
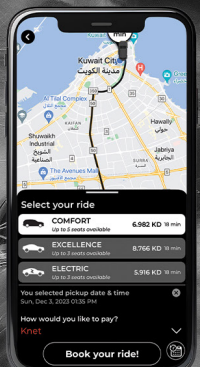


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10 NBK's AGM approves all motions proposed by board of directors



Ramadan Kareem	
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Shrooq	: 05:48
Dhuhr	: 11:54
Asr	: 15:23
Maghrib	: 18:01
Isha	: 19:19



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# Kuwait, Saudi reaffirm ties

## Sheikh Mohammad, Prince Mohammed hold talks during PM's official visit to kingdom



**JEDDAH:** Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud received HH the Prime Minister of Kuwait Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah during his official visit to the kingdom. During the meeting, held late Thursday, HH the Prime Minister conveyed to the Crown Prince the best regards of HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his wishes of everlasting prosperity and progress for the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

HH the Amir expressed gratitude to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the kind invitation for the visit, saying his visit reflects the deep-rooted historical relationship and fraternity between both nations. The visit falls in the framework of constant consultation and coordination to serve the interests of both brotherly nations, he pointed out.

The meeting reviewed the aspects of the growing cooperation and integration in various areas, and reaffirmed shared commitment to opening wider horizons for the historical relations under the wise

leaderships of HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal and his brothers King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Both sides discussed the latest developments on the regional and international arenas and the stances of both countries on them, HH the Prime Minister said.

Sheikh Dr. Mohammad appreciated the balanced policy of Saudi Arabia and the efforts of its wise leadership to promote security and peace in the region and beyond. The meeting gathered, from the Saudi side, Ambassador to Kuwait Prince Sultan bin Saad Al-Saud and Minister of State and Cabinet Member Prince Turki bin Mohammad Al-Saud, and, from the Kuwaiti side, Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Sheikh Sabah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad departed Jeddah on Friday after performing umrah. The premier in a departure statement expressed deep gratitude to the kingdom, its government and its people for the warm hospitality and wished them ever-lasting stability and prosperity. — KUNA

**RAMADAN KAREEM**

### Nothing is permanent

By Hassan Twaha Bwambale

We need to understand that, although life on earth is temporary, the lessons we learn here, the lives we touch and change, and the wonderful rewards that we accumulate, will endure forever. When I ride in an airplane, I enjoy looking at how small the world seems from a distance. Yet when you zoom in, what seemed so small and insignificant turns out to be very important and major for most of us.

Humans tend to be very shortsighted when planning for their future. We plan for school, college, a career, family, children, retirement — among others. However, it tends to stop at that. Why don't we plan for what we are certain will happen without a doubt? The answer is because we are scared of the unknown, and are comfortable with what we know.

Almighty Allah tells us the following in the Noble Quran, translated as: "Know that the life of this world is but amusement, diversion, adornment and boasting to one another and competition to get more wealth and children, like the rain whose (resulting) plant-growth pleases the tillers. Then it dries and turns yellow, then it becomes (scattered) debris. And in the Hereafter is severe punishment, and forgiveness and pleasure from Allah. And the worldly life is nothing but enjoyment of fleeting delusion." (Al-Hadeed — the Iron 57: 20)

In the verse above, Almighty Allah reprimanded those who neglected to defend their religion and loved ones when the enemies had rallied against them to annihilate them, being afraid for their lives, as well as those who lagged behind in giving zakat and charity. We understand also from the above-quoted verse that the highest benefits and means of pleasure and enjoyment that one can possibly attain in the world are indeed short-lived, insignificant, and confined to a few years of temporary life, and can be destroyed by just one turn of fate. Contrary to this, the life in Hereafter is splendid and eternal. Its benefits are great and permanent and its losses are also great and permanent.

Continued on Page 6

## Russia concert hall attack kills 133; Amir sends condolences

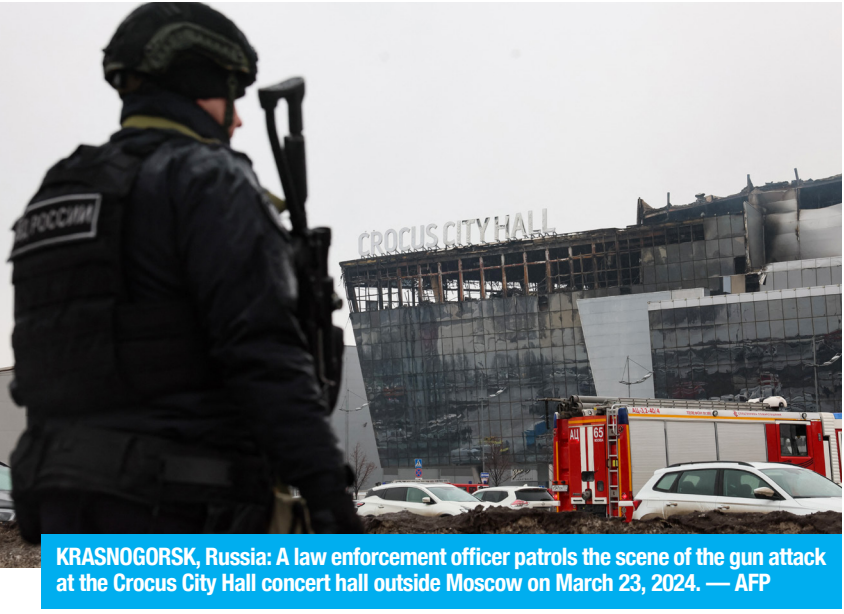
**MOSCOW:** Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday called an attack on a concert hall that killed more than 130 a "barbaric terrorist act" and vowed harsh retribution to all those involved. The Islamic State (IS) group said Saturday four of its militants carried out the attack. "The attack was carried out by four IS fighters armed with machine guns, a pistol, knives and firebombs," IS said on one of its Telegram channels, adding that the attack was part of "the natural context of the raging war" with "countries fighting Islam".

In a televised address, Putin said all four gunmen had been arrested before they had a chance to cross the border

into Ukraine. "I am speaking to you today in connection with the bloody, barbaric terrorist act, the victims of which were dozens of innocent, peaceful people," Putin said in his first public remarks since the attack. "All four perpetrators of the terrorist attack who shot and killed people have been detained. They were traveling towards Ukraine where, according to preliminary information, they had a window to cross the border," the Kremlin leader said.

HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable of condolences to Putin expressing heartfelt solace on the

Continued on Page 6



## UN chief calls for end to Gaza 'nightmare'

**GAZA:** UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, on a visit to the doorstep of war-ravaged Gaza, on Saturday said the world has seen enough of its horrors and appealed for a ceasefire to allow in more aid. He spoke at the crossing on the Egyptian side of Rafah, where most of Gaza's population has sought refuge but the Zionist entity vows to send in ground troops against Hamas militants, despite the fears of Guterres and other global leaders.

"Palestinians in Gaza — children,

women, men — remain stuck in a non-stop nightmare," Guterres said. "I carry the voices of the vast majority of the world who have seen enough". Despite warnings that a Rafah operation would cause mass civilian casualties and worsen the humanitarian crisis gripping Gaza after nearly six months of war by the Zionist entity against Hamas, Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he will press ahead with the attack.

But his government is under growing international pressure to ease its bombardment and ground offensive, which the health ministry in Gaza says has killed at least 32,142 people. Large parts of the territory have been reduced to rubble and the World Food Program on Monday said Gazans are

Continued on Page 6



## UK in shock over Kate's cancer announcement

**LONDON:** After weeks of wild speculation, the UK was on Saturday digesting the shock news that Catherine, Princess of Wales, has cancer, with many praising her courage and others criticizing those who spread conspiracies. Catherine revealed the news on Friday in a highly personal video, which came just weeks after King Charles III revealed he too is battling the disease.

The candid disclosure leaves the British monarchy in an unprecedented crisis in modern times with two of its most senior members simultaneously fighting serious illness. Head of state Charles — 17 months into his reign when Buckingham Palace announced in February that he had cancer and would be cancelling all public engagements — led tributes to his "beloved daughter-in-law".

The ailing 75-year-old monarch spoke of his pride in "her courage in speaking as she did", shortly after Kensington Palace posted the video on social media. Following other warm words from UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and the White House, British newspapers directly quoted Kate on their Saturday front

covers while also praising her "courage" on the inside pages.

"Kate, you are not alone" read the front of The Sun. Inside, the tabloid said it was "hugely comforting" to hear Kate say she was getting stronger, and that "perhaps the world will now appreciate why so much secrecy surrounded her surgery in January". Others hoped it would end the frenzied rumors, with the Daily Mail tabloid taking aim at the "social media trolls who have been peddling disgusting conspiracy theories to explain her absence from public life".

In her statement Kate, as the 42-year-old is widely known, admitted the diagnosis was a "huge shock" and asked

Continued on Page 6





# Minister stresses the need to enhance water security

## Water demand expected to increase to 800 million imperial gallons per day

**KUWAIT:** Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy and Minister of State for Housing Affairs Dr Salem Al-Hajraf on Friday stressed the need to enhance water security and build capacities to face common global challenges. "Water is not just a private resource that can be monopolized and competed for, but it is a human right that everyone must respect," Hajraf said in a statement marking World Water Day.

Hajraf said the rate of demand for water is expected to increase to 800 million imperial gallons per day by 2035, while the maximum rate of demand for water until the end of this year may reach 585 million imperial gallons per day, an increase of 27 percent. He pointed out that the ministry has developed its future plan to meet the needs of the state, noting that

its production of water will reach approximately one billion imperial gallons per day by 2035.

He said that the challenges facing Kuwait when it comes to water security still exist, on top of which are the high consumption rates, but the ministry has taken serious and effective steps towards improving water management and conservation through the study and experimentation of the use of renewable energy and its endeavor to acquire modern and advanced technologies with high efficiency and high performance.

Hajraf added that the celebration of World Water Day sends a message to world leaders and peoples of the earth that it is necessary to cooperate in the field of water to achieve a positive compounded ef-

fect for humanity, as water is the main pillar of life. He added that Kuwait's participation with the countries of the world in celebrating this day shows its keenness to secure its local water needs in modern and innovative ways, efforts which date back to 1951 when it established the Shuwaikh plant as the first seawater desalination plant in the world at the time.

He pointed out that World Water Day is an opportunity to join efforts on water issues and accelerate progress in this vital field. "We must all play our role, each within their capacities, to preserve this basic resource of existence and work together to manage this blessing in a sound and sustainable manner."

Hajraf said that the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy has been working since its

establishment on November 17, 1962 with every effort to realize its goals and keep pace with Kuwait's vision for the state's housing and service projects.

He spoke about the world's commitment to the sixth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which stipulates the provision of sustainable water management for all by 2030, thereby providing safe drinking water to disadvantaged communities.

The world celebrates World Water Day on March 22 of every year as a way to draw attention to the importance of freshwater and advocate for the sustainable management of freshwater resources, and the aim of this day is to take action to deal with the global water crisis in support of achieving the sixth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals. — KUNA

# Children celebrate Girgian



**KUWAIT:** Children celebrate Girgian with joy on the streets of Yarmouk after police cordoned off the area. Only residents of the area were allowed to enter to make the streets relatively traffic-free and safer for children. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



## Kuwait committed to ecosystem protection

**BRUSSELS:** Kuwait on Friday submitted a written deposition to the ICJ registry on its commitment to ecosystem protection. The document, presented by Ambassador to the Netherlands Ali Al-Thifeeri at the Hague-based International Court of Justice, came upon a request by the UN General Assembly, according to an embassy statement. Through the deposition, Kuwait is seeking to reaffirm fulfilling commitments, protocols, and international agreements it signed vis-à-vis climate protection. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Oil Imad Al-Atiqi, Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya, and Kuwait's Governor to OPEC Mohammad Al-Shatti had significantly contributed to producing the deposition. — KUNA



**Kuwait Ambassador to the Netherlands Ali Al-Thifeeri submits the written deposition to ICJ registry on its commitment to ecosystem protection. — KUNA**

## 'Arena Challenge' promotes community values, sports

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwait Youth Public Authority stressed its keenness to build partnerships and strengthen cooperation with state institutions, civil society and entities in the private sector with direct ties to youth. The authority affirmed its commitment to supporting all initiatives related to the social, health, sports, cultural and educational aspects of youths' lives as these initiatives play an important role in youth development.

The commitment comes on the sidelines of the "Arena Challenge" event, which was held for 10 days under the auspices of the youth authority at 360 mall. Official spokesperson of the youth public authority Asrar Al-Ansari said in a press statement Friday after the conclusion of the event that activ-



**Asrar Al-Ansari**



**Bashayer Al-Bader**

ities such as the "Arena Challenge" promote community values and encourage the practice of sports among all members of society, especially youth. Ansari said the event witnessed the attendance of more than 10,000 participants over the ten days. It included sports competitions and challenges and a series of educational roundtables that dealt with topics of interest to young people such as sports, types of injuries, weight loss, healthy nutrition and

other matters related to sports and health.

She explained that the authority considers community partnerships one of the most important tools to achieve its vision in empowering and developing youth, praising the fruitful cooperation with the organizers of the event and their efforts in making it a success. One of the organizers of the event, Bashayer Al-Bader, said in a press statement that sports activities — namely walking and jogging — and daily lectures provided by participating medical staff targeted all age groups of both sexes. The event organizers designated one hour every day during the event for women only, while another was open to all. In addition to allocating an area for children to enable families to participate and enjoy the event.

She pointed out that all the daily sports classes were provided under the supervision of specialized trainers, which made them a great success and ensured the event achieved its goals. She thanked all parties supporting the event, foremost of which the youth authority. — KUNA

## KPC vows to provide safe oil supplies

**KUWAIT:** CEO of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC), Sheikh Nawaf Saud Al-Nasser Al-Sabah, has restated KPC's unwavering commitment to providing safe supplies of crude oil and environmentally friendly oil byproducts. Sheikh Nawaf Saud Al-Sabah made the remark during a debate held on the sidelines of the CERAWEEK 2024 conference, hosted by Houston City in the US state of Texas from March 18–22, the KPC said in a press release.

He said the KPC is a national oil corporation but of international significance and regards its customers as partners, based on decades of deep trade relations, thus becoming a reliable global supplier. CERAWEEK 2024 is considered the most significant international oil conference since it weighs the economies and policies of the world oil industry, according to the release. Several senior Kuwaiti oil officials are partaking in debates held on the sidelines of the global oil gathering. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** Participants take a group photo after the CERAWEEK 2024 conference. — KUNA



# Zain celebrates Girgian at Social Care Centers

Annual event brought joy to foster care children, special needs individuals, the elderly



Al Mutairi and Sheikhha Al Sabah honor Al Khashti for Zain's support.



Zain's team with social care residents at the event.

**KUWAIT:** As it does every year, Zain hosted its special Girgian celebration (traditional candy distribution) in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs' Social Care Centers and the Public Authority for Disability Affairs. The annual event, which came under the Zain Alshuhoor Ramadan campaign, brought joy to residents of the Social Care Centers, including foster care children, people with special needs, and elderly individuals.

The event was attended by the Director General of the Public Authority for Disability Affairs Alhumaidi Al Mutairi, Zain Kuwait Chief Corporate Affairs and Relations Officer Waleed Al Khashti, Honorary President of the Kuwait Disabled Sport Club Sheikhha Sheikhha Al Abdullah Al Sabah, officials from the three partners, and the centers' administrative and medical staff.

Zain is proud to partner with the Social Care Centers and the Public Authority for Disability Affairs every year to make this event a success as part of its annual Ramadan campaign, Zain Alshuhoor. Through this collaboration, the company shares the joys of Girgian, the much-cher-

ished local candy distribution tradition, with foster care children, people with special needs, and the elderly who reside within the care centers. The event witnessed special theatrical and traditional segments presented by the residents of the centers and other participating entities.

During the event, Zain's team joined in distributing candy, gifts, and toys in an atmosphere that was full of joy and happiness. The company believes the Holy Month of Ramadan is a special time of the year, and it is always keen on sharing the blessings of this time with everyone, most importantly those cherished segments of the community. This year, six of Zain's strategic community partners, including the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Public Authority for Disability Affairs, join its annual Ramadan social campaign, Zain Alshuhoor. The campaign features a wide range of humanitarian, charitable, social, religious, health, and sports programs that continue throughout the Holy Month of Ramadan.

Zain Alshuhoor is one of Kuwait's biggest and most successful community programs during the



One of the event's theatrical performances.

Holy Month. Every year, the company introduces a bigger, renewed version of the campaign that expands upon the previous year's initiatives

and programs. The campaign strives to share the blessings of this holy month with the entire Kuwaiti people.



Girls pose for a picture.



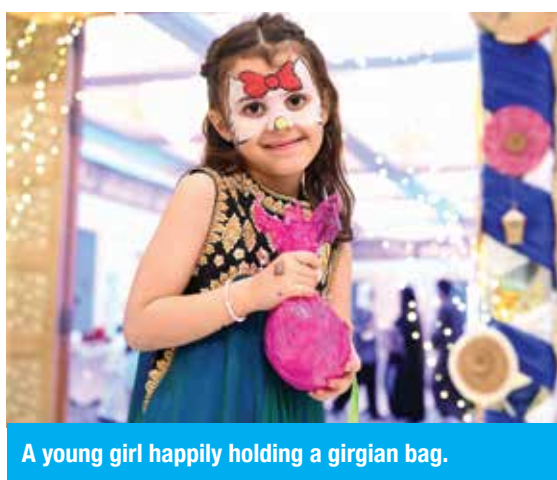
Girl pictured in a performance of a folklore show at the event.

## 'Girgian of our Minors' brings joy to children

By Passant Hisham

**KUWAIT:** With unwavering dedication to ensuring the inclusion of all children under its care in Kuwait's festivities, the Public Authority for Minors Affairs hosted its 15th annual "Girgian of our Minors" event on Thursday. The lively evening brought together approximately 700 attendees, including children without guardians. Filled with energy and enthusiasm, they engaged in spirited competitions, savored sweets and immersed themselves in engaging heritage games.

Recognizing the profound significance of such events in the lives of minors and those under the care of the authority, Hamad Al-Barjas, the Acting Director General of the Authority, underscored the organization's commitment to continue hosting such celebrations. He emphasized the authority's sense of duty. "It makes us accountable to meticulously organize upcoming events with great attention to detail to fulfill the requirements



A young girl happily holding a girgian bag.

of our children and their different needs," he said.

Moreover, he pointed out the crucial role of connecting younger generations with their cultural roots by actively involving them in events that revive Kuwait's rich heritage and traditions. Through these initiatives, the aim is to cultivate a profound sense of national pride and identity, he added.

Tamader Al-Omar, head of the social and educational department at the authority, highlighted the ongoing



A boy holds Ramadan lantern.

efforts of the authority to address the emotional gaps experienced by those children and minors who have lost their fathers. "We are always dedicated to standing by the side of our children and celebrating with them on every occasion," she said. "While we understand that we can never completely fill the void left by their lost fathers, we are always prepared to meet their requests. Hopefully, we will never fall short in fulfilling their needs."

## Gulf Week for Cancer awareness campaign

By Abdellatif Sharaa

**KUWAIT:** Secretary General of the Gulf Federation for Cancer Control and Chairman of the Cancer Aware Nation (CAN), Dr. Khalid Al-Saleh, said more than 2,000 activities were carried out in the GCC countries during the 9th Gulf Week for Cancer Awareness. Al-Saleh, who spoke during the closing ceremony of the joint 9th Gulf Week, said the federation organized various programs aimed at increasing awareness about cancer diseases.

He said this joint Gulf cooperation resulted in a notable increase in the awareness rate, contributed to the reduction of the percentage of those who say cancer is not curable (from 65 percent to 45 percent), and raised the percentage of those who believe in early detection (from 50 percent to 70 percent). Gulf Week became a Gulf imprint in the cancer awareness campaign. He an-



Officials, participants take a group during the 9th Gulf Week for Cancer Awareness program.

nounced the launch of the outstanding award. Al-Saleh said the winner of the prize is the Anti-Cancer Charity Society in Al-Ahsa (Taufal), Saudi Arabia. He congratulated them for their efforts.

Chairwoman of the coordination committee of the Gulf Week, Dr. Hussa Al-Shaheen, lauded the success achieved by the Gulf Week with regards to awareness programs and early detection of cancer. She said the

increase in awareness rates of cancer diseases boosts recovery rates and calls for adopting healthy lifestyles. This year's program included 60 scientific, social, sports, and entertaining activities that target all the groups in society. Other activities include awareness messages, posts, and videos that were published on social media and other media outlets. She stressed the importance of the family role in preventing cancer and lauded the role



of NGOs in Kuwait and the Gulf.

Meanwhile, representative of the Taufal society, Dr. Fuad Al-Jughaiman, said Taufal participated in activities in line with its strategic goals. He said Taufal visited many places and organized three lectures, five awareness exhibitions, and three walking initiatives with more than 1,500 participants. Al-Jughaiman said society's vision is to be a world model in the prevention of cancer.

In my view

## Why we sometimes love what we hate

By Yousef Abu-Ghazaleh



**T**here's a prevailing attitude many people subscribe to where they shun topics they aren't interested in simply because they are not curious to explore them. And to a degree, that makes sense. Why would someone actively seek out what doesn't interest them? I hated mathematics growing up, and so I don't do calculus in my spare time.

Another person may find history to be tearfully boring, and so they don't spend free hours surfing the web for new facts about the Mongol Empire. But, they might enjoy watching a movie about the Mongol Empire, in the same way I enjoyed the math-themed movie Good Will Hunting. Nine times out of 10, the reason people dislike a subject is not necessarily because of the subject itself, rather than the vessel through which the subject is introduced. Again, let's look at the example of history. Imagine a boring professor with elbow patches and 3 PhDs lecturing you about Soviet irrigation systems. I'm getting bored just writing the sentence and I love history!

Now, imagine the same professor discussing the same topic but through the lens of how those systems caused an entire sea to disappear, for cities to become abandoned, and for the map of the world to change within the scope of a few short years. All of a sudden the subject becomes a little more captivating. And so I urge you, next time you find yourself thinking about how bored a certain subject makes you, try zooming out and looking at it from a different angle - you might surprise yourself!



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EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432

ADVERTISING : 24833199 Extn. 359

CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 220

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## Ramadan health tips

## Consult healthcare providers

For the elderly and patients with medical conditions, seek advice from healthcare providers on whether your health allows you to fast. If you or your loved ones are well enough to carry on fasting, discuss with your doctor the adjustments in your medication schedule during Ramadan and the ways you can administer fasting safely. It is important to note that these individuals are not made compulsory to fast for the sake of protecting their well-being.

## Compassion, kindness

In Islam, charity is a means to purify our hearts from any soul-destructive feelings such as jealousy, ungratefulness, and hatred. Be it in the form of monetary or good deeds, this thoughtful gesture aims to train us to treat others the way we want to be treated through acts of compassion, kindness, and empathy. Apart from that, taking part in volunteerism is a practical option to manifest charity. Sign up for soup kitchens or contribute items to food and clothing banks to provide for the less fortunate. You may also share your blessings of wealth by giving donations at the mosque and the orphanages.

## Make Quran your social media

Never a day we do not log in to our Instagram and Twitter first thing in the morning, before bedtime, or whenever there is a free break. Why not replace your gadgets with a much better tool for a change — the Holy Quran? One of the main goals you should achieve during Ramadan is to achieve khatam Al-Quran or complete the recitation of the Quran from cover to cover. During each of the five prayer times, you can plan to recite either several verses, chapters, or pages depending on your own capability. Such practice motivates us to be consistent with reading the holy book daily. Invite your family or friends as well to join and do it in groups. If Arabic is not your first language, there are plenty of context-based translations available to assist with your understanding of the Quran. However, keep in mind that quality is better than quantity. As long as you manage to spend time reading it every day and gain some lessons from the meanings, you are one step forward to self-betterment.

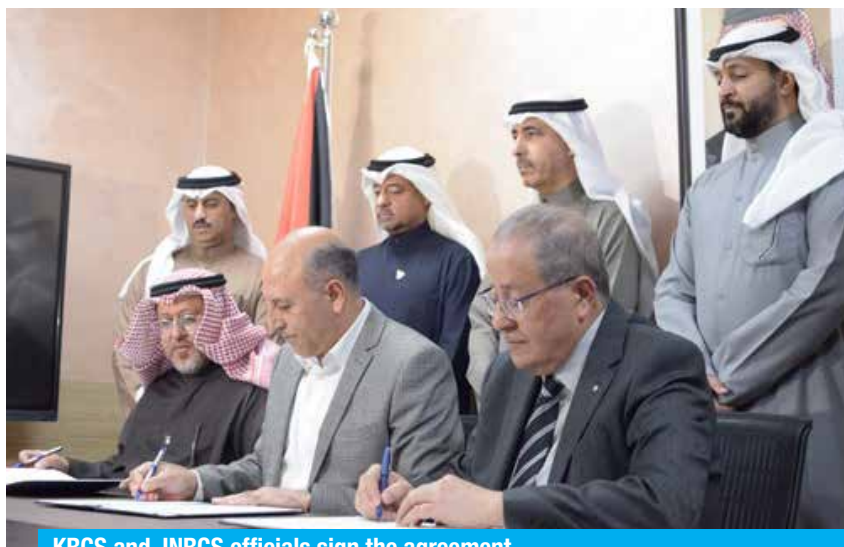
## Kuwait Heritage



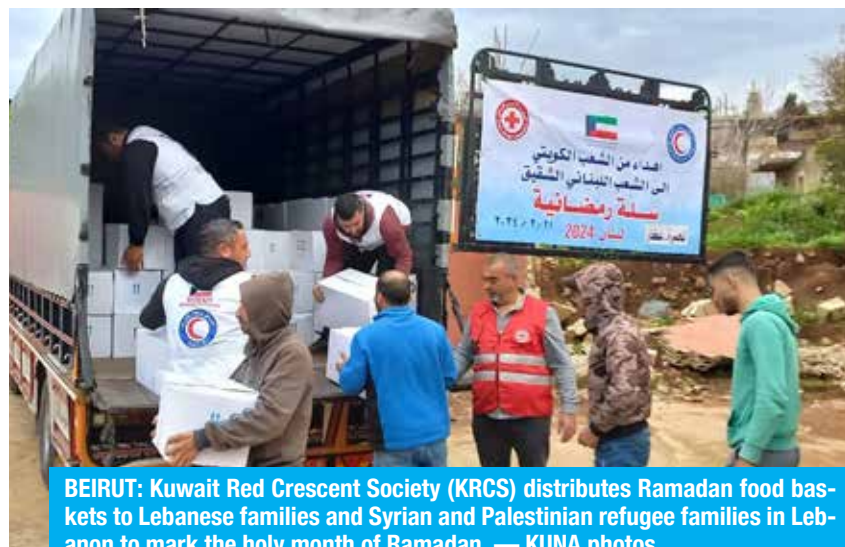
KUWAIT: A group of camels and a Bedouin man are seen in the Kuwaiti desert in the 1960s. - Photo from KOC archive, provided by Mahmoud Zakaria, heritage researcher at Ministry of Information.

# Kuwait and Jordan charities agree to boost aid to Gaza

KRCS distributes Ramadan baskets to Lebanese, Syrian refugees, Palestinians



KRCS and JNRCS officials sign the agreement.



BEIRUT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) distributes Ramadan food baskets to Lebanese families and Syrian and Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon to mark the holy month of Ramadan. — KUNA photos



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AMMAN: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) has concluded a cooperative agreement with the Jordanian National Red Crescent Society (JNRCS) and the Jordanian Hashemite Charitable Organization to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza. Speaking to KUNA on this occasion, Kuwaiti Ambassador Amman Hammad Al-Marri said the signing of the deal is part of Kuwaiti-Jordanian cooperation aiming at helping the population of Gaza, which has been launched since the Zionist occupation aggression on the enclave.

He added that both countries' political leaderships attach much attention to relief and humanitarian action with a view to supporting Palestinians in Gaza amid grave human rights violations committed by Zionist occupation forces. He noted that Kuwait has launched an airlift to help Gazans at the behest of Jordanian King Abdullah II, in parallel with the Gulf country's air bridge via Egypt's Al-Arish International Airport. For his part, Secretary-General of the Jordanian Hashemite Charitable Organization, Dr. Hussein Al-Shibli, said that the deal reflects a joint action mechanism to help the population of Gaza in various domains, mainly relief, food, and medical ones.

Speaking to KUNA, he highly commended the co-operation between the KRCS and JNRCS as being "sustainable and permanent," noting that this agreement aims at bolstering and maintaining joint cooperation and exerting more efforts to deliver aid to the Palestinian territory. For his part, Director-General of the KRCS Abdulrahman Al-Oun said in a statement to KUNA that the agreement is meant to promote bilateral cooperation and to meet the directives of the political leadership to help the Palestinian people.

## GCC chief slams Zionist discriminatory practices

RIYADH: Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jassem Al-Budaiwi, underlined the necessity for the international community to take the necessary measures to end the suffering of the Palestinian people from the daily Zionist discriminatory practices. This came in a statement issued by Al-Budaiwi on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, observed on March 21st of each year.

He referred to the tragic situation in the Gaza Strip and the persecution, discrimination, and racial segregation suffered by the Palestinian people, which is based on dominance, the imposition of restrictions, deprivation, differentiation, and serious violations of human rights and international law by the occupying forces. Al-Budaiwi affirmed the commitment of the GCC member states to the provisions of the Declaration of Human Rights of the Council Cooperation, which guarantees rights enshrined in their constitutions and national legislation.

He specifically referred to Article 2 of the Declaration, which states that "people are equal in human dignity, rights, and freedoms, and they are equal before the law without discrimination based on origin, sex, religion, language, color, or any other form of discrimination." He stated that the leaders of the GCC countries believe in

He reiterated his society's interest in increasing humanitarian and relief aid to the population of Gaza through crossing points and airdropping. JNRCS Chairman Mohammad Al-Hadid told KUNA that the tri-lateral deal reflects societal partnership and is intended to boost humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people.

### KRCS distributes food baskets

In another development, the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) began distributing Ramadan food baskets to Lebanese families and Syrian and Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon to mark the holy month of Ramadan. Relief Coordinator at the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC), Yousef Boutros, told KUNA that the distribution is in collaboration with the LRC and covers areas such as Zahle in eastern Lebanon, Arsal in the northeast, and Akkar in the north, spanning 10 days to reach as many families as possible.

The baskets contain essentials and various food items to support families during the holy month, aiming to alleviate some of the economic burdens they face, he pointed out. This initiative is seen as a generous gesture filled with humanitarian values, enhancing a sense of brotherhood and solidarity among Arabs, especially amidst the ongoing challenges in the region, he noted. He underscored that these Ramadan baskets also provide support to Lebanese families as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees who struggle with limited resources to meet their living expenses. On his side, Lebanese citizen Salem Abu Akr from Zahle expressed gratitude to Kuwait and its people, as well as KRCS, for their continuous care for Lebanese people and refugees in Lebanon, particularly during Ramadan. — KUNA

the dignity of human beings and respect for their rights, stressing their commitment to their protection as guaranteed by Islamic law, as well as the principles laid out in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which all the GCC member states have ratified, has also played a role in shaping the GCC countries' legislative and regulatory frameworks that are aimed at combating racial discrimination, hatred, and prejudice, as well as promoting a culture of tolerance, coexistence, justice, and equality in their societies," he said.

Al-Budaiwi commended the role played by the GCC countries in the process of achieving lasting peace, which is primarily based on equality and non-discrimination. Additionally, he encouraged the international community to recognize the importance of eliminating all forms of discrimination and take strict measures to eliminate the causes and conditions that create racial discrimination worldwide. Meanwhile, the Arab Parliament strongly denounced on Saturday a decision by the Zionist government to confiscate 8,000 hectares of land in the West Bank for settlement expansion. The parliament said in a statement that the continuing confiscation of the occupied Palestinian territories, building, and expanding settlements aim to create a de facto situation in blatant breach of international law and resolutions of international legitimacy. — KUNA





Modi opponent Arvind Kejriwal remanded in custody ahead of India election

Ramadan prayer at Jerusalem’s Al-Aqsa under the shadow of Gaza

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GAZA: Displaced Palestinians fleeing from the area in the vicinity of Gaza City's Al-Shifa hospital ride on a donkey-drawn cart on March 18, 2024. (Inset) A woman carries three babies as she reaches the central part of the Gaza Strip after fleeing the Al-Shifa hospital compound in Gaza City, on March 21, 2024. — AFP photos

# ‘Worse than hell’: Zionists raid Al-Shifa hospital again

Zionists ‘evacuate all residents’, force them to Gaza’s south while stripping, interrogating men

**GAZA:** Around the Gaza Strip’s besieged largest hospital, Palestinians have witnessed constant bombardment, mass arrests, tanks and corpses littering the streets during a multi-day Zionist raid, with no end in sight.

Zionist forces battling Hamas militants launched the operation in and around Gaza City’s Al-Shifa hospital on Monday, saying senior operatives were based at the sprawling compound. Since then, according to the military, about 150 Palestinian militants have been killed and hundreds more have been arrested or questioned.

And after five days, Zionist forces have shown no signs of pulling back. “Everyone is afraid of being executed or arrested,” said 59-year-old Mohammed, who lives about 500 meters (0.3 miles) from Al-Shifa and gave only his first name. “I feel that Gaza has become worse than the fires of hell,” he told AFP. “I saw many bodies on Al-Shifa Street and tanks blocking the roads leading to the hospital. I saw fires in a house next to Al-Shifa.”

The surrounding areas, the Al-Rimal neighborhood and Al-Shati refugee camp, are like “ghost towns”, with only few residents remaining, said Mohammed.

Many Palestinians in the territory’s north, where Gaza City is located, fled south earlier in the war. The latest raid on Al-Shifa — following a military operation there in November that sparked international outrage — has sent more seeking safety elsewhere.

AFP footage showed streams of people fleeing south along Gaza’s coast to escape the hospital onslaught on Thursday. Mahmoud Abu Amra, 50, who lives in Al-Rimal, said Zionist troops forced “women and children to go west to Al-Rashid road on the coast, and then to the south of the Gaza Strip”.

Those who remain in the north, about 300,000 people according to the United Nations, face dire conditions and crippling shortages of basic supplies. The Zionist entity’s military campaign in Gaza has killed at least 32,070 people, most of them women and children, according to the territory’s health ministry. The Zionist entity claims its invasion of Gaza is in response to an attack staged by Hamas on October 7, which resulted in about 1,160 deaths, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of official Zionist figures.

On Friday at dawn Abu Amra said he saw Zionist forces raiding homes and residential build-

ings in Gaza City’s west. “These forces evacuated all residents from their homes, and forced all men over the age of 16 to strip completely except for their underwear,” he said. “They tied them up, beat them with rifle butts, insulted them and took them to a school near Al-Shifa hospital for interrogation and detention.”

The Zionist entity has maintained that its actions were in accordance with international law. The Zionist forces told AFP it was “often necessary for terror suspects to hand over their clothes ... to ensure that they are not concealing explosive vests or other weaponry”. “Detainees are given back their clothes when it’s possible to do so,” it added.

The Zionist entity had long said the sprawling Al-Shifa complex, where displaced Palestinians have taken refuge alongside patients and staff, sat atop an underground Hamas command center. Hamas has denied using the hospital for military purposes.

The Zionist forces said Friday that troops were “continuing to conduct precise operational activity in the Al-Shifa Hospital area while preventing harm to civilians, patients, medical teams and medical equipment”. — AFP

## 2 Rohingya found dead at sea after boat capsizes



CALANG: Rescue workers carry a body bag during their search operation for missing Rohingya refugees on March 23, 2024 after 69 refugees were rescued from their overturned boat last week. — AFP

**ACEH JAYA, Indonesia:** The bodies of two Rohingya refugees were retrieved and several more were spotted at sea Saturday, local rescuers said, days after a wooden boat believed to be carrying around 150 people capsized, leaving many missing or dead. The mostly Muslim ethnic Rohingya are heavily persecuted in Myanmar, and thousands risk their lives each year on long and expensive sea journeys, often in flimsy boats, to try to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

Indonesian rescuers called off the search for any remaining Rohingya refugees on Friday despite reports from some of the survivors that dozens of people were swept away on Wednesday when their boat and another trying to help them capsized.

More than half a dozen bodies were spotted by fishermen on Saturday, but only two bodies were retrieved, authorities said. “We evacuated only two people. Both were females,” Mirza Safrinadi, Aceh Jaya Search and Rescue Operation chief, told reporters.

“It’s confirmed, they are Rohingyas. According to the fishermen’s information, there are several more victims who drowned.” United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) protection associate Faisal Rahman told AFP “two (bodies were) already evacuated, the rest are still in the process”.

On Thursday, authorities staged a dramatic rescue of 69 Rohingya who had been adrift at sea for weeks before the boat capsized, with many found clinging to the hull of the overturned vessel. Six others were rescued by fishermen on Wednesday. From mid-November to late January, 1,752 Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children, landed in the Indonesian provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra, according to the UNHCR. — AFP

## 35 Somalis arrive in India for trial over ship hijacking

**MUMBAI:** India brought 35 accused Somali pirates to Mumbai on Saturday, days after they were apprehended when naval commandos recaptured a hijacked bulk carrier and rescued several hostages. The December hijacking of the Maltese-flagged MV Ruen was the first time since 2017 that any cargo vessel had been successfully boarded by Somali pirates.

Indian commandos boarded and took control of the vessel on March 17 some 260 nautical miles (480 kilometers) off the coast of Somalia. The destroyer INS Kolkata, which led the rescue operation, arrived in Mumbai early on Saturday carrying all 35 men accused of the hijacking.

A navy statement said the operation “upheld the principles of international law and commitment to ensuring safe seas and maritime security in the region”. An AFP journalist at the scene saw each of the detained men handcuffed to a police officer and taken into police vans.

All appeared to be in good spirits although some showed signs of slight injury including visible bandages. The group was expected to be brought before a magistrate later on Saturday. Navy spokesman Vivek



MUMBAI: Accused Somali pirates wait to be transferred to police custody at the Indian naval dockyard in Mumbai on March 23, 2024. — AFP

Madhwal said this week marked the first time in more than a decade that men captured at sea would be brought to Indian shores to face trial for piracy.

Under India’s anti-piracy laws, the men face the death sentence if they are convicted of a killing or an attempted killing, and life imprisonment for piracy alone. Last Saturday’s rescue was the culmination of a 40-hour operation.

Commandos parachuted out of a military C-17 airplane to board the vessel in an assault that “successfully cornered and coerced” all 35 pirates aboard to surrender, an earlier navy statement said. In the process they freed the MV Ruen’s 17 crew members — nine from Myanmar, seven from Bulgaria and one

from Angola — none of whom were injured in the rescue. Bulgarian vessel owner Navibulgar called India’s rescue a “major success”.

**‘Mother ship’**

Somali pirates have in the past sought to capture a “mother ship” capable of sailing greater distances so they can target larger vessels. The European Union naval force said the MV Ruen could have been used by pirates for their successful hijacking of the bulk carrier MV Abdullah on March 12.

The Bangladesh-flagged MV Abdullah has since been steered into Somali waters, with its 23-member crew still held hostage. India’s navy has been deployed continuously off Somalia since 2008, but it stepped up anti-piracy efforts last year following a surge in maritime assaults, including in the Arabian Sea and by Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the Red Sea.

At least 18 other suspected pirates have been captured by India’s navy this year, including in operations to rescue three Iranian-flagged fishing vessels. Information on the fate of those hijackers has not been publicly released.

Since the start of the Houthi attacks, launched in response to Israel’s war against the Palestinian militant group Hamas, many cargo ships have slowed down far out at sea to await instructions on whether to proceed. Experts say that has left them vulnerable to attack. — AFP



## International

# Ramadan prayer at Al-Aqsa under shadow of Gaza war

## Heavy presence of Zionist forces, a sign of lurking tensions in the holy city

**JERUSALEM:** Muslims worshippers flocked to Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound for the second Friday prayer of Ramadan under the heavy presence of Zionist entity police, a sign of lurking tensions in the holy city.

"We feel lucky to be at Al-Aqsa while hundreds of thousands are deprived of access to it," said Mustafa al-Sheikh, a 62-year-old Palestinian who travelled with his wife from Anata, a town near Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank. The couple were among about 180,000 people who prayed on Friday at the mosque compound, according to the religious body that administers the historically sensitive site in Zionist entity-annexed east Jerusalem.

"The prayer went smoothly and peacefully," Azzam al-Khatib, head of the Waqf Islamic affairs council, told AFP. The Al-Aqsa mosque compound is Islam's third holiest site and Judaism's most sacred, known to Jews as the Temple Mount. It is also a frequent source of tensions in the Zionist entity-Palestinian conflict which have soared this year as war rages in the Gaza Strip.

In past years, violence flared around Al-Aqsa during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, with Palestinians accusing Zionist entity of increasingly restricting access to the site. Thousands of police officers were deployed to the area surrounding the compound on Friday, some of them heavily armed, in part to enforce age restrictions imposed on West Bank Palestinians.

Zionist entity has said only men aged 55 and over and women older than 50 would be allowed to enter from the territory. But for many, simply reaching Jerusalem from other parts of the West Bank, dotted with Zionist entity checkpoints, could be a challenging feat.

Zainab Ramadan Freij, a 70-year-old resident of the northern West Bank's Tulkarem refugee camp, said she had to take a bus at 6:30 am from to make it to Jerusalem — just over 60 kilometers (40 miles) away — in time for the noon prayer. Once inside the compound, worshippers rejoiced and took photos on Al-Aqsa's iconic rock stairs. "My friend Lina has been in America for 20 years. I want to send her these pictures because she loves Al-Aqsa and misses it," said Rabab Hadiya, a 49-year-old teacher from Jerusalem.

Just two weeks ago, mass prayers at the compound ended in clashes between Palestinians and Zionist entity forces, but so far Ramadan has passed without any major incident.

Kobi Michael, a senior researcher at Zionist entity think-tank the Institute for National Security Studies, attributed the relative calm to several policy decisions. Officers had been told to be particularly careful and police were monitoring social media for incitement, Michael told AFP.

He also said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had reined in the firebrand Zionist entity minister overseeing the police force, who had suggested barring all West Bank residents from the revered mosque. "Netanyahu himself intervened" to strip National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir of his "authority on the issue of Palestinians' access to Al-Aqsa during Ramadan", Michael said. In his sermon, the preacher spoke of Palestinians suffering hunger in the war-battered Gaza Strip.

"Do not forget and remember your brothers in Gaza who sleep without food in a tent or in a destroyed house", he said. This message resonated with 69-year-old Mohammad Abu Arar, whose wife's



**JERUSALEM:** Palestinian Muslim devotees attend the second Friday Noon prayers of Ramadan near the Dome of the Rock mosque in the compound of the Al-Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem on March 22, 2024. — AFP

family in Gaza are currently sheltering in tents in the far-southern city of Rafah. "We pray for our people there to be safe and for the war to end peacefully, from the most sacred place for us," said Abu Arar. Zionist entity's military campaign against Palestinians has killed at least 32,070 people in Gaza,

most of them women and children, according to the Hamas-ruled territory's health ministry. International mediators had aimed for a new truce before Ramadan, but more than two weeks into the holy month and nearly six months into the war, no agreement has been reached. — AFP

## Slovakia votes for president amid deep divisions

**BRATISLAVA, Slovakia:** Slovaks voted on Saturday in the first round of a tight presidential election pitting the Moscow-leaning ruling camp against a pro-Kyiv candidate amid deep divisions on the war in neighboring Ukraine. Parliament speaker and former prime minister Peter Pellegrini and liberal ex-foreign minister Ivan Korcok, who is backed by the opposition, are the clear front-runners among nine contenders.

Pellegrini is backed by populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, who has questioned Ukraine's sovereignty amongst a list of inflammatory comments over Russia's invasion. Korcok is staunchly pro-Ukraine like outgoing president Zuzana Caputova, a government critic who chose not to seek a second term. After casting his ballot, Pellegrini said Slovakia would stay anchored in the EU and NATO after the election, despite Fico's remarks. "Even if we talk about a more sovereign foreign policy this does not mean that the course of Slovakia's foreign policy should change," he added.

"People know what I stand for. Now it is up to them to go and vote," Korcok said after voting and before a bike ride he was planning



**SENEC, Slovakia:** Photographers watch Slovakia's Former minister of Foreign affairs and presidential candidate Ivan Korcok (left) talking to journalists after voting during the first round of Slovak presidential elections on March 23, 2024 in Senec, Slovakia. — AFP

later on Saturday. Caputova told journalists she hoped her successor would "represent our country abroad well".

Though the office is largely ceremonial, Slovakia's president ratifies international treaties, appoints top judges and is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The head of the NATO and EU member of 5.4 million

people can also veto laws passed by parliament. The latest opinion polls have suggested a tight race. An Ipsos agency survey indicated that Pellegrini would garner 37 percent of the vote, while Korcok would bag 36 percent. An April 6 runoff is likely as neither is expected to win over 50 percent in the first round. Polling closed at 2100 GMT on Saturday. — AFP

## Afghan IS branch top suspect in Moscow attack

**PARIS:** The Islamic State group (IS) has claimed responsibility for Friday's attack on a Moscow concert hall that killed more than 100 people — terrorism experts say its Afghan branch is likely responsible.

Since the fundamentalist Taliban took over Kabul, the ISKP — the Afghan branch of IS — has managed to poach members from its rival movement and has repeatedly shown off its will and capability to strike outside Afghanistan's borders. An August 2021 blast claimed by the group killed 100 civilians and 13 American soldiers at Kabul airport — just as the United States was withdrawing from the Afghan capital and the Taliban laid their hands on power.

It was the deadliest-ever attack by IS against the US. Washington offered a \$10 million reward for information on ISKP's leader Sanullah Ghafari, also known as Shahab al-Muhajir. Born in 1994, he is "responsible for approving all ISIS-K operations throughout Afghanistan and arranging funding to conduct operations," according to the US State Department, which uses an alternative

acronym for the ISKP.

The US foreign ministry placed Ghafari on its foreign terrorist blacklist in November 2021. Afghanistan's IS branch was built by the group's envoys arriving from Iraq and Syria — unlike almost everywhere else in the world, where pre-existing outfits pledged to its cause, said Hans-Jakob Schindler, director of the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) research outfit and a former UN terrorism expert. "They have very close connections to the centre, much more than the other affiliates," Schindler told AFP, adding that this gives them access to ample funding.

Lucas Webber, co-founder of specialist website Militant Wire, highlighted that the "ISKP has emerged as the most internationally minded IS branch... producing propaganda in more languages than any other branch since the height of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria." It has been mounting an "ambitious and aggressive campaign to bolster its external operations capabilities and strike its various enemies abroad," he added. — AFP

## Nothing is permanent...

**Continued from Page 1**

Exegetes of the Noble Quran maintain that the bodies of the unbelievers and weak believers are diverted by mundane pleasures from the sublime goal of worshipping Almighty Allah, and their hearts are diverted from the mention and remembrance of the Majestic Allah.

According to some interpreters of the Noble Quran, in the above verse, Almighty Allah instructed Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to inform the polytheists who had asked him to dismiss the poor Muslims when they (the rich and influential polytheists) wanted to discuss with him religious issues, "that life of this world is but amusement, diversion, adornment and boasting to one another and completion to get more wealth and children..."

Our life on this planet Earth is like a rider who alighted and enjoyed the shade of a tree. Abdullah bin Masoud (RA) narrated that Allah's Messenger (PBUH) slept on mat, and when he stood up, it left marks on his flank. He and his companions said, translated as: "O Allah's Messenger, we can get a soft bed for you." He replied, "What do I have to do with the world? I am not in the world but as a rider who rests in the shade of a tree, then he gets up and leaves it." (Sahih At-Tirmidhi # 4, 109)

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is an epitome of sports-

manship, who realized that you cannot always be a winner: Anas bin Malik (RA) narrated that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used to have a she-camel called 'Al-Adh'ba'a' that could not be surpassed in a race. Once a bedouin came riding a young camel and it surpassed it (Al-Adh'ba'a) in a race. The Muslims were very upset by that, and the Prophet (PBUH) saw the expression on their faces. They said, 'O Allah's Messenger, 'Al-Adh'ba'a' has been defeated (in a race)! He replied, 'It is Allah's Law that nothing is raised high in this world, except that He lowers it.'" (Al-Bukhari # 2, 872)

Among the lessons that we learn from the above hadith (prophetic narration) is that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was extremely humble yet he is the best human being ever created by Almighty Allah. A believer should patiently persevere and endure when changes happen: Abu Saeed Al-Khudrei (RA) narrated that Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said: "Nothing afflicts a believer, whether a chronic disease, fatigue, illness, sadness, or even worry that distresses him, except that his sins are expiated by it." (Muslim # 2, 573)

Finally, we need to understand that inevitably each one of us will individually face Almighty Allah after He resurrects us. At that point, either joy will fill us because of what we did for Allah's sake or we will regret for failing to do more. — Courtesy of Kuwaiti Society for Cultural Dialogue

Zionist forces continued operations in and around Gaza's biggest hospital complex, Al-Shifa, for a sixth day on Saturday. The UN's humanitarian agency, OCHA, said "health workers have been among those reported arrested and detained". Mohammed, 59, who lives a short walk from the Al-Shifa complex in Gaza City, told AFP he had seen "many bodies" in the streets, buildings on fire and tanks blocking the roads. "I feel that Gaza has become worse than the fires of hell," he said, giving only his first name.

Netanyahu on Friday reiterated his plan to send ground troops into the southern city of Rafah. "I hope to do that with the support of the United States, but if we need to, we will do it alone," Netanyahu told visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Netanyahu has said repeatedly that a ground invasion of Rafah is the only way to root out Hamas, but global leaders have warned that an incursion would worsen an already catastrophic situation.

In Rafah on Saturday, Guterres said: "Any further onslaught will make things even worse." Blinken said he would continue discussions with Zionist officials to find an alternative to a ground incursion of Rafah. Even without ground troops, Rafah is suffering regular bombardments. Members of the Kawari family, who had taken refuge in Rafah after fleeing from Gaza City, told AFP a "huge explosion" killed four children and their grandmother during an air strike early Saturday. —AFP

## Russia concert hall attack kills 133...

**Continued from Page 1**

victims of the terrorist attack. HH the Amir affirmed Kuwait's strong condemnation of this ugly terrorist act that targeted innocent people. He wished the injured quick recovery and the deceased the Almighty's mercy. HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah sent a similar cable of condolences to Putin.

Kuwait's ministry of foreign affairs earlier expressed strong condemnation and denunciation of the terrorist attack. In a statement, the ministry, while emphasizing Kuwait's condemnation of this terrorist act and its rejection of violence in all its forms, called on the international community to stand up to these terrorist acts that target civilians. It added Kuwait extends its condolences and sympathy to the families of the victims and to the Russian Federation, government and people, wishing speedy recovery to all injured in the attack. Russia's FSB security service said earlier the assailants had been "in contact" with people in Ukraine as they tried to flee the country. Russian investigators said Saturday the death toll from the shooting and fire at a Moscow concert hall had risen to 133 from an earlier figure of 115 dead. "While clearing the debris in the Crocus City Hall concert hall, the number killed as a result

of the terrorist attack rose to 133 people. Search operations are continuing," the Investigative Committee said in a statement on Friday's attack.

Camouflaged gunmen opened fire at the packed Crocus City Hall in Moscow's northern suburb of Krasnogorsk on Friday evening ahead of a concert by Soviet-era rock band Piknik in the deadliest attack in Russia for at least a decade. Russian authorities have called it a "terrorist attack", but have not commented on the Islamic State's claim. "Terrorists, murderers, non-humans will face the unenviable fate of retribution and oblivion," said Putin, who declared Sunday a day of national mourning across Russia. Some Russian lawmakers pointed to Kyiv, without providing evidence. "The main interested party could most likely be Ukraine and its patrons... we can't rule it out," said senior Russian MP Andrey Kartapolov. Ukraine, which has been facing a Russian military offensive for the past two years, had "nothing to do" with the attack, according to a statement by presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak on Telegram.

The Kremlin said the head of the FSB security service had informed Putin about the arrests, while authorities warned the number of fatalities was set to keep rising, with more than 100 still hospitalized and a search of the burnt-out venue ongoing. "FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov reported to the president on the detention of 11 people, including four terrorists involved in the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall," it said. Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said rescue workers were still working on site, pulling bodies from the building. — AgenciesIn

herself during that two-minute plus broadcast," royal expert Richard Fitzwilliams told AFP. "But there's no doubt at all that it's a very, very difficult time for the institution of monarchy," he added.

Buckingham Palace announced on Feb 5 that tests had identified Charles had "a form of cancer" without giving further details. He has cancelled all public engagements except audiences with the prime minister and ambassadors, and worked on official papers while receiving treatment. He has been photographed several times since then, and seen attending church. Kate was last seen at a public engagement on Dec 25.

Kensington Palace announced on Jan 17 that she was facing up to two weeks in hospital and several months' recuperation following abdominal surgery. She was not expected to be ready to return to public duties until after Easter on March 31, a statement at the time said. But Kate disclosed tests after the operation "found cancer had been present" and that she was now undergoing "preventative chemotherapy". Kensington Palace said she would return to official duties "when she is cleared to do so by her medical team". — AFP

## UN chief calls for end to Gaza...

**Continued from Page 1**

already "starving to death", with famine projected by May in northern Gaza without urgent intervention.

Writing on social media platform X on Friday, the head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, Philippe Lazzarini, said the aid ("Zionist") authorities are allowing in is still by far not enough". Currently, an average of 150 trucks a day enter Gaza, he said, compared with at least 500 before the war. In the face of limited ground access, several nations have begun aid airdrops, and a sea corridor from Cyprus delivered its first cargo of food.

The Zionist entity's most staunch ally the United States, which provides it with billions of dollars in military aid, has repeatedly blocked Gaza ceasefire resolutions at the UN Security Council. But Washington has also become increasingly vocal about the war's impact on civilians. On Friday it tried to pass a text mentioning an "immediate ceasefire as part of a hostage deal", but China and Russia vetoed the US text. The Gaza health ministry, in its latest toll on Saturday, reported at least 72 people killed overnight.



## International

# Modi opponent Kejriwal remanded in custody ahead of India election

## AAP supporters take to streets as opposition cries 'decay of democracy'

**NEW DELHI:** A top Indian opposition politician and Chief Minister of Delhi was remanded in custody Friday following his overnight arrest in a case supporters say is aimed at sidelining challengers to Prime Minister Narendra Modi before next month's election.

Arvind Kejriwal, chief minister of the capital Delhi and a key leader in an opposition alliance formed to compete against Modi in the polls, was detained late Thursday in connection with a long-running corruption probe. He is among several leaders of the bloc under criminal investigation and one of his colleagues described his arrest as a "political conspiracy" orchestrated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Kejriwal was brought before a New Delhi court on Friday which ruled he should stay remanded in the custody of the Enforcement Directorate, India's main financial crimes investigation agency, until at least March 28. "My life is dedicated to the country, whether I am inside or outside," Kejriwal told reporters while being led into the courtroom before the hearing began.

Shadan Farasat, a member of Kejriwal's legal team, told AFP that colleagues were considering their next course of action after the ruling. His Aam Aadmi Party (Common Man Party, AAP), maintains that Kejriwal has not resigned his office as chief minister despite his arrest.

"We made it clear from the beginning that if needed, Arvind Kejriwal will run the government from jail," Delhi education minister Atishi Marlena Singh told reporters Thursday. Hundreds of supporters from Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) took to the streets Friday to condemn the leader's arrest, with police breaking up one crowd of protesters who attempted to block a busy traffic intersection.

Several demonstrators were de-

tained, including Singh and Health Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj.

Rallies in support of Kejriwal were



Arvind Kejriwal

held in numerous other big cities around India. Kejriwal's government was accused of corruption when it implemented a policy to liberalize the sale of liquor in 2021 and give up a lucrative government stake in the sector. The policy was withdrawn the following year, but the resulting probe into the alleged corrupt allocation of licences has since seen the jailing of two top Kejriwal allies.

Kejriwal, 55, has been chief minister for nearly a decade and first came to office as a staunch anti-corruption crusader. He had resisted multiple summons from the Enforcement Directorate to be interrogated as part of the probe.

Tamil Nadu chief minister MK Stalin, a fellow member of the opposition bloc, said Kejriwal's arrest "smacks of a desperate witch-hunt". "Not a single BJP leader faces scrutiny or arrest, laying bare their abuse of power and the decay of democracy," he said.

Modi's political opponents and international rights groups have long sounded the alarm on India's shrinking democratic space. US think-tank Freedom House said this year that the BJP



**NEW DELHI:** Police detain supporters of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as they protest against the arrest of AAP leader and Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in New Delhi on March 22, 2024. -- AFP

had "increasingly used government institutions to target political opponents".

Rahul Gandhi, the most prominent member of the opposition Congress party and scion of a dynasty that dominated Indian politics for decades, was convicted of criminal libel last year after a complaint by a member of Modi's party. His two-year prison sentence saw him disqualified from parliament for a time until the verdict was suspended by a higher court, but raised further concerns over democratic norms in

the world's most populous country.

Kejriwal and Gandhi are both members of an opposition alliance composed of more than two dozen parties that is jointly contesting India's national election, which is running from April to June.

A delegation from the bloc met with India's election commission on Friday to condemn what they said were deliberate efforts to undermine the opposition's campaign. "It is a larger issue of impairing, undermining and sabotaging the basic struc-

ture of the Indian constitution," Congress politician Abhishek Manu Singhvi told reporters after the meeting.

But even without the criminal investigations targeting its most prominent leaders, few expect the bloc to make inroads against Modi, who remains popular a decade after first taking office. Many analysts see Modi's reelection as a foregone conclusion, partly due to the resonance of his assertive Hindu-nationalist politics with members of the country's majority faith. — AFP

### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### Lebanon moves UN against Zionists

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon will lodge a complaint against Zionist entity at the UN Security Council accusing it of disrupting navigation systems and civil aviation around Beirut airport, the foreign ministry said on Friday. Since the Gaza war erupted in October, Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement, a Hamas ally, has been exchanging near-daily cross-border fire with the Zionist army. Lebanon will "submit an urgent complaint to the UN Security Council about Zionist entity... disrupting navigation systems and civil aviation safety" in the skies around Beirut airport since the start of the Gaza war, the foreign ministry said in a statement on the official NNA news agency. — AFP

#### Trial begins for US rancher

**LOS ANGELES:** The trial of a rancher accused of killing a Mexican migrant on his property in Arizona began Friday, as tensions mount in the United States over an inflow of migrants across the southern border. George Alan Kelly, 75, is charged with second-degree murder for the death of Mexican Gabriel Cuen-Buitimea, 48, on his property in the border town of Nogales in January 2023. During opening arguments Friday in a southern Arizona courtroom, the rancher's defense attorneys claimed that Kelly was eating lunch that day when he saw a group of men walking on his land with backpacks and rifles. After hearing a gunshot he reached for his AK-47 to fire into the air and scare them. — AFP

#### Mexico probes kidnappings

**CULIACAN, Mexico:** Mexican authorities were investigating the alleged kidnapping Friday of at least 15 people in a northwestern state home to one of the country's most powerful drug cartels, an official said. An emergency hotline received reports of abductions from several homes in a working-class neighborhood of Culiacan, according to Sinaloa state security secretary Gerardo Merida. "In total there are 15 people. This is the preliminary data we have," Merida told journalists, adding that several minors were reported to be among them. Security forces were deployed to investigate, he said. — AFP

#### Nigeria food stampede kills 2

**KANO, Nigeria:** At least two students died and 23 were hurt in a crush in central Nigeria on Friday as a huge crowd gathered for food handouts at a university, a spokesman told AFP. Thousands of students at Nasarawa State University, Keffi, surged and broke through gates where the state government was distributing bags of rice. Nigeria has been grappling with soaring food prices since the government withdrew a petrol subsidy and floated the naira currency in a bid to shore up the economy. Inflation has reached a three-decade high of 31.7 percent, making basic items inaccessible for many Nigerians, most of whom live on less than \$2 a day. — AFP

## Philippines: China attacks supply vessel with water cannon

**MANILA:** The Philippines said the China Coast Guard blocked a Filipino supply vessel and damaged it with water cannon on Saturday, causing injuries near a reef off the Southeast Asian country. The Philippine military released video of what it said was a nearly hour-long attack off Second Thomas Shoal in the contested South China Sea, where Chinese ships have unleashed water cannon and collided with Filipino vessels in similar stand-offs in recent months.

China Coast Guard and other vessels "once again harassed, blocked, deployed water cannons, and executed dangerous manoeuvres" against a routine rotation and resupply mission to the shoal Saturday morning, the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea said.

"Their reckless and dangerous actions culminated with the water cannoning of UM4 causing severe damage to the vessel and injuries to Filipinos on-board," it said in a statement, referring to the supply boat Unaizah May 4. The task force did not say how many people on the boat were injured nor identify them or describe their injuries.

China claims almost the entire South China Sea, brushing off rival claims from other countries including the Philippines and an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

Despite the attack, the task force said the damaged vessel and a coast guard escort ship that came to its aid later deployed rigid-hull inflatable boats to deliver its cargo and personnel to the Filipino outpost. The Philippine soldiers stationed on the shoal live on a derelict navy ship, the BRP Sierra Madre, and require frequent resupplies for food, water and other necessities as well as transport for personnel rotations.

China Coast Guard spokesman Gan Yu said in a statement that the Philippine resupply ship "tried to forcefully intrude into the adjacent waters of Ren'ai Jiao", using the Chinese name for the Second Thomas Shoal, despite the Chinese side's repeated warnings and route controls. The China Coast Guard carried out "lawful regulation, interception



**AT SEA, Undefined:** The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) shows a China Coast Guard ship (second left) and vessels identified by the Philippine Coast Guard as "Chinese Maritime Militia" (left and right) surrounding the Philippine Coast Guard ship BRP Cabra (second right). — AFP

and expulsion in a reasonable and professional manner", Gan said, adding that Philippine ships had attempted to "transport construction materials" to the BRP Sierra Madre.

"We warn the Philippines that playing with fire is an invitation of disgrace, and the China Coast Guard is ready at all times to defend the country's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests," Gan said.

The Philippine task force said the country "will not be deterred—by veiled threats or hostility—from exercising our legal rights over our maritime zones, including Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal which forms part of our (exclusive economic zone) and continental shelf". The latest confrontation came four days after visiting Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States stood by its "ironclad" commitments to defend longtime ally Manila against armed attack in the South China Sea.

Two days after Blinken's visit to Manila, the China Coast Guard also tried to drive away Filipino scientists who landed on two cays near Scarborough Shoal, another contested South China Sea outcrop. US ambassador to the Philippines MaryKay Carlson

said that Washington stood with Manila against China's "repeated dangerous maneuvers & water cannons to disrupt (the Philippine Coast Guard's) lawful activities in the (Philippine) EEZ".

Carlson also accused Beijing of violating international law and Philippine freedom of navigation in a post on X, formerly Twitter. The Unaizah May 4 was joined Saturday by an escort of two Filipino coast guard vessels and two Philippine Navy ships, a Philippine military statement said.

The military handout video clips showed a white ship repeatedly dousing another vessel sailing alongside it with a water cannon. One clip showed two white ships simultaneously firing water at the same vessel.

Another clip showed a white ship marked "China Coast Guard" crossing the bow of a grey vessel it identified as the Unaizah May 4. The vessel was also damaged in a China Coast Guard water cannon attack in the same area on March 5 that left four crew members injured. The military released yet another video clip which it said showed a Chinese inflatable boat deploying "floating barriers to prevent further entry of any vessels in the shoal". — AFP

cartels, using the military and millions of dollars from the United States, which pushed for harsh crackdowns in the country. But, the narco business is still thriving. Colombia's leftist President Gustavo Petro is now seeking a different approach.

"We need to decriminalize and reduce consumption through prevention, given the global failure of the war on drugs," he said in January at the Davos Forum. His government wants to stop going after small players such as coca farmers and other low-ranking workers and go all-in against the big bosses and those involved in money-laundering networks. In March 2023, Petro signed a law allowing poor women who are the main breadwinners of their families to serve their sentences outside of prison, by doing community service, with the authorization of a judge.

"The diagnosis is that the war on drugs has been highly costly in financial terms, but perhaps even more so in terms of people's lives," said Camilo Umana, vice minister of justice. The Colombian justice ministry estimates that 37 percent of the 7,000 women imprisoned in overcrowded prisons were there for crimes related to drug trafficking or microtrafficking—the small-scale distribution of narcotics. — AFP



**BOGOTÁ, Colombia:** Estefany Villa, convicted for drug trafficking charges, cries during an interview at El Buen Pastor women's prison, in Bogota on February 26, 2024. — AFP

"It is always us, the least involved, who pay the price," Tabares told AFP in Buen Pastor, the main women's prison in Bogota, where she spends her days cleaning and painting ceramics.

Colombia has spent decades battling powerful drug

## Colombia offers new hope for jailed women

**BOGOTA, Colombia:** Ana Tabares was a broke and desperate single mother of two when she took a job preparing food in a cocaine laboratory, got caught up in a police raid, and found herself behind bars. The Colombian government, which considers the United States-led war on drugs a failure, is analyzing the cases of thousands of jailed women like Tabares, some of whom have already been freed under a new law.

Tabares was 36 when soldiers and police burst into the remote camp where she worked for cocaine manufacturers. She was arrested alongside three other people as part of a fierce war on drugs in Colombia, the world's biggest cocaine producer.

A judge ignored her pleas and sentenced her to 10 years and eight months in prison for trafficking and manufacturing narcotics. Her boss remains at large.



# Business

SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2024

## Alghanim Industries and Saudi Coffee Company forge a strategic alliance

Partnership to amplify Saudi coffee culture globally • Alghanim opens 100th Costa Coffee store



Officials of Alghanim Industries, Saudi Coffee Company and Costa Coffee pose for a group photo in the Jazeen Experience store.



Mahmoud Samara, Khaled Abu Theeb and Philippe Schaillee.



Opening of the 100th Costa Coffee store in KSA.

**RIYADH:** Alghanim Industries has forged a strategic partnership with the Saudi Coffee Company, which is owned by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund. This collaboration highlights the Saudi Coffee Company's specialty coffee brand, Jazeen, and is aimed at promoting Saudi Arabia's distinguished coffee culture on a global scale. A significant milestone of this partnership is the opening of Alghanim's 100th Costa Coffee store, symbolizing the shared dedication to enhancing the worldwide appreciation of coffee culture and fostering the industry's growth both within Saudi Arabia and internationally.

As the largest Costa Coffee franchisee in the region, Alghanim Industries is dedicated to showcasing Jazeen Coffee's exclusive blends, cultivated in Saudi Arabia's southern region, across all Costa Coffee locations in the Kingdom, highlighting the depth of local coffee culture.

Kutayba Alghanim, Executive Chairman of Alghanim Industries, stated, "Partnering with the Saudi Coffee Company to introduce locally-grown Jazeen coffee beans into our Costa Coffee stores represents a significant strategic initiative that underscores our deep commitment to the Kingdom

of Saudi Arabia. This effort shines a light on our continuous drive to support job creation and expand employment opportunities, aligning perfectly with the objectives of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. It signifies our contribution to the local economy, our dedication to energizing the job market, and our celebration of the Kingdom's rich coffee culture. We view this not merely as a business opportunity but as an avenue to support the community and safeguard the deep-rooted traditions that characterize this region's identity."

Mahmoud Samara, CEO of Alghanim Industries, reflected, "Our alliance with Costa Coffee, flourishing for over a decade, transcends the bounds of conventional business partnerships by merging global excellence with the essence of local culture. This collaboration, especially through integrating Costa's esteemed brand with distinctive local concepts like Jazeen coffee, not only underscores our commitment to innovation, community involvement, and the celebration of local heritage but also opens the door to showcasing Saudi coffee beans across the region and potentially beyond, leveraging our position as the largest Costa Coffee franchisee. It embodies our strategic vision to enhance the con-

sumer experience significantly, contributing positively to the Saudi economy and elevating the nation's rich coffee culture on a global stage."

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a prominent player in the global coffee market is supported by significant initiatives, notably by entities like the Saudi Coffee Company. Their efforts to cultivate the southern region of Saudi Arabia aim to harvest some of the highest quality Arabica coffee available, contributing to the development of a vibrant local coffee culture and meeting the growing demand within the Kingdom.

Khalid Abu Theeb, CEO of Saudi Coffee Company, commented: "We are delighted to partner with Alghanim Industries facilitating the integration of locally produced coffee beans in global coffee blends. This partnership underpins Saudi Coffee Company's commitment to empower the private sector in the coffee industry, as well as promote Saudi-based coffee production across the region and globally. At Saudi Coffee Company and through its specialty coffee brand Jazeen, we are keen to partake in sustainable coffee production processes across the full value chain; placing the Saudi coffee beans on the global stage for coffee trade."

Philippe Schaillee, CEO of Costa Coffee, said: "It is an honor to join Alghanim Industries in celebrating the opening of their 100th Costa Coffee retail store. Alghanim have some of the best Costa Coffee stores in the world - helping us create a progressive and innovative brand in Saudi Arabia, targeting younger consumers, as well as inspiring those who already know and love the Costa Coffee brand. The partnership with Saudi Coffee Company is a fantastic example of how a global brand like Costa Coffee can operate in multiple markets and regions, whilst working with local partners to celebrate and champion individual markets heritage and produce."

The majority of Alghanim Industries' food offerings at Costa Coffee are sourced from local suppliers within the Kingdom, highlighting significant collaborations with Saudi brands that are prominently featured in Costa Coffee stores. Under the strategic guidance of Alghanim Industries, Costa Coffee has experienced significant growth not only in the Kingdom but also in expanding markets, including Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait, demonstrating the brand's growing influence and commitment to the Gulf region's coffee culture.

## US Senate passes govt funding bill, averting shutdown

**WASHINGTON:** The US Congress approved a funding bill Saturday in a rare show of cross-party unity, keeping federal agencies running through September and averting a damaging partial government shutdown. Senators missed a midnight deadline to pass the \$1.2 trillion package to keep the lights on in several key government agencies but voted in the early hours to pass a resolution that had already advanced from the House.

"It wasn't easy, but tonight our persistence has been worth it," Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor after hours of tense negotiation. "It is good for the American people that we have reached a bipartisan agreement to finish the job," he added before the bill received final approval. A day of high-stakes drama began on Capitol Hill when the House of Representatives passed a \$1.2 trillion, six-bill

package Friday at lunchtime, representing the largest and most contentious section of federal funding.

With cash running out at midnight for three-quarters of the government, including defense and homeland security, the Senate was thrust into a race against the clock to advance the legislation to President Joe Biden's desk. But the budget negotiations looked like they were breaking down, with both sides pushing to tweak the legislation to reflect their campaign messaging and priorities ahead of November's presidential election, when Biden faces former president Donald Trump.

Senators were preparing to adjourn with no deal on holding a vote, which would have prompted the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to begin scaling back operations in key federal agencies on Saturday morning. But a deal came together just as the midnight deadline arrived and the Senate voted to pass the resolution after 2:00 am local time (0600 GMT) in Washington.

"OMB has ceased shutdown preparations because there is a high degree of confidence that Congress will imminently pass the relevant appropriations and the president will sign the bill on Saturday," the White House said in a statement after the deal was struck.



WASHINGTON: The US Capitol in Washington, DC, on March 22, 2024. The US House of Representatives voted March 22 to approve a sprawling \$1.2 trillion package to fund the government. — AFP

"Because obligations of federal funds are incurred and tracked on a daily basis, agencies will not shut down and may continue their normal operations." Hours earlier, Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson had angered his own right flank by relying on Democratic

votes to advance the package to the Senate.

Marjorie Taylor Greene, a close ally of Trump, told reporters she had filed a "motion to vacate" the speaker's chair over Johnson's endorsement of the funding package, thrashed out over weeks of tense negotiations between the parties. The resolution, a rare maneuver that requires a simple majority to pass, comes after the same move led to the removal of previous speaker Kevin McCarthy last fall — and weeks of infighting as Republicans rejected several potential replacements before settling on Johnson.

The timeline for next steps on Greene's resolution was not immediately clear, although a vote to remove Johnson cannot take place until April at the earliest, with the House now on a two-week recess. Greene told CNN that "quite a few" Republicans were supporting her effort. The shutdown would have affected about 70 percent of government agencies and departments, as the first 30 percent — covering agriculture, science, veterans' programs, transport and housing — passed without major drama last month. Five of the six bills covering the rest of federal spending were also straightforward, but disputes over the funding of homeland security delayed the release of the deal, originally expected last weekend. — AFP



## Business

# Burgan Bank launches Burgan Beacon

## Program to motivate its staff and reward demonstrated core values

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced the launch of its newest program, launching Burgan Beacon (Manarat Burgan), which revolves around appreciating and rewarding all employees who go the extra mile in their areas of work. This program comes as a new bid to reinforce and encourage innovation and outstanding performance in the workplace. It is part of the bank's comprehensive human capital development strategy and its unwavering efforts to foster national talents, especially in the banking sector.

Through Burgan Beacon, the bank aims to bolster its leading position in the market, reinforcing its role as one of the most impactful institutions in the Kuwaiti banking and financial sector. The program also cements the Bank's reputation for offering one of the most desirable workplaces in the domestic banking sector. Designed as one of many instruments that Burgan Bank devises to create a healthy

and positive work environment where employees are encouraged to innovate and find creative solutions to everyday problems while feeling recognized for their remarkable efforts, Burgan Beacon offers monthly rewards for staff members who apply and embody the Bank's values, such as responsibility, teamwork, transparency, and passion, in their work and daily interactions. The program also offers quarterly honors and awards to the teams that exhibit flawless synergy and cooperation as well as yield praiseworthy results. The program's different award schemes reflect the Bank's acknowledgment and appreciation of its caliber and positive results, which play a central role in achieving Burgan's strategic goals and vision.

"We are proud of launching this innovative rewards program, which shows our commitment to appreciating our exceptional employees and encouraging them to excel in their line of work," Ali



Ali Hussain Akbar

Hussain Akbar, Deputy General Manager – Human Resources and Development for the Group at Burgan Bank, said. "We see the program as an excellent opportunity for reinforcing the team spirit across the institution and growing our faith in our abilities and potential for achievement, especially seeing how they form this institution's primary pillar of

"Thanks to its human capital, Burgan Bank was able to take confident strides toward new horizons of success," Akbar further noted. "This was possible because, for many years, the Bank has invested greatly in the growth and development of its calibers, seeking to evolve not only their professional know-how but their personal skillset as well. We believe that our deeply rooted values of excellence and professionalism are the foundation that holds all our present and future endeavors for success, and on this note, we intend to continue pursuing notable success and achievements."

Burgan Bank remains committed to implementing its human capital development strategy by offering its employees numerous learning and training opportunities that are tailored to their varying personal needs and professional aspirations, enabling them to raise their performance and grow at a consistent pace.

## EU eyes tariffs to 'choke off' Russian grain sales

BRUSSELS: The EU is looking to "choke off" revenue Russia uses for its war on Ukraine by slapping "prohibitive tariffs" on grain and related imports into the bloc, under a plan being put to a leaders' summit on Friday.

Moscow responded immediately by saying Europeans would "suffer" from the move. The added sanctions, welcomed by Kyiv, will not apply to Russian grain transiting through the European Union to other markets, so as not to disrupt food supplies elsewhere, EU trade commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky complained to the EU leaders meeting in Brussels Thursday, via video link, that it was not fair Russian grain continued to have "unrestricted" access to their markets, while Ukrainian imports were being limited.

Brussels has been seeking to increase pressure on Moscow's finances after several rounds of sanctions that have already frozen Russian assets in the 27-nation bloc, targeted leaders including President Vladimir Putin and curbed trade. At the same time, the European Commission has been multiplying concessions to EU farmers, who have been holding protests

over depressed income, part of which they blame on grain imports from war-torn Ukraine.

Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said late on Thursday that the proposed tariffs would "prevent Russian grain from destabilizing the EU market in these products". Moscow warned against the plan. "Consumers in Europe would definitely suffer," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Dombrovskis, speaking on Friday, said: "Today's proposal will choke off another important source of revenue for the Russian government to fund its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine." The tariffs were also to be imposed on products from Belarus, which served as a staging ground for Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine. The proposal follows an increase in Russian agricultural imports into the EU in 2023, according to the commission.

The tariffs would target imports of cereals, oilseeds and derived products from Russia and Belarus, applying at a level of either 95 euros (\$103) per ton or 50 percent of the value, depending on the product. "Our proposed prohibitive tariffs will make imports of these products commercially unviable," Dombrovskis said.

"It will also help put a stop to the Russian practice of illegally exporting stolen Ukrainian grain into the EU", Dombrovskis said. Under World Trade Organization rules, virtually all Russian grain has until now been exempt from EU import duties.

Despite sanctions taking aim at huge swaths of Russia's economy, the EU until now avoided targeting the farm or fertilizer sectors for fear of destabi-



BRUSSELS, Belgium: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (center) and European Council President Charles Michel (right) arrive for a press conference on the second and last day of the European Council summit at the EU headquarters in Brussels on March 22, 2024. — AFP

lizing the global cereal market and undermining food security in Asia and Africa.

"We have been careful to uphold global food security," Dombrovskis said, adding that the move "will not affect the transit of Russian and Belarussian grain products to third countries." Russia last year exported 4.2 million tons of cereals and related agricultural products to the EU, for a total value of 1.3 billion euros. Belarus imported 610,000 tons, with a value of 246 million euros. — AFP

## Curacao floating market reborn as border reopens

WILLEMSTAD, CURACAO, Netherlands Antilles: For four generations, the Cordero family traveled regularly from Venezuela to the island of Curacao to sell their fruit and vegetables at the picturesque "floating" market of Willemstad.

Their source of income was abruptly taken away when Caracas shuttered its maritime and air border with Curacao in 2019 in a diplomatic dispute. Reopened last year, the market is slowly coming back to life, and the Corderos' hopes with it.

"The reopening was very good news for everyone, for Venezuelans and Curacaoans, as it is a source of revenue for everyone," said 32-year-old Rene Cordero, whose father, grandfather and great-grandfather all sold goods at the market. His dad, Ramon, first traveled to the autonomous Dutch Caribbean island of Curacao when he was 16, with his father. Caracas halted air and sea travel to Curacao amid an international spat following the 2018 re-election of President Nicolas Maduro in elections widely denounced as neither free nor fair.

Curacao at the time received food and medicine sent by the United States as "humanitarian aid" requested by opposition leader Juan Guaido, then recognized as Venezuela's de facto leader by the White House in a failed bid to displace Maduro.

In April last year, the governments of both nations agreed to reopen the borders, and with it the market that has been there since 1918. Its stands have always been run by Venezuelans who stay in Willemstad, the island's capital, for about two months at a time before returning home, to be replaced by others. "It was very hard," said Cordero of the closure of the market which is on land but described as "float-



People buy vegetables and fruits at the Punda floating market on the waterfront of old town Willemstad, Curacao, in the Dutch Caribbean. — AFP

ing" because its vendors all arrive on small boats that are moored next to their stands.

In the time it was closed, Rene and his father tried to make it to the United States in search of an alternative income. After crossing seven countries, however, they were forced to return to Venezuela because of a tightening of US immigration policy. Once rich, Venezuela's economy is in dire straits, with GDP plummeting by 80 percent in a decade, forcing more than seven million to emigrate.

Between 2010 and 2019, Venezuela and the three islands of the neighboring archipelago of Curacao, Aruba and Bonaire, had an average commercial exchange of between \$200 million and \$300 million per year. Much of the vendors' income comes from passing cruise ships.

Last year, Curacao with its turquoise waters welcomed more than 500,000 visitors, according to the tourist office of the island of 150,000 inhabitants.

The sun is not up yet as Rene Cordero sets up his stall. It is an eight-hour journey to Curacao on the family's boat: the Francisca I, from La Vela de Coro in northern Venezuela. "The prices here are better than at the supermarket, and everything is fresh," said local customer Carlos Veris. Yet, the market is not quite back to what it once was.

Of the thirty or so small Venezuelan boats that used to supply the market by sea, only six continue to make the trip today. A plaque put up in 2007 by the Willemstad oil refinery, celebrates the market as "a symbol of more than a century of brotherhood of two neighboring peoples." — AFP

## Global stocks mixed after rallying over interest rate outlook

NEW YORK: European and US stock markets were mixed Friday after gaining earlier in the week over expectations of a series of interest rate cuts later this year. On Wall Street, the Dow fell as it was pulled lower by Nike, which offered a lackluster outlook.

The wider S&P 500 retreated slightly, while the tech-heavy Nasdaq gained to finish at a record for the third straight day. Frankfurt rose after a survey showed improved business confidence, while Paris closed lower. Markets were "catching their breath after an eventful week," said Charles Schwab analyst Joe Mazzola.

"The market heads into the final week of the first quarter buoyed by optimism over the economy and renewed confidence the Federal Reserve will embark on a rate-cutting cycle later this year," he said.

London, which has lagged behind most major markets so far this year, was the strongest major market Friday, with the FTSE 100 index closing up 0.6 percent. It had gained almost two percent Thursday as the Bank of England signaled it could start cutting interest rates over the UK summer.



TOKYO: People walk past an electronic board showing a share price of the Nikkei index of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo. — AFP

"The FTSE 100 is benefitting more than the other indices because it was cheap," said Kathleen Brooks, an analyst at XTB.com. "This shift in rate cut expectations from the BOE is like a red flag to a bull, and markets have rallied sharply," she said.

The Swiss National Bank on Thursday became the first major central bank to cut rates aimed at

combating soaring inflation, and was followed later in the day by the bank of Mexico. Equities across the world had surged Thursday in response to the Federal Reserve's closely watched projections that it would lower borrowing costs three times this year, even after figures showed prices ticking up in January and February. — AFP

## Russia's central bank holds rates amid inflation

MOSCOW: Russia's central bank held interest rates unchanged on Friday as Moscow's military offensive on Ukraine has led to stubbornly high inflation and labor shortages. The central bank raised rates to 16 percent in a series of hikes last year to cool the pace of price rises. Analysts are waiting for the bank to signal whether its policy is working, and if it might cut borrowing costs soon. "Current inflationary pressures are gradually easing but remain high," the bank said Friday in a statement.

It said recent rate increases would eventually bring inflation down, but that it was "premature to judge the pace" at which that would play out. Speaking at a press conference in Moscow, Governor Elvira Nabiullina said the bank would "need to maintain tight monetary conditions for a long period" and that inflation risks remained "tilted to the upside" — meaning price rises could accelerate in the coming months. Russia's Rosstat statistics agency said prices rose 7.7 percent in the year to February — up from 7.4 percent in January.

The government officially targets an annual inflation rate of four percent. Consumer prices are a sensitive topic in Russia, where surveys show the majority of people have virtually no savings and where memories of hyperinflation and economic instability run deep. A surge in military spending to support the offensive has helped shield the Russian economy from a sharp downturn that many predicted when Putin ordered troops across the border in February 2022.

"The growth of economic activity has sped up again, primarily in household consumption," Nabiullina said Friday, adding that she continued to "see signs of overheating." The drafting of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, a ramp-up in domestic arms production and an exodus of men seeking to avoid being conscripted has created deep labor shortages in parts of the economy.

All of that has combined to create a spiral of rising wages and consumer prices. The bank said Friday that "labor market tightness has increased again," suggesting the trend will continue to push prices higher — particularly in the services sector — over the foreseeable future. — AFP

## German business morale improves

FRANKFURT: German business morale rose more strongly than expected in March, a key survey showed Friday, raising hope there is "light on the horizon" for Europe's crisis-hit top economy. The Ifo institute's closely watched confidence barometer, based on a survey of around 9,000 companies, rose to 87.8 points, from 85.7 in February.

Analysts surveyed by financial data firm FactSet had forecast a reading of 86.

The improvement will bring hope that the eurozone's traditional growth engine is starting to recover after being battered by surging inflation, higher interest rates and an industrial slowdown.

"Sentiment in German companies has improved noticeably," Ifo president Clemens Fuest said.

"The German economy glimpses light on the horizon." The business climate reading rose across all sectors surveyed by Ifo in March — manufacturing, services, trade and construction.

The component of the index that refers to future expectations rose sharply, although the component covering businesses' current situation increased more modestly. Despite the improvement, ING economist Carsten Brzeski noted that the reading "is still far lower than levels seen last summer".

Combined with other recent more positive data, "the message is clear", he said. "The German economy is bottoming out — but a strong recovery is not in sight yet." He warned of several factors that could hit growth in the short term, including supply chain woes caused by tensions in the Red Sea and a wave of recent strikes. Andrew Kenningham of Capital Economics added that "the outlook remains very gloomy".

"Stagnant real incomes, the continued drag from high interest rates, weak external demand and tight fiscal policy all suggest that the economy is unlikely to grow much, if at all, over the rest of the year."

Kenningham and other analysts predict the economy will contract for a second successive quarter at the start of this year, sending Germany into a technical recession. Output shrank 0.3 percent last year and while a rebound is expected this year, growth is still expected to be weak. In recent times, the German government, the central bank and economic institutes have all downgraded their 2024 growth forecasts, predicting the recovery will take longer than previously expected. — AFP





General Assembly for the year 2023.

Hamad Al-Bahar  
NBK Group Chairman

- NBK's strong financial results in 2023 underscore the resilience of the bank's business model, setting the stage for higher performance in the future.
- NBK boasts an impressive balance sheet and capital base, facilitating the satisfaction of its customers' expanding requirements.
- The bank strengthens its reputation as a safe haven for investors, depositors, and clients in wealth management.
- More than KD 28 million in CSR contributions in 2023, marking a notable 22 percent increase from the previous year.

Isam Al-Sager  
NBK Group Vice  
Chairman and CEO

- Our profits underscore the benefits of our geographical diversity, advancements in our digital journey, and the strength of our financial position.
- Boubyan Bank enhances our competitive edge by offering both Islamic and conventional banking services.
- NBK Wealth has emerged as a premier destination for innovative and advanced wealth management solutions.
- We have positioned ourselves as pioneers in digital innovation within the financial industry.

# NBK's AGM approves all motions proposed by Board of Directors

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) for 2023 on Saturday, March 23, 2024, with a quorum of 71.87 percent. The AGM approved the Board of Directors' recommendation to distribute 25 percent cash dividend to shareholders (25 fils per share) for the second half of the financial year, bringing the total cash dividend distributions for the year to 35 percent, in addition to the distribution of 5 percent bonus shares (5 shares for every 100 shares owned).

**Board approves distribution of 25% cash dividend for second half, bringing the total cash dividend distributions for the year to 35% and 5% bonus shares for FY 2023**

## Consistent progress

In his speech to the AGM attendees, Hamad Al-Bahar, NBK Group Chairman, emphasized that the strong financial results achieved by the bank in 2023 highlight its unique business model and strong financial position. This performance reaffirms NBK's dedication to providing the highest returns for shareholders and promoting sustainable growth.

Al-Bahar highlighted the multitude of successes attained by the bank in 2023, further solidifying its track record of accomplishments and leadership both domestically and internationally. These endeavors were acknowledged with numerous prestigious awards, further affirming NBK's position of excellence.

"Our sustained achievements stem from our core strategy of diversification, which lies at the foundation of our operations. By strategically expanding our portfolio and services across various geographical locations, we mitigate risks, capitalize on

potential opportunities, and reinforce our dedication to adaptability, resilience, and long-term stability."

"We remain committed to making substantial strides in executing our strategic agenda, and we are optimistic that our accomplishments over the past year will serve as a catalyst for enhanced performance in the future," Al-Bahar emphasized. He also underscored NBK's robust balance sheet and stable capital foundation, highlighting their role in meeting the evolving demands of customers and delivering optimal returns for shareholders.

Al-Bahar further stated, "Our endeavors yielded improvements across all key performance indicators compared to the previous year. This underscores the effectiveness and adaptability of our long-standing strategy, solidifying our position as a safe haven for investors, depositors, wealth management clients, individuals, and businesses alike. Moreover, we remain committed to leveraging the potential of digital transformation and sustainability initiatives, while fostering collaboration with communities, corporations, and individuals to foster a brighter and more inclusive future."

## Social responsibility

Al-Bahar highlighted the bank's prominent role in social responsibility over the past year, establishing itself as a leader in Kuwait. The bank contributed over KD 28 million across various sectors including healthcare, childcare, societal initiatives, environmental causes, sports, and education.

## Expanding our footprint

Discussing the bank's prospects for the current year, Al-Bahar remarked, "Regarding our outlook for 2024, our expansion efforts will primarily focus on Kuwait as our core market, with strategic initiatives in the GCC markets. We intend to further strengthen our presence in current markets through strategic investments. Additionally, the bank aims to introduce its proven digital banking solutions in other markets, while enhancing its footprint across MENA region."

## Unwavering commitment

Al-Bahar emphasized NBK's unwav-

ering dedication to upholding the highest ethical standards and governance principles. He highlighted the bank's dynamic and proactive governance framework, which fosters transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct across all levels. Al-Bahar noted that the Board of Directors, in collaboration with the dedicated executive management team, prioritizes aligning strategic decisions with the bank's core values to effectively serve the interests of its shareholders.

## Historical earnings

Meanwhile, Isam J. Al-Sager, NBK Group Vice Chairman and CEO, outlined in his speech that the bank reached its highest annual profit on record in 2023 and maintained strong profit trends. This accomplishment was supported by its diversified business model, strategic investments, and resilience in the face of various economic conditions.

Al-Sager highlighted that despite the challenging operating environment and geopolitical tensions experienced last year, the bank achieved a record profit of KD 560.6 million, marking a year-on-year growth of 10.1 percent. Additionally, the operating profit surged to KD 1.2 billion, reflecting a substantial increase of 15.6 percent.

Al-Sager further stated, "Our core segments exhibited strong performance and sustained operational momentum, particularly in our international operations and wealth management divisions. Additionally, Boubyan Bank further supported our competitive edge in the local market as the sole banking group offering both Islamic and conventional banking services in Kuwait."

He explained that the bank maintained consistent dividend rates of 35 fils per share by the end of the year, highlighting the strong financial position of the Group and its commitment to providing shareholders with optimal returns.

He highlighted that as of December 31, 2023, total assets stood at KD 37.7 billion, marking a 3.7 percent year-on-year increase. He attributed this growth primarily to the expanding volume of the Group's business across diverse sectors and activities.

Al-Sager also indicated that shareholders' equity reached KD 3.7 billion, reflecting a notable annual growth of about 7.3 percent. Return on average shareholders' equity stood at 15.0 percent, while return on average assets demonstrated strong rates, reaching 1.53 percent in 2023. Moreover, customer deposits surged to KD 21.9 billion by year end, marking an 8.8 percent increase compared to 2022. Concurrently,

achievements of the bank in the previous year were attributable to several factors, including leveraging its geographical footprint, advancing the digital transformation initiative, and maintaining a robust financial position. These aspects strengthened revenue streams while maintaining the bank's prudent policies over the years. Consequently, this positively impacted asset quality and boosted capitalization.



Members of the Board of Directors.

loans and advances experienced a growth of 6.1 percent, reaching KD 22.3 billion. Additionally, the capital adequacy ratio surpassed the minimum required levels, reaching 17.3 percent.

## Challenges and opportunities

Al-Sager remarked that Kuwait encountered challenges akin to those experienced globally in 2023. However, he highlighted several opportunities seized upon during the past year. These included the sustained increase in oil prices, the flexibility observed in consumer spending, accelerated growth in the projects market compared to previous years, positive trends in employment and population growth, advancements in the refining sector, and a less hawkish monetary policy approach. These factors collectively contributed to shaping a favorable economic environment in Kuwait.

He highlighted that the remarkable

## Centre of attention

Al-Sager emphasized that in 2023, NBK continued its commitment to prioritizing customers by offering innovative digital services and products to support their financial objectives.

## Wealth management

Al-Sager highlighted that in the previous year, NBK Wealth was introduced as a premier destination for pioneering and sophisticated wealth management solutions. It offers an extensive array of comprehensive services in private banking and advanced asset management through a global network spanning 9 cities across 5 countries. In the domain of digital transformation, Al-Sager emphasized that the bank leads among financial institutions in digital innovation, prioritizing a banking experience tailored to the actual needs and aspirations of its customers. He noted that the bank's unwavering dedication to addressing customer needs has played a pivotal role in reshaping the lifestyles of its customers through a meticulously crafted range of digital services and products.

## Sustainability momentum

Al-Sager elaborated that the bank sustained its progress in sustainability by embarking on a new trajectory for its environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) strategy. This involved the adoption of a formal ESG governance framework and the integration of these standards across its services and products. For instance, it introduced green mortgage loans, consumer loans for electric vehicles, financing options related to sustainability, and low-emission housing loans.



Farouq Bastaki on the sidelines of the general assembly.



Sulaiman Al-Marzouq



Business



Shaikha K Al-Bahar

NBK Deputy Group CEO

- Our performance in 2023 showcases the strength of our diversified business mix and our prudent risk management approach.
- The achievements of 2023 highlight the effectiveness of our investment philosophy in fostering sustainable growth initiatives.
- We remain committed to investing in the future and improving our digital capabilities to enhance customer service.
- Adopting a balanced approach, we aim to boost revenue from various sources and enhance the Group's overall profitability.
- We are focused on strengthening the bank's presence in key regional markets, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
- The Saudi market holds strategic importance for the Group, alongside our continued investment in Egypt.



Salah Al-Fulaij

Chief Executive Officer

- Our strategic investments in our people, processes, and digital technologies have proven to be prudent and effective.
- We remain dedicated to implementing customer-centric strategies that set new benchmarks in the banking industry.
- Leveraging the momentum in consumer spending, we continue to offer premium services and products.
- Our innovative efforts have been recognized as the most groundbreaking globally.
- We have capitalized on Weyay Bank's valuable offerings to expand our market share among the youth demographic.

"Recently, we have been recognized as the Best Bank in the Middle East for ESG-related loans. Furthermore, we have successfully finalized and approved the ESG framework, clearly defining responsibilities among members of the executive management. We have also established the Sustainability and Climate Change Committee, which operates under the direct oversight of the Board of Directors.

Al-Sager highlighted that NBK has maintained a high score by CDP, distinguishing itself as the sole bank in Kuwait to receive this recognition. Furthermore, NBK ranks among the highest-rated GCC financial institutions engaged in this initiative. Additionally, the bank has committed to reducing total operating emissions by 25 percent by 2025 and aims to achieve zero emissions operationally by 2035. These initiatives are integral to the bank's overarching plans to attain carbon neutrality by 2060. Consequently, these efforts led to an upgrade in the Bank's MSCI ESG Governance rating to BBB as per the 2023 review.

A sustainable future

"Our agile strategy and resilient business model will persist in steering us towards delivering utmost value to our stakeholders, serving as a cornerstone in our journey towards a digital and sustainable future. We remain steadfast in our commitment to sustaining revenue growth through responsible banking practices, strategic investment in our future, innovative products and services, enhancement of our digital capabilities, fostering holistic community development, and playing a significant role in fostering economic growth in Kuwait and beyond," Al-Sager said.

Focus on profitability

"As we navigate the opportunities and challenges of 2024, our dedication to prioritizing profitability, capital resilience, and sustainable growth remains unwavering. However, we recognize the need to closely monitor several challenges, with geopolitical tensions in the region standing out as particularly significant," Al-Sager concluded.

Diverse mix

On the sidelines of the AGM, Shaikha K Al-Bahar, NBK Deputy Group CEO highlighted that NBK has witnessed positive growth trends in the previous year, demonstrating continued success in executing its strategic plans, confirming that the primary sources of profitability in 2023 were centered around core banking operations. Al-Bahar explained that NBK's performance in 2023 showcased the effectiveness of its diverse business portfolio and prudent risk management practices. She highlighted the substantial strides made in executing its customer-centric strategy, underscoring NBK's sustained momentum across various fronts. This encompassed achieving robust levels of capitalization, maintaining high credit quality, and strengthening customer relationships, all of which led to an expansion in business volume.

She emphasized that these factors were pivotal in driving last year's strong performance and will play a significant role in generating sustainable value for shareholders in the long term. She also highlighted the bank's ongoing commitment to expanding its business operations while enhancing the quality of its services. "2023 served as a testament to the resilience of our investment philosophy in driving growth initiatives and the importance of customer-centricity. These factors propelled the ongoing expansion across our diverse business sectors. Throughout the year, we remained committed to investing in the future, enhancing our digital capabilities to improve customer service, and introducing innovative products and solutions aimed at facilitating our customers' banking needs," Al-Bahar said.

Al-Bahar emphasized that the International Banking Group (IBG) maintained robust performance and supported the balance sheet, accounting for 24 percent of operating income and 23 percent of the Group's profits. This underscores their significant

contribution to the overall performance of the Group.

She highlighted that in 2024, IBG will strengthen the bank's footprint in key regional markets, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This will involve targeting Government Related Entities and Top-Tier Corporations. Additionally, strategic expansion efforts will focus on the European Union, particularly in corporate lending, trade finance, Commercial Real Estate, and residential mortgages. The Group also aims to strengthen its footprint in Asia through its regional hub in Singapore while diversifying its Commercial Real Estate portfolio. Al-Bahar further emphasized that IBG are committed to diversifying the Group's commercial real estate portfolio. Additionally, they aim to integrate ESG standards into credit management processes while promoting digital and technological investment



Member of the Board of Directors Huda Al-Rifai during the general meeting.

ments across the business network.

She emphasized that throughout 2023, the bank remained focused on maintaining high asset quality and strong capitalization. Highlighting the significance of the Saudi market, she noted that it is a key priority for the NBK Group due to the numerous emerging opportunities aligning with the bank's strategic goals. Additionally, she highlighted the profitability of the bank's operations in Egypt, which continue to be among the most lucrative within the Group, boasting the highest returns on both shareholders' equity and assets.

Wealth management

Al-Bahar highlighted that NBK Wealth Group played a significant role in 2023, contributing 10 percent to operating income and approximately 11 percent to the Group's profits. She noted that the previous year marked the official announcement of the launch of its brand, solidifying its position as one of the largest regional groups in comprehensive wealth management. The group caters to high-net-worth individuals and corporations, offering tailored financial advisory services aimed at protecting and growing the wealth of its customers, through offering innovative and comprehensive banking and investment solutions.

She further mentioned that NBK Wealth, with approximately US\$37.6 billion in personal financial assets by the end of 2023, boasts an elite team comprising over 100 investment experts and brokers with extensive experience in the field.

Revolutionary change

Al-Bahar emphasized that the bank has made significant progress in its digital transformation journey by introducing notable updates and enhancements to the NBK Mobile Banking App. These updates represent a revolutionary shift in how customers engage with their everyday banking requirements through a highly efficient and user-friendly interface. This contributes to enhancing and refining the overall customer experience.

The best experience

Al-Bahar highlighted that NBK's efforts persist in delivering top-tier banking ex-

periences, operating with the utmost efficiency, and securing a significant market share by offering customers a broader array of options and numerous value-added services. She underscored the bank's consistent commitment to delivering added value for all stakeholders, employing a balanced approach to boost revenues from diverse sources, and enhancing the Group's profitability. This entails maintaining the bank's prominent position in its core business while fostering growth through expansion into sectors beyond its key business activities.

Digital offerings

She emphasized that NBK remains dedicated to investing in its digital offerings to furnish customers with a unique and unparalleled banking experience. This commitment encompasses the implementation

of cutting-edge financial tools and unique banking services, along with regular updates to the NBK Mobile Banking App, acclaimed as one of the premier banking applications in the sector. Moreover, NBK leverages data analysis and artificial intelligence across many of its services, employing machine learning techniques to deliver a personalized experience that surpasses customer expectations.

Social initiatives

Al-Bahar confirmed that the bank's social initiatives persisted throughout the past year, marked notably by the official introduction of the "Bankee" program. This initiative aims to enhance financial inclusion, particularly among school students, fostering sustainable improvement in financial literacy levels within society. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Kuwait Authority for Anti-Corruption "Nazaha", the program engaged 150 schools and over 16,000 students, supported by the participation of 3,000 teachers. Additionally, the program also included a special needs school for learning difficulties.

She highlighted that the bank's endeavors to support and empower women saw significant recognition with the NBK Rise program receiving the prestigious Best Initiative for Women in Business accolade at the MEED MENA Banking Excellence 2023. This notable achievement reflects the culmination of the bank's dedicated steps towards women's empowerment. Importantly, this effort extends beyond the bank itself to encompass several leading organizations in Kuwait.

Leadership centre

On the sidelines of the AGM, Salah Y Al-Fulaij, Chief Executive Officer – Kuwait remarked that throughout 2023, NBK's endeavors were marked by initiatives aimed at strengthening its leading position in Kuwait and enhancing customer loyalty. Al-Fulaij further added that the bank focused on enhancing and refining the NBK Mobile Banking App by incorporating over 30 enhancements to improve both user interface and experience. He highlighted that the App witnessed over

50 million banking transactions in the past year, marking a notable 19 percent year-on-year growth.

He emphasized that NBK Mobile Banking App is elevating digital offerings to new levels as part of the bank's ongoing endeavors to empower customers through the digital transformation journey. This is particularly evident in the substantial increase in customer satisfaction rates, exceeding 90 percent, following the recent update of the new App.

The youth segment

Al-Fulaij indicated that in 2023, the bank continued to leverage the valuable offerings provided by Weyay Bank, increasing its market share in the youth segment to over 30 percent. Additionally, the bank forged a partnership with MasterCard, which now serves as the exclusive provider of bank cards. He highlighted that NBK extended bank cards to SMEs as part of its commitment to catering to the needs and demands of this segment. Moreover, the bank entered into several partnerships to introduce new services, including exclusive offers for retirees in collaboration with the Public Institution for Social Security. He emphasized that the bank has broadened its range of robust offerings for customers in the premium services sector through partnerships with top-tier brands, providing this segment with an exclusive lifestyle experience.

"We will persist in implementing customer-centric strategies that foster technological advancements and introduce innovative initiatives to bolster NBK's standing as a reliable financial partner and establish new benchmarks in Kuwait's banking industry," Al-Fulaij said. Al-Fulaij underscored that NBK's commitment to delivering exceptional products and services to its customers earned it several accolades throughout the year, notably being recognized as the Best Innovation and Transformation (World) by Global Finance. He emphasized that NBK's significant and strategic investments in its workforce, operational infrastructure, and digital platforms over the years have unequivocally proven their worth and effectiveness.

Maximum benefit

Al-Fulaij emphasized that NBK's Personal Banking Group capitalized on the momentum of consumer spending and operations by offering exceptional banking services and products. He highlighted the implementation of a strategy that prioritizes customer choice based on individual needs and lifestyle preferences when designing products. Additionally, he emphasized NBK's commitment to maintaining a significant digital advantage over its competitors.

He added that the Corporate Banking Group remains steadfast in achieving its strategic objectives, with a primary focus on maintaining and expanding NBK's leadership and market share as the preferred corporate partner in Kuwait.

He emphasized that the bank plans to continue leveraging new business opportunities with existing customers and attract new ones, thanks to its exceptional service and the strength of its capital base.

Al-Fulaij elaborated that in 2023, the Corporate Banking Group introduced a pioneering set of commercial cards, the first-of-its-kind in Kuwait, aimed at empowering customers to manage their business expenses effectively. Additionally, new services were introduced to streamline the provision of digital and physical documents to corporate clients, fostering the growth of our medium-sized corporate clientele. "In 2024, our focus will remain on maintaining prudent credit risk management practices. We will continuously monitor and assess the performance and effectiveness of our interactions with corporate customers, to continually enhance our offerings. Moreover, we are committed to continue our efforts to integrate ESG standards into our assessments of corporate customer credit and creditworthiness, thereby fostering improved governance in business practices," Al-Fulaij commented.

Renewed momentum

Al-Fulaij also noted that Kuwait's operating environment in the past year displayed continued signs of recovery, driven by increased consumer spending and improved business activity. Additionally, there was a gradual recovery in spending and project awards, with project activities experiencing their strongest performance since 2017 in terms of the value of contracts awarded. This positive trend is expected to have a favorable impact on private sector lending.

Key pillar

Al-Fulaij indicated that the exceptional results achieved by the bank in 2023, along with its robust operational and financial performance, owe much to the exceptional human capital, which stands as the cornerstone of the bank's achievements. He highlighted that the Human Resources Group is persistently dedicated to fostering a work environment conducive to enhancing employees' capabilities, encouraging peak performance, fostering innovation, and driving continuous improvement.

Al-Fulaij revealed that in 2023, NBK allocated approximately 179,000 training hours to its employees, with 142,000 hours dedicated to local training initiatives and 36,700 hours for IBG. Moreover, the bank initiated numerous academic, motivational, and cultural programs. He emphasized NBK's commitment to providing equal opportunities to all employees, underscoring that this commitment is evident in the bank's workforce composition. Notably, women accounted for approximately 44 percent of the total workforce, with around 28.8 percent holding senior management positions. Additionally, Kuwaiti employees constituted about 76.7 percent of the total workforce by the end of 2023.

He highlighted that the bank's initiatives persist in fostering a workplace culture where individual advancement meets collective achievements. These initiatives entail offering professional development avenues for employees, equipping them to navigate the complexities of the dynamic landscape and the evolving demands of the sector. "Our investments have not only empowered our employees and supported their capability to tackle challenges but have also positioned our organization as a frontrunner in innovation and competitiveness," he emphasized.

"In 2023, the bank's endeavors culminated in receiving five prestigious awards. Among these accolades were three awards from MEED, recognizing our outstanding contributions to women's empowerment initiatives and sustainable development of human resources. Additionally, we were honored with the bronze award from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). The recognition is credited to the NBK RISE program, recognizing the initiative's excellence in diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, we received the coveted Bronze Medal from Brandon Hall International Group, for our excellence in Best Advance Program in Compliance Training," Al-Fulaij concluded.

Acknowledgment

Al-Bahar, on behalf of the Board of Directors, expressed his appreciation to all stakeholders for their unwavering support throughout NBK's journey. He also extended gratitude to the Bank's Board of Directors and Executive Management for their dedication and invaluable contributions to the accomplishments of 2023.

Moreover, he conveyed his profound gratitude for the trust and loyalty demonstrated by customers towards NBK, underscoring the bank's dedication to fostering a meaningful relationship with its customers that extends beyond banking transactions. Al-Bahar expressed his gratitude towards the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Capital Markets Authority for their remarkable efforts in advancing the banking sector. He also commended the shareholders for their steadfast support towards the efforts of NBK's Board of Directors in strengthening the bank's prominent position within the banking industry in Kuwait.



Sheikha Al-Bahar during an interview with Dr Nasser Al-Saeedi and Dr Robert Eid.



Faisal Al-Hamad during an interview with Zaid Al-Sagar and Mishari bin Salama on the sidelines of the general assembly.



Abdul Wahab Al-Bader, Member of the Board of Directors during the general assembly.



## The unexplained: Giant Swedish archive logs paranormal phenomena

Newspaper clippings, books and first-hand accounts of people who said they visited other planets are catalogued in a giant Swedish archive on paranormal phenomena, attracting the curious and researchers from around the world. The Archives for the Unexplained (AFU) claims to be the world's biggest library of paranormal phenomena, with 4.2 kilometres (2.6 miles) of shelves running underground.

Clas Svahn, 65, and Anders Lil-

jegren, 73, who run the archive located in the southeastern town of Norrköping, say they are neither superstitious nor believers, but rather "curious investigators of the unknown".

The AFU -- the name of both the library and the association that has collected documentation for more than 50 years -- is mainly comprised of books, but also more original documents, such as first-hand accounts of paranormal activity recorded on tape and photos of

ghosts. "What we are building here at AFU is depository knowledge," explains Svahn, showing AFP journalists around the 700-square-metre (7,535-square-foot) library. "We're trying to get as much as we can on... every kind of unsolved scientific mystery that we can find... to make this available for the world."

The library receives around 300 visits each year, by appointment only. The archives are in the process of being digitalised and many of the documents

"I have worked in countless archives in Europe, the United States and the UK. My time at the AFU was easily the most fascinating and most productive," he told AFP. "The AFU is without question the... most comprehensive archive for materials involving the global history of the UFO phenomenon in the world," he said, adding: "One cannot study the subject thoroughly without consulting its holdings."

The study of UFOs has long been stigmatised, but is becoming a more accepted field of scientific research. In September 2023, NASA officially joined the search for UFOs, saying the discipline required "a rigorous, evidence-based approach." At the AFU, Svahn flips through the yellowed pages of a book with a red cover.

The work is from the underground UFO scene in the former Soviet Union, typed up clandestinely in only seven or eight original copies. The book is "one of the rare things we have", Svahn says as he peruses the handwritten notes in Russian in the margins and sketches of rockets.

"They didn't know what they were seeing... but we can compare this with our own files and (can conclude it was) rocket launches from the Plesetsk rocket base" which were secret at the time, he says.

### Victor Hugo and Vietnam

The AFU archives contain some surprising material, including a little-known anecdote about French writer and politician Victor Hugo, currently on display at the Norrköping museum of art. In notes he wrote during his political exile on the British island of Jersey from 1852-1855, Hugo described having encounters with his dead daughter.

These writings contributed to the birth of a new religion now practiced by several million followers in Vietnam,

Caodaism, said exhibition curator Magnus Bartas. A fresco of Victor Hugo today adorns the wall of a temple a dozen kilometres north of Ho Chi Minh City.

The AFU, administered by an association of volunteers and hobbyists, "also covers the folklore, the beliefs" associated with paranormal phenomena in general, said Svahn.

chives to create a giant sculpture made of dark wood.

She sought inspiration from the experiences of witches, detailed in books, whose knowledge has been disdained throughout history, she told AFP.

People whose experiences and accounts are not taken seriously in society can find their rightful place in the



Swedish artist Ida Idaida poses next to her sculpture at the Museum of Art in Norrköping.

Files on UFO reports in Sweden are seen on shelves at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU).

Files on UFO reports in Sweden are seen on shelves at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU).

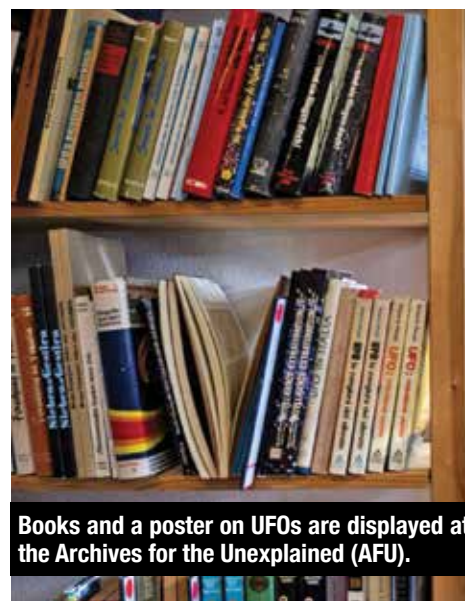
### Growing acceptance

Greg Eghigian, a professor of history and bioethics at Pennsylvania State University in the United States, visited the AFU to do research for a book on the history of UFOs (unidentified flying objects).

can already be consulted on a server. All that is needed is an access code, which the pair are more than happy to share.



Files on UFO reports in Sweden are seen on shelves at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU).



Books and a poster on UFOs are displayed at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU).



Old magazines on UFOs and space from Japan are displayed at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU) in Norrköping, Sweden.—AFP photos



Files and images are displayed at the Museum of Art in Norrköping.

"We love to see this as a social thing, impacting society all around the world and impacting people's lives." Beliefs evolve over generations and what was superstitious and rejected as such in the past may not be as stigmatised today. Swedish artist Ida Idaida spent a month doing research in the AFU ar-



Books on UFOs are displayed at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU).



Archivists Clas Svahn (right) and Anders Liljegren stand between bookshelves at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU).

archive, says museum curator Magnus Bartas. "The archive says something is unexplained. That means we shouldn't reject it. We should investigate it. We should be open."—AFP



Archivist Clas Svahn looks at a book at the Archives for the Unexplained (AFU).



A portrait dated 13 March 1969 of Laurent de Brunhoff, son of French artist Jean de Brunhoff who created the series Babar, King of the Elephants, to the world in 1931.—AFP photos

## Laurent de Brunhoff, heir of the 'Babar' saga

French author and illustrator Laurent de Brunhoff, who died Friday at the age of 98 according to US media, successfully continued the adventures of the affable elephant "Babar" -- first imagined as a bedtime story by his mother, before being turned into a beloved children's character.

Cecile de Brunhoff used to tell her two sons Laurent and Mathieu the story of a little elephant who fled to Paris after its mother was killed, learned to live among humans, and then returned

to the forest to marry and become king.

His father Jean de Brunhoff, a painter, was enraptured by Cecile's story and turned it into a children's book first published in 1931. "In the big forest, a little elephant was born. His name is Babar," he wrote under a drawing, unaware of the incredible destiny that awaited the elephant in a green suit. The books -- around twenty written by Laurent and seven by his father -- have since sold millions of copies, especially in the United States, and have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

"There were very few books for children then. My father's imagination and poetry were (new) as was his way of drawing, neither stylized nor realistic", Laurent explained 40 years later.

He was 12 years old when Jean died of tuberculosis in 1937, with his uncle Michel, who directed the French edition of Vogue, taking over the "Babar" enterprise. At 21, he began to pen the life of his childhood elephant, starting with



Babar the Elephant, the French fictional children's character by Jean de Brunhoff, celebrates the 80th Birthday of Babar with Saks by ringing the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

"Babar's cousin: that rascal Arthur". "Continuing Babar was prolonging my father's life," he said. His mother lived till the age of 99.

### Favourite of generations

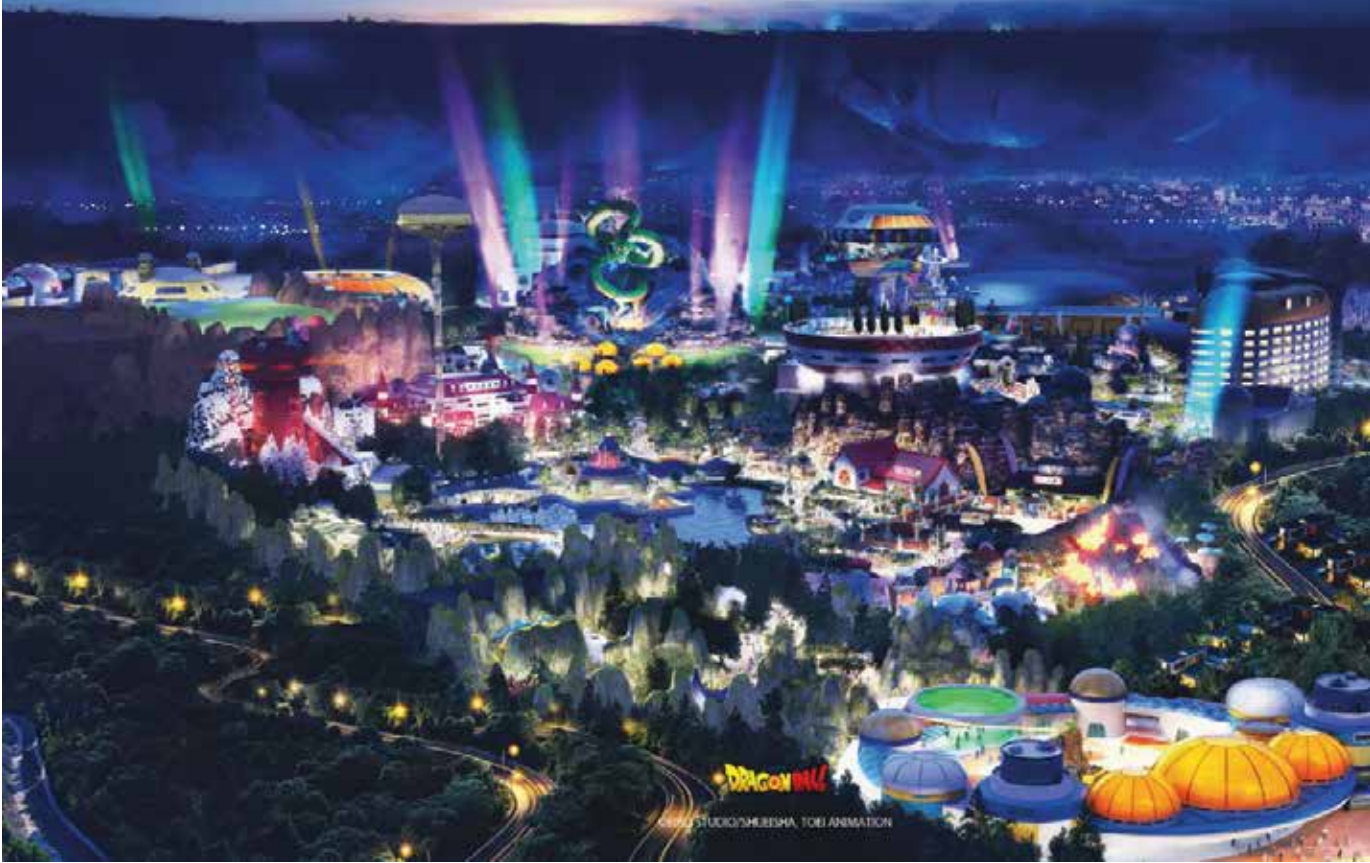
Born on August 30, 1925, in Paris, Laurent studied painting. He had always

been drawn to his father's paintings of Babar at their family home in the Chessy neighbourhood.

He stayed faithful to his father's depictions, favouring the explosions of colour and large format. Children's books had until then been printed in a smaller format. His work on "Babar" saw the elephant adorn over 500 different objects, from bedsheets to backpacks to wallpaper. The character became a favourite for an entire generation of children, and was the focus of several exhibitions. Today, Babar's saga continues, with the introduction of Badou, the elephant's grandson.

Laurent settled in the United States and married the American author Phyllis Rose. She had posted on Instagram on Wednesday that he had recently suffered a stroke and was in hospice care at home in Key West, Florida.—AFP





# ‘Dragon Ball’ theme park planned in Saudi Arabia

A theme park based on Japan’s “Dragon Ball” manga franchise will be built in Saudi Arabia’s new high-end tourist attraction of Qiddiya just outside Riyadh, authorities said Friday. The announcement comes two weeks after fans of the massively popular and influential series were shocked by news of the death of its creator Akira Toriyama, aged 68.

The 500,000-square-metre (125-acre) park will allow fans to “live the adventures at the heart of the action, experiencing the journey from the first Dragon Ball series to the latest Dragon Ball Super”, according to a press release by the Qiddiya Investment Company. First serialised in 1984, “Dragon Ball” is one of the best-selling manga

franchises of all time and has spawned countless anime series, films and video games. Toriyama’s death this month from a blood clot on the brain sparked an outpouring of grief from around the world, including tributes from French President Emmanuel Macron and Brazilian Vice President Geraldo Alckmin. In a press release on the official Dragon Ball website, authorities in

Qiddiya did not give an opening date for the park, and also did not say how much construction would cost. The statement said the attraction would be split into seven themed zones based on the magical dragon-containing balls that are central to the series. The park will have at least 30 rides and include a 70-metre (230-foot) dragon at the centre of the site, it said.

The Qiddiya “entertainment city” project, featuring high-end theme parks, motorsport facilities and a safari area, is under construction near the Saudi capital Riyadh. Shares of Toei Animation, which produced the “Dragon Ball” anime series, surged 6.7 percent on Friday.—AFP



A woman looks at artworks at La Fabrica de Arte Cubano (The Cuban Art Factory) in Havana.—AFP photos



People enjoy a concert space at La Fabrica de Arte Cubano.

## Cuban Art Factory, fostering 10 years of creativity, expression in Havana

For ten years, the privately-funded Cuban Art Factory in Havana has provided a space for local talent to exhibit their creations in what was once a train station. The FAC, as it is known, has become internationally renowned as a gallery and nightclub -- a place for expression in a country where saying what you think can land you in jail. Every week, from Thursday to Sunday, hundreds of visitors pay the equivalent of \$4 to attend music concerts, see plays, dance, or simply stroll through its corridors replete with modern art. Everything is on offer here: nights of techno music, exhibits of plastic works, photography, fashion and just plain fun. “Here, you can see things you couldn’t even imagine,” Olivia Rodriguez, a 30-year-old musician, told AFP as she waited for renowned Cuban salsa singer Issac Delgado to come on stage. He performed as part of the FAC’s 10th anniversary celebrations. “Since we opened here, this (venture) has been carried by artists, always

focusing on the work and the message,” X Alfonso, founder and leader of the avant-garde project, told AFP. The provocative and light-hearted contributions of some artists have sometimes caused problems, admits Alfonso, but he does not want to dwell on the subject. Hundreds of Cubans, including artists, are in jail for daring to speak out against the communist state or demonstrating against poverty amid the communist island’s worst economic crisis in 30 years, marked by shortages of fuel, medicines and food. Countless others have fled into exile. “We make art, those who want to turn it into politics can, that’s their problem,” said Alfonso, a composer and performer who won the 2022 Latin Grammy for best folk album with the group Sintesis, formed by his parents. “It’s like a fuel station for the soul,” he added. ‘Owe nothing to anyone’ Like the city that harbors it, the FAC enjoyed prosperous years with the eas-



Cuban Musician X Alfonso speaks during an interview with AFP at La Fabrica de Arte Cubano

ing of ties between Cuba and the United States in 2015 under the presidency of Barack Obama (2009-2017). American cruise ships landed full of tourists eager to drive in an old convertible and discover the nightlife of Havana. The economy of the city flourished. Celebrities such as Quincy Jones, Michelle Obama and Jon Bon Jovi visited the FAC premises in the affluent district of Vedado, and Mick Jagger performed at a concert in Ciudad Deportiva, another cul-

tural venue. And in 2019, Time Magazine included the FAC in its list of the World’s 100 Greatest Places. But the good times did not last, with Donald Trump reversing most of his predecessor’s overtures. Sanctions were toughened after a crackdown on protests in July 2021. The Covid pandemic did not help, starving the island of much-needed tourism. Today, Cuba battles recurring power outages, and running the FAC has become a daily struggle. In October, it was threatened with closure by authorities seeking to reduce electricity consumption. But it did not come to pass. Providing some 300 direct and indirect jobs, the FAC is a “union of private companies,” self-financing and without sponsors, said Alfonso, proud to “owe nothing to anyone.” “The most important thing is that the factory is a living organism, living in Cuba, with all the needs and problems that exist. But it is still alive and still trying... to survive,” he said.—AFP

## Global music biz sees 10.2% growth in 2023: Industry

Global music revenues were up 10.2 percent last year to \$28.6 billion, according to figures released, but record firms are concerned over how to maintain growth in the streaming era. The biggest artist in the world was -- no surprise -- Taylor Swift, according to the annual report by International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, which represents global record companies.

Swift was followed closely by two Korean bands, Seventeen and Stray Kids, reflecting the increasing spread of K-Pop. The biggest singles in the world were “Flowers” by Miley Cyrus, the only song to surpass 2 billion streams (2.7 bn), followed by “Calm Down” by Rema and Selena Gomez (1.89 bn) and “Kill Bill” by Sza (1.84 bn). The music industry grew for the ninth consecutive year, thanks largely to the continued growth of streaming (up 11.2 percent), which now accounts for more than two-thirds (67.3 percent) of global revenues. Paid streaming subscriptions soared past 500 million for the first time to reach 667 million.



Taylor Swift

Physical formats -- particularly vinyl -- also saw growth, with sales up 13.4 percent. “The figures in this year’s report reflect a truly global and diverse industry, with revenues growing in every market, every region and across virtually every recorded music format,” said John Nolan, IFPI’s chief financial officer. The fastest-growing regions were Sub-Saharan Africa (up 24.7 percent) and Latin America (19.4 percent), thanks to the spread of streaming and the rise of local stars like Burna Boy, Asake, J Balvin and Bad Bunny. The biggest music markets remained the United States, Japan and Britain.

**TikTok effect** The industry has several key concerns, however, particularly as young people spend increasing time on TikTok and games. “The worst ad-supported, short-clip video platforms have no chance of leading to paid subscriptions and are becoming the primary consumption platforms for many young consumers,” said Dennis Kooker, of Sony Music, at a press conference to launch IFPI’s report. Universal Music Group recently yanked its music off TikTok in a feud over the app’s approach to AI-generated music and song royalties. Kooker suggested record firms were increasingly focused on superfans. “Those who want more, and are willing to pay more, need products that are specifically designed for them,” he said.—AFP



People enjoy a concert at La Fabrica de Arte Cubano.



A man looks at artworks at La Fabrica de Arte Cubano.



A group of young people queue to enter La Fabrica de Arte Cubano



People visit La Fabrica de Arte Cubano



# Mustafizur helps Chennai down Bengaluru in IPL opener

## Car crash survivor Pant ready for 'emotional' IPL comeback

**CHENNAI:** Bangladesh's Mustafizur Rahman returned figures of 4-29 to set up a six-wicket win for defending champions Chennai Super Kings in the IPL opener against Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Friday. Hosts Chennai kept Bengaluru down to 173-6, a total their batsmen overhauled in 18.4 overs at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium.

Shivam Dube, who hit 34, and fellow left-hander Ravindra Jadeja, who made 25, put on an unbeaten stand of 66 to steer the team home. The 17th edition of the lucrative league began with a glitzy ceremony, with performances by Bollywood stars including India's Oscar-winning composer A.R. Rahman.

Extravagant dances, popular music and fireworks gave way to the toss as Bengaluru skipper Faf du Plessis elected to bat. Old warhorse M.S. Dhoni had shocked his fans on the eve of the opener when he handed over the captaincy to Ruturaj Gaikwad, who said he got to know of the decision last week.

"I have always enjoyed it," Gaikwad said of his captaincy debut in the IPL. "Haven't felt the additional pressure, right from the state side. Not even a single time I felt pressurised by anything. Obviously had 'Mahi' (Dhoni's nickname) bhai with me."

Gaikwad's leadership witnessed early challenges when his opposite number Du Plessis smashed regular boundaries but left-arm quick Mustafizur led Chennai's fightback with his IPL-best haul. Mustafizur had Du Plessis caught out for 35 and Bengaluru slipped from 41-0 to 42-3 in the space of seven balls when Australia's Glenn Maxwell was out for a first-ball duck off Deepak Chahar. Mustafizur was named man of the match.

### 'King' Kohli returns

Virat Kohli returned to competitive cricket after two months following a paternity break when he missed India's 4-1 Test victory over England and

started cautiously. He made 21 off 20 balls including a six off spinner Maheesh Theekshana before his departure in another inspired spell by Mustafizur, who again struck twice in an over.

Kohli was caught in the deep after a relay catch between Ajinkya Rahane and Rachin Ravindra and soon Cameron Green departed with Bengaluru losing half their side inside 12 overs. "We were 15-20 runs short on a pitch that wasn't as bad as we played in the first ten overs," Du Plessis said.

"We were always a little bit behind trying to get ahead of the game. They were always ahead of the game," Anuj Rawat, a wicketkeeper-batsman who hit 48, and Dinesh Karthik, 38 not out, steadied the ship and then took the attack to the opposition in their partnership of 95 in 50 balls. In reply, Chennai's batsmen including IPL debutant Ravindra, who hit a 15-ball 37, got starts but lost regular wickets. Green struck with two key wickets including Rahane (27) and Daryl Mitchell (22) with his fast-medium bowling but Jadeja kept the chase going.

Dube, who came in as impact substitute in place of Mustafizur, and Jadeja ensured the team sailed through. Organisers have released only the first two weeks of the IPL schedule so far because it clashes with India's six-week-long general election. Last season the 10-team IPL lasted eight weeks.

Meanwhile, India's Rishabh Pant on Saturday said he was "really emotional" ahead of his comeback Indian Premier League match, returning to the field for the first time since a horror 2022 car crash.

The wicketkeeper-batsman returns as captain of Delhi Capitals after 14 months away from elite cricket in his team's opening IPL match against Punjab Kings. "Really emotional time for me," Pant said at the toss after Delhi were invited to bat first at Mullanpur. "Just want to enjoy the moment."

Pant crashed his Mercedes SUV north of New



**CHENNAI:** A model of IPL trophy is pictured before the start of the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bangalore at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai on March 22, 2024. — AFP

Delhi before dawn in December 2022, suffering multiple injuries when the car rammed into a crash barrier, flipped over and caught fire. He was rushed to hospital before being airlifted to Mumbai for further treatment and surgery.

Pant has been on an intensive rehabilitation programme since the crash left him with a damaged ligament in his right knee, a hurt wrist and ankle, and abrasions to his back. He was replaced as skipper of

Delhi Capitals by David Warner of Australia and the team ended ninth in the 10-team table last year.

"Not thinking much. Not worried about last season," Pant said. "Really exciting times. We have been preparing well." Delhi have never won an IPL title since the lucrative Twenty20 league began in 2008. Pant, an attacking left-hand batsman, has played 129 internationals for India across three formats, scoring 4,123 runs, including six centuries. — AFP

## Karunaratne half-ton keeps Sri Lanka in control

**SYLHET:** Dimuth Karunaratne scored a patient half-century to guide Sri Lanka to 119-5 in the second innings Saturday, building a 211-run lead against Bangladesh at stumps on the second day of the first Test.

Bangladesh finished the first innings 92 runs behind in Sylhet but made some early strikes to keep the match alive. Karunaratne held firm to score 52 off 101 balls before his dismissal off Shoriful Islam in the day's final session. Skipper Dhananjaya de Silva, who scored 102 runs in the first innings, was batting on 23 alongside Vishwa Fernando on two.

Debutant Nahid Rana dismissed Nishan Madushka (10) and Kusal Mendis (three).

Spinners Tajul Islam and Mehidy Hasan Miraz removed Angelo Mathews (22) and Dinesh Chandimal (0) respectively to give Bangladesh some hope, with the tourists teetering on 64-4 before Karunaratne's rally.

Vishwa claimed four wickets in Bangladesh's first innings of 188 while Lahiru Kumara and Kasun Rajitha each took three. "Fast bowlers did so well, they kept bowling right outside off throughout the day, they got lot of edges," Sri Lankan bowling coach Darushena Gamage told reporters. — AFP

## MLB launches probe of Ohtani and former interpreter scandal

**LOS ANGELES:** Major League Baseball on Friday announced a formal investigation into the scandal swirling around Shohei Ohtani and his former interpreter amid charges the Los Angeles Dodgers superstar was the victim of "massive theft." The Dodgers fired Ipeei Mizuhara, Ohtani's long-time interpreter and close friend, on Thursday after Ohtani's representatives alleged the Japanese two-way star had been the victim of theft, which was reported to involve millions of dollars and link Mizuhara to a suspected illegal bookmaker in California.

"Major League Baseball has been gathering information since we learned about the allegations involving Shohei Ohtani and Ipeei Mizuhara from the news media," Major League Baseball said in a statement. "Earlier today, our Department of Investigations (DOI) began their formal process investigating the matter." ESPN reported that MLB is expected to request interviews with all parties, including Ohtani and Mizuhara, although officials cannot compel Mizuhara's cooperation because he no longer works in the major leagues.

The murky affair emerged this week when West Hollywood law firm Berk and Brettler issued a statement on behalf of Ohtani after receiving media inquiries about a reported federal investigation into alleged illegal bookmaker Mathew Bowyer in which Ohtani's name surfaced.

"In the course of responding to recent media inquiries, we discovered that Shohei has been the victim of a massive theft and we are turning the matter over to the authorities," the law firm said. ESPN reported that questions had arisen around "at least \$4.5 million in wire transfers sent from Ohtani's bank account" to an associate of Bowyer.

ESPN said that multiple sources, including

## Verstappen on pole ahead of Sainz at Australian Grand Prix

**MELBOURNE:** A "very satisfied" three-time world champion Max Verstappen clinched a third straight pole of the season on Saturday at the Australian Grand Prix as the flying Dutchman targets a record 10th consecutive win.

Under hazy skies at Albert Park, Ferrari's Carlos Sainz, back in the car barely two weeks after appendicitis surgery, came second in tense qualifying and will keep the Red Bull ace company on the front row.

Sergio Perez in the other Red Bull came third but will start from sixth after being slapped with a three-place grid penalty for impeding Nico Hulkenberg, bumping up McLaren's Lando Norris. Charles Leclerc in the second Ferrari - who won in 2022 - moves up to fourth with McLaren's Oscar Piastri fifth. "Very happy with that because so far this weekend it has been a bit tough to find a good balance in the car," said Verstappen, who is looking to repeat his feat from last year when he started first and won a chaotic race in Melbourne.

"And even throughout qualifying in Q1 and Q2 I didn't really feel I could be fighting for pole. But then we made some little tickles on the car and that seemed to help me in Q3 to really push it to the limit.

"Obviously things can improve, but overall very satisfied with the performance." The 26-year-old knocked out his rivals to earn a 35th career pole with a flying lap of one minute 15.915, 0.270 secs ahead of Sainz, who missed the last race in Jeddah. "I don't feel 100 percent, it's impossible after spending a lot of



**MELBOURNE:** Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen leaves the pit lane during the qualifying session of the Formula One Australian Grand Prix at the Albert Park Circuit in Melbourne on March 23, 2024. — AFP

days in bed like I did to try and recover," said the Spaniard after his remarkable comeback in front of 130,000 fans.

"But the good thing is that I have no pain. I just have discomfort and everything feels a bit weird. "Today, when the adrenaline came out I could close the visor and go for it which is a good thing." Mercedes' George Russell came seventh ahead of RB's Yuki Tsunoda and the Aston Martin pair of Lance Stroll and Fernando Alonso.

But there was disappointment for Mercedes' seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton who missed Q3 and will start from 11th. "It's not a great feeling for anyone in the team at the moment but we will keep working away," said Hamilton, a two-time Melbourne winner. "I'll be focused on coming back tomorrow and trying to do a better job." He will need something special to stop Verstappen, who won the opening two races of the season in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, both from pole. — AFP

## Japan's Sakamoto wins third figure skating women's title

**MONTREAL:** Kaori Sakamoto delivered a bravura free skate on Friday to become the first woman in more than 50 years to win three straight titles at the Figure Skating World Championships, vaulting from fourth after the short programme.

The 23-year-old from Kobe is the first woman since American Peggy Flemming in 1966, 1967 and 1968 to win three straight world golds, her triumph at the Centre Bell capping an unbeaten 2023-24 campaign.

Two 17-year-olds completed the podium, with American Isabeau Levito taking silver and South Korean Kim Chae-yeon grabbing bronze. Sakamoto's charismatic routine packed with quality jumps had fans on their feet in Montreal.

He earned 149.67 points for the free skate for a total of 222.96. That put her more than 10 points clear of Levito, who was second after the short programme and second in the free skate to finish with 212.16 points.

"I was fourth in the short program, so I was a little anxious about that, but today I was in a really good place emotionally," Sakamoto, who earned bronze at the 2022 Olympics before winning world gold in 2022 and 2023, told the crowd.

She said the key to her victory was maintaining her composure not only after catching an edge early in her programme but also as fans began to respond to her bold performance. "I made sure I didn't get carried away and skated with composure," she said.

Kim, who was sixth after the short programme, took bronze with a total of 200.25 points as short programme leader Loena Hendricks settled for fourth. Levito said she was "in a state of shock" after completing her free skate.

"I had two goals coming into this world cham-



**MONTREAL:** Gold medalist Kaori Sakamoto of Japan (C) poses with silver medalist Isabeau Levito of the United States (L) and bronze medalist Kim Chae-yeon of South Korea during the women's victory ceremony of the International Skating Union (ISU) World Figure Skating Championships in Montreal, Canada. — AFP

pionship, getting on the podium and securing the third spot for the American women next year," she said. "I did both. It was extremely satisfying," added Levito, whose result combined with teammate Amber Glenn's 10th-place finish ensure the US will have three skaters at next year's worlds in Boston. Belgium's European champion Hendrickx, bidding to land gold after finishing with a silver and a bronze at the last two, was eighth in the free skate to finish off the podium.

Earlier, Madison Chock and Evan Bates of the United States launched their ice dance title defense by topping the standings in the rhythm dance. Chock and Bates, trying to complete their first undefeated campaign, received a season-best 90.08 points from judges. The ice dance and men's deciding free skates will be contested on Saturday. Two-time reigning European champions Charlene Guignard and Marco Fabbro of Italy, second at last year's worlds, were second in the rhythm dance with 87.52 points. — AFP



## Sports

# Brazil football bosses break silence on ‘shameful’ Robinho, Alves rape cases

## Dani Alves remains in Spanish jail after fails to raise bail



MILAN: (FILES) AC Milan's Brazilian forward Robinho celebrates after scoring in Milan. Former Manchester City and Real Madrid striker Robinho will serve a nine-year rape sentence, imposed on him by an Italian court, in Brazil. — AFP

LONDON: Brazil coach Dorival Junior said the national team and players were going through a “difficult time” coming to terms with the rape convictions of former internationals Robinho and Dani Alves. The Brazilian team and national federation had been criticised for their silence concerning the cases of striker Robinho and full-back Alves, both aged 40.

Robinho has begun a nine-year sentence in Brazil for taking part in a gang rape in Italy in 2013, while Alves received a four-and-a-half year conviction for raping a young woman in a Barcelona nightclub in 2022. “As coach of the national team, I have an obligation to speak out,” Dorival said ahead of Saturday’s international friendly against England in Wembley.

“First, I think it’s a very delicate situation. I think of the families and especially the victims affected by these cases which occur every day in our country and around the world,” Dorival, who took over the five-time world champions in January, said the situation of Robinho whom he coached at Brazilian club Santos was particularly painful for him.

“If it has been proven that there was any crime, he must be punished even if it hurts my heart to say this about a person with whom I have always had an exceptional relationship,” added the 61-year-old. “I didn’t have the opportunity to work with Daniel, but we all know his story within football. It’s a difficult

time for all of us to express ourselves in these situations,” Dorival added: “But I care much more for the victims, for the families. “I know how painful it must have been for each of them. What I can do is help them with prayers, nothing more.” In a statement on Friday, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) described the cases as “shameful”, expressing its support for “the victims of the two brutal crimes committed by former players”.

CBF president Ednaldo Rodrigues added that in an environment where “machismo reigns”, men must “fight not only sexual violence, but all kinds of violence”. Brazil full-back Danilo, who will captain the national side against England, called on the football authorities to raise awareness among young players, to put themselves “in women’s shoes in a more empathetic way”.

Meanwhile, convicted rapist and former Brazil international footballer Dani Alves will remain in jail until at least Monday after failing to raise the one-million-euro bail set by a Barcelona court to ensure his release pending appeal.

Wednesday’s surprise decision by the court caught prosecutors off guard as the footballer had routinely been refused bail since his arrest in January 2023 on grounds he was a high flight risk. One of the world’s most decorated footballers, Alves, 40, was convicted last month of raping a young woman in the VIP bath-

room of a Barcelona nightclub in the early hours of December 31, 2022.

His lawyers swiftly appealed the conviction and on Tuesday requested he be let out on bail on grounds he had already served a quarter of his four-and-a-half-year sentence in pre-trial detention. A day later, the Barcelona court approved the request on condition that Alves post bail of a million euros (\$1.08 million), hand over his Spanish and Brazilian passports, remain in the country and present himself to court “on a weekly basis”.

But he has since missed a daily 2:00 pm cut-off time for presenting the funds, meaning he has had to remain in jail. His lawyer on Friday asked for a one-hour extension until 3:00 pm but his representatives had not transferred the money by that time, so Alves will have to remain in jail over the weekend until the court office reopens on Monday, legal sources said.

The footballer’s financial situation has deteriorated since his arrest in January 2023. The case led Mexican club Pumas UNAM to sack him and other sources of income to dry up, his defence team said. Since his arrest, Alves has been held at a prison near Barcelona. The appeal process could take months to complete. The court’s decision to grant him bail was angrily denounced by the victim’s lawyer as “justice for the rich”. — AFP

## Colombia defeat disappointing Spain in friendly

LONDON: Colombia inflicted Spain’s first defeat in almost a year with a 1-0 friendly victory in London on Friday. Crystal Palace defender Daniel Munoz struck in the second half after a superb run by Luis Diaz to capitalise on a disappointing display from La Roja ahead of this summer’s European Championship in Germany.

Spain, who won the Nations League last year to end an 11-year run without silverware after triumphing at Euro 2012, underwhelmed in their second loss under coach Luis de la Fuente. The first came in March 2023 in a defeat by Scotland in Euro 2024 qualifying which cast early doubt over the coach’s credentials for the job, with concerns easing over the subsequent months.

De la Fuente picked an experimental line-up against Colombia, handing Athletic Bilbao defender Dani Vivian his debut in the heart of defence, while resting captain Rodri among others. On Thursday the coach said he hoped the country’s football would draw admiration despite the Spanish federation’s recent turmoil, making headlines this week as part of a corruption investigation that saw its headquarters searched by police.

However Spain did not shine against Nestor Lorenzo’s Colombia side, who have now gone 20 matches unbeaten in a streak longer than two years. “From defeats you learn more than from wins, it was a very hard game,” said De la Fuente.

“We did some things very well but others we have

to improve, especially from the second half.” La Roja did shade the first half with Vivian heading over a cross from Alejandro Grimaldo, who put in several dangerous balls, and Gerard Moreno’s volley saved well by Colombia goalkeeper Camilo Vargas.

Colombian supporters made up the majority of the crowd and they were brought to their feet by Liverpool winger Diaz on occasion. Former Real Madrid playmaker James Rodriguez came on at half-time for Colombia to further excite their fans and he turned the tide in Los Cafeteros’ favour.

### ‘Still growing’

Alex Remiro tipped over one Rodriguez strike and another sailed over, with the South American side now on top. They took the lead after 61 minutes when Diaz exploded down the left flank and crossed to the back post where Munoz finished with an acrobatic effort.

Tottenham defender Pedro Porro came close to levelling but volleyed into the side-netting. De la Fuente brought on 17-year-old Barcelona defender Pau Cubarsi for his debut in the final stages, becoming the second youngest player ever to play for Spain behind team-mate for club and country Lamine Yamal.

Mikel Merino hammered a late chance over the bar as Spain failed to find an equaliser. They next face Brazil on Tuesday in Madrid, at the Santiago Bernabeu in another friendly. “They pegged us back bit by bit in the second half (but) their goal came from a great individual move,” said Moreno.

“We have to work, analyse ourselves, improve.” Colombia face Romania on Tuesday as they continue their warm-up for this summer’s Copa America. “In the second half we set out to show we wanted to play,” said Diaz. “We are building well for what is to come ... we’re still growing.” — AFP



LONDON: Spain's midfielder #15 Alex Baena challenges Colombia's midfielder #16 Jefferson Lerma during the international friendly football match between Spain and Colombia at The London Stadium. — AFP



LONDON: Racks of England's new Nike designed football shirt are displayed for sale in a central London store.— AFP

## Flag change on new England football kit causes uproar

LONDON: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Friday waded into a row over a new England football shirt designed by Nike that changes the colours of the St George’s Cross, saying “we shouldn’t mess” with national flags. The US sportswear giant altered the appearance of the Cross—the flag of England—using purple and blue horizontal stripes in what it called a “playful update” to the shirt ahead of Euro 2024, which starts in June, Nike and the Football Association said the colours on the back of the collar—different from the traditional red cross on a white background—were inspired by the training kit worn by England’s 1966 World Cup winners.

But the decision has led to a furious backlash from some fans and former players, with leading politicians weighing in. Sunak—a fan of Championship side Southampton—said he “prefers the original” England shirt.

“My general view is that when it comes to our national flags, we shouldn’t mess with them,” he told reporters. “Because they are a source of pride, identity, who we are, and they’re perfect as they are.” Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer, whose remit includes sport, said the FA and its kit partner had failed to put supporters first. “Our national heritage—including St George’s Cross—brings us together. Tying with it is pointless and unnecessary,” she said on X. Keir Starmer, the leader of Britain’s main opposition Labour party and an Arsenal supporter, called on Nike to “reconsider” its decision. “I’m a big football fan, I go to England games, men and women’s games, and the flag is used by everybody. It is a unifier.

It doesn’t need to be changed. We just need to be proud of it,” Starmer told the Sun newspaper. In a statement later on Friday, Nike said it “was never its intention to offend” but did not indicate any plans to change the kit design. “We have been a proud partner of the FA since 2012 and understand the significance and importance of the St George’s Cross and it was never our intention to offend, given what it means to England fans,” it said. “Together with the FA, the intention was to celebrate the heroes of 1966 and their achievements. The trim on the cuffs takes its cues from the training gear worn by England’s 1966 heroes, with a gradient of blues and reds topped with purple.—AFP

## Argentina down El Salvador 3-0 without Messi

NEW YORK: The absence of captain Lionel Messi didn’t slow Argentina on Friday as the world champions warmed up for their Copa America title defense with a 3-0 friendly victory over El Salvador in Philadelphia.

Defender Cristian Romero opened the scoring in the 16th minute with Enzo Fernández in the 42nd and Giovanni Lo Celso in the 52nd completing the victory at Lincoln Financial Field, home of the NFL’s Philadelphia Eagles.

Messi, the eight-time Ballon d’Or winner now starring for Major League Soccer’s Inter Miami, was ruled out of Friday’s match and Argentina’s friendly against Costa Rica in Los Angeles next week after tweaking a hamstring in Miami’s 3-1 victory over Nashville in the CONCACAF Champions Cup this month.

On a chilly night in Philadelphia, Argentina didn’t need him to comfortably win their first friendly of the year against a team that has now gone 21 matches without a win. Romero was the first to break through against the team coached by Spain’s David Doniga, rising to head home a corner kick taken by Angel Di Maria.

Minutes before halftime, Di Maria received the ball on the right flank and set up Rodrigo de Paul, whose back pass was headed by Lo Celso to Fernandez who slotted home from in front of the goal. After the break, it was Lo Celso’s turn as he finished off another brilliant connection between Di Maria and Lautaro Martinez with a left-footed shot.

The match saw Argentina manager Lionel Scaloni take the opportunity to give minutes to youngsters Alejandro Garnacho and Valentin Barco—the 19-year-old left-back signed by Brighton in January who stood out for the U-23 team in qualifying for the Paris Olympics. — AFP



PHILADELPHIA: El Salvador's defender #21 Bryan Tamarit and Argentina's defender #15 Nicolas Gonzalez vie for the ball during the international friendly football match between El Salvador and Argentina at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. — AFP

# Classifieds

### Clinics & Hospitals

#### Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804

Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

#### Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300

### Change of Name

I, **Shaik Shameer** (old name) holder of Indian Passport No. R7706896, R/o 5/341, Kolimi Street, Rajampet, Annamayya DT, A.P. do hereby declared that I have changed my name as **Shaik Shameer Basha** (new name) S/o Shaik Ibraheem Basha.

(#5188) 24/03/2024



## Celtics take down Pistons for eighth straight win, Lakers claw past 76ers

Russell drilled four three-pointers, setting Lakers franchise record



DETROIT: Derrick White #9 of the Boston Celtics drives around Jaden Ivey #23 of the Detroit Pistons during the first half at Little Caesars Arena in Detroit, Michigan. — AFP

**LOS ANGELES:** The league-leading Boston Celtics, fueled by 33 points from Jaylen Brown, beat the depleted Detroit Pistons 129-102 to push their NBA winning streak to eight games on Friday. With teammates Jayson Tatum, Al Horford and Jrue Holiday all out, Brown ably filled the void connecting on 13 of 19 shots from the field.

"(I) just tried to be aggressive coming out," Brown — who notched his sixth game since the All-Star break of 30 or more points — told NBC Sports Boston. "I know we had some guys out." Brown said he tried to keep his teammates involved, and even though he ended up with zero assists Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said he was doing all the right things.

"He's getting the shots he wants, both for himself and his teammates," Mazzulla said. "He's playing very well-rounded basketball and it has been fun to watch." Payton Pritchard added 20 points and Derrick White and Kristaps Porzingis scored 19 apiece for Boston, who improved their league-best record to 56-14.

Tatum sat out the first game of a six-game road trip to rest a troublesome ankle. Horford was sidelined by a toe injury and Holiday by an arm injury. But against last-placed Detroit — who were without half a dozen players after Jalen Duren was ruled out shortly before tipoff with back spasms — the Celtics were still too strong.

James Wiseman got his first start of the season for the Pistons and scored a team-high 24 points. The Celtics held Detroit scoring leader Cade Cunningham to 15 points on six of 17 shooting as they extended the league's longest active winning streak. The Oklahoma City Thunder edged back ahead of the defending champion Denver Nuggets for the Western Conference lead with a 123-103 victory over the Raptors in Toronto. Oklahoma City's Canadian point guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 23 points, grabbed seven rebounds and handed out eight assists, and rookie center Chet Holmgren scored 18 points with 10 rebounds, two steals and a blocked shot.

**Russell in the record book**

In Los Angeles, the Lakers clamped down defensively in the second half to beat the Philadelphia 76ers 101-94. Anthony Davis scored 23 points and grabbed 19 rebounds and LeBron James scored 11 of his 20 points in the fourth quarter as the Lakers overcame 21 turnovers that led to 27 Sixers points.

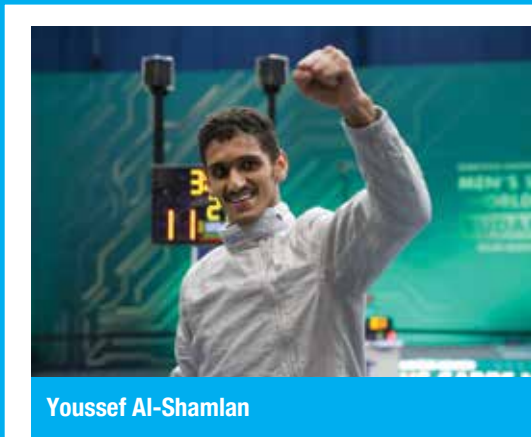
"The second half we did a great job (defensively), despite some of our offensive mistakes—turning the ball over, missing point blank shots," Lakers coach Darvin Ham said. "We were able to still sustain our defensive effort."

D'Angelo Russell drilled four three-pointers on the way to 14 points, setting a Lakers franchise record for most three-pointers in a season along the way. Russell's first trey of the night was his 184th of the season, surpassing the record of 183 set by Nick Van Exel in the 1994-95 campaign.

In San Francisco, Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton scored 26 points and handed out 11 assists as the Pacers beat the Golden State Warriors 123-111.

Pascal Siakam added 25 points and 16 rebounds for Indiana, who trailed by as many as 12 in the second quarter but they cut the deficit to one at halftime and out-scored the Warriors 36-21 in the third to seize control. Stephen Curry led Golden State with 25 points and 10 rebounds but the Warriors couldn't recover from a disastrous third period in which two Curry three-pointers were blocked. The Warriors, holding down the tenth spot in the West, couldn't find a way to respond in the fourth and are now just two games ahead of the Houston Rockets for the last place in the play-in tournament.

In San Antonio, the Spurs fell 99-97 to the Memphis Grizzlies despite another stellar performance for Rookie of the Year favorite Victor Wembanyama. The towering French center scored 31 points with 16 rebounds, five assists, two steals and three blocked shots. It was tied 97-97 with 18 seconds remaining, but Memphis's Jaren Jackson Jr. drilled the game-winning jump shot with just over a second remaining. — AFP



Youssef Al-Shamlan

### Kuwaiti fencer Shamlan qualifies for 2024 Olympics

**KUWAIT:** Kuwaiti fencer Youssef Al-Shamlan qualified for the 2024 Paris Olympics. The achievement came after defeating the Hong Kong national team player 15-11 in the round of 64 at a grand prix in Hungary. Secretary and Chairman of the National Teams Committee of the Kuwaiti Fencing Federation, Hamad Al-Awadhi, said that Al-Shamlan maintained the 29th place in the international classification of the game qualifying him for the Paris Olympics. Al-Awadhi noted that the International Federation of Fencing allocates Olympic qualification to the top 32 players globally. As the champion, Al-Shamlan secured Kuwait's third seat in the Olympics. — KUNA

### Sabalenka keeps emotion in check to beat Badosa

**MIAMI:** World number two Aryna Sabalenka returned to the court for the first time since the death of her former boyfriend earlier this week and kept her emotions in check as she beat Spain's Paula Badosa 6-4 6-3 on Friday. After six hours of rain delays, Sabalenka walked onto the court wearing an all-black outfit, a choice matched by her close friend Badosa.

Two-times Australian Open winner Sabalenka on Wednesday said she was "heartbroken" by the death of former boyfriend Konstantin Koltsov in a statement on Wednesday, where she revealed they had not been a couple at the time of his death.

Koltsov died on Monday with Miami police saying he had jumped from the balcony of a room at an resort in an "apparent suicide." The former NHL ice hockey player and coach, was 42-years-old. Sabalenka made a slow start to the match but broke to go 4-3 up in the first set and never looked back from that point on. The Belarusian then broke in the third game of the second set with a superb cross court forehand winner and showed too much power for her Spanish opponent as she wrapped up the win in one hour 22 minutes. The two players embraced at the net before leaving the court without an on-court interview. Sabalenka has asked the WTA to be excused media duties at the tournament.

Badosa said she was not surprised by the way Sabalenka was able to maintain her focus and deliver a solid performance. "She is a very, very strong woman, strong personality. You can see it on the court...I know her off court so it doesn't surprise me at all," she said. "I knew she was going to play very well or like normal. I told her I wish her the best and let's see if she can go



MIAMI: World number two Aryna Sabalenka returned to the court for the first time since the death of her former boyfriend. — AFP

deep in this tournament," added the Spaniard. Badosa had said before the match that she expected it to be "uncomfortable" playing against Sabalenka given her friendship with the Belarusian.

But she said their professionalism and mental strength had shown itself. "Honestly, both of us are pretty strong mentally. We're strong women and she proved it and I proved it," she said. "We knew how to disconnect in that two hours for the match. She played really well and I played really well given from where I am coming from (with injuries)," she added.

"All that comes from knowing that we've been through a lot in our lives and we're strong women. We knew how to separate (things) in that moment," she said. American Coco Gauff, the third seed, had little trouble in her test against Argentine Nadia Podoroska winning 6-1 6-2 in one hour 16. In the ATP event, 60th ranked Czech Tomas Machac came out after the long delay to claim his first Top 10 victim, upsetting fifth seeded Russian Andrey Rublev 6-4, 6-4. The rain returned later in the evening and play was suspended for the day. — AFP

### Kuwait lose in WCup qualifier

**DOHA:** Kuwait's national football team were defeated by Qatar 0-3 Thursday in the third round of Group A in qualifications for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia. The first half of the game held at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium ended in a 0-0 draw, although the two teams tried to net.

The second half was totally different as Qatari player Akram Afif managed to score twice in the 47th and 68th minutes, and teammate Ahmad Al-Rawi scored in the 51st minute. Kuwaiti players tried to net, but the game ended in favor of the hosts. This win helped Qatar top Group A with nine points, while Kuwaitis ranked second with three. India and Afghanistan are set to play later in the day in Saudi Arabia in the same group. The first and second teams out of 36 in total will qualify for the 2027 Asia Cup in Saudi Arabia, according to Asian Federation Football. — KUNA



DOHA: Kuwait and Qatar players in action. — KUNA