Gulf Arab neighbors in April of 2012, which ultimately came into effect in December of 2013, while they rejected any "unilateral" Iraqi measure to nix joint security protocols aiming to regulate maritime navigation in the Khor Abdullah waterway between the two countries.

Kuwait and Manama went on to give their backing to the works of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), which provides assistance and support to Iraqis, in addition to efforts aiming to identify the remains of "Kuwaitis and third-country nationals". The two sides also stressed that Al-Durra Field is located entirely within the maritime borders of the State of Kuwait, affirming that its natural resources are shared between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, both sides touched on the situation in Palestine and other Arab-occupied territories, expressing deep concern regarding the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. Kuwait and Bahrain urged the International Society and the UN Security Council to end the ongoing war in Gaza and protect civilians, calling to prevent any Zionist displacement attempts on the Palestinians. The two sides agreed on the necessity of allowing international organizations to carry out their tasks in providing humanitarian assistance for the Palestinian people.

Further, both sides called on the international community to support the efforts of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), stressing the agency's important role in providing aid to about 5.7 million refugees. Both sides affirmed the need to reach a just settlement of the Palestinian cause by using the principle of the two-state solution as stated in the Arab Peace Initiative and the relevant international legitimacy resolutions in a way that guarantees the Palestinian people their right to establish their

independent state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Regarding Yemen, the two sides stressed the importance of reaching a comprehensive political solution to the Yemeni crisis in accordance with the three terms of reference: the Gulf Initiative and its implementation mechanism, the outcomes of the comprehensive national dialogue, and Security Council resolutions, including Resolution 2216. Regarding navigation in the Red Sea, the two sides stressed the importance of maintaining the security and stability of the region and respecting the right to maritime navigation therein per the provisions of international law and the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to preserve the freedom of global trade.

On the other hand, King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa awarded His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah the Order of Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa at Bahrain's Sakhir Palace in recognition and appreciation for his efforts to reinforce the bilateral ties between the two nations. In turn, His Highness the Amir thanked the Bahraini King for his hospitality and warm welcome. The



joint Kuwait-Bahrain statement highlights the "historic bond" during his visit to the country, showing the deep brotherly ties between the two countries. — KUNA

Kuwait and Bahrain explore new horizons in bilateral relations

MANAMA: Kuwait's deep-rooted relations with the Kingdom of Bahrain have ambitious visions derived from close ties between the leadership and their people. Mutual visits between the leaderships, like His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's visit to Bahrain, confirmed the close relations and ties of kinship. The continuation of visits gives strong indications of the leadership's keenness to launch joint relations for the benefit of their peoples and reflect the consensus on regional and international issues.

The strength of Kuwaiti-Bahraini relations has been represented throughout history, such as Bahrain's position and its pivotal role in providing logistical support and military ground, air, and naval support to the coalition forces during Iraq's brutal invasion of Kuwait. The Kingdom

contributed to the drafting of resolutions condemning Iraq's invasion and calling for the regime's total withdrawal from Kuwaiti territory, as well as its support of the return of legitimacy to Kuwait in all international forums.

Bahrain also embraced about 12,000 Kuwaitis during the invasion and formed a committee to handle their affairs, as well as the Kingdom's efforts post-liberation through medical support and infrastructure rehabilitation. In addition, the late King of Bahrain Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifah visited Kuwait immediately after liberation on June 19, 1991, to congratulate the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people on the return of Kuwaiti legitimacy and the demise of the Iraqi occupation.

King Isa said, "It is a most joyful hour for me to meet my brother the Amir (Sheikh Jaber) in Kuwait after the scourge has been lifted of Kuwait and its return to its people." Returning gratitude and in recognition of Bahrain's great efforts, the late Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, went to Bahrain to express his gratitude and Kuwait's appreciation for all that Bahrain has provided. Moreover, in 2003, during

the Iraq war, Bahraini troops headed to Kuwait to participate in protecting its borders during the entry of US forces into Iraq to oust the former Iraqi regime.

Kuwait also has honorable positions with Bahrain, the last of which was Kuwait's support of the Kingdom during the unfortunate events that occurred in February 2011: the Kuwaiti naval forces participated under the Peninsula Shield Forces in Bahrain to maintain security in the Kingdom. Kuwait also partnered with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to support the efforts of the fiscal program in Bahrain as part of an aid package amounting to about \$10 billion in 2018.

Over the past decades, Bahraini-Kuwaiti relations have witnessed significant development at all levels, especially since the establishment of a joint higher committee for cooperation between the two countries in 2001, leading to the signing of eight agreements in the fields of diplomatic, consular, tourism, air, cultural, educational, and media cooperation, a memorandum of understanding, and executive programs for cooperation in various fields. The trade between the two countries amounted to about \$482 million by the end of 2022, and Kuwaiti di-



rect investments in Bahrain exceeded \$2.3 billion. In addition, the signing of the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development 19 agreements with Bahrain was worth about \$1.5 billion; trade between Bahrain and Kuwait increased to \$113 million in 2023 by a factor of 10 compared to 2022. The two countries are constantly seeking to develop bilateral relations, which consistently witness remarkable growth for the benefit of both Kuwait and Bahrain. — KUNA

News in Brief

Travelers on family visit visas
'must use national carriers'

KUWAIT: Travelers on family visit visas to Kuwait must book round tickets on national carriers only: Kuwait Airways and Jazeera Airways, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation clarified, adding that those who arrive on other airlines will be sent back, and the airline will be penalized.

No objection on registering
alternative medicines: MoH

KUWAIT: Health Minister Dr. Ahmad Al-Awadhi affirmed on Tuesday that there was no objection to registering alternative medicines if they included internationally recognized certification. This statement came during Dr. Al-Awadhi's address to the National Assembly's regular session in response to a parliamentary question regarding the reasons for the delay in registering medicines and the procedures followed to register medical, herbal, and veterinary supplies, as well as nutritional supplements and medical devices in the ministry. He stressed that the delay in registering some medicines was to ensure the quality and safety of the medicine and that the ministry's priority was the citizens' and residents health. He added that he would not allow the introduction of medications that may cause harm. — KUNA

Kuwaiti artist showcases
her artwork in Qatar

DOHA: Kuwaiti pioneering artist Thuraya Al-Baqsmi launched her exhibition (Al-Mazyouna) on Monday in the Qatari capital, Doha, with the attendance of Kuwait's Ambassador to Qatar, Khaled Al-Mutairi. The artist told KUNA that she displayed many of her works, old and new, noting that some of her art took two months to finalize and be presented to the public in the exhibition. She praised the Qatari audience for their love and appreciation for art and culture, adding that the Qatari people have a great taste in art and that she is proud to display her artwork in Qatar. The artist is displaying her artwork at Al-Markhiya Gallery in Doha until April. Her last exhibition in Doha was in 1995. Al-Baqsmi won several awards in art and literature. She introduced many special artworks, and she wrote many novels, poems, and short stories. Her books were translated into many different languages. — KUNA

ABK hosts Open Day for employees
and families at Dar Shaikha farm

Loai Muqames

Afrah Alarbash

KUWAIT: Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) recently organized a vibrant Open Day in an atmosphere that was filled with fun activities, sports competitions, and cultural events. The Open Day provided a refreshing opportunity for employees to bond outside of their regular work environment, strengthening relationships and fostering a sense of camaraderie.

On this occasion, Loai Muqames, CEO-Kuwait at ABK, said, "We recognize the significant role our employees play in our success, and we continuously strive to create a supportive and enjoyable work environment for them. The Open Day represents a gesture of our appreciation and the spirit of collaboration in a healthy work environment. We remain committed to organizing more events in the future to enhance employee wellbeing and provide an opportunity to build relationships." Held at Dar Shaikha, the open day took employees from a corporate environment to the outdoors, providing the opportunity for attendees to enjoy nature and the



great weather. Furthermore, by inviting their families, ABK aimed to support a better work-life balance and strengthen family ties.

Throughout the day, team-building activities were planned to foster a healthy sense of competition and engagement among employees revolving around teambuilding and collaboration. On this occasion, Afrah Alarbash, General Manager of Human Resources, said, "This event highlights the significance of connecting employees' personal values with our corporate values, reinforcing the importance of remaining engaged and connected to the Bank's mission and culture."

Alarbash also emphasized the importance of fostering a cohesive team dynamic, highlighting the Bank's efforts to promote teamwork and healthy competition among employees. She emphasized, "ABK is dedicated to understanding and meeting the needs of our workforce by regularly conducting surveys to enhance the overall work experience.



We continuously invest in the professional development of our employees, offering extensive training programs and educational workshops in collaboration with industry experts." Furthermore, ABK is committed to promoting employee wellness through informative workshops, health seminars, and sporting events. This comes in recognition of the significance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance and actively encouraging employees to adopt a holistic approach to their wellbeing.

Alarbash concluded, "We believe that a healthy workforce is a productive workforce. ABK remains committed to providing the necessary resources and support to thrive both personally and professionally and maintain its strong team spirit." Looking ahead, ABK persists in its dedication to fostering an inclusive and supportive work environment, with plans to host a range of engaging initiatives and events to further strengthen employee relationships and morale.

World Government
Summit enhances
cooperation

DUBAI: Kuwaiti academic, media, and literary figures affirmed on Tuesday at the World Government Summit in Dubai the importance of this international event in enhancing cooperation between institutions and sectors to achieve sustainable development and improve the quality of life around the world. They told KUNA, on the sidelines of the 11th session of the summit, that this event was a vital platform that gathered many officials and experts, which enhanced international cooperation.

Dr. Mohammad Al-Rumaihi said, "Today's attendance at this summit was aimed mainly at expanding participants' prospects and raising the level of knowledge and qualification to keep abreast of recent developments in the world." Al-Rumaihi added, "We learned about immense and unprecedented information on technological advances that

may lead to a radical shift in how societies and economies operate, and it is called the 5th Industrial Revolution "Artificial Intelligence" (AI)."

He indicated that AI would play an important role in solving many humanitarian problems in the future, so the challenges that are associated with AI applications must be taken into account and ensured to be used correctly. On his part, Waled Al-Nusif — Al-Qabas newspaper's Editor-in-Chief — pointed out that the discussions that were held during the summit were crucial. He added that conferees addressed critical issues related to technology, innovation, and sustainable development, and he expressed his prudent optimism in building a better future.

The Kuwaiti novelist and journalist Saud Al-Sanousi said that one of the most important things about the summit is its attraction of guests from several disciplines. Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic



Waled Al-Nusif



Dr. Mohammad Al-Rumaihi



Saud Al-Sanousi

Affairs and Investments, Dr. Anwar Ali Al-Mudhaf, headed the Kuwaiti delegation to the summit, representing Kuwait's Prime Minister, His Highness Sheikh Dr. Mohammed Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah. Moreover, the Director General of Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), Dr. Fatma Al-Salem, participated in the summit along with the Chairman of Kuwait's Civil Service Commission (CSC), Dr. Essam Al-Rubaian, and other top officials. — KUNA



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Open Day for
International
Friends Club

KUWAIT: In an expression of gratitude on behalf of the International Friends Club, Narjes Al-Shatti extended heartfelt appreciation to the wife of the ambassador of Mauritania for her generous hospitality and excellent organization of the Open Day for the International Friends Club. The event is part of the club's celebration of Kuwait's national festivities this February.

The occasion witnessed the presence of ambassadors from Kenya and Sierra Leone, alongside fellow members who represented their respective countries. They shared aspects of their cultures, donning beautiful national costumes and presenting dishes from their cuisines. Musical and dance performances representing each country added to the cultural exchange.

The members engaged in friendly competition, participating in a quiz on Kuwaiti culture and vying for titles in categories such as best costume and best cultural presentation. The attendees conveyed their gratitude to the ambassador's wife for hosting such an enjoyable and culturally enriching event, presenting her with a token of appreciation.





Damascus power cuts drive workers, students to cafes

US Senate passes Ukraine aid bill

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RAFAH: A woman reacts as she stands before a vehicle loaded with items secured by rope as people flee from Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on February 13, 2024 north towards the center of the Palestinian territory. — AFP

Zionist entity faces growing pressure over Gaza ceasefire

Mossad, CIA chiefs meet Qatari, Egyptian officials for new round of talks in Cairo

GAZA: The Zionist entity faced growing international pressure Tuesday to agree to a ceasefire with Hamas, as it prepared for an incursion into the crowded southern Gaza city of Rafah where more than a million Palestinians are trapped. CIA director William Burns met with Mossad chief David Barnea in Cairo for a new round of talks on a Qatari-brokered plan to temporarily halt fighting in exchange for Hamas freeing people held captive in Gaza. The two intelligence chiefs were joined by Qatar's prime minister and Egyptian officials, Egyptian media reported — two countries in the middle of mediation efforts as ceasefire proposals bounce back and forth between the two sides.

A day after Zionist forces said they rescued two of the captives, the families of the remaining captives made an emotional plea to Barnea and the Zionist delegation ahead of the Cairo talks: "Do not return until everyone comes home — the living and the dead".

The campaign group, Hostages and Missing Families Forum, has been urging the Zionist government to exhaust every option to return some 130 hostages still believed to be in Gaza. The Zionist entity says 29 of them are presumed dead.

The group called it a "once-in-a-lifetime mission" and said they must "not return without a deal". Hamas fighters took about 250 people captive in an attack on communities and army bases near the Gaza-Zionist entity border that resulted in the deaths of about 1,160 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Zionist figures.

At least 28,473 people, mostly women and children, have been killed in the Zionist entity's relentless

bombardment and ground offensive in Gaza since then, according to the health ministry in the Palestinian territory.

The Cairo meeting came after the United States and the United Nations warned the Zionist entity against a ground offensive into Rafah without a plan to protect civilians, who say they have nowhere left to go. With the city on edge, some of Rafah's residents started to dismantle their makeshift tents and prepared to move on again. "We are sleeping in the street, (the tent) doesn't have a roof, it's made of nylon — if it gets hit by a missile, you will die instantly," said Gazan Fayez Abed.

After White House talks with Jordan's King Abdullah II on Monday, US President Joe Biden said civilians in Rafah "need to be protected", calling them "exposed and vulnerable". King Abdullah pushed for a "lasting ceasefire" to end the more than four-month-old war, warning a Zionist attack on Rafah would "produce another humanitarian catastrophe". Other countries cautioned the Zionist entity against a Rafah ground assault, including China, Germany and Norway, while Italy said the Zionist entity's bombing in Gaza had been "disproportionate".

'We want to be ready'

After rejecting Hamas's terms for a truce last week, the Zionist entity conducted a Monday pre-dawn raid in Rafah that freed two hostages and killed around 100 people. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the operation that freed Fernando Simon Marman, 60, and Luis Har, 70, as "perfect", while the Palestinian foreign

ministry said the deaths of dozens of Gazans amounted to a "massacre".

The rare rescue mission came hours after Netanyahu spoke with Biden, who reiterated his opposition to a major assault on the crowded area. But the Zionist leader said "complete victory" cannot be achieved without the elimination of Hamas' last battalions in Rafah. The United States has angered some Middle East allies by repeatedly refusing to back a full ceasefire, with Washington saying it supports the Zionist entity's drive to eradicate Hamas and calling for shorter pauses with hostage-prisoner swaps instead.

A Hamas official told AFP they were waiting for the outcome of the Cairo meeting but were "open to discussing any initiative that achieves an end to aggression and war". Over half of Gaza's 2.4 million people have sought refuge in Rafah, pressed up against the Egypt border in makeshift camps where they face outbreaks of hepatitis and diarrhea, and a scarcity of food and water.

AFP saw some families, already displaced several times, dismantling their tents and leaving in cars, vans or using horse and carts. "We escaped the north with empty hands, then we escaped Khan Yunis with almost empty hands," said one, Ismail Joundiyah. "We want to be ready this time."

No safe place

Netanyahu has said the Zionist entity would provide "safe passage" to civilians trying to leave, but foreign governments, Gazans and aid groups have questioned where they could go. "There is no place that is cur-

rently safe in Gaza," said United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

A report in the Wall Street Journal Tuesday said the Zionist entity was proposing to create 15 campsites of around 25,000 tents each in southwestern Gaza as part of an evacuation plan. The newspaper cited Egyptian officials saying the camps and field hospitals would be installed and administered by Egypt, although there has been no confirmation.

UN human rights chief Volker Turk warned an "extremely high number of civilians" could be killed or injured in a Zionist incursion into Rafah, which would also further hit aid. As smoke was seen rising over Rafah, Al Jazeera said two of its journalists were severely wounded in a Zionist strike on the city.

Reporter Ismail Abu Omar's life was at risk after having his right leg amputated, while cameraman Ahmad Matar had suffered multiple wounds and severe bleeding, the Qatar-based broadcaster said Tuesday, citing a physician.

Two other journalists with the broadcaster have been killed during the war, while its Gaza bureau chief Wael al-Dahdouh was wounded. So far 85 journalists and media professionals have been confirmed killed, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists in their latest toll to February 7. The Zionist military said Tuesday that three more soldiers had been killed in fighting in Gaza, taking its losses to 232 since ground operations began on October 7. It also said its forces had killed more than 30 "terrorists" in Khan Yunis — southern Gaza's largest city, where there has been heavy fighting in recent weeks. — AFP

Biden on TikTok: 'lol' or national security worry?

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's debut on TikTok has caused a stir — not least because the Chinese-owned social media platform is still officially considered a security risk by Washington. The video posted during the Super Bowl on Sunday was part of an effort by the 81-year-old's reelection campaign to reach younger voters, and included a reference to the quirky meme of a laser-eyed Biden alter-ego.

But Republicans have criticized Democrat Biden for using an app that is banned on US federal government devices over fears it harvests data for Beijing. Even the White House admitted it still had concerns about TikTok on Monday. "There are still national security concerns about the use of TikTok on government devices and there's been no change to that policy," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters after repeated questions about the issue.

The White House said that election rules barred it from formally commenting on campaign matters, but said more broadly that it was aware of fears that platforms like TikTok could spread disinformation. "It's a concern that we have," said White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

TikTok is owned by Chinese firm ByteDance and has been accused by a wide swath of US politicians of being a propaganda tool used by Beijing, something the company furiously denies. The concerns "didn't stop the Biden campaign from joining the CCP's dangerous



WASHINGTON: In this photo illustration, a reporter shows US President Joe Biden's X account on his phone at the White House on February 12, 2024 in Washington, DC. — AFP

propaganda app," Republican Senator Joni Ernst said on X, formerly Twitter, referring to the Chinese Communist Party. "Panic is when the Biden campaign joins TikTok after the White House banned the app from devices a year ago," added Republican Representative Darrell Issa.

Nevertheless, Biden's campaign has clearly decided that engaging on TikTok is worth it to win over younger voters ahead of a likely November clash with Republican former president — and social media juggernaut — Donald Trump. They are also counting on such social media posts to allay voter concerns over Biden's age, which have mounted since a special counsel report last week described him as a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory." Titled "lol hey guys," Sunday's video posted on the @bidenhq campaign account touches light-heartedly on topics ranging from politics to the NFL championship game. — AFP

Modi in UAE to open Hindu temple, deepen trade links

DUBAI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi started a visit to the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday to inaugurate the Middle East's largest Hindu temple and boost investment and trade links. The two governments signed deals, including a framework agreement on a major trade and transport route, at the start of Modi's two-day visit, the third in the past eight months.

His trip comes ahead of India's national elections expected in April. Modi was due to inaugurate the region's largest Hindu temple on Wednesday, a day after he addresses thousands of expatriates in a community event in UAE capital Abu Dhabi.

The visit is largely focused on galvanizing the diaspora, according to experts, even though Indians in the UAE can't vote from abroad. The UAE is home to about 3.5 million Indian nationals — the largest expatriate community in the Gulf country.

On Tuesday, Modi met UAE president Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, according to the Indian foreign ministry and local state media, their fifth meeting in eight months. They signed several deals, including a bilateral investment treaty, building on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement signed in 2022, India's foreign ministry said. They also signed an "intergovernmental framework agreement" on the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, a ship-to-rail transit network that will supplement existing sea and land routes. The ministry did not elaborate on the



ABU DHABI: This handout picture provided by the UAE Presidential Court shows UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan embracing India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 13, 2024. — AFP

deal which comes after an ambitious plan for a modern-day Spice Route was first announced on the sidelines of a G20 summit in New Delhi in September.

Ties have gradually deepened since a landmark 2015 visit by Modi to the UAE, the first by an Indian prime minister in more than three decades. The UAE is India's third largest trading partner, with a bilateral trade volume of around \$85 billion between 2022 and 2023.

Later on Tuesday, Modi was expected to address large crowds at the Zayed Sports City Stadium in Abu Dhabi, where organizers say some 60,000 Indian expatriates had registered to attend. For Modi, "this visit will be focused on the diaspora", said Ian Hall, author of the book "Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy". — AFP

International

US Senate passes Ukraine aid bill

Republican opposition in Congress likely to sink bill which also includes funding for Zionist military

WASHINGTON: The US Senate on Tuesday approved long-delayed funding for Ukraine's war effort, part of a foreign aid package that right-wing House Speaker Mike Johnson has indicated his Republican-led chamber will reject.

Republican and Democratic lawmakers have been negotiating the national security measure for months, but strong opposition from likely Republican 2024 presidential nominee Donald Trump and his allies in Congress still threatens to sink it.



WASHINGTON: US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Democrat from New York, speaks during a news conference at the US Capitol on February 13, 2024.

The \$95 billion package includes funding for the Zionist entity's military and key strategic ally Taiwan, but the lion's share — \$60 billion — would help Ukraine restock depleted ammunition supplies, weapons and other crucial needs as it enters a third year of war against Russian invasion.

The legislation, which the Senate voted on early Tuesday morning and which easily passed 70-29 with cross-party support, is the latest effort in a tortuous process to save President Joe Biden's policy of

leading a Western response to the Russian attack on democratic Ukraine.

A previous Senate bill negotiated by both parties had also encompassed tough new US border protections aimed at stemming an influx of migration into the United States from Mexico — a demand from Republicans, who said they would not help Ukraine without first paying attention to the domestic issue.

However, Trump-led Republicans in Congress then killed that bill, leaving the legislature in chaos. Johnson suggested late Monday that even if Republicans in the Senate backed the Ukraine bill, the party in the lower house will not follow — unless, again, it comes with border control measures.

"House Republicans were crystal clear from the very beginning of discussions that any so-called national security supplemental legislation must recognize that national security begins at our own border," Johnson said in a statement.

This came despite Johnson previously rejecting the Senate's first bill, which included some of the harshest immigration curbs in decades, but which he said still did not go far enough. The Republican maneuvers to prevent both border measures and Ukraine aid from passing in Congress follow the lead of Trump, who is campaigning heavily on the border problems — while opposing help for Ukraine's fight against Russia.

Senate Democrats, led by Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, have now set up a major showdown on the issues by getting the foreign aid bill passed and sent to the House. "Today we make (Russian President) Vladimir Putin regret the day he questioned America's resolve," Schumer said on the Senate floor, adding that if Johnson allowed the bill to go to a House vote, "it will pass with the same strong bipartisan support."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed gratitude for the aid measure's advancement despite its



SELYDOVE: A woman walks past a residential building damaged by a missile attack in the town of Selydove, Donetsk region, on February 8, 2024. — AFP photos

uncertain fate in the House, taking to social media to thank "every US Senator who has supported continued assistance to Ukraine as we fight for freedom, democracy, and the values we all hold dear."

Republican divisions

The Republican logjam over the bill comes amid both disunity within the party and desire on the right wing to keep the border an open issue leading into the election. Given Trump's domination of the party, it meant top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell had to step out of line in marshalling support during the overnight debate ahead of Tuesday's vote.

McConnell had urged his colleagues to reject the Trump-favored isolationist approach and to consider

the message it would send if the United States failed to support Ukraine and other democracies. "Our adversaries want America to decide that reinforcing allies and partners is not in our interest, and that investing in strategic competition is not worth it," McConnell said in a statement after Tuesday's vote. "Today, on the value of American leadership and strength, history will record that the Senate did not blink."

Trump's acolytes in the Senate, however, only highlighted the divisions among Republicans and how a significant faction of the party is turning inward. "We must fix our country before devoting more resources to Ukraine," Senator J D Vance, a strong Trump backer, said on X. "That's our message, and the fight goes on." — AFP

Ukraine debates future of downed Soviet monuments

LVIV: In Ukraine's westernmost city of Lviv, a statue of the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, sprawls on the ground, red paint splashed around her helmet. The region bordering the European Union claims it was the first in Ukraine to topple all its Soviet monuments, in a nationwide ouster of symbols glorifying Kremlin rule.

But the removal of hundreds of statues has raised the difficult question of what to do with their remains, at a time when Russia's invasion has sparked a cultural and historical reckoning. "In Ukrainian society, there's an ongoing debate: if we should preserve these monuments, what we should do with them," said Liana Blikharska, a historian and researcher at the Territory of Terror museum in Lviv. Outside the museum, which features accounts of Soviet repressions and deportations of Jews, lie several downed statues — stylized metal figures and severed body parts. Blikharska said staff relented when local authorities asked them to house the relics since there was little other choice. "There's no other museum or place to store them, so we said yes."

'Shared history'

Downing statues is not new in Ukraine. The country toppled thousands honoring the Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin and other Soviet monuments in the 1990s. A new wave of removals began in 2014 after Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula, and then redoubled after the 2022 invasion.



LVIV: This photograph taken on January 19, 2024, shows Soviet-era statues at the Territory of Terror Memorial Museum in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. — AFP

Then last year, Ukraine passed a "decolonization" law on renaming streets and removing monuments linked to Moscow. Governor Maksym Kozytsky announced last month that Lviv had taken down 312 monuments, crossing the finish line first in the race to "de-communize."

One among them was that of Tereshkova, now an 86-year-old pro-Kremlin lawmaker. It was installed in 1983 and removed in November from a Lviv street formerly named after her. For Andriy Godyk, the head of the regional working group on monuments, the campaign represents the "ideological front" of the war with Russia. "Our generation is doing the work of our parents, which should have been done in the early 1990s," the 35-year-old said. Anna Gerych, a journalist and co-founder of a group called Decommunisation of the Lviv Region, backed the campaign because she felt it was unacceptable for the monuments to remain when "people are dying at the hands of these same occupiers".

Lviv was part of Poland until World War II and had a relatively small quantity of Soviet architecture and symbols. Russian is not widely spoken. But still, Godyk conceded they had encountered opposition in getting rid of Soviet monuments. "There are indeed times when people stand in front of our equipment and say 'we will not allow this to be dismantled'," he said. He said locals were hesitant to remove war memorials, especially those bearing relatives' names. Others brought trucks and tractors to rip down monuments for free, he said. Across the country, authorities have differed in their approach to the problem.—AFP



CONWAY, United States: Former US President and 2024 presidential hopeful Donald Trump attends a rally in this file photo. — AFP

Trump defiant after backlash over NATO remarks

WASHINGTON: Former US president Donald Trump defended his record on NATO Monday, saying he had made it "strong" after sparking a firestorm of criticism over comments downplaying his commitment to the alliance.

Trump was rebuked from all sides after saying in a speech Saturday that he would "encourage" Russia to attack members of NATO who had not met their financial obligations, in his most extreme broadside against the organization.

"I MADE NATO STRONG, and even the RINOS and Radical Left Democrats admit that," Trump said on Truth Social Monday, using an acronym deployed by conservatives for critics within their own party: Republicans in Name Only.

"When I told the 20 Countries that weren't paying their fair share that they had to PAY UP, and said without doing that you will not have US Military Protection, the money came rolling in. After so many years of the United States picking up the tab, it was a beautiful sight to see."

Trump has long complained about NATO, accusing Western allies of being freeloaders that do not pull their weight on military spending, taking for granted that they can rely on the US as a defensive shield. But he demonstrated repeatedly both during and after his time in office that he either doesn't understand how NATO works or is unwilling to speak accurately about it. In 2006, NATO countries made a vague commitment — formalized in 2014 — to spend two percent of their gross domestic product on their own defense, but members do not pay subscription fees and do not "owe" the alliance money for defense. The two percent benchmark is voluntary and there are no penalties enshrined in NATO's founding treaty for falling short.

Speaking at a campaign rally in South Carolina on Saturday, Trump had described what he said was a conversation with a fellow head of state at an unspecified NATO meeting. "One of the presidents of a big country stood up and said, 'Well, sir, if we don't pay, and we're attacked by Russia, will you protect us?' I said, 'You didn't pay, you're delinquent? No, I would not protect you,'" Trump told his supporters. "In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want."

President Joe Biden slammed the comments as "appalling and dangerous," warning that his predecessor, who is running for reelection, intended to give Russian leader Vladimir Putin "a greenlight for more war and violence."

Trump's remarks came after Senate Republicans last week rejected a bipartisan bill that would have included \$60 billion in funding for Ukraine, plus aid for ally Zionist entity, along with reforms to address the US-Mexico border crisis.

A foreign aid package that includes the Kyiv support but decouples the funding from the border issue entirely passed a key procedural vote in the US Senate on Sunday, though Republicans are still expected to block it from becoming law. — AFP



JAKARTA: Supporters of presidential candidate Anies Baswedan and vice presidential candidate Muhaimin Iskandar buy campaign merchandise made in the style of K-pop during an election rally organized by youth volunteers on February 8, 2024. — AFP photos

Indonesia election candidates turn to K-pop to pull votes

JAKARTA: Indonesia holds its presidential election on Wednesday but candidates are looking to another country's export to win votes — K-pop, the South Korean sensation that has swept much of the world. At an event held by young volunteers for candidate Anies Baswedan in the capital Jakarta, die-hard K-pop fans had photoshopped his face with sunglasses on merchandise fashioning him in the style of a South Korean pop star.

In Indonesia, megastars BTS and other K-pop groups are extremely popular, giving politicians another route to appeal to young people. Millennials and Gen Zers make up more than half of the country's electorate. Hundreds gathered in a noisy crowd, some holding posters, paper fans and stickers emblazoned with Baswedan's face in a K-pop style. "It is funny, very contemporary," said tax analyst Nurul Hidayah, a supporter of Baswedan. "Usually the campaign materials are old-fashioned, too boring. But this is very fun."

Others had put his cartoon image on T-shirts and his campaign's name on neon products. Baswedan is battling front-runner and Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, and former Central Java

governor Ganjar Pranowo for the presidency. The country's own BTS fanbase — known as ARMY — has held online fundraisers to support political causes before, and now candidates are trying to rally them behind their own campaigns. Baswedan has replicated K-pop stars' livestreams on the campaign trail, posting videos of himself on TikTok answering supporters' questions from his car.

It has earned him the nickname "Park Ahn Nice" online, which is a modified phonetic Korean translation of "Sir Anies". "I think it is a good strategy for them to use the K-pop trends," said 32-year-old entrepreneur Hafidz Surapranata. "This campaign is really unique."

Voter awareness

Some K-pop fans were no longer "allergic" to talking about politics because of the campaign tactics, according to digital anthropologist Karlina Octaviani. "It is effective in gaining voters' awareness," she said. A Twitter account set up by alleged K-pop fans to promote Baswedan's campaign has amassed more than 120,000 followers. Subianto has already taken to social media to present himself as a dancing "cute grandpa" to soften his image. His Gerindra party last year called on fans to wear merchandise from K-pop group Blackpink in front of posters of Subianto.

Another candidate, Pranowo, caused a storm last summer when he asked social media followers which K-pop act he should invite to the country. Fans quickly rounded on him, accusing him of trying to ride the coattails of the K-pop craze. "This is not related to politics," he posted on X. — AFP



A man holds a t-shirt bearing an image depicting the face of Presidential candidate Anies Baswedan, with his name changed from "Pak" (Mr in Indonesian) Anies, to a more Korean-sounding name "Park Ahn Nice".



Married couple Hady Irfan (left) and Ajeng Pangesti, K-pop fans and supporters of Anies Baswedan hold campaign merchandise made in K-pop style.

International

Damascus power cuts drive workers, students to cafes

Cafe owners upgrade their businesses into co-working spaces for electricity-hungry customers

DAMASCUS: Majida has been working from a central Damascus cafe almost every day for a year, depending on it for reliable electricity and wifi in a country plagued by debilitating power cuts. "Without cafes, I would have been unable to work because of the long blackouts at home," said the graphic designer, 42, declining to provide her surname.

drag on for up to 20 hours a day. Key oil and gas fields in the country's northeast have not been under government control for years, while Western sanctions have hampered resource imports and strained public funds.

In 2021, Economy Minister Samer al-Khalil said energy sector losses since 2011 amounted to around "\$100 billion in direct and indirect damages". In the

cafe to be a place for young workers and students when he opened it three years ago. "Damascus cafes solve at least three problems for people these days: electricity, internet and heating," he said.

Azmeh has rearranged the furniture to accommodate a growing number of workers seeking makeshift offices, with benches resembling school desks and a large rectangular table for meetings. He bought a generator and has installed a battery system that kicks in when state power drops out, ensuring a constant electricity supply. Azmeh also doubled the number of outlets for charging mobile phones and other devices. "I often find myself sleeping at the cafe instead of heading home" to avoid long power cuts, he added.

Across the city in the eastern neighborhood of Bab Tuma, known for its cafes and bars, Saint-Michel Coffee has also become a haven for freelancers and students. Visiting the cafe "is not an option for me, but a necessity" said George Kassari, 18, a computer science student at Damascus University. "As soon as I arrive, I take out all my devices to charge them," he said, adding that he and his sister often recharge each other's electronics at the cafe.

'Only solution'

Muhammad Sabahi, a student who works as a website developer for a company in the Gulf, was preparing for an online meeting at a table nearby. "I work from the cafe every day," said the 22-year-old, adding: "I now have a fixed seat here, employees know my favorite drink by heart and they begin making it as soon as I arrive."

If not for the coffee shop, "I would have failed my university exams and lost my job," he said. "This is the only solution for me and many of my friends," he added, a large bag filled with chargers, cables and other necessities sitting beside him. Medical student Shadi Elias, 18, said he chased sunlight around his home by day and read his textbooks by torchlight at night, heading to the nearest coffee shop whenever the batteries ran out. "Cafes are crowded during the exam periods, so I make sure to come early," he said, sitting near a chalkboard with drawings of lightbulbs reading "battery-powered". "This place turns into a big classroom — we borrow pens, papers, books and sometimes even phone chargers from each other," he said with a smile. — AFP



Students Shadi (left), Pierre (center) and George study at a cafe.

Enterprising owners have upgraded their businesses with generators and batteries to guarantee power and draw in Damascenes plagued by Syria's war-battered and crumbling infrastructure. "I need a continuous power supply (to work) — and I get my inspiration from the people here," added Majida, drawing designs on a tablet on the cafe's sofa.

Nearly 13 years of civil war have hammered Syria's infrastructure, including power stations and energy pipelines, leading to power outages that can

Syrian capital, the shortages have sparked a boom in cafes turned informal co-working spaces for electricity hungry workers and students. At Flow Space Coffee, a colorful cafe with a quiet, studious ambiance, customers including Majida type on laptops or sip coffee while shuffling through papers.

'A necessity'

The owner, Ihsan Azmeh, 38, whose friendly white dog Lilly is also a regular, said he wanted the

Armenia says 4 killed in Azerbaijan border flare-up

YEREVAN: Arch-foes Armenia and Azerbaijan accused each other Tuesday of opening fire on their volatile border, with Yerevan saying Azerbaijani forces killed four of its soldiers as Russia urged restraint. Yerevan and Baku had fought two wars — in 2020 and in the 1990s — over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region before Azerbaijan recaptured in a lightning offensive last September.

The deaths on Tuesday came several days after the re-election in Azerbaijan of President Ilham Aliyev, who has held power for two decades in the oil-rich Caspian country. "Four were killed and one injured as a result of fire on Armenian positions from Azerbaijani troops," the Armenian defense ministry said in a statement.

The fighting occurred near the village of Nerkin Hand in the southern region of Siunik. Azerbaijan's border guards said the action was a "riposte" to a "provocation" on Monday by Armenian troops that Baku said had injured one Azerbaijani soldier.

The Armenian foreign ministry accused Baku of "constantly trying to thwart efforts of parties interested in the stability and security of the South Caucasus" and called for a "return to (peace) talks." The EU's foreign minister Josep Borrell slammed Baku's actions.

Moscow urges 'restraint'

"The Armenian shooting of the Azerbaijani soldiers yesterday was deplorable. But Azerbaijan's response today seems disproportionate," Borrell said in a statement to the press. Russia — which used to be the main mediator of the conflict but has in recent years been distracted down by its Ukraine invasion — urged calm and called the violence "worrying". "We call on both sides to show restraint to avoid any acts that the opposite side could see as provocative," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Armenia has distanced itself from its historic ally Russia since Azerbaijan's offensive, with Yerevan angry that Moscow's peacekeeping force in Karabakh did not act during Azerbaijan's takeover. Baku has denied having territorial claims to Armenia after having regained Karabakh and ruled out a fresh conflict with Yerevan.

But Aliyev is suspected of trying to wrest control over Armenia's Siunik region to link Azerbaijan to the enclave of Nakhchivan, which is also bordered by Iran and Turkey. Aliyev's election win last week was all but guaranteed after his country's historic victory over Armenian separatists last year.

Internationally mediated peace talks have so far failed to produce a breakthrough between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan last month proposed a non-aggression pact, pending a comprehensive peace treaty between the neighbors.

Pashinyan and Aliyev had previously said a peace agreement could have been signed by the end of last year. Almost the entire ethnic-Armenian population of Karabakh — more than 100,000 people — fled for Armenia following Baku's takeover, sparking a refugee crisis. — AFP



DAKAR: Protestors run away as a smoke grenade lands near them during clashes with police in Dakar on February 9, 2024. — AFP

Senegal suspends Internet, bans election protest

DAKAR: Senegalese authorities on Tuesday suspended mobile Internet and banned a march against the delay of this month's presidential poll, as the UN voiced concern about tensions in the country. Three people have been killed during violent protests after President Macky Sall's decision to push back the February 25 vote plunged traditionally stable Senegal into one of its worst crises in decades.

"We are deeply concerned about the tense situation in Senegal," Liz Throssell, spokeswoman for the United Nations rights office, told reporters in Geneva. "Following reports of unnecessary and disproportionate use of force against protesters and restrictions on civic space, we call on the authorities to ensure that they uphold Senegal's long-held tradition of democracy and respect for human rights," she added.

Demonstrations are subject to authorization in Senegal, with authorities refusing to give the green light for many opposition rallies in recent years. Unauthorized protests often descend into violent clashes. Security forces repressed demonstrations which took place on Friday.

Throssell said at least three young men were killed and 266 people, including journalists, were reportedly arrested across the country. The Aar Sunu Election (Let's protect our election) collective, which includes some 40 civil, religious and professional groups, had called for a peaceful rally in the capital Dakar on Tuesday at 1500 GMT.

But one of the organizers, Elymane Haby Kane, told AFP he had received an official letter from local authorities in Dakar saying the march was banned as it could seriously disrupt traffic. "We will postpone the march because we want to remain within the law," said Malick Diop, coordinator of the Aar Sunu Election collective.

'Subversive hate messages'

Authorities on Tuesday also suspended mobile internet access for the second time this month, with the

communications ministry citing "the dissemination on social networks of several subversive hate messages that have already provoked violent demonstrations".

Access to mobile data had already been restricted eight days earlier when parliament backed Sall's decision to postpone the election. It was later restored on Wednesday. The decision to cut access was a repeat of a move last June when Senegal's government restricted mobile internet amid high tensions.

The measure has become a common response to curb mobilization and communication via social networks and is strongly condemned by rights activists. Sall said he postponed the election because of disputes over the disqualification of potential candidates and over fears of a return to unrest seen in 2021 and 2023.

Parliament backed Sall's suspension of the election until December 15, but only after security forces stormed parliament and removed some opposition lawmakers who opposed the bill. The vote paved the way for Sall — whose second term was due to expire in April — to remain in office until his successor is installed, probably in 2025.

Senegal's opposition has described the move as a "constitutional coup" and suspects it is part of a plan by the presidential camp who feared defeat at the ballot box. It has denounced the delay as a move to extend Sall's term in office, despite him reiterating that he would not stand again. The United States and the European Union have called on the government to restore the original election timetable.

Possible amnesty

Sall, who has been in power since 2012, is now seeking a way out of the turmoil. Media reports have raised the possibility of dialogue with the opposition, including anti-establishment firebrand Ousmane Sonko, who fought the state for more than two years before being imprisoned last year.

Some have suggested the possibility of an amnesty for Sonko, his imprisoned second-in-command Bassirou Diomaye Faye and for people detained during unrest in 2021 and 2023. The government has not commented on the reports.

Sall has said he wants to begin a process of "ap- peasement and reconciliation". But the rhetorical olive branch raises a host of questions, including whether it will be accepted by the likes of Sonko and Faye and what it means for their fate. — AFP

Unable to survive in Egypt, refugees return to Sudan

CAIRO: Ten months after war erupted in Sudan sending hundreds of thousands fleeing, many of those who sought refuge in neighboring Egypt face a grim choice between homelessness and returning home at their own peril.

Single mother Rehab has been in Egypt for seven months, fighting to build a life for her children. "I have a daughter who was born here, and I can't work to provide for her," the 28-year-old told AFP. Gathered in a small church in eastern Cairo, dozens of women like Rehab said their families — cramped into overcrowded apartments — have been sleeping on bare floors since they arrived.

"People came to Egypt thinking life will be better here," said 28-year old Ibram Kiir, a Sunday school teacher from Sudan who has been in Egypt for five years and helps refugees through the church. "But then reality hits. They don't have any money, they can't get an apartment, it's cold and they can't get winter clothes. So they turn back," he told AFP.

Since the fighting began in April between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, more than 450,000 people have crossed the border into Egypt, according to official figures. Their priority, many told AFP, is finding anywhere safe to lay their heads, even if only on a cold tile floor.

But as the months stretch on, employment, proper housing and help have become nearly impossible to find, with Egypt's two-year economic crisis rapidly worsening. Soaring inflation — which registered a record high of 39.7 percent last year — hit livelihoods just as war-weary Sudanese began arriving.

Many turned up with just the clothes on their backs. They ended up staying in small apartments with two or three families at a time, many of them with only one breadwinner between them earning less than minimum wage. Dan Mhik Akom, a 34-year-old who cleans houses part-time, tried to convince a friend things would get better. But after months watching his family "unable to even get to the kitchen to feed themselves" because of overcrowding, "he made up his mind and returned to Sudan," he told AFP.

'Rather die'

Another Sunday school teacher, Randa Hussein, said her cousin left Cairo in October, heading back to her home on the war-ravaged outskirts of Khartoum. She said she "would rather die there than stay here," said Hussein, 33. Her family has not heard from her since. Hussein is now hosting another refugee, a 20-year-old mother of two who had been staying with her grandmother, until the landlord threatened the elderly woman with eviction if the newcomers did not leave. Unable to find a job or an apartment, "she's insisting on going back to Sudan," Hussein said. "She has a one-year-old she can't feed. She doesn't know what to do."

Yet back in Sudan, the situation is no better: her Khartoum neighborhood has been shelled beyond recognition, and the homes that still stand are overrun with fighters. "People are being forced to choose between being homeless and being unsafe," said Sudanese political economist Raga Makawi.

"Unable to afford even squalid conditions in Egypt, they choose to go back, preferring to negotiate their security with armed actors however they can," she told AFP. The threat of homelessness is just around the corner for several Sudanese AFP interviewed. Hawa Talfon, a preacher's wife, was kicked out with only two weeks' notice for hosting too many displaced family members. She had lived in her home in eastern Cairo for five years, before her brother's family joined her to flee the war. "What was I supposed to do? Kick them out?" she asked, after her landlord objected to her guests.

'Burden'

AFP heard from dozens of Sudanese families across Cairo who faced the same fate, with landlords citing reasons such as "excess wear-and-tear" on their properties. Under the shadow of the nationwide financial crisis, human rights groups and Sudanese living in Egypt have warned of rising anti-refugee sentiment. Yasser Ali, 40, who came to Cairo in 2002 to study law, told AFP that just in the past year, "everything has changed, people's attitudes have got a lot more aggressive."

According to Nour Khalil, executive director of human rights organization Refugees Platform in Egypt, there is "a concerted campaign, based purely on misinformation, to place the blame for the current economic crisis on society's most vulnerable". "This isn't the first campaign of its kind, but is especially dangerous because it includes government officials," Khalil told AFP.

Last month, the government said it would audit how much Egypt's "guests" — as the administration calls nine million refugees and migrants — cost the country. Almost in tandem, Khalil and other human rights defenders tracked a rise in social media posts labeling refugees as a "burden", though most receive little to no assistance from either the United Nations or the government. Cairo for its part holds that new arrivals are allowed to work and move "freely". Rents have soared in Cairo as the economic crisis worsens, though rights groups and Sudanese told AFP landlords were specifically targeting Sudanese residents. "You either pay up or they'll find someone who will," Kiir said, with some families like Talfon's given a different ultimatum: kick out "your own flesh and blood" or leave. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024

COP hosts UAE, Azerbaijan and Brazil announce climate 'troika'

'Troika' to keep alive goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius

PARIS: Past and future UN climate talk hosts the United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan and Brazil said Tuesday they are forming a "troika" aimed at keeping alive the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The UAE hosted last year's COP28 conference in Dubai, while Azerbaijan will host this year's summit followed by Brazil in 2025. The three countries were mandated by 198 signatories to the Dubai agreement to work together on a roadmap to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, a key climate goal that has been seriously threatened by global greenhouse gas emissions.

"The Troika helps ensure we have the collaboration and continuity required to keep the North Star of 1.5C in sight—from Baku to Belem and beyond," COP28 president Sultan Al-Jaber said in a statement.

Taking into account current climate pledges, the world is still on track to warm between 2.5 and 2.9 degrees Celsius over this century, according to UN estimates. The 1.5-degree Celsius limit will probably be reached between 2030 and 2035, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

According to the final agreement reached at COP28, the troika partnership should "significantly enhance international cooperation and the international enabling environment to stimulate ambition in the next round of nationally determined contributions". This is "with a view to scaling up action and implementation during this critical decade and keeping the 1.5C limit within reach", according to the agreement.

At COP28, the world agreed to "transition away" from fossil fuels, but there was no progress on unblocking financial flows to developing countries, a



Past and future UN climate talk hosts the United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan and Brazil said Tuesday they are forming a "troika" aimed at keeping alive the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

major sticking point in negotiations. This issue is set to be a central theme of COP29 in Baku, where a new target is expected to be set for the financial support provided by developed countries for climate change. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, wealthy nations likely met their goal of providing \$100 billion in annual climate

finance to poorer nations in 2022 -- two years later than promised.

The UN's high-level expert group on climate finance said in 2022 that developing nations (excluding China) need to spend some \$2.4 trillion a year on clean energy and climate resilience by 2030 -- four times current levels. "We are committed to

leveraging our strength as a bridge builder between the developed and developing world as host of COP29, to accelerate efforts to keep 1.5 in reach," said COP29 president-designate Mukhtar Babayev. "Key to that will be establishing a new climate finance goal that reflects the scale and urgency of the climate challenge." —AFP

Burgan Bank announces new partnership with VOX Cinemas

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced that it has signed a strategic partnership with VOX Cinemas Kuwait, in line with its efforts to offer its customers an exceptional banking experience rich with advantages and benefits. Under this new partnership, the Bank's customers of all segments will be entitled to a 'Buy One, Get One Free' offer when they book their cinema tickets online using any of their Burgan Bank credit and prepaid cards.

Driven by its steadfast commitment to rewarding loyal customers, Burgan continues to seek opportunities to go beyond basic financial services and offer its customers added value benefits complementing their lifestyle needs. To this end, the Bank's customers can get the most out of their cinema experience, benefiting from the special offer all week long, including weekends, by purchasing tickets through the VOX Cinemas website or mobile application.



Lolwa Al-Khatrash

Burgan Bank customers will benefit from the 'Buy One, Get One Free' offer on different ticket categories. The 'Standard' experience includes 2D Standard, 2D Premium View, 3D Standard, and 3D Premium View, while the 'MAX' experience comprises 2D MAX Premium View and 3D MAX Premium View. Lastly, the 'KIDS' experience includes 2D Standard and 3D Standard. Customers can get only one free ticket per online transaction.

Commenting on the partnership, Lolwa Al-Khatrash, Executive Manager - Products and Segments at Burgan Bank, said: "We are thrilled to be announcing our new partnership with VOX Cinemas, which marks a start to a tremendous business relationship that will surely reap great benefits for our customers. As part of our core 'Driven by You' philosophy, we strive to deliver greater value to our customers through partnerships and offers that suit their lifestyles and meet their ever-evolving expectations."



It serves to note that Burgan Bank places customers at the heart of its strategy as it endeavors to offer an enhanced, elevated, and personalized banking experience that addresses every aspect of the customers' financial life journey. Accordingly, the Bank continues to introduce offers and promotions tailored to the lifestyles of its customers, as well as smart and convenient solutions that make every day easier and more financially secure.

Apple's iMessage, Microsoft's Bing escape EU rules

BRUSSELS: Apple's iMessage and Microsoft's Bing search engine got a reprieve from tougher EU rules curbing how tech titans do business, the European Commission said on Tuesday.

From next month, the world's biggest digital firms, identified as "gatekeepers" by the EU, must comply with strict do's and don'ts under a landmark law. The commission announced in September that 22 "core" services provided by the designated gatekeepers—Google's Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, TikTok parent ByteDance, Facebook owner Meta and Microsoft—met the thresholds for mandatory compliance.

The European Commission at the same time launched probes to consider whether Apple's messaging service iMessage, Microsoft's Bing, and Microsoft's browser Edge and advertising service should also be included. "Yesterday (Monday), the Commission has adopted decisions closing four market investigations... finding that Apple and Microsoft should not be designated as gatekeepers" for the four services, the EU's executive arm said in a statement.

The commission in September also said it would investigate Apple's iPad system. That probe is to be completed within 12 months from the announcement.

Apple and Microsoft hailed this week's decision. "We thank the Commission for agreeing with us that iMessage should not be designated under the DMA (Digital Markets Act)," an Apple spokesperson said in a statement. "Consumers today have access to a wide variety of messaging apps, and often use many at once, which reflects how easy it is to switch between them." A Microsoft spokesperson said: "We welcome the Commission's decision to exempt Bing, Edge, and Microsoft Advertising, which operate as challengers in the market." —AFP



GENEVA: The logo of the intergovernmental World Trade Organization (WTO) at its headquarters. — AFP

Big trade deals may elude WTO meet in Abu Dhabi

GENEVA: The world's trade ministers could put the final touches to a historic fisheries deal when they meet in Abu Dhabi later this month, but other landmark agreements will likely prove more elusive. Several issues remain stuck in the weeds ahead of the World Trade Organization's biennial ministerial meeting, as anxiety swells over the impact that geopolitical tensions and the looming US elections could have on global trade.

Two years ago at its Geneva headquarters, the WTO's last major gathering struck deals on fisheries, on Covid vaccine patents, and on the need to reform the global trade body itself.

But ahead of the WTO's 13th ministerial conference (MC13), set for February 26-29, trade diplomats admit they are unlikely to break out the champagne. "It's going to be a bit of a battle," said one Western diplomat, who asked not to be identified. Rashid Kaukab, a professor at the International Institute in Geneva (IIG)

business school, said he was "cautiously optimistic" that some deals could be accomplished. But "no big bang, no solution to everything", the former Pakistani diplomat told AFP. "That is not going to be possible."

Adding to the challenges for those gathering in the United Arab Emirates is the ongoing crisis in the Red Sea, where Yemeni rebels' attacks on vessels are disrupting international shipping. "The (meeting) will take place in a challenged region of the world," John Denton, head of the International Chamber of Commerce, told AFP, stressing the need for "strong leadership" from the UAE hosts and WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. Even without such difficulties, reaching agreement on anything is a feat at the WTO, where full consensus is needed to conclude a deal.

Most hope rests on finalizing a historic agreement banning harmful fisheries subsidies, which was reached in 2022 after more than two decades of negotiations. The agreement banned subsidies that contribute to fishing that is illegal, unreported or unregulated, but it stopped short of outlawing subsidies that contribute to overfishing more broadly. The initial agreement was aimed at dealing with "the most alarming situations", explained Tristan Irschliger at the International Institute for Sustainable Development think-tank. "What this second wave of negotiations is meant to address... is the root cause," he said. —AFP

News in Brief

EU clears Korean Air's Asiana bid

BRUSSELS: The EU approved on Tuesday the takeover by South Korean flag-carrier Korean Air of smaller troubled rival airline Asiana, conditional on the firm fulfilling commitments to allay competition concerns. Korean Air in late 2020 said it would purchase Asiana for \$1.6 billion as the coronavirus pandemic grounded planes worldwide. The European Commission, the bloc's powerful antitrust authority, last year expressed concerns the takeover could restrict competition on routes between Europe and South Korea. The commission also had concerns on the merger's impact on cargo transport services between all of Europe and South Korea. — AFP

Body Shop's UK arm enters bankruptcy

LONDON: The UK arm of The Body Shop, the near 50-year-old cosmetics company renowned for ethical hair and skin products, has entered bankruptcy, administrators said Tuesday, placing thousands of jobs at risk. The retailer has appointed experts from FRP Advisory to oversee administration—a UK process where financial experts are drafted in to try and save parts of a firm. "Today, the directors of The Body Shop International Limited have appointed Tony Wright, Geoff Rowley, and Alastair Massey of business advisory firm FRP as joint administrators of the company, which operates The Body Shop's UK business," said an FRP statement. — AFP

EU adopts fallow land exemption

BRUSSELS: The European Commission on Tuesday officially extended an exemption from contested rules to leave a share of agricultural lands fallow, which had become a flashpoint for protesting farmers across the bloc. First lifted in 2023 in response to market disruptions caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the rules will remain partially suspended this year, according to the decision published in the EU's official journal. Instead of keeping four percent of arable land unproductive, farmers will be allowed to use it for "nitrogen-fixing crops" such as lentils or peas, or "catch crops" grown between regular harvests, and remain eligible for EU subsidies. — AFP

France jobless rate stable at 7.5%

PARIS: France's official jobless rate was stable at 7.5 percent for the final quarter of 2023 as statistics agency INSEE revised upwards by 0.1 percent its initial estimate on Tuesday. The fourth quarter saw the number of jobless nationwide rise 29,000 over the third quarter to 2.3 million with the rate 0.4 percentage points higher than the 40-year-low it had reached at the end of 2022. President Emmanuel Macron has set himself the target of full employment by the end of his second and final mandate in 2027 -- that statistically counting is 5.5 percent or below. — AFP

Business



Reusable bags at a cooperative provided by Gulf Bank.



Officials pose for a group photo.

Gulf Bank launches second phase of environmental sustainability initiative

Initiative in partnership with Al-Shamiya and Al-Shuwaikh co-op

KUWAIT: Following the specified timeline, Gulf Bank has launched the "A Step Towards Change" environmental sustainability initiative, aimed at shifting societal habits by promoting the use of reusable bags, in partnership with Al-Shamiya and Al-Shuwaikh cooperative society. Over the course of a week, the initiative involves distributing around 20,000 reusable bags at the Al-Shamiya and Al-Shuwaikh co-op, accompanied by various informative events.

Gulf Bank had earlier revealed the timetable for executing the initiative within the participating co-ops, which include Al-Dahiya and Al-Mansouriah, Al-Shamiya and Al-Shuwaikh, Al-Rawda and Hawally, Kaifan, and Mishref. This disclosure took place in the presence of bank officials, representatives from the Environment Public Authority, and the Committee for Environmental, Food, and Water Security in the National Assembly.

On this occasion, Fahad Al-Sharrah, Assistant Manager of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, stated: "We are thrilled to partner with Al-Shamiya and Al-Shuwaikh co-op in the next stage of our environmental sustainability initiative, following the

successful launch at Al-Dahiya and Al-Mansouriah co-op last week."

He continued, saying: "Our primary objective is to instigate a change in behavior within society, and we are working closely with Al-Shamiya and Al-Shuwaikh co-op to achieve this. Through the distribution of reusable bags and encouraging customers to reduce their plastic consumption, we hope to make significant progress."

Al-Sharrah conveyed optimism that this initiative would actively contribute to shaping government's decisions and laws, compelling both institutions and individuals to minimize plastic usage. Ultimately, this effort is expected to contribute significantly to the protection of Kuwait's environment from the significant harm caused by plastic bags.

He further emphasized that this initiative is part of Gulf Bank's annual commitment to implement various initiatives aimed at reinforcing the principles of environmental sustainability within the community. Gulf Bank believes that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and they found it fitting to initiate this program with selected major co-ops in

Kuwait. Around 100,000 reusable bags will be distributed to the selected co-ops, marking the first step towards changing behavior, and becoming an integral part of their daily lives.

He added, "This initiative is rooted in Gulf Bank's 2025 strategy, with the goal of establishing principles of environmental, social, and governance sustainability. It aligns with the country's environmental strategy under the vision of 'New Kuwait 2035,' as well as legislation related to the environment, laws safeguarding the environment, resource conservation, pollution reduction, environmental safety, ecosystem rehabilitation, biodiversity protection, waste management efficiency improvement, utilization of renewable energy, and building and developing national capabilities in environmental work."

Adel Aldokhi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al-Shamiya and Al-Shuwaikh co-op, conveyed his contentment with the partnership with Gulf Bank in the "A Step Towards Change" initiative, highlighting their commitment to driving societal progress towards decreased plastic consumption.

He observed the synergy between Gulf Bank's ini-

tiative and the cooperative society's environmental conservation efforts, which involve promoting the use of biodegradable bags. Furthermore, he stressed the introduction of a "Fast Track" service by the co-op for shareholders who utilize reusable bags, with the aim of promoting their ongoing use. Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining robust developments in sustainability at environmental, social and governance levels through diverse sustainability initiatives, strategically selected to benefit the Bank both internally and externally. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with various parties to achieve it.



City Centre unveils new identity - now City Hypermarket

KUWAIT: In a grand ceremony held last week, City Centre proudly unveiled its new name and a refreshed identity, that will now be known as "City Hypermarket."

The announcement was made at the company's headquarters in Manara Mall nestled in the bustling Industrial estate of Shuwaikh, and was attended by the Management, its valued partners and media.



The rebranding marks a significant milestone amidst a series of recent developments and expansion witnessed by the company. Notably, City Hypermarket celebrated its regional expansion with the inauguration of its first branch in the State of Qatar in December 2023. Additionally, the company has undertaken extensive renovations across all 12 stores distributed across Kuwait with a focus on enhancing the shopper experi-

ence, especially at its Salmiya branch, which is among the largest hypermarket store formats in the country, spanning an impressive area of 25,000 square meters. It also boasts an extensive inventory of over 120,000 products across a variety of departments.

Nasser Alghanim, Deputy CEO, expressed immense pride in this crucial step that would help elevate the shopping experience and ushering in a new era of continual innovation at City Hypermarket. He stressed the company's commitment to ongoing expansion efforts, both within Kuwait and within the region, throughout the current year beginning with the opening of the newest branch of City Hypermarket in Al-Muhallab Mall, Hawally.

Founded in 1999, City Centre has emerged as a pioneer in the retail landscape and over a period of time, has earned a reputation for offering an unparalleled variety of products ranging from food to fashion to toys and electronics, supporting locally made products while offering exclusive items and brands from around the world namely - Waitrose and Partners, Organic Larder and more at unbeatable prices. City Hypermarket's mission remains steadfast - value at heart, which is to empower shoppers to embrace a superior lifestyle at exceptional value.



US proposes rule to boost investment advisor scrutiny

WASHINGTON: US authorities plan to tighten anti-money laundering rules on investment advisors, the Treasury Department announced Tuesday, after identifying "illicit finance and national security risks" in the sector.

"Thousands of investment advisors overseeing the investment of tens of trillions of dollars into the US economy are generally not subject to comprehensive anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism" measures, the Treasury Department said in a notice.

The proposed rule would require investment advisors registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to implement such measures — including reporting suspicious activity and keeping records on the movement of funds. The Treasury Department said the sector has "nearly doubled in assets under management" since 2015, stressing the need to strengthen the regulatory environment.

Investment advisors may serve retail investors, high net worth individuals and government entities — with clients often granting advisors the ability to decide which securities to buy and sell. But the Treasury Department said it has identified cases where sanctioned individuals and corrupt officials used investment advisors "as an entry point to invest in US securities" and other assets.

There were cases where "foreign adversaries, including China and Russia," invested in early stage companies through such advisors, seeking to gain access to "sensitive information and emerging technology." The rule, if enacted, would make it easier to identify similar attempts, the department said. A senior Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) official told reporters that there have been cases where US investment advisors with significant ties to Russian oligarchs invested in companies developing artificial intelligence and autonomous vehicle technology.

"We've also seen this pattern with respect to investments in US government, military and intelligence contractors," added the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of the proposed rule's announcement. Besides investment advisors registered with the SEC, those reporting to the commission as exempt reporting advisors will also be covered by the latest rule.

While the FinCEN official did not have an overall estimate on how much funding in the sector was used for illicit means, it has flagged cases "of millions and billions of dollars."

The comment period for this rule will be open until April 15. Last week, FinCEN issued another proposal to deter money laundering in the residential real estate sector. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Shoppers walk through the Fashion Centre at Pentagon City, a shopping mall in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

US consumer inflation cools in January

WASHINGTON: US consumer inflation slowed less than anticipated last month, according to government data released Tuesday, as President Joe Biden battles to assuage households' worries over costs of living while he seeks reelection. The closely watched Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 3.1 percent from a year ago in January, down from 3.4 percent in December, the Department of Labor said. A measure stripping out volatile food and energy costs held steady too despite expectations that it would ease further, adding to signals that the path to lowering inflation is a gradual and bumpy one. "Core" CPI rose 3.9 percent from a year ago, the same as in December, said the Labor Department report. After years of relatively low interest rates, the US Federal Reserve rapidly hiked the benchmark lending rate in 2022 to quell an inflation surge.

It is now holding the rate at the highest level in more than two decades, with the goal of bringing inflation back to two percent over the longer haul.

CPI readings have fallen from a 9.1 percent peak in June 2022, and progress towards two percent is good news for policymakers — as is the economy's apparent resilience as inflation cools. But the Biden administration is struggling to convince voters that price pressures are easing, given that inflation is decelerating and this does not always translate to an outright drop in prices. Congressman Brendan Boyle, top Democrat on the House Budget Committee, stressed in a statement: "Once again, today's CPI data shows inflation has fallen sharply from its peak."

From December to January, overall inflation ticked up 0.3 percent, an acceleration from the November to December figure, said the Labor Department report. "The index for shelter continued to rise in January, increasing 0.6 percent and contributing over two thirds of the monthly all items increase," the department added. The food index also increased over the month, even as energy costs slumped due to lower gas costs.

"The latest data, which show a reacceleration — especially in the 3- and 6-month annualized readings — support the Fed's view that rate cuts are not imminent," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief US economist at High Frequency Economics. — AFP

Business

NBK launches salary acquisition campaign with exceptional benefits up to KD 5,000

Campaign within bank's endeavors to deliver a unique banking experience

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) always seeks to enrich customer banking experience by providing top-notch services and exceptional offers through unique campaigns and rewards. In this context, the bank has launched its new salary acquisition campaign for 2024, which gives customers the opportunity to avail benefits up to KD 5,000.

The salary acquisition campaign this year will give customers exceptional benefits with the best packages that offer them the strongest exclusive offers, best cards, most appropriate financing solutions that suit their needs, as well as instant discounts, cashback, and rewards at 900+ outlets, while enjoying access to the largest branch network across Kuwait.

Upon transferring their salary, customers will receive many benefits including cash gifts, the highest cashback, the best suite of credit cards, the best packages to suit all salary levels, weekly free cinema tickets, and weekly coupons from talabat.

Commenting on this campaign, Mohammed



Mohammed Al-Othman

- We are offering unmatched benefits for salary transfer customers this year
- Salary transfer allows customers to enjoy a full spectrum of financing and investment banking solutions within a rich banking experience

Al-Othman, Chief Executive Officer of Consumer & Digital Banking at National Bank of Kuwait said, "We always seek to provide our customers with the best special offers and exceptional benefits that suit their different segments and ages. To this end, we have launched our new salary transfer campaign

for this year with unmatched benefits and rewards."

"Salary transfer allows customers to enjoy NBK's top-notch banking solutions, including innovative digital services and cutting-edge payment solutions, within a banking experience offering utmost luxury, security and peace of mind," he added. "All offers provided in salary transfer campaign this year are tailored to customers' needs and seasonality, as part of our commitment to always provide the most valuable and relevant offers to our customers," he emphasized.

"Salary transfer qualifies customers to special benefits including banking and investment solutions, as well as instant discounts and points earned through Kuwait's largest rewards program, NBK Rewards," he added. Customers get various benefits when transferring their salary to NBK including access to the largest branch and ATM network in Kuwait, as well as the broad geographical footprint across key regional and global markets.

Moreover, NBK Customers can enjoy quick and



easy banking anytime using the digital channels spearheaded by NBK Mobile Banking, which undergoes frequent enhancements and revamps and is highly popular among customers, and accounts for the major share of banking transactions.

EU eyes export ban on three Chinese firms

BRUSSELS: The EU has proposed imposing export bans on firms in mainland China, India and Turkey accused of supplying Russia with military technology as part of a new round of sanctions over the war in Ukraine, according to a document seen by AFP.

Officials in Brussels are currently hammering out a 13th package of sanctions on Russia to coincide with the second anniversary of its all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As part of the push, the EU's diplomatic service has proposed adding around 20 firms, including three in mainland China, one in Turkey and one in India to an export blacklist of those providing support to Russia's military.

That would mean firms in the 27-nation bloc would be prohibited from doing business with the companies as Brussels steps up efforts to crack down on the circumvention of its sanctions on Russia.

The EU has already placed similar export bans on over 600 firms, including three based in the Chinese territory of Hong Kong, and firms in countries including Armenia, the United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan. If EU members states agree to the proposal it will be the first time that firms in mainland China will be targeted for helping Russia get around sanctions on acquiring technology that can be used on the battlefield. Brussels last year proposed putting five Chinese firms on the list but they were dropped in the face of opposition from Beijing and reluctance from some EU capitals.

An EU diplomat told AFP that so far this time only Hungary has expressed reservations about adding more firms from third countries to the blacklist. The EU has already imposed 12 rounds of unprecedented sanctions on Moscow since it launched its invasion.

Officials say it is becoming increasingly difficult to agree on new sectors of the Russian economy to hit and increasing attention has focused on closing loopholes in the current measures. The new sanctions being planned are also expected to see scores more Russian officials subjected to an asset freeze and visa bans in the EU. — AFP

Far right could exploit EU's economic slump to win big in June vote

BRUSSELS: Soaring food costs, economic stagnation and deteriorating living standards risk pushing voters into the far right's arms in European elections later this year, which could shake up the political agenda in Brussels.

EU citizens are reeling from multiple crises. Just as the European Union's economy was recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022, forcing Europe to search for new energy sources.

That scramble led to higher gas and electricity prices, hurting households and businesses.

Amid the cost-of-living crisis, Europe's far right has prospered, with the 2022 victory of Italy's Giorgia Meloni, then Geert Wilders in the Netherlands last year. "There is a correlation between the rise in populist forces and the economic and financial crises," said Thierry Chopin, political scientist at think tank Jacques Delors Institute.

"The radical right today significantly exploits the feeling of impoverishment" and the "very strong pessimism" among voters, Chopin said.

Inflation is falling, however, which gives European politicians hope that the EU economy will improve after more than a year of zero growth. But the improvements will only start to be visible after the summer, not in time for the EU-wide elections on June 6-9.

Nearly three in four Europeans believe their standard of living will fall this year, while almost one in two say it has already deteriorated, according to the European Parliament's Eurobarometer survey published in December. Some 37 percent of the participants said they faced difficulty paying their bills. Factory closures are rising in the car industry, especially in Germany. — AFP

Markaz participates in PwC's seminar on Kuwait taxation

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz" affirmed its commitment to staying abreast of the latest developments and trends in the industry and creating awareness of changes in industry standards, regulations, and requirements across local, regional, and global markets. This was reflected in the participation of Ali H Khalil, Markaz's CEO, at the 'Kuwait Annual Tax and Legal Seminar' organized by PwC, along with the presence of government officials, prominent tax experts, and business leaders from various sectors across the country.

Speaking at a panel discussion on the impact of Kuwait's taxation laws, Khalil emphasized the relevance of the new taxation laws in Kuwait's ongoing efforts to align with global taxation namely, the OECD/G20 inclusive framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS). He explained that the company's focus is on the opportunities rather than the commonly perceived challenges of the new tax regime. Khalil elaborated on the impact of corporate tax regimes on four major areas of such laws: company's earnings, market values of companies, investors' behavior, asset allocation preferences and mindset, as well as operational readiness towards compliance and enforceability. Stressing that the implementation of taxation in Kuwait will also contribute to the government's effort to diversify its revenues, but will have a wide-ranging impacts on consumers' purchasing power and their investment behavior. The government can also use tax policy as a tool to encourage long term investments and other behavior conducive for economic growth,

From tourism to energy, Senegal braces for fallout

PARIS: Senegal's hotels have seen a wave of cancellations since political unrest hit the West African country and many foreign companies are nervous about the deadly troubles. At least three people have died and scores more have been arrested in demonstrations across the country since President Macky Sall postponed an election planned for February 25.

Tourism—together with oil—is one of the cornerstones of Senegal's economic development plan. The tourism sector accounted for 10 percent of gross domestic product before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to World Bank figures. "We have seen a large number of cancellations because of the crisis," Pape Berenger Ngom, president of the Senegal Hotel and Restaurant Professionals' Association, said.

"Hotel reservations have been particularly hit," he added. Searches for flights to Senegal, which relies heavily on the winter sunshine trade, fell 17 percent in the week of February 2 to 8 compared to the previous week, according to the ForwardKeys consultancy that monitors travel industry trends. Nevertheless, the Club Med holiday village operator indicated that there had not been much impact so far.

Its resort at Casamance was 98 percent full on Monday and it had not imposed restrictions on outside trips, it said.

Several multinationals appear to be prepared to ride out the storm, with British oil and gas giant BP and Australia's Woodside both developing new oil fields off the Senegalese coast. Multinationals including Nestle, Philip Morris and TotalEnergies also have operations in Senegal. "Some employees are more worried than others," one company chief based in Dakar told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the crisis.

So far, no foreign staff have asked to leave, the executive added, but "the atmosphere risks becoming more difficult" in coming days. A planned protest march for later on Tuesday against the contested vote delay was postponed after it was banned by authorities. But the crisis, which has prompted international concern, shows no sign of abating. "The positive perception of Senegal among local and foreign investors will be greatly



Markaz's Ali H Khalil participates in 'Kuwait Annual Tax and Legal Seminar' organized by PwC.

business formation and job creation. Khalil remarked the importance of adopting the right mindset when it comes to taxation. For corporate taxpayers, he recommended being proactive and equipped with the right knowledge to handle their tax responsibilities, including outsourcing to tax professionals due to the level of knowledge required, the cost of operation, and the need to focus on the core business.

As for the Kuwait Tax Authority, he stressed the importance of close collaboration with the tax payers such as organizing information and discussion seminars and roundtable that speed up and facilitate implementation.

Khalil added that, given Kuwait's ambitious plans to diversify its economy and maximize its

private sector workforce in line with the aspirations of its young and talented population, it is vital for the nation to overcome challenges and achieve sustained progress. He identified a few essential priorities for the nation to capitalize on the new opportunities, such as enhancing the ease of doing business, as already demonstrated by the growing digitization across various ministries.

Concluding, he stated that the concept of taxation is a partnership between the private sector and the government. Taxation creates an alignment of interest between the two sectors, whereby the growth in earnings and the success of the private sector increase positively impacts the tax collection by the government.



DAKAR: A woman walks down a road in the popular Yoff neighborhood in Dakar. — AFP

affected given the high country risk that this situation is going to generate," the National Employers' Confederation of Senegal said.

Foreign-backed energy projects have been a particular sign of Senegal's move towards hydrocarbons to foster growth. BP is leading the development of the Grand Tortue natural gas field, while Woodside is close to starting oil production at the Sangomar offshore field.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had predicted 8.8 percent economic growth for 2024 because of the start of oil and gas production—more than double the estimated 2023 figure. Woodside insisted that its project remains on target, with the first production expected in mid-2024.

BP did not comment on any impact on its activities. Neither did DP World, the Dubai group building the Ndayane deepwater port near Dakar, nor Aksa, a Turkish group building a gas-fired power plant at Saint-Louis, the northern town where a student was killed on Friday. But Senegal's future investment could be at risk, experts said.

"When an enterprise decides an investment, it could perhaps want to postpone it when it reads what it reads," Etienne Giros, head of the French Council of Investors in Africa, said. International

creditors will also be watching closely. Africa has seen eight coups d'etat since 2020, with Niger and Burkina Faso both losing some of their international aid after military takeovers.

Senegal received about \$1.8 billion in foreign finance in 2022, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. It is among the biggest recipients in Africa of international assistance. The IMF in May approved \$1.8 billion over three years under a deal in which the Dakar government would undertake reforms.

"Recent political developments in Senegal have created some uncertainty, potentially impacting investor confidence and economic activity," the IMF told AFP in a statement. While "the full impact remains to be seen", it said it was "actively monitoring" the situation and made no comment on future payments in light of recent events.

But, the troubles have come as a shock to some analysts. Senegal was "a favorite of the multilateral finance and development organizations", said Dominique Fruchter, a senior economist at the Co-face risk consultancy. It has always been seen as "institutionally solid with favorable economic prospects," he added. — AFP

Lifestyle

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024



SADI 2024 Materiality of the Desert at Sadu House

Artwork by Fatemah Dashti



Artist Ahmed Al-Saffar introducing his artwork to visitors.

By Ghadeer Ghloom

Sadu House held an exhibition titled "SADI 2024: Materiality of the Desert", showcasing the works of five talented artists: Zainab Dashti, a filmmaker whose art piece is titled, "Products of the Desert"; Mohammed Khesroh, a multidimensional designer whose art piece is titled "Desert Alchemy"; Maha Al-Shammari, an illustrator whose art piece is titled "The Lost Path to the City of Weavers"; Ahmed Al-Saffar, an architect whose art piece is titled "Transformed Pattern"; and Fatemah Dashti, an illustrator whose art piece is titled "Resilience".

These artists delved into the intricacies of Sadu, a traditional weaving technique practiced by bedouin wom-



Artist Fatemah Dashti

en. The exhibition displayed their pieces, which beautifully reflect their knowledge and curiosity in merging the past and present, practicality and expression, as well as constraint and innovation. The exhibition opened on Monday, Feb 12, 2024 and will remain open to the public until Feb 29, 2024.

Sheikha Bibi Duaij Al-Jaber Al-Sabah told Kuwait Times that this initiative provides artists with the opportunity to explore Kuwait's weaving heritage

and reinterpret traditions in a contemporary manner, each through their own unique perspective. Sadu House is holding this exhibition to showcase each artist's personal way of reflecting the textiles as a concept and material. The theme of the exhibition — 'Materiality of the Desert' — delves into the relationship between Kuwait's natural desert environment and the traditional Sadu weaving craft.

Sadu weaving is a craft that embodies the essence of the desert and the bedouin's ability to adapt to its harsh conditions through the use of natural materials and innovative weaving techniques. It served both utilitarian purposes, such as creating tent parts, as well as a means of expressing social status and tribal identity.



Fatemah Dashti explaining the materials she utilizes to create her art pieces.



Artist Zainab Dashti (right)



Visitors inspecting Zainab Dashti's artwork.



Visitors appreciating Fatemah Dashti's artwork.



Zainab Dashti explaining the products of the desert that her work combines.



Artwork by Maha Al-Shammari



Sheikha Bibi Duaij Al-Jaber Al-Sabah



Artist Maha Al-Shammari

Al-Hamra Shopping Center hosts Contemporary Sadu Exhibition events



As a destination for entertainment and shopping in Kuwait and a contemporary community center, Al-Hamra Shopping Center is hosting the Contemporary Sadu Exhibition, which kicked off on Tuesday, February 6, 2024 at Al-Hamra Diwaniya on the ground floor. The exhibition

is organized by the Kuwaiti Sadu Association in celebration of the national holidays of Kuwait. The exhibition was inaugurated by Sheikha Bibi Duaij Al-Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Kuwaiti Sadu Association, in the presence of a representative from the new Ministry of

Information – Head of the National Holidays Celebrations Team in Kuwait and representatives from Al-Hamra Real Estate.

This year's exhibition focused on the harmony between preserving traditions and innovation in the field of tex-

tile arts; it featured a panoramic display of Sadu arts in Kuwait with a modern and unique touch. More than 20 artists contributed creative designs in various forms of textiles. The exhibition will continue throughout the month of February and the holy month of Ramadan.



Lifestyle



Worshippers gather to pray in a mosque of the Bagcilar district in Istanbul.



Worshippers take part in a fitness session after prayer in a mosque of the Bagcilar district in Istanbul.



Fitness instructor, Fatih Yamanoglu (center) hosts a fitness session for worshippers after prayer in a mosque of the Bagcilar district in Istanbul.

Istanbul mosques convert working class faithful to sport

The afternoon prayers have ended in the working-class Istanbul mosque and the silver-haired men turn their gaze from the imam to the sport instructor in a white polo shirt. A dozen worshippers and the imam with a long, carefully trimmed beard stand up straight, feet planted on the thick, turquoise carpet of the Abdulhamid Han Mosque. Then they raise their knees, rotate shoulders and hop in place, exchanging muted giggles and shy glances. For 15 minutes they follow the instructors' movements, getting more exercise in than they had done in many years.

"A person is like a vehicle. Just like we need vehicle maintenance, when we do sport our organs improve," mosque-goer Servet Arici explained. Like the others, the 66-year-old had been doing his daily gymnastics since January, when a fitness project was rolled out in 11 mosques of Istanbul's Bagcilar district, one of the massive city's most densely populated and deprived. To his right, the veteran of the group, Huseyin Kaya, 75, said he was delighted to "make every part of my body move".

"It makes a difference," the bearded former taxi driver said, his forehead creased with wrinkles under his black skullcap. The instructor, Fatih Yamanoglu, said the daily routine was enough "to avoid future injuries and make life easier" for the elderly men. Between 25 and 35 worshippers work on their flexibility every day after noon and late afternoon prayers, Yamanoglu said.



This photograph shows the Abdulhamid Han Mosque in the Bagcilar district of Istanbul. — AFP photos

'They are rejuvenated'
Women, who in Turkey more often pray at home, are currently excluded from the project. But the Bagcilar council, led by a mayor from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamic-rooted AKP party, said it was open to seeing that change. Women's employment rate in Turkey is less than half that officially recorded for men, making them especially vulnerable to sedentary lifestyles. More than half of Turkish women have low levels of physical activity, compared to about one in three men, according to health ministry data.

This female fitness deficit is found "in many countries", said Serap Inal, director of the department of physiotherapy and rehabilitation at the Istanbul Galata University. The residents of Istanbul's disadvantaged neighborhoods do less sport than their counterparts in better-off districts, Inal added. In a country where the share of the over-65s has almost doubled in 25 years to more than 10 percent, offering gym sessions in mosques "might be a good idea", Inal said. "However, I would suggest taking them out and exercising in fresh air," she said.

Worshippers take part in a fitness session after prayer in a mosque.



The imam, Bulent Cinar, is delighted his mosque was now more than a place of worship, attracting fitness-conscious faithful from neighboring mosques. He said he was also ready to have "a female instructor" lead exercises in the women's prayer room, urging the initiative to be extended across Turkey's 90,000 mosques. "After we do these exercises, the quality of their prayers improves," the imam said. "They move more easily. They are rejuvenated." — AFP



Indian Heritage opens new store in Al-Khiran Mall

With the recent grand opening of Indian Heritage, nestled in the heart of south of Kuwait in Al-Khiran Mall, their store aims to redefine the shopping experience for individuals who seek elegance, quality, and unparalleled craftsmanship.

The Khiran store was inaugurated on 12th of February by Indian Ambassador Adarsh Swaika in the presence of Indian heritage's executives, as well as a large gathering of shoppers and well-wishers.

Having embraced the philosophy of preserving the Indian heritage and blending it with rich traditions of Kuwait's culture, Indian Heritage began its journey as an exclusive Indian textile house back in 2000. Over the years, it has become one of Kuwait's largest and most reputable stores, offering a diverse range of exclusive designer and heritage products from India.

From sumptuous silks to opulent cashmeres, every piece in their store reflects meticulous attention to detail and a commitment to excellence and exceptional quality. The brand ensures that all its products are crafted with the finest materials, providing customers with a



Photo shows (center) Indian Ambassador Adarsh Swaika with Indian heritage's executives.

luxurious and high-quality product. The brand is slated to open another store at the prestigious Avenues Mall by the end of the month and has plans to introduce more lifestyle products in the future.

The new Khiran store promises an unparalleled shopping experience with a meticulously curated collection of items to ensure that customers have access to the latest trends and timeless classics, all under one roof and at competitive prices.

Indian Heritage is now present in Kuwait and Bahrain with four stores in op-

erations, Souk Safat, Kuwait City, Magic Mall in Abu Halifa, Al-Sama Mall in Egaila and the fourth one in Bahrain. With the opening of its fifth branch in Al-Khiran Mall the brand looks forward to celebrating the appreciation for design and quality in Kuwait, and to provide customers with an immersive experience in the exquisite tapestry of Indian fashion that harmoniously blends with rich traditions of Kuwait.

Lifestyle



User Wang Xiuting chatting with her virtual boyfriend on Wantalk - an artificial intelligence chatbot created by Chinese tech company Baidu, on her phone at a shopping mall in Beijing. — AFP photos



A Wantalk user Wang Xiuting applying lipstick at a cosmetics shop at a shopping mall in Beijing.



Lu Yu scrolling through virtual character profiles on her phone at the Baidu headquarters in Beijing.

'Better than a real man': Young Chinese women turn to AI boyfriends

Twenty-five-year-old Chinese office worker Tufei says her boyfriend has everything she could ask for in a romantic partner: he's kind, empathetic, and sometimes they talk for hours. Except he isn't real. Her "boyfriend" is a chatbot on an app called "Glow", an artificial intelligence platform created by Shanghai start-up MiniMax that is part of a blossoming industry in China offering friendly — even romantic — human-robot relations.

"He knows how to talk to women better than a real man," said Tufei, from Xi'an in northern China, who declined to give her full name. "I confide in him about my problems at work," she told AFP. "I feel like I'm in a romantic relationship." The app is free — the company has other paid content — and Chinese trade publications have reported daily downloads of Glow's app in the thousands in recent weeks.

Some Chinese tech companies have run into trouble in the past for the illegal use of users' data but, despite the risks, users say they are driven by a desire for companionship



Lu Yu, head of Product Management and Operations of Wantalk shows a virtual girlfriend profile on her phone.

because China's fast pace of life and urban isolation make loneliness an issue for many.

"It's difficult to meet the ideal boyfriend in real life," Wang Xiuting, a 22-year-old student in Beijing, told

AFP. "People have different personalities, which often generates friction," she said. While humans may be set in their ways, artificial intelligence gradually adapts to the user's personality — remembering what they say and adjusting its speech accordingly.

'Emotional support'

Wang said she has several "lovers" inspired by ancient China: long-haired immortals, princes and even wandering knights. "I ask them questions," she said when she is faced with stress from her classes or daily life, and "they will suggest ways to solve this problem." "It's a lot of emotional support."

Her boyfriends all appear on Wantalk, another app made by Chinese internet giant Baidu. There are hundreds of characters available — from pop stars to CEOs and knights — but users can also customize their perfect lover according to age, values, identity and hobbies.

"Everyone experiences complicated moments, loneliness, and is not necessarily lucky enough to have a

friend or family nearby who can listen to them 24 hours a day," Lu Yu, Wantalk's head of product management and operations, told AFP. "Artificial intelligence can meet this need."

'You're cute'

At a cafe in the eastern city of Nantong, a girl chats with her virtual lover. "We can go on a picnic on the campus lawn," she suggests to Xiaojiang, her AI companion on another app by Tencent called Weiban. "I'd like to meet your best friend and her boyfriend," he replies. "You are very cute." Long work hours can make it hard to see friends regularly and there is a lot of uncertainty: high youth unemployment and a struggling economy mean that many young Chinese worry about the future.

That potentially makes an AI partner the perfect virtual shoulder to cry on. "If I can create a virtual character that... meets my needs exactly, I'm not going to choose a real person," Wang said. Some apps allow users to have live conversations with their virtual companions — reminiscent of

the Oscar-winning 2013 US film "Her", starring Joaquin Phoenix and Scarlett Johansson, about a heartbroken man who falls in love with an AI voice.

The technology still has some way to go. A two- to three-second gap between questions and answers makes you "clearly realize that it's just a robot", user Zeng Zhenzhen, a 22-year-old student, told AFP. However, the answers are "very realistic", she said.

AI might be booming but it is so far a lightly regulated industry, particularly when it comes to user privacy. Beijing has said it is working on a law to strengthen consumer protections around the new technology. Baidu did not respond to AFP's questions about how it ensures personal data is not used illegally or by third parties. Still, Glow user Tufei has big dreams. "I want a robot boyfriend, who operates through artificial intelligence," she said. "I would be able to feel his body heat, with which he would warm me." — AFP

US to launch next Moon mission on Valentine's Day

US companies are set to launch for the Moon on February 14, less than a month since a similar mission ended in failure with the spaceship burning up in the Earth's atmosphere, NASA said Wednesday. The upcoming attempt features a lander built by Houston-based Intuitive Machines fixed to the top of a SpaceX rocket, while the last try involved a United Launch Alliance rocket and Astrobotics lander. But the stakes remain just as high: achieving America's first soft touchdown on the lunar surface since the end of the Apollo-era five decades ago, and the first ever by private industry.

SpaceX is targeting a 12:57 am blast off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, with Intuitive Machines' Nova-C lander expected to land on the Moon on February 22, at an impact crater near the lunar south pole. NASA paid Intuitive Machines more than \$100 million to ship its scientific hardware on the mission, part of a broader strategy to stimulate a lunar economy and delegate routine cargo missions to the private sector.

The "Nova-C" lander's payload includes instruments to better understand the lunar environment as NASA prepares to send human crew members back to the celestial body under the Artemis program later this decade. It also includes more colorful cargo, including sculptures by the artist Jeff Koons. Only five nations have achieved soft lunar landings. The Soviet Union was first, followed by the United States, which is still the only country to put people on the Moon. China achieved the feat three times in the past decade, followed by India, and most recently Japan. Japan's lander touched down on January 20 but ended up on its side, leaving its solar panels off kilter.

Astrobotics' failure was the third botched effort by non-government missions, after a Zionist non-profit and Japanese company both crash-landed in 2019 and 2023, respectively. Landing on the Moon is complicated by treacherous terrain and the lack of atmosphere, which means parachutes aren't an option and a spaceship has to use its thrusters to achieve a controlled descent. — AFP



Sira Rehn, a user of 'DigiVi', a dating app developed exclusively for people with mild intellectual disabilities or autism, poses for a photo at a cafe in Uppsala, Sweden. — AFP photos



Therese Wappsell (left), a 'DigiVi' user, meets to discuss about how to improve the platform with Magnus Linden (center), one of its project managers, at a cafe in Uppsala, Sweden.

Dating app helps Swedes with disabilities find love

For 24-year-old Sira Rehn, a dating app for people with mild intellectual disabilities and autism has opened up the world of online dating and a chance to find love in a safe space. "In here I know that people will not judge me, you just have to be yourself," says Rehn, who long felt excluded from other popular dating apps used by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Launched in Sweden last November, the DigiVi app is reserved for people with autism or mild intellectual disabilities, specifically those with an IQ of between 50 and 69.

The app features a simplified user interface and requires an in-person meeting to create an account in order to ensure the security of users, who are often victims of abuse on social media. Seated at a cafe in Uppsala, north of Stockholm, Rehn sips a lemonade while tapping energetically on a cell phone. Rehn identifies as non-binary and uses the gender neutral Swedish pronoun "hen", equivalent to "they" in English.

Excluded from online world

"I've just started to chat with someone!", Rehn tells an AFP journalist. "We share the same interests, she seems nice. I can't wait to see what will happen... I dream of finding love," they gush. Rehn's profile features a photo and a list of interests and hobbies: singing, dogs and watching movies. "On other platforms I used to hide my disability but it's a big part of who I am. People didn't want to talk to me when they found out about it," they recall.

DigiVi — a contraction of the words "Digital" and "Vi", which means "us" in Swedish — was developed by an organization that helps people with intellec-

tual and cognitive disabilities. The app's functions are stripped down to the bare minimum: a profile, a discussion forum, and a help button.

"Unfortunately a lot of people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, are shut out of the digital world because a lot of things on the Internet are complicated even though they don't need to be," explains Magnus Linden, one of the app's founders. "Those who need a lot of help in their daily lives usually need help with their love lives too," he says. To join the app, users must meet with a DigiVi representative, who verifies their identity and helps them create an account. The app has representatives in around 20 Swedish cities. Each account is linked to the user's social security number, which Linden says prevents misuse.

No nudes

"It's comforting to know that it can't be downloaded by just anyone," says Therese Wappsell, a user with a mild intellectual disability who helped develop the app. She says she and others with similar disabilities are "especially vulnerable to violence". Worries range from unwanted explicit pictures to "being pressured to send things you don't want to send, or you meet people that you have met online and they are someone different than they said they were," says app co-founder Aline Groh.

"There are people who abuse other people and there's a risk for people with disabilities — it's more difficult for them to get appropriate support for that and ask for help," she says. "With DigiVi we can easily see if someone's causing trouble and act on it." Moderators



Sira Rehn, a user of 'DigiVi', shows his profile on the dating app that was developed exclusively for people with mild intellectual disabilities or autism, at a cafe in Uppsala, Sweden.

on the app — where nude photos are banned — can permanently exclude users who behave inappropriately and contact police if necessary.

The love lives of people with intellectual disabilities and autism have been highlighted in several reality shows in recent years, including "Love on the Spectrum", "Born this Way" and "Down for Love". "I think it's important for people to see that we can find love too. That disabilities don't matter and the point is the feelings inside," says Rehn of the series.

DigiVi currently has 180 regular users. "It's spreading, our goal is to be represented in every city," co-founder Groh says, adding that "we have heard from people who have created new relationships." "About one percent of the population has intellectual disabilities, about 5 percent have autism and 15 percent have some form of disability, so there are really a lot of people who can profit from DigiVi." — AFP



Aline Groh (left), project manager for 'DigiVi', Therese Wappsell (second left), a 'DigiVi' user, project manager Magnus Linden (center) and user Sira Rehn (right) meet to discuss about how to improve the dating app, at a cafe in Uppsala, Sweden.

Sports

Record-setting West Indies beat Australia in third T20

Biggest sixth-wicket partnership in a Twenty20 international

PERTH: Andre Russell and Sherfane Rutherford put on the biggest sixth-wicket partnership in a Twenty20 international to steer the West Indies past Australia by 37 runs in their third and final clash on Tuesday. Both men crunched quickfire half-centuries to propel the visitors to 220-6 in Perth with Australia managing just 183-5 in reply, David Warner top-scoring on 81 in his last appearance for Australia at home.

The hosts won the first match in Hobart by 11 runs and sealed the series with a 34-run victory at Adelaide. The West Indies made a horror start after winning the toss and opting to bat, losing three wickets in the opening three overs.

But Russell (71 off 29 balls) and Rutherford (unbeaten 67 off 40) led the fightback, with both posting their highest T20 scores in a 139-run sixth-wicket partnership that set a new standard. Spinner Adam Zampa went for 1-65 off four overs — his most expensive in the format.

"I was just happy I could contribute tonight," said Russell. "I think it's just the nature of this team, we are never out of it. Five wickets down, but there wasn't any panic in the change rooms. I'm happy we came together as a team and we were definitely playing as a unit tonight."

Australia started well with Warner and captain Mitchell Marsh reaching 61 without loss after the six-over powerplay. Warner clocked his 3,000th run as he brought up a 26th half-century off 25 balls be-

fore Marsh departed for 17, skying a catch to Jason Holder off Akeal Hosein.

They reached 98-1 at the halfway mark but were pegged back by tight bowling. The match turned when Australia lost three wickets for three runs. Roston Chase bagged two of them, including Warner and Josh Inglis (one), while Romario Shepherd bowled Aaron Hardie (16).

Glenn Maxwell blasted an unbeaten 120 in Adelaide but, with 96 needed off the final five overs, it was a bridge too far even for him and he fell for 12 as the chase fizzled despite Tim David cracking a lightening 41.

"We knew they'd come into this series, they're a really good team with some amazing cricketers, so fair play to the West Indies," Marsh said. With Australian pace spearhead Josh Hazlewood rested, Xavier Bartlett earned a debut and Johnson Charles nicked to wicketkeeper Matthew Wade in his first over before he bowled Kyle Mayers in his second over.

In between, Nicholas Pooran was removed by Jason Behrendorff to leave the West Indies reeling at 17-3. But Chase began the rebuild, taking 17 off Bartlett's third over before his luck ran out against Zampa, bowled for 37 as he attempted another big hit.

Hardie accounted for Rovman Powell (21) before Rutherford and Russell came to the rescue. Russell blasted seven sixes and four boundaries, while Rutherford hit five sixes and five fours. — AFP



PERTH: Australia's players pose with the trophy after winning the series following their defeat in the third Twenty20 international cricket match against the West Indies at Perth Stadium in Perth on February 13, 2024. — AFP

Stokes marks 100th Test with India series on knife-edge

RAJKOT: Ben Stokes will earn his 100th Test cap when he leads England against India in the third Test beginning Thursday in Rajkot, with both sides having to contend with the absence of key players. The five-match series is on a knife-edge at 1-1 after India's 106-run victory in the second Test in Visakhapatnam followed England's 28-run win in Hyderabad.

Batsmen Virat Kohli and KL Rahul will be absent for India while England's senior spinner Jack Leach has been ruled out of the final three matches with a knee injury suffered in the first Test. Stokes, 32, was lauded for his leadership after England won the series opener in Hyderabad to hand India only their fourth Test loss at home since 2013 and then aggressively chased 399 in Visakhapatnam before falling short.

England have won 14 Tests out of 20 since Stokes and coach Brendon McCullum took the reins with an attacking style dubbed "Bazball", but one former great thinks the term is overplayed. "Much of England's success has been attributed to 'Bazball' — the desire to score quickly and tactically rattle the opposition — but this is a misnomer," former Australia captain Ian Chappell was quoted as saying on Cricinfo. "What Stokes has really done is set out to achieve victory from ball one by playing aggressive cricket — in all aspects of the game," he said.

Unbelievable achievement'

All-rounder Stokes, who is playing in the series as a batsman after recovering from knee surgery, has scored 6,251 runs and taken 197 wickets since his Test debut in 2013. "To play 100 Tests is an unbelievable achievement," batsman Ollie Pope, who scored a match-winning 196 in the opening Test, told reporters Tuesday.

"Obviously he's had his highs and lows but what he's done since being a captain has been amazing... He's probably changed the game in all aspects." India will be without their batting great Kohli, who will be unavailable for the rest of the series for "personal reasons", after having missed the first two Tests.

Batsman Rahul will again miss out having not recovered completely after missing the second Test, but was named in the squad and is expected to be fit for the rest of the series after Rajkot. "There is a chance for the newcomers to grab the opportunity," said Indian left-arm spinner Kuldeep Yadav.

"They have done really well in domestic cricket and it's their time to show what they've got," he said, adding that he did not expect a rank turner for the Rajkot game. The England squad travelled to Abu Dhabi for a rest and to spend time with family members after the second Test but are already back training in Rajkot.

Anderson, Ashwin milestones

Rohit Sharma's side started the series with the defeat in Hyderabad after Pope's brilliant knock turned the game on its head despite India having taken a 190-run first-innings lead. In Visakhapatnam, India survived some nervy moments during England's spirited chase before securing the series-levelling win. India spinner Ravichandran Ashwin needs just one wicket in Rajkot to reach 500 Test dismissals, while England seamer James Anderson needs five more to reach 700 victims, a mark bettered only by spinners Shane Warne (708) and Muttiah Muralitharan (800).

The 42-year-old Anderson will play his 185th Test, if selected, and could be joined in the attack again by young spinners Tom Hartley, Shoaib Bashir and Rehan Ahmed, who have just six caps between them. England's spinners, including part-timer Joe Root, have surprisingly stood out so far with 33 wickets compared to their Indian counterparts, who have taken 23.

India's match-winner in Visakhapatnam was fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah, who rose to the top of the world's Test bowling ranking after his nine-wicket haul that showcased his reverse swing brilliance. Yashvi Jaiswal hit 209 in the first innings and tops the series batting charts on 321 runs, followed by Pope on 243 and England opener Zak Crawley, who has 200. — AFP

All-rounders lead S Africa fightback in second Test

HAMILTON: All-rounders Ruan de Swardt and Shaun van Berg were leading a South African rearguard on Tuesday as they recovered to 220-6 after New Zealand had dominated the start of the second Test. De Swardt had reached his maiden half-century to be 55 not out at stumps on day one, while van Berg was on 34 on his Test debut, with the pair having combined for 70 off 27 overs in Hamilton.

It represented a recovery for the tourists, who won the toss but were 64-3 at lunch and 150-6 early in the final session when key batsman David Bedingham was dismissed in freakish fashion. After losing the opening Test in Mount Maunganui by 281 runs, an understrength South Africa must win at Seddon Park to avoid becoming the first team from their country to lose a Test series to New Zealand.

De Swardt — one of six Proteas debutants in the first Test — showed the specialist batsman how to preserve his wicket in a gritty 135-ball knock. He received support from 37-year-old leg-spinner von Berg, finally given an international opportunity after playing 135 first class matches.

The pair halted a mini-collapse either side of the tea break inspired by Rachin Ravindra, who took 3-33. Ravindra, who scored 240 in the first Test, underlined his all-round talent by removing Zubayr Hamza for a painstaking 20 off 99 balls and Keegan Petersen for two.

His left-arm spin then accounted for the unfortunate Bedingham, on 39, whose leg-side flick struck the top of his shoe and flew to close-in fielder Will Young. South Africa made a dreadful



HAMILTON: South Africa's Ruan de Swardt plays a shot on day one of the second Test cricket match between New Zealand and South Africa at Seddon Park in Hamilton on February 13, 2024. — AFP

start when makeshift opener Clyde Fortuin was dismissed for nought first ball in the second over, the wicketkeeper caught brilliantly in the gully by Glenn Phillips off Matt Henry.

Pace bowler Will O'Rourke claimed a scalp on debut when he had captain Neil Brand trapped leg before wicket for 25, while Raynard van Tonder was out for 32 in the over before lunch, caught at gully after failing to get on top of Neil Wagner's short delivery. South Africa boosted their spinning stocks,

introducing von Berg and recalling off-spinner Dane Piedt for his first Test in four years. They replaced opener Edward Moore and seamer Duanne Olivier. For New Zealand, 22-year-old O'Rourke replaced Kyle Jamieson, who had back pain following the first Test.

Veteran seamer Wagner was recalled in place of spinner Mitchell Santner, while Young replaced batsman Daryl Mitchell, who was ruled out with a foot injury. — AFP

First Palestine Mini Goal Cup championship

KUWAIT: Chairman of the "Mini Goal" game committee of Kuwait Olympic Committee Hassan Al-Khawaja announced the organization of the first Palestine Mini Goal Cup championship from Feb 14th until Feb 17th for both men and juniors to be held at the late Sameer Saeed playground of the Cultural and Social Committee in Maidan Hawally.

Al-Khawaja revealed during a press conference in the presence of Chairman of Kuwait Coordination Committee of the Foreign Palestinian Congress Nader Abu Hanaina the major official and popular support of this tournament that is organized for the first time



and he thanked the sponsors for their support of their brothers in Gaza.

Member of the Mini Goal committee Abdullah Al-Majadi said there will be 16 adults and 8 children teams participating in the tournament which will be refereed by referees from Kuwait

Football Association.

He said the tournament named after Palestine and its teams have names from Palestine is open for all nationalities in Kuwait as this newly established sport is loved tremendously in both the sport and youth media.

Prizes of the tournament are as follows: First place in the adults category will receive KD 600, second place KD 300 and third place KD 100. Meanwhile first place winner of the children category (age 11-13 years) will receive KD 300 and second place KD 100.

Paris Olympics set for gold medal in luxury promotion

PARIS: From the podium to athletes' wardrobes, French luxury goods giant LVMH is planning to put high-end Gallic chic at the heart of the Paris Olympics, underlining how sport has become a promotional platform for even the most exclusive brands.

Parisian luxury jewellery house Chaumet, one of LVMH's lesser-known properties, was thrust into the public limelight on Thursday when its design for the medals for the July 26-August 11 extravaganza was unveiled.

The role was a departure from its usual niche making engagement rings, tiaras and diamond-studded brooches for the ultra-wealthy, with LVMH hoping to harness the huge international reach of the Olympics on home turf.

Antoine Arnault, senior LVMH executive and eldest son of company founder Bernard Arnault, said at the ceremony to reveal the medals that there was a "quasi-military organization inside the company" working on Paris Olympics projects.

"LVMH as a partner will try to add a little touch of creativity, notably during the moments of celebration," he told reporters. Controlled by the world's richest man, Bernard Arnault, LVMH signed up as "premium partner" for the Paris Games in July last year after months of complex negotiations about the use of its brands.

While Chaumet secured the medal honour, high-end leather goods brand Berluti is set to dress the French athletes during the spectacular opening ceremony being planned on the river Seine on July 26. Thousands of Olympics VIPs and high-paying corporate guests are set to sip LVMH-owned Moët & Chandon champagne as well as Hennessy cognac among other premium drinks in their hospitality suites.

Dior is also set for a role — which has not yet been announced — as is celebrated handbag and luggage maker Louis Vuitton. A series of



PARIS: (From L) French Paralympic swimmer Alex Portal and French wheelchair tennis parathlete Pauline Deroulede pose next to the Paralympic medals during the unveiling of the Olympic and Paralympic medals for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, in Paris. — AFP

LVMH-sponsored sports ambassadors will help promote the brand on social media, with 21-year-old French swimming medal hope Leon Marchand one of the earliest names revealed. — AFP

Sports

Under-fire Bayern turn focus to Lazio after Leverkusen humbling

Bayern managers are judged primarily on team's Champions League showings

BERLIN: Stung by a 3-0 humiliation at the hands of Bayer Leverkusen, Bayern Munich head to Lazio on Wednesday knowing only a deep run in Europe will salvage their season. Thomas Tuchel's side were humbled by an outstanding Leverkusen on Saturday and are now five clear in the league and remain unbeaten after 31 games in all competitions.

Bayern managers are judged primarily on the team's Champions League showings, particularly in recent years when the side's financial might made domestic dominance a formality. Despite winning the double, Niko Kovac never recovered from a last 16 elimination at the hands of Liverpool in 2019.

Tuchel's predecessor Julian Nagelsmann's days were numbered after his Bayern were dumped out by Villarreal at the quarter final stage in 2022. A poor showing against Lazio, who sit eighth in the Serie A table, could push Tuchel closer to an unthinkable exit, less than a year after joining the German champions.

'Nothing has changed'

With 13 games remaining, Bayern could still bridge the five-point gap — particularly given Leverkusen's reputation for second-place finishes — but it was the manner of the defeat which was most troubling. Bayern only had one shot on target compared to Leverkusen's eight and no clear chances at goal.

Xabi Alonso's side showed they are clearly the best in Germany, despite a budget dwarfed by that of the six-time Champions League winners Bayern. Despite Tuchel's previous success, the highlight of which was winning the Champions League with

Chelsea in 2021, he has failed to put his stamp on a Bayern side too often reliant on individuals.

Bayern CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen told reporters on Saturday that "nothing had changed regarding the question of the coach's future." But the fact that Tuchel has failed to put his stamp on the club despite taking over just six months after Alonso took over at Leverkusen will worry the Bayern hierarchy.

Tuchel has an acute appreciation of Bayern's unyielding thirst for success. He got the job after his predecessor, Julian Nagelsmann, was sacked with the side just one point behind in the league. Unlike this season, Nagelsmann's Bayern were still in the German Cup and had won six from six in a Champions League group which included a La Liga-title bound Barcelona and eventual finalists Inter Milan.

No title for Kane?

Already eliminated in the German Cup by third-division Saarlouis, Bayern are looking down the barrel of a first trophyless season since 2012. That this should happen after the famously trophyless Harry Kane arrived at the club has not been lost on football pundits on either side of the pond, who asked if the England captain was jinxed.

Bayern would however be in a far worse position without their 100-million-euro (\$108 million) striker, who has scored 28 goals in 28 matches in all competitions this season. Kane received little service on Saturday from a stodgy Bayern midfield. Veteran Thomas Mueller slammed his side's performance, saying "Leverkusen were taking risks, looking for solutions and playing football.

was a beacon of hope not only to people of his village but also to the many in the country and beyond."

'State of shock'

Several lawmakers called for a full investigation into the crash and for better protection of Kenya's athletes. Police said Kiptum was driving from Kaptagat to Eldoret around 11 pm (2000 GMT) Sunday when the accident occurred. A police report said the father of two had lost control of the car and veered into a ditch before hitting a tree. Kiptum and his coach Gervais Hakizimana were killed on the spot while a woman passenger was injured.

"As we mourn, some actions must be taken by the ministry of sports... they must take our athletes seriously," said Kiptum's local MP Gideon Kimaayo. "Some of the athletes are young with promising careers but they are left on their own."

His call was echoed by opposition MP Phelix Odiwuor. "There should be a thorough investigation into what caused the accident," he said. "Our athletes should be treated as VIPs and be given security." The governor of Uasin Gishu county, where the high-altitude training hub of Eldoret is located, has also appealed for a full probe.

"We are asking the police to investigate what really happened and to tell us what caused the accident," Jonathan Bii told reporters on Monday. "The whole world is in a state of shock." Kiptum's death is the latest in a saga of tragedies to hit Kenyan athletes.

In 2011, Kenyan marathon great Samuel Wanjiru

Ferrari said that "the positive feeling the drivers had in the cockpit over the final few races of last season" was the starting point for the new car, with the aim being "a car that is easy to drive and that reacts predictably". "This year, we must start off where we left off at the end of last season, when we were consistent front runners," said Vasseur. "The longest ever F1 season awaits us and Charles, Carlos and I all agree, we must be more clinical and effective in how we manage the races." The new 24-race campaign kicks off in Bahrain on March 2 with Ferrari not having won a drivers championship since 2007 and a constructors since 2008. Ferrari finished miles behind Red Bull in both the championships in 2023, with Leclerc closing the season 369 points behind champion Max Verstappen in fifth and Sainz seventh.

"I like the look of the car a lot... But of course, what really interests me is how it will perform on track, as that's all that matters," said Leclerc. "This season the aim is to be front runners all the time and I want to give our fans plenty to cheer about."



LONDON: A handout picture released on February 12, 2024 by Aston Martin shows the team's Aston Martin AMR24 Formula One racing car for the 2024 season. — AFP

Briton Hamilton will partner Leclerc when he joins Ferrari — replacing Sainz whose contract is up come the end of the season — hoping to finally claim a record-breaking eighth F1 title. The 39-year-old won the last of his world crowns in 2020 but lost the 2021 championship in controversial fashion to

Verstappen when the race director ignored the safety car rules in Abu Dhabi, effectively blocking the Briton's route to victory in both that Grand Prix and the championship. Dutchman Verstappen has dominated F1 since, romping to the last two championships in a powerful combination of great car and driver. — AFP



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's English forward #09 Harry Kane (C), Bayern Munich's German-Serbian midfielder #45 Aleksandar Pavlovic (L) and team mates attend a training session of German club FC Bayern Munich in Munich, southern Germany on February 13, 2024, one day ahead of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg football match between S S Lazio and Bayern Munich to be played in Rome. — AFP

"We're playing from A to B, B to C, and nobody plays freely or takes risks." A clearly disappointed Kane told Sky Germany on Saturday that Europe was now the focus. "We didn't play well with the

ball... every time we won it back, we gave it straight back to them." "This one hurts, we wanted a different outcome, but we have to focus on, first, the Champions League, and obviously the next game." — AFP

Kenyan MPs honour Kiptum amid calls to protect athletes

NAIROBI: Kenyan lawmakers held a minute of silence on Tuesday in honour of running star Kelvin Kiptum after his death in a late-night car crash, and appealed for better support and protection for the country's sporting talent.

Kiptum, who smashed the world marathon record in October, was killed along with his Rwandan coach in the accident near his home in the Eldoret area in Kenya's Rift Valley on Sunday. His death at the age of just 24, shocked his homeland and the world of athletics, with his compatriot and rival Eliud Kipchoge leading tributes to the "rising star".

In Nairobi, members of parliament bowed their heads for a minute's silence for the man who rose from humble beginnings as a herder to record three of the seven fastest marathon times in history. He was a favourite for marathon gold at the Paris Olympics later this year, where he was due to face off against his older rival Kipchoge for the first time.

"At the young age of 24 years, Mr Kiptum had achieved what many athletes could only dream of," said Ng'elechei Caroline Jeptoo, MP for Elgeyo Marakwet County where the accident occurred. "He

Ferrari's new F1 car unveiled for final season

MILAN: Ferrari unveiled their new SF-24 car on Tuesday, ready for the upcoming Formula One season which will be the last before Lewis Hamilton joins the Italian team from rivals Mercedes. The team head into their 2024 campaign, which has been overshadowed by seven-time F1 champion Hamilton agreeing to join next year, trying to recover ground on all-conquering Red Bull.

And Ferrari unveiled the SF-24 to their legion of fans with a short and low-key video, adding in a statement that "a small audience of guests" were given a live viewing of the new car. Among those present were Ferrari's Team Principal Frederic Vasseur and drivers Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz, who will race together for the last time this season.

PSG head, Paris mayor see red in stadium dispute

PARIS: The chairman of Qatar-owned PSG and the mayor of Paris have fallen out publicly over the club's stadium, the Parc des Princes, raising doubts about the future home of the capital's only first division team.

Nasser Al-Khelaifi and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo were once seen regularly together in the VIP seats of the stadium, but are no longer on speaking terms. At the heart of the quarrel is Khelaifi's desire to buy the 48,000-seater stadium from the city, which Hidalgo's leftwing administration has blocked over the last year, including in a vote by the municipal council on February 6.

"We've wasted years wanting to buy the Parc," Khelaifi said angrily last week on the sidelines of a UEFA meeting. "It's over now. We want to move from the Parc." In other acidic comments, he said last month he wanted "respect" from the mayor's office, adding: "We haven't had it."

The stakes are high for PSG which wants to follow the model of other major European football clubs by developing hospitality facilities at the stadium and increasing its capacity to 60,000 seats. It signed a new 30-year lease for the Parc in 2013, however — two years after the Qatari state-backed takeover of the club — meaning they are committed in theory to 2043 unless there are clauses allowing them to break the contract.

For the city, seeing PSG leave the Parc would be a disaster, with the capital lacking another sports club capable of selling out its vast steeply banked stands in western Paris. "We don't want to carry on talking to PSG through the media," deputy Paris mayor, Emmanuel Gregoire, told reporters on Sunday. "We've got things to say to them and we imagine they've got things to say to us." "What we want is to get back to work without further comment. PSG will never leave the Parc des Princes."

Most observers see the clash as a game of brinkmanship, with PSG having no easy options to move and the city having lots to lose if its prestigious tenant walked away. PSG let it be known they were interested in buying the much larger Stade de France, the national sports stadium, but decided against submitting a bid before the deadline at the beginning of January. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

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

Change of Name

I, JAGDEEP, holder of Indian Passport No. U8959079 having permanent address 141007, Punjab, India residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (given name) Jagdeep Singh and (surname) Jagdeep.
(#5162 13/02/2024)

I, HABIB AMAR SHAB HABIB IRFAN, holder of Indian Passport Number U0195176 having permanent address at Post Arab Colony Taluka, Gangapur Dist. Aurangabad, Pin 431109, Maharashtra residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under (given name) IRFAN HABIB AMAR and (surname) BINSHAHAB.
(#5161 13/02/2024)

I, RAVI MANDLA, holder of Passport No. N5197547, date of Issue: 06/03/2016. place of issue: KUWAIT, do hereby change my name to RAVI (as given name) MALEPATI (as surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in name RAVI MALEPATI and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents.
(#5160 13/02/2024)

I, SIDDESH GURU PEREIRA, my address H. No. 417, Voilem Bhat Mercus Muda Tiswadi, Goa, pin -403005. I have changed my name from Siddesh Guru Fatarpekar to Siddesh Guru Pereira. Hereafter in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by the name Siddesh Guru Pereira.
(#5159 13/02/2024)

Historic NBA night for Wemby



TORONTO: Victor Wembanyama #1 of the San Antonio Spurs tries to strip the ball from Scottie Barnes #4 of the Toronto Raptors in the first half of their NBA game at Scotiabank Arena in Toronto. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: Victor Wembanyama posted an epic NBA triple-double with 27 points, 14 rebounds and 10 blocked shots on Monday to power San Antonio to a 122-99 victory at Toronto. The 20-year-old, seven-foot-four-inch (2.24-metre) French rookie star, the top pick in the 2023 NBA Draft, had the most blocks in a game by any NBA player in more than three years in his second career NBA triple-double. "We felt great today, had a great rhythm," Wembanyama said. "Started the game strong. I don't know. I guess it's just the NBA. We've got ups and downs in terms of shape. Today was an up day."

Wembanyama became only the fifth player in NBA history with at least 25 points, 10 rebounds, 10 blocks and five assists in an NBA game, joining legendary big men Hakeem Olajuwon, Ralph Sampson, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and former Spurs star David Robinson. "It's great company to have a name in this group and even more because it's in the Spurs family," he said. Wembanyama became only the fourth NBA rookie with a triple-double that included blocks, joining Robinson, Mark Eaton and Ralph Sampson.

It was the first NBA triple-double to include blocked shots since Clint Capela did it in January 2021. San Antonio snapped a seven-game losing streak behind "Wemby," the first NBA player since Olajuwon in 1996 with at least 20 points, 10 rebounds, 10 blocks and five assists in a game. The Frenchman warned his size and

skill at swatting aside shots might prevent many double-digit blocks nights. "It's getting harder to block shots - I had to make an extra effort tonight - because less and less people go at me," Wembanyama said. "Intimidation, I can see it happening."

Wembanyama, whose first NBA triple-double came last month against Detroit, hit 10-of-14 shots from the floor, two-of-four three-point attempts, and five-of-six free throws while adding five assists and two steals over 29 minutes. "He did a little bit of everything," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said. "He is an all-around talented player." In other games, Minnesota's Karl-Anthony Towns scored 24 points to lead the Timberwolves over hosts the Los Angeles Clippers 121-100 in a showdown for the Western Conference lead.

The T-Wolves (37-16) also had 23 points from Anthony Edwards to rout the Clippers (35-17). At Milwaukee, Greek star Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 36 points and grabbed 18 rebounds while Damian Lillard added 18 points to lead the host Bucks over the injury-hit defending NBA champion Denver Nuggets 112-95. Serbian big man Nikola Jokic, like Antetokounmpo a two-time NBA Most Valuable Player, had 29 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists for the Nuggets, who lost starters Jamal Murray and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope to leg injuries.

Philadelphia snapped Cleveland's nine-game win

streak with a dramatic 123-121 road victory. Kelly Oubre scored 24 points and blocked Donovan Mitchell's tying layup attempt with one second remaining. The Cavs (35-17) had won 17 of their prior 18 games but were denied their first 10-game win streak since 2017. An Oubre three-pointer gave the 76ers a 120-110 lead with 1:25 to go but Mitchell, who scored 36 points, netted eight in a late 11-3 rally, only to be denied at the finish.

Elsewhere, Golden State had 26 points from Klay Thompson and 25 by Stephen Curry to win 129-107 at Utah, stretching the Warriors' win streak to five games. In Dallas, NBA scoring leader Luka Doncic had a triple-double with 26 points, 15 assists and 11 rebounds for the Mavericks in a 112-104 victory over Washington. At Houston, a foul whistled on New York's Jalen Brunson with 0.3 seconds remaining led to a heartbreaking 105-103 Knicks loss.

With the game tied, Brunson was called for a foul on Houston's Aaron Holiday's three-point shot. Holiday, who scored 18 off the bench, hit two game-winning free throws and missed the third to kill the final split second. Charlotte's Miles Bridges had 20 points and 10 rebounds to spark the host Hornets over Indiana 111-102. DeMar DeRozan and Ayo Dosunmu each scored 29 points to lead Chicago's 136-126 victory at Atlanta while Herbert Jones had 17 points to lead New Orleans in a 96-87 triumph at Memphis. — AFP

Osaka avenges Australian Open loss, beats Garcia



Naomi Osaka

DOHA: Naomi Osaka put last week's first round defeat in Abu Dhabi behind her with a straight sets defeat of 15th seed Caroline Garcia at the Qatar Open on Monday. This was former world number one Osaka's second win from the five matches she has played since returning last month after a 15-month time out on maternity leave from the tour.

The Japanese four-time Grand Slam winner was exacting a small measure of revenge on Garcia with this 7-5, 6-4 success in Doha as it was the French star Garcia who knocked her out in the first round of last month's Australian Open. And she reckons she is beginning to find her stride again after becoming a mum. "I feel like I'm a much better player now. In Australia, my returns weren't as good and I don't feel like I was as focused as I am now," said the match winner.

On coming back physically after pregnancy she added: "It's been a really tough journey. I felt like I was chasing myself in the past and it honestly wasn't really healthy to do." After giving birth, I feel I trained really quickly, I'm a very big perfectionist and it's tough when you don't see results as quickly. "I felt like I was driving a car that wasn't mine. So my body didn't feel like the body that I was used to." "It was in that journey I felt like I learned how to love myself as I am now. I got to wake up every day and see my daughter and know that I was strong enough for her to come into this world."

Osaka's next assignment on her comeback trail is a second round date with Petra Martic of Croatia. This is the second time the pair have crossed swords but it comes a decade after their first encounter. A 16-year-old Osaka prevailed on that occasion, a final qualifying round match at Stanford in 2014. The omens did not look great for Osaka on Monday as Garcia won her first 11 service points but she knuckled down and finally broke her opponent when she was serving for the set to level at 5-5. — AFP

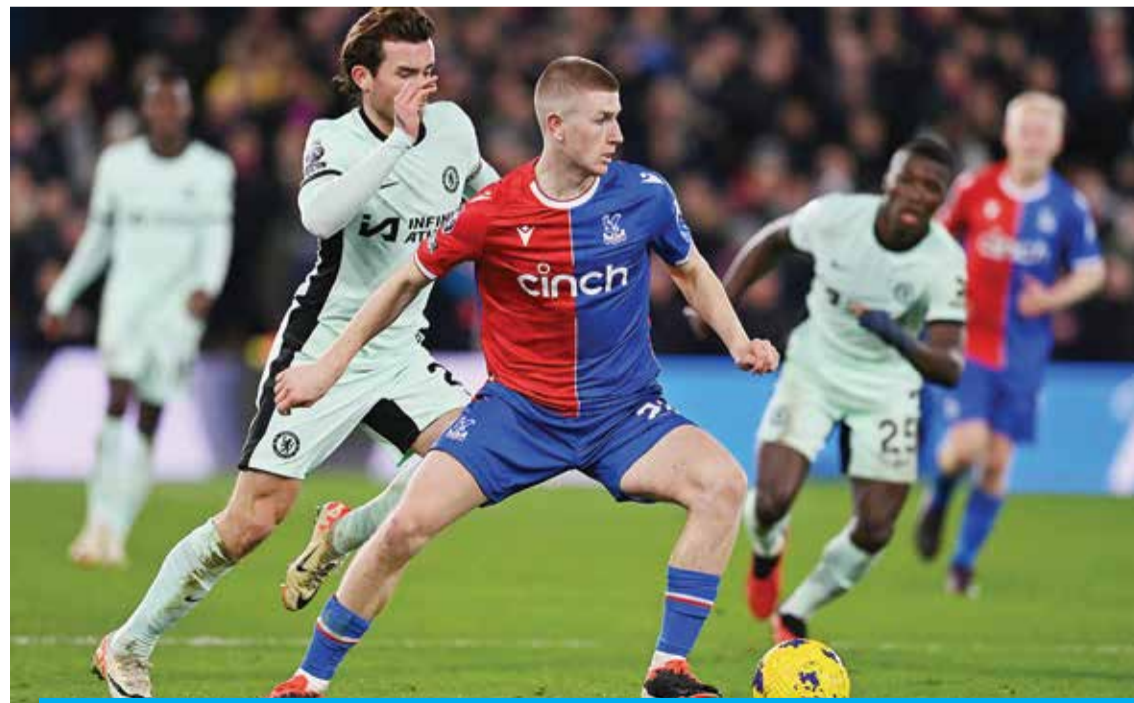
Chelsea late show deepens Crystal Palace crisis

LONDON: Conor Gallagher struck twice to condemn his former club Crystal Palace to a damaging 3-1 defeat on Monday and keep Chelsea in the hunt for European football next season. The injury-ravaged Eagles were on course for a huge win in their battle to remain in the Premier League when Jefferson Lerma's long-range strike opened the scoring. But Palace have won just three times in 19 games and were undone late on after Gallagher equalized within two minutes of the second half.

Gallagher fired home his second of the night and Enzo Fernandez added the third in stoppage time to lift Chelsea up to 10th and within two points of seventh. Defeat leaves Palace still just five points above the relegation zone in 15th. "It was extremely cruel but the game is about goals and unfortunately we made mistakes which led to goals," said under fire Palace boss Roy Hodgson.

The home side were decimated by key injuries with all three of their star players Eberechi Eze, Michael Olise and Marc Guehi ruled out. Hodgson and the club's board are under attack from the fans and banners held up before kick-off took aim at a "weak club culture" and "weak transfer policy." But Palace more than held their own for the first 45 minutes thanks to another lacklustre Chelsea performance away from home.

"We started really flat, we didn't show enough intensity. It was a really tough first 45 minutes," said Chelsea boss Mauricio Pochettino. "Second half we started really well, scored the 1-1 and it allowed us to manage the game." Pochettino had hailed his side's 3-1 FA Cup win at Aston Villa last week as his side's "best performance of the season." However, it was back to



LONDON: Crystal Palace's English midfielder #20 Adam Wharton (center) vies with Chelsea's English defender #21 Ben Chilwell (left) during the English Premier League football match between Crystal Palace and Chelsea at Selhurst Park on February 12, 2024. — AFP

the drawing board for the Argentine in the first half at Selhurst Park as Chelsea were pedestrian in possession and were punished. Noni Madueke was easily bullied out of possession on the edge of his own box and the ball fell to Lerma to take aim and fire into the top corner beyond Djordje Petrovic.

It took until first-half stoppage time for Chelsea to even register a shot as Gallagher dragged his effort across goal. But that was a warning Palace did not heed.

The start to the second half was delayed while referee Michael Oliver sought repairs to his communication device with his assistants and VAR. And Palace were caught cold on the restart as Gallagher, who enjoyed a successful loan spell at Palace in the 2021/22 season, smashed home Malo Gusto's cross. Chelsea suffered a setback when Thiago Silva was forced off with a groin injury that is likely to keep him out of the League Cup final against Liverpool later this month. — AFP