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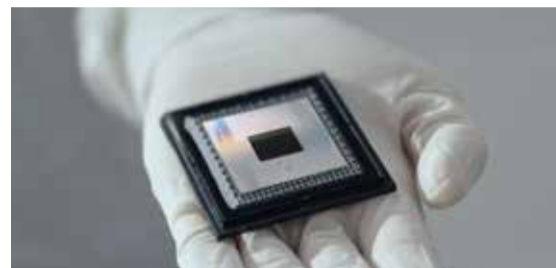
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Syria rebels name interim PM

Turkey won't let 'Syria be divided' • Anger over Zionist strikes • IS kills 54 troops • Tortured bodies found

Amir receives Saudi Minister of State



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Saudi Minister of State and member of the cabinet Prince Turki bin Mohammad Al-Saud at Bayan Palace on Tuesday. Prince Turki conveyed to HH the Amir the greetings of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud and Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud, as well as their wishes to HH the Amir for long-lasting health and wellness and for the people of Kuwait further progress and prosperity. In response, HH the Amir conveyed his greetings to King Salman and Prince Mohammad, wishing them long-lasting health and wellness, and Saudi Arabia and its people further progress and prosperity. — KUNA

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DAMASCUS: The rebels who ousted president Bashar Al-Assad and are now in power in Syria appointed a transitional head of government Tuesday to run the country until March 1, a statement said. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged all nations to support an "inclusive" political process in Syria, saying the United States would eventually recognize a government if it meets such standards.

"The general command has tasked us with running the transitional government until March 1," said a statement attributed to Mohammad Al-Bashir on state television's Telegram account, referring to him as "the new Syrian prime minister". Assad fled Syria as an Islamist-led rebel alliance swept into the capital Damascus on Sunday, ending five decades of brutal rule by his clan.

Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani, the Islamist leader who headed the offensive that forced Assad out, had announced talks on a transfer of power and vowed to pursue former senior officials responsible for torture and war crimes. His group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is rooted in Syria's Al-Qaeda branch and is proscribed by many Western governments as a terrorist organization, though it has sought to moderate its rhetoric.

Blinken said the future government of Syria should be "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian" after Islamist rebels toppled strongman Assad, a member of the Alawite minority who led a secular dictatorship. Laying out US priorities, Blinken said the new government must "uphold clear commitments to fully respect the rights of minorities" and allow the flow of humanitarian assistance. The United States

wanted the next government to "prevent Syria from being used as a base for terrorism", he added. Although they no longer hold any territory in Syria, the jihadists of the Islamic State group remain active. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said IS fighters killed 54 government troops after capturing them as they fled across the vast Syrian Desert.

The UN envoy for Syria said the groups that forced Assad to flee must transform their "good messages" into actions on the ground. "They have been sending messages of unity, of inclusiveness," Geir Pedersen said, adding that in Aleppo and Hama, "we have also seen... reassuring things on the ground". But "what we need not to see is... that this is not followed up in practice in the days and the weeks ahead of us," he added.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas warned of the risks of sectarian violence and a resurgence of extremism. "We must avoid a repeat of the horrific scenarios in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan," she said. The overthrow of Assad, who maintained a complex web of prisons and detention centers to keep Syrians from straying from the Baath party line, sparked celebrations around the country and in the diaspora around the world.



Mohammad Al-Bashir

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NEWS IN BRIEF

104 journos killed, over half in Gaza

BRUSSELS: This year has been "particularly deadly" for journalists with 104 killed worldwide, over half of them being in Gaza, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said Tuesday. According to the figures collated by the press group, 55 Palestinian media workers were killed in 2024 in the face of the Zionist offensive in Gaza. "Since the start of the war on 7 October 2023, at least 138 Palestinian journalists have been killed," the federation said. Bellanger condemned the "massacre that is happening before the eyes of the world". — AFP

OPEC chief to serve 3 more years

LONDON: The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) renewed the term of Secretary General Haitham Al-Ghais for another three years at a virtual meeting on Tuesday, the oil producer group said. Kuwait's Al-Ghais took office in early Aug 2022, succeeding Nigeria's Mohammad Barkindo. The group will hold its next ordinary meeting on May 28. — Reuters

8 dead in Cairo building collapse

CAIRO: Eight people were killed and three more injured when a six-storey residential building collapsed in central Cairo on Tuesday. Nine ambulances were dispatched to the scene as rescuers continue to "lift rubble and search for any wounded or bodies", the health ministry said. A restoration order had been issued in 1993 for the building, which was constructed in the 1960s in Cairo's lower-middle income Al-Waili neighborhood. — AFP

Jordanian, Lebanese men back home after decades in Syria jails

AMMAN/BEIRUT: A Jordanian man has returned to his home country after spending 38 years in Syrian jails, an official said on Tuesday, after the fall of president Bashar Al-Assad ended an agonizing wait for his family. The man, named as Osama Bashir Hassan Al-Bataynah, was found in Syria "unconscious and suffering from memory loss", Jordanian Foreign Ministry Soufian Al-Kodat told AFP.

Kodat said the man's relatives reported his disappearance in 1986, when he was just 18, and that he had been in jail ever since. "He was transferred from Damascus to the Jaber border crossing (with Jordan) where he was handed over to border guards," added Kodat, saying the man had been reunited with his family on Tuesday morning.

176 killed in two days of intense Sudan battles

PORT SUDAN: At least 176 people were killed in two days of army and paramilitary strikes across Sudan, according to an AFP tally of tolls provided by officials, activists and lawyers on Tuesday. In Omdurman, part of the

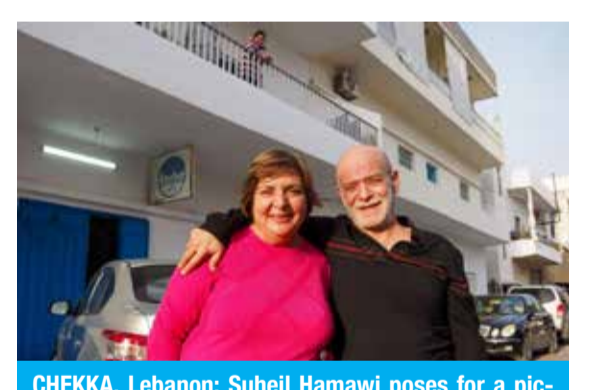
Sudanese capital, paramilitary shelling killed at least 65 people and wounded hundreds on Tuesday, according to the state's army-aligned governor. A single shell on a passenger bus "killed everyone on board and turned 22 people into body parts", said Khartoum governor Ahmed Othman Hamza.

He attributed the strike to "the terrorist militia", in reference to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, at war with the army since April 2023. The attack comes a day after an army air strike on a market in the North Dar-

fur town of Kabkabiya killed over 100 people, the pro-democracy Emergency Lawyers reported Tuesday.

"The air strike took place on the town's weekly market day, where residents from various nearby villages had gathered to shop, resulting in the death of more than 100 people and injury of hundreds, including women and children," said the lawyers' group, which has been documenting human rights abuses during the conflict.

The lawyers also reported six people were killed in North Kordofan state



CHEKKA, Lebanon: Suheil Hamawi poses for a picture with his wife Josephine in this coastal town in northern Lebanon on Dec 9, 2024, after spending 33 years in a Syrian prison. — AFP

when a drone that had crashed on Nov 26 exploded. In the famine-stricken Zamzam displacement camp in North Darfur, paramilitary shelling on Tuesday killed five people, according to civil society group the Darfur General Coordination of Camps for the Displaced and Refugees. A UN-backed report in July declared famine had taken hold in the camp after a months-long RSF siege of state capital El-Fasher and the surrounding area. The war between the RSF and the regular army has so far killed tens of thousands and uprooted 12 million. — AFP

Suspect charged with US insurance executive's murder

NEW YORK: A 26-year-old man was arrested and charged with murder Monday in the targeted killing of a health insurance executive on the streets of New York, along with other violations. Luigi Mangione was charged in New York on suspicion of one count of murder, two counts of second-degree criminal possession of a weapon, one count of second-degree possession of a forged document and one count of third-degree possession of a weapon, according to online court documents seen by AFP.

Investigators continued to interrogate Mangione

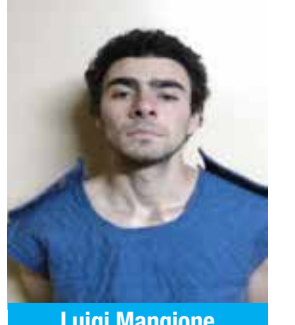
in connection with last week's brazen murder, which triggered a nationwide manhunt and global headlines. He arrived at a Pennsylvania court wearing a dark sweatshirt after 6:00 pm (2300 GMT) Monday and was led inside by Altoona police flanked by NYPD detectives where he was arraigned, broadcasters showed. Mangione is next due to appear in court on Dec 23.

Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro said that murder charges in New York state would follow, telling a media briefing "we do not kill people in cold blood to resolve policy differences or express a viewpoint". Police have not confirmed reports the words "delay" and "deny" — language used by insurers to reject claims — were written on casings found at the scene, hinting at a possible political motive for the crime.

According to a New York Times report citing friends of Mangione, the suspect lived with serious

back pain and underwent surgery for the condition last year. A photo on what appeared to be one of his social media accounts included an X-ray of an apparently injured spine. Mangione was apprehended by officers following a tip from staff at an Altoona McDonald's branch, where he was found wearing a mask and a beanie while using a laptop, and gave officers a fake ID, charging documents show.

They then searched him and found what police called a "ghost gun" capable of firing 9mm rounds and equipped with a suppressor that could have been made on a 3D printer. — AFP



Luigi Mangione



Zain shares vision for Kuwait's digital economy with officials

Discussion hosted by KDIPA, The Business Year was attended by Minister Omar Al-Omar



KUWAIT: Minister Omar Al-Omar poses for a photo with Nawaf Al-Gharabally and Zain's executive team.



Officials participate in the panel discussion.

KUWAIT: Nawaf Al-Gharabally, CEO of Zain Kuwait, participated in an insightful panel discussion held by the Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA) and the global media group The Business Year. The event was joined by Omar Al-Omar, Minister of State for Communications Affairs, alongside a distinguished group of executives and senior leaders from various public and private sector institutions.

The Thought Leadership Circle, titled Accelerating Technology & AI Implementation, focused on four key pillars: aligning public-private efforts for AI-driven transformation; AI's impact on workforce, education, and skills development; data analytics, cybersecurity, and digital payments; and challenges and opportunities in AI implementation.

During the session, Nawaf Al-Gharabally said: "We value initiatives that bring together visions and ideas from leading institutions and companies in the country, particularly in the technology and banking sectors. Such efforts create synergies between the public and private sectors and strengthen collaborative initiatives, helping us collectively achieve Kuwait's development goals and shape the future of the country's digital economy."

He continued: "At Zain, we consider ourselves



Nawaf Al-Gharabally

a human-centric organization, and our purpose is to build lasting connections that enrich lives. As a leader in tech innovation, we see ourselves at the heart of Kuwait's digital transformation. Through our partnerships with leading technology players and the expertise of our national talents, we empower government entities and private sector companies to harness technology, enhance their operations, and realize their visions, especially in

the era of data and artificial intelligence."

Al-Gharabally added: "Technology companies handle vast amounts of data, which is the fuel of artificial intelligence. Data unlocks immense opportunities and unprecedented potential for institutions across vital sectors to accelerate their digital transformation and overcome challenges efficiently." He explained further: "Recently, we have taken significant steps to accelerate AI adoption, including investing in technical training for our workforce, enhancing collaboration with our partners, and integrating solutions into our digital infrastructure to improve operational efficiency. These efforts contribute to sustainability goals and enhance customer experiences." Al-Gharabally emphasized: "We work closely with our technology partners to harness the power of data and AI, enabling companies and government entities to make informed decisions and better serve both individual and corporate customers. AI is a tool that helps us achieve this mission."

He also highlighted Zain's successful partnerships with various institutions, leveraging data to support their goals. He noted that the challenge lies in viewing each customer as a unique sector with distinct needs and designing tailored services to deliver

the best experience for them. This can be achieved through data-driven insights, supported by regulatory frameworks that facilitate this approach. Concluding his remarks, Al-Gharabally said: "We are optimistic about the Kuwaiti government's vision to accelerate digital transformation. Over the past years, we have witnessed many successful initiatives in this area, and there are future plans that will be implemented to achieve this vision. This is a step in the right direction toward a digital economy, and we at Zain remain steadfast in our commitment to being a strategic partner to the public sector in driving digital transformation."

Zain continues its long-standing partnership with The Business Year, headquartered in London, to host such insightful gatherings. The company believes in the critical role of these platforms in fostering dialogue, exchanging ideas, and enabling innovation across various market sectors. Zain also commends the pivotal efforts of KDIPA in improving Kuwait's business environment, diversifying the economy, enhancing competitiveness, and positioning Kuwait as a global financial and investment hub. Zain reaffirms its commitment to supporting these efforts toward achieving a New Kuwait as a proud representative of the Kuwaiti private sector.

Society for Student Support pays school fees for 379 students



Nasser Al-Hamad

Abdullah Al-Sabej

KUWAIT: Chairman of the Kuwait Society for Student Support Abdullah Al-Sabej praised the significant efforts and contributions of the Awqaf Secretariat General, particularly Acting Secretary General Nasser Al-Hamad and Director of Waqf Funds Maareb Al-Yaaqub. He acknowledged that the Secretariat has consistently demonstrated outstanding efforts since its establishment as the official body responsible for managing the Waqf, ensuring it aligns with Shariah objectives, while also contributing to societal development and easing the financial burdens of the needy.

The society has received crucial support from Waqf funds to implement a project aimed at assisting needy students attending private schools in 2024. In response, the society has developed an operational plan that includes the formation of a committee to assess the cases of students in need and select the most deserving individuals. As part of this initiative, school fees have been covered for 379 financially struggling students.

Al-Sabej expressed his gratitude to the Secretariat General for believing in the charitable mission of the society and their ongoing support for its activities to help students in need.

Peruvian envoy hails strong ties with Kuwait on Independence Day

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: Peruvian Ambassador to Kuwait Carlos Enrique Tomas Jimenez Gil-Fortoul marked Peru's Independence Day by emphasizing the enduring and deep-rooted ties between Peru and Kuwait, which have strengthened over nearly five decades.

Speaking on Monday to an audience that in-



KUWAIT: Capital Governor Sheikh Abdullah Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah, accompanied by officials, conducts a tour to review the ongoing construction work at the third phase of Al-Shaheed Park. — KUNA photos

Capital governor tours long-awaited 3rd phase of Al-Shaheed Park

KUWAIT: Capital Governor Sheikh Abdullah Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah conducted on Tuesday an official tour to review the ongoing construction work at the third phase of Al-Shaheed Park. During the tour, the governor expressed his admiration for the project's modern designs, which meet the highest global standards. He highlighted that this phase of the park is a key part of Kuwait's broader development initiatives, showcasing the country's progress and modernity.

Several delays

Construction of the third phase of the park has experienced several delays since it was first approved by Cabinet in February 2020. Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, in December 2021, officials announced that more than 50 percent of the project was completed. It was estimated that the third phase would be ready for visitors by the end of 2022. Several officials have conducted tours of the sites since then. That year, Dr

cluded Assistant Foreign Minister for International Organizations Abdulaziz Al-Jarallah and the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, the ambassador pledged Peru's continued friendship and support for Kuwait. "We pledge that, as in the past 50 years, we, the people of Peru, will stand by the State of Kuwait, proving our friendship and offering our support whenever needed," he said.

The ambassador also commemorated Peru's bicentennial by reflecting on the values of freedom and diversity. "Today, exactly 200 years ago, the people of Peru sealed their independence," he said, underscoring that freedom is more than governance — it is a promise that empowers individuals to shape their destinies. "Freedom is much more than elections and

Hassan Kamal, a member of the Municipal Council said wooden structures and parts of the old ice skating rink were retained and will be repurposed to create a 3D museum. He noted that the project is being carried out with a strong commitment to preserving the green spaces across all three phases, as well as maintaining historical and heritage sites within the project, including the "Shamiya Gate" and the ice rink. The third phase of the project is approximately the same size as the first two phases combined.

A national symbol

During his visit Tuesday, Sheikh Abdullah emphasized that Al-Shaheed Park is not just a national development project, but also a major tourist landmark. It reflects Kuwait's cultural heritage and competes with the most advanced recreational projects in the Middle East. The park has become a comprehensive entertainment and tourist destination, as well as a national symbol honoring the memory of the country's martyrs. He also noted the project's deep historical and cultural significance.

The governor's tour included a detailed look at the achievements and ongoing developments in the third phase of the park. He was briefed by project leaders on the new facilities and buildings being constructed, and visited several key sites

within this phase, such as the amphitheater, green spaces, playgrounds, ice skating rink, and various other recreational areas.

The governor expressed his admiration for the modern designs of the project, which adhere to the highest global standards. He noted that the third phase of the garden is a key element in a series of developmental initiatives that showcase the country's progress and modernity.

He emphasized that the park is a national development project and a major tourist landmark that reflects the country's cultural heritage and rivals the most advanced recreational projects in the Middle East and has become a comprehensive tourist and entertainment destination, as well as a national symbol honoring the memory of the nation's martyrs. Additionally, he noted that it is a developmental project rich in historical and cultural significance.

The tour included an overview of the accomplishments and ongoing projects in the third phase of the park. The governor was briefed by project leaders on the new facilities and buildings being developed in this phase, as well as other ongoing initiatives. The governor also inspected several sites and facilities within the scope of this phase, including the amphitheater, green spaces, playgrounds, ice skating rink, and various other recreational areas.



KUWAIT: Peruvian Ambassador Carlos Enrique Tomas Jimenez Gil-Fortoul and Assistant Foreign Minister for International Organizations Abdulaziz Al-Jarallah celebrate with a ceremonial cake cutting at the event.

Local

GCC marks 10th anniversary of Human Rights Declaration

Al-Budaiwi condemns Zionist entity's human rights violations in Palestine



DOHA: GCC officials attend an event marking the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the GCC Human Rights Declaration on Tuesday, December 10, 2024. — KUNA photos

DOHA: The grave violations by Zionist forces against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank are a glaring example of challenges facing the promotion of human rights in today's world, said Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Jassem Al-Budaiwi.

The remarks came during a celebration Tuesday marking the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the GCC Human Rights Declaration, held in the Qatari capital Doha.

Al-Budaiwi condemned the Zionist entity's actions in the occupied Palestinian territories as clear violations of fundamental human rights, and he highlighted the escalating regional and international conflicts, as well as the rise of hatred and Islamophobia. Al-Budaiwi reaffirmed the GCC's commitment to working within a multilateral international system and strengthening global cooperation to tackle common challenges and safeguard human rights.

The event was also attended by Assistant Foreign Minister for Human Rights, Ambassador Sheikhha Jawaher Ibrahim Al-Duajj Al-Sabah, who affirmed the GCC's unwavering commitment to enhancing human rights.

In her statement to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), Sheikhha Jawaher emphasized that the GCC's dedication to human rights is firmly rooted in national legislations, the teachings of Islam, and the rich traditions and values inherent in the mem-

ber states. She highlighted that the GCC has become a unique model in advancing human rights and reinforcing human dignity across the region.

She commended the leading role the GCC countries play in empowering women, youth, and individuals with disabilities. She also pointed out their efforts to ensure access to basic rights such as health, education, and development. She noted that these efforts are in line with the principles outlined in the GCC Human Rights Declaration, which encapsulates the core values and fundamental rights of individuals.

Sheikha Jawaher also praised Qatar's initiative in organizing and hosting this celebration, which serves as a reminder of the substantial efforts the GCC has made in the realm of human rights. The event was an opportunity to reaffirm the key principles outlined in the GCC Human Rights Declaration and to continue working towards achieving these goals.

Furthermore, Sheikha Jawaher stated that Kuwait, in its role as chair of the 45th session of the GCC Supreme Council and as a member of the Human Rights Council for the period 2024-2026, remains committed to fostering collaboration and coordination with GCC member states in various fields, particularly in the area of human rights. She emphasized that Kuwait seeks to utilize the best global practices to further enhance the region's human rights initiatives. Addition-



Ambassador Sheikhha Jawaher Al-Sabah (right) poses for a photo with Qatar's Minister of State for International Cooperation Maryam Al-Misnad.

ally, she referred to the declaration issued by Kuwait during the 45th GCC summit, which addressed key human rights topics such as the empowerment of women and youth. Sheikha Jawaher concluded by wishing continued success and prosperity for the GCC countries under the wise leadership of their rulers.

On the sidelines of the event, Sheikha Jawaher met with Qatar's Minister of State for International Cooperation Maryam Al-Misnad to discuss mutual cooperation between the two countries in the field of human rights.

Crown Prince receives Prince Turki Al-Saud, Saudi officials



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah receives Prince Turki bin Mohammed bin Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud at Bayan Palace on Tuesday, December 10, 2024. — KUNA

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received Prince Turki bin Mohammed bin Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Saudi Arabia's Minister of State and Cabinet Member, at Bayan Palace Tuesday morning, who is on an official visit to Kuwait.

During the meeting, Prince Turki conveyed the greetings of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. He extended their best wishes for the continued health and well-being of His Highness the Crown Prince and for further progress and prosperity for the people of Kuwait, under the wise leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

His Highness the Crown Prince sent his greetings to King Salman

bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, wishing them both good health and continued success. He also prayed for further development and prosperity for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its people under the guidance of King Salman.

The meeting was attended by several high-ranking Saudi officials, including Minister of Finance Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Jadaan, as well as Kuwaiti senior officials, including Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya, Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Investment Noura Al-Fassam, Director General of the Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority Sheikh Dr Meshal Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, and member of the Board of Directors of the Kuwait Investment Authority Sheikh Shaikh Saoud Salem Abdulaziz Al-Sabah. — KUNA

KSHR and EU Delegation launch 'Together 4' project

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: On the occasion of International Human Rights Day, Kuwait Society for Human Rights (KSHR) and the European Union Delegation in Kuwait, in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), announced on Monday the launch of the "Together 4" project. EU Ambassador to Kuwait Anne Koistinen highlighted the significance of the event, which commemorates International Human Rights Day under the theme "Our Rights, Our Future, Right Now". She noted the timeliness of the initiative, which closely coincides with International Migrants Day on Dec 18.

"Human rights apply to everyone, everywhere, at all times, including during conflicts or crises. The situations we see today in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Ukraine, Sudan and other parts of the world are painful reminders that all human rights are equally important, as enshrined in the UN Charter," Koistinen stated. She emphasized human rights as a priority in the EU Delegation's collaboration with Kuwait at both governmental and civil society levels. "Last week, the EU and Kuwait held the fifth round of our annual human rights dialogue, co-chaired by Kuwait's Assistant Foreign Minister for Human Rights, Sheikhha Jawaher Al-Sabah. This dialogue allows us to review human rights developments, exchange perspectives, and build cooperation on mutual priorities such as women's empowerment," Koistinen explained.

The EU Delegation also values part-



Ahmed Al-Saleh, a board member at Kuwait Society for Human Rights.

nerships with local civil society and supports various initiatives to promote human rights across all sectors of society. Koistinen praised the Kuwait Society for Human Rights. "KSHR exemplifies this collaboration. We have co-funded their 'Together' project on migrant workers' rights across previous phases and look forward to renewing our partnership." She noted that KSHR received the EU's 2023 Chailot Prize for promoting human rights in the GCC region, particularly for its advocacy and awareness efforts concerning migrant workers' labor rights in Kuwait.

"For the European Union, human rights are at the core of our founding treaties. These foundational values guide both our internal policies and international actions," Koistinen added. She underscored the EU's commitment to building partnerships with countries like Kuwait to uphold the UN Charter and a rules-based international order.

Ahmed Al-Saleh, a board member of KSHR, described the "Together" project as a collaborative initiative to protect human rights in Kuwait. He highlighted that Kuwait's constitution, laws and regulations guarantee

between Kuwait and the United States. He added that the medal expresses the US leadership's appreciation for Commodore Sheikh Mubarak's efforts in strengthening military cooperation between the two countries, wishing him success in performing his duties. Sasahara praised the Kuwaiti military's keenness on enhancing cooperation with the US, and the mutual respect between US and Kuwait's militaries.

The award was given to Commodore Sheikh Mubarak in recognition of his exceptional service as Commander of the Combined Task Force (CTF) 152, the largest international maritime partnership in the world. From February 2019 to October 2023, he served as the US Central Command's Deputy Commander for Navy Affairs and as a representative of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior. His contributions included supporting over 30 bilateral and multilateral exercises and facilitating 55,000 operational hours for unmanned surface vessels and artificial intelligence initiatives.

Sheikh Mubarak's efforts directly contributed to achieving US Central Com-



EU Ambassador to Kuwait Anne Koistinen

mand's goal of creating the world's first fleet of 100 unmanned surface vessels by a partner nation. His leadership and personal initiatives played a key role in advancing regional maritime security and strengthening ties between the US Navy and its Gulf Arab allies. — KUNA

these rights. "This phase of the 'Together' project marks its fourth iteration, building on KSHR's efforts since 2016. The project focuses on protecting, educating and raising awareness among contracted workers in Kuwait about their rights and responsibilities. It also advocates for labor issues, provides psychological, social and legal support, and monitors labor conditions through periodic reports on governmental actions, both positive and negative," Al-Saleh said.

He emphasized that KSHR has partnered with numerous local and international organizations to implement the project successfully. In its fourth phase, following an agreement with the Public Authority of Manpower, the project aims to transform into a national initiative. "This phase seeks to enhance Kuwait's ranking in international human rights and anti-trafficking reports. It aligns with key recommendations from the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Committee on Human Rights," Al-Saleh stated. "Today, we renew our collaboration with the EU Delegation, continuing our mission to protect and raise awareness among migrant workers in Kuwait about their rights and responsibilities," he concluded.



KUWAIT: Admiral Brad Cooper awards Commodore Sheikh Mubarak Ali Al-Sabah with the US Legion of Merit award. — KUNA

mand's goal of creating the world's first fleet of 100 unmanned surface vessels by a partner nation. His leadership and personal initiatives played a key role in advancing regional maritime security and strengthening ties between the US Navy and its Gulf Arab allies. — KUNA

Women at the heart of progress

By Dr Moez Doraid and Ghada Hatim Eltahir Mudawi

As we mark the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, we are reminded that violence against women is not only a grave violation of human rights but also a barrier to women's empowerment and progress across all spheres of life. Globally, nearly one in three women experience violence in their lifetime. In the Arab States, many women and girls face compounded risks due to conflict, displacement, and negative stereotyping, which underscores the urgent need for countries to share successful models of action.

This year's campaign coincides with a moment of reflection and renewed commitment, as we approach the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a landmark framework recognizing that sustainable development and women's empowerment go hand in hand. Yet, as we reflect on decades of progress, it is clear that realizing women's rights and achieving women's empowerment requires more than addressing violence; it demands creating opportunities that empower women to participate fully and equally in economic, social, and political life.

Kuwait's initiatives to strengthen women's economic empowerment and its commitment to achieve Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals offer good practice examples to the region and beyond. In every country in the world challenges remain, and leaders must do more to address the root causes of violence and inequality that hinder women's full participation in society. As a member of the Human Rights Council, Kuwait has a particular opportunity to highlight the fundamental importance of women's rights and gender equality to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Kuwait is to date the only country in the region to have prioritized Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The dedicated program, which aligns with Kuwait's Vision 2035, seeks to address the fact that violence against women and economic exclusion are interrelated. Both are rooted in inequality and harmful norms that devalue women's contributions and restrict their potential. The evidence is clear that women who have access to resources, decent work, and opportunities are better equipped to break cycles of abuse and advocate for their rights.

This year's 16 Days of Activism remind us that a future free from violence is a future of opportunity. In Kuwait and the wider region, there is significant potential to leverage economic reform and innovation to advance

women's empowerment. By fostering safe workplaces, reforming discriminatory laws, and challenging outdated social norms, Kuwait is increasingly demonstrating the critical role of women in building resilient economies that sustain national development for future generations. Notably, nearly 50 companies in Kuwait have committed to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of women's leadership and participation in the private sector. In 2023, leading Kuwaiti companies that had signed the WEPs came together to form the Kuwait Women's Empowerment Platform to advance women's empowerment in the private sector and the community, in contribution to national efforts on Agenda 2030 and SDG 5. This commitment underscores Kuwait's progress in integrating gender equality into corporate practices, further reinforcing



Dr Moez Doraid



Ghada Hatim Eltahir Mudawi

ing its leadership in creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

As we amplify the voices of survivors of violence against women and commit to concrete actions, let us also seize this moment to strengthen Kuwait's advancement of women's empowerment and human rights. By building economic systems that work for women and prioritizing inclusive development, both Kuwait's economy and society can benefit tremendously. Together, we can create a future where women and girls not only live free from violence, but also have the resources, opportunities, and support they need to reach their full potential—for their sake and for the prosperity of all.

Note: Dr Moez Doraid is the UN Women Regional Director for the Arab States.

Ghada Hatim Eltahir Mudawi is the United Nations Resident Coordinator to the State of Kuwait.

US honors Coast Guard's Director General

KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah attended at the headquarters of the Defense Ministry on Monday, an award ceremony for Director General of Kuwait's Coast Guard, Commodore Sheikh Mubarak Ali Al-Sabah. The Director General received the US Legion of Merit award, given by the President of the United States. Deputy Commander of US Central Command Admiral Brad Cooper presented the award in presence of Kuwait Army Deputy Chief-of-Staff Air Marshal Sabah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, US Ambassador to Kuwait Karren Sasahara, and a number of military and embassy officials.

Sheikh Fahad said in a speech the award reflects the strong military relations be-

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: The sun shines over the Al-Ghanim and Al-Kharafi mosque west of Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

European diplomats briefed on standards for university accreditation

KUWAIT: The National Bureau for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance held a presentation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aimed to familiarize European diplomats with the bureau's work and the standards used in Kuwait to assess academic programs and institutions abroad. Dr Jasem Al-Ali, Director General of the bureau, said the authority accredits academic programs and higher education institutions that have their qualifications and degrees recognized by Kuwait's Ministry of Higher Education.

He further explained that the meeting, initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was designed to engage with the ambassadors directly, explaining the standards and accreditation process for programs outside of Kuwait. It also provided an opportunity for diplomats to ask questions, offer feedback, and discuss how the authority collaborates with universities around the world to ensure alignment with its accreditation standards. The presentation follows a coordination meeting held between the bureau and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in November.



Dr Jasem Al-Ali

Officials continuously review the list of universities accredited by the bureau. Last November, Minister of Higher Education Dr Nader Al-Jallal removed four academic programs and degrees in the United States and suspended registration at two others. The decision included suspending all undergraduate and postgraduate programs in all disciplines at the University of Wyoming and the University of New Mexico, in addition to programs at Arizona State University, Pepperdine University, Wayne State University and Creighton University. — Agencies

Kuwaiti officials urge unity to protect national identity

Political biases, sectarianism identified as threats; Experts call for 'disciplined freedom'

KUWAIT: Experts and officials are calling for educating citizens on their rights, duties, and responsibilities, to ensure they contribute to the country's development with a sense of belonging and dedication.

During a forum on "National Identity and Enhancing Citizenship Principles in Kuwaiti Society" which kicked off Tuesday, participants stressed the importance of preserving national unity as the first line of defense against external threats, especially in a world marked by regional instability and challenges. They also emphasize the need to protect Kuwait's national identity from political biases, sectarianism, and extremism.

"We all belong to this nation, and we have no other homeland. It is our collective responsibility to preserve it, and this requires unified national efforts," Dr Yaqoub Al-Kandari, Director of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Center at Kuwait University said.

According to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), the forum brings together researchers and experts to discuss national identity from scientific, academic, and legal perspectives, independent of political biases. It's organized by the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Center at

Kuwait University, the Women's Institute for Development and Peace, and the National Unity Enhancement Team at the Cabinet. The two-day forum is taking place at Kuwait University in Shuwaikh.

Dr Abdullah Al-Sharika, Head of the National Unity Enhancement Team at

Peace, said the forum's primary goal is to address the challenges facing national identity, stressing the need to confront these challenges and protect the national identity from political biases and divisions. She called for reinforcing core values and traditions, combating ex-

disclosed that Kuwait's national identity is rooted in its deep connection to the land, the spread of values like tolerance and acceptance, and the rejection of violence. "We must stress the importance of true citizenship — loyalty to the nation, attachment to its soil, and adher-



Kawthar Al-Jou'an



Dr Yaqoub Al-Kandari



Dr Abdullah Al-Sharika

the Cabinet said the true measure of a Kuwaiti citizen's worth is their service to the country, their commitment to the law, and their respect for its values. He highlighted that while Kuwait is marked by cultural, intellectual, and political diversity, its people are united by the belief that "Kuwait unites us."

Kawthar Al-Jou'an, Head of the Women's Institute for Development and

treism in all its forms, and promoting disciplined freedom.

She also emphasized that a citizen's awareness of their rights and responsibilities is crucial to shaping their sense of self and their connection to their country, fostering national belonging. "Citizenship involves three pillars: attachment to the land, participation, and equality," she explained. Al-Jou'an un-

ence to the national identity defined by Kuwait's Constitution, while avoiding sectarianism," she said. "We are all called upon to preserve national unity, as it is the first line of defense against external threats. In a world marked by instability, regional rivalries, and growing dangers, the people of Kuwait must understand their responsibility in maintaining unity."



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ABU DHABI: Information Minister Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi (left) meets with Bahrain's Minister of Information Dr Ramzan Al-Nuaimi. — KUNA photos

Info minister discusses Arab media cooperation amid digital revolution

ABU DHABI: Kuwait's Minister of Information, Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi held meetings with several Arab media officials in Abu Dhabi on Monday to discuss joint Arab media cooperation in light of the digital revolution. The meetings took place during Al-Mutairi's participation in the 102nd session of the Permanent Arab Media Committee and the 20th regular session of the Arab Information Ministers Council.

During his visit, Al-Mutairi met Bahrain's Minister of Information Dr Ramzan Al-Nuaimi, Chairman of the National Media Office (NMO) and Chairman of the UAE Media Council Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed

bin Butti Al-Hamed, and the Head of Egypt's Supreme Media Council Khaled Abdelaziz.

The discussions focused on the key issues and agenda of the 102nd regular session of the Permanent Arab Media Committee, the 20th session of the Executive Bureau of the Arab Information Ministers Council and the latest developments in the Arab media strategy abroad. Topics also included the role of Arab media in combating terrorism, the Arab media map for sustainable development by 2030, and efforts to enhance media quality, professionalism and the capabilities of Arab media professionals.

The UAE hosted the 102nd session of the Permanent Arab Media Committee, with representatives from over 22 countries and local and regional media organizations under the umbrella of the Arab Information Ministers Council. The discussions aimed to explore the future of Arab media amid the digital revolution and the rise of artificial intelligence, emphasizing its role as a powerful force in building informed societies and promoting international understanding. — KUNA



Minister Al-Mutairi meets with Chairman of the UAE Media Council Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Butti Al-Hamed.



Zionist PM testifies in corruption trial

Brazil's president 'stable' after emergency surgery

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SAYDNAYA: This aerial photo shows traffic as people gather at the Saydnaya prison in Damascus on December 9, 2024. — AFP

Assad's dungeons and torture chambers give up their secrets

Thousands of intelligence files lay abandoned

DAMASCUS: Syrians lived in terror for decades of what went on behind the concrete walls of Damascus' security compound. Now the Assad dynasty has been toppled, its dungeons and torture chambers are giving up their secrets. Rebel fighters stand guard at the entrances to the forbidden city in the capital's Kafr Sousa district, where the feared security services had their headquarters alongside government offices. The myriad of different agencies which kept tabs on the lives of ordinary Syrians each operated their own underground prisons and interrogation chambers inside the walled defense ministry compound.

Syrians lived in fear of being summoned for a round of questioning from which they might never return. AFP found first responder Sleiman Kahwaji wandering around the complex this week trying to locate the building where he was questioned and then detained. He said he was still at secondary school when he was arrested in 2014 on suspicion of "terrorism", a frequent allegation under the rule of now toppled president Bashar Al-Assad, who brooked no dissent.

'My dear mother'

"I spent 55 days underground," he said. "There were 55 of us in that dungeon. Two died, one from diabetes." Scribbled graffiti left by the prisoners are barely legible on the walls amid the darkness. "My dear mother," one had scribbled, probably in his own blood. The cells that were used for solitary confinement are so small there isn't even space to lie down. As many as 80 prisoners per cell were crammed into the larger ones, forcing inmates to take turns to sleep, recalls another former detainee Thaeer Mustafa, who was arrested for alleged desertion. All remaining prisoners were freed on Sunday after their captors fled as

Asma Al-Assad: Syria's London-born first lady not welcome in UK

LONDON: Once celebrated as an advocate of women's rights in the Middle East, Syria's British-born former first lady Asma Al-Assad has fled into exile with her husband, with UK officials saying she is not welcome to return to London. Asma Al-Assad, 49, her husband and three children have sought refuge in Moscow after rebels ousted Bashar Al-Assad from power, according to Russian state news agencies, although the Kremlin has not confirmed the reports. It is just the latest blow to the shredded reputation of a woman whose glamour and charm had been seen in the past as a key asset to the Syrian government.

Asma al-Assad was born in London in 1975 and has spent half her life in the UK, with her parents still living in the west of the capital city. She retains British citizenship, but foreign minister David Lammy said Monday that she was no longer welcome in the country, suggesting she may soon lose her UK passport. "I've seen mentioned in the last few days, Asma Assad (is) potentially someone with UK citizenship that might attempt to come into our country, and I want it confirmed that she's a sanctioned individual and is not welcome here in the UK," he told parliament.

Asma al-Assad had her UK assets frozen in March 2012 amid growing protests against her husband's rule, as part of a European sanction program that London maintained after Brexit. The UK has previously stripped citizens of their nationality for joining the Islamic State group, Bader Mousa Al-Saif, researcher at the Chatham House think tank, told AFP. "If that could be happening to an unknown in an extremist camp, I think the same, if



Moaz Merheb, 51, prays as he is received by his family and friends after 18 years of imprisonment in Syria's notorious Saydnaya prison. — AFP

the rebels swept into Damascus capping the lightning offensive they launched late last month.

A large crowd broke into the security zone and ransacked the sprawling offices on the upper floors of the complex. Thousands of intelligence files lay abandoned, many of them scattered on the floor, detailing the activities of ordinary citizens subjected to draconian surveillance by security service agents. One handwritten document lists more than 10,000 prisoners held on suspicion of membership of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Sunni Islamist group was anathema to the Assad clan who are members of Syria's Alawite minority, followers of an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

Brotherhood membership became punishable by death since 1980 two years before Assad's father and predecessor Hafez ordered the army to crush its insurgency with an assault on the central city of Hama which

not more, warrants for the case of Asma Al-Assad," he added. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said on Monday that it was "far too early" to discuss such a measure, while minister Pat McFadden told the BBC "we have had no contact" with the former first lady.

Road to Damascus

Asma Al-Assad was born to cardiologist father Fawaz Al-Akhras and retired diplomat Sahar Ouri, both from Syria. She grew up in the leafy west London neighborhood of Acton where the Akhras still live, although some UK media reported Monday that they were thought to have flown to Russia to be with their daughter. Asma Al-Assad attended a local primary school, where she went by the name of Emma, before studying at the prestigious Queen's College private school.

She later graduated from London's King's College university with a degree in computer science and French literature before moving into finance, working at Deutsche Bank and JP Morgan. It was in this line of work that she met Bashar Al-Assad in the late 1990s, and the couple married a few months after he succeeded his father, Hafez, as Syrian president in July 2000. The couple have two adult sons and a daughter, with the eldest recently graduating in mathematics from the University of Moscow. The Syrian presidency announced in May that Asma had leukaemia, having already been treated for breast cancer between 2018 and 2019.

'War profiteer'

Asma Al-Assad is from a Sunni family whereas Bashar Al-Assad belongs to the Shiite Alawite movement, which — along with her promotion of women's rights — helped burnish her reputation as a transformative and modernizing first lady. Feted by the Western media for her looks and style, Asma became the toast of high society, hosting celebrities such as Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie while enjoying a lavish re-

ception overseas. Fashion bible Vogue called her the "Desert Rose". But her reputation crumbled when she stood by her husband's side as he cracked down on anti-government protests that erupted in 2011, turning into full-scale civil war in June 2012.

She was heavily criticized for remaining silent during the violence and was dubbed "Marie Antoinette" and "predator in chief". Detractors also accused her of enriching herself through the Syria Trust for Development, a charity she founded that centralizes most of the funding coming from abroad. She and her husband also took charge of many parts of the Syrian economy using frontmen, according to news site Syria Report. In 2020 the United States imposed sanctions on Asma Al-Assad, her parents and two brothers, with then-secretary of state Mike Pompeo describing her as "one of Syria's most notorious war profiteers". — AFP

Another, dated this January, details the investigation into a bomb attack on the Mazzeh neighborhood of Damascus, in which an Iraqi was wounded. Nothing was considered too trivial to escape the security services' attention. There are files recording the activities of ordinary citizens as well as journalists and religious leaders. Not even government ministers were immune. On a list of members of Assad's government, a security service agent has carefully noted the confession of each minister — Sunni or Alawite, Christian or Druze. The security services operated vast networks of paid informers, who provided the tiniest details of people's daily lives. Families have been arriving at the gates of the Damascus security zone since Saturday, desperately seeking word on the fate of their missing loved ones.

Many come after first visiting Saydnaya Prison, a vast detention complex on the outskirts of Damascus where many of those who survived interrogation at security headquarters were taken for long-term incarceration. "We heard that there were secret dungeons. I'm looking for my son Obada Amini, who was arrested in 2013," said Khoulood Amini, 53, her husband and daughter by her side. "He was in his fourth year at the engineering faculty, I went to Saydnaya but I didn't find him. I was told there were underground dungeons here. I hope that all Syrian prisoners are freed." — AFP



ALEPPO: This file picture shows Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and First Lady Asma Al-Assad waving to the Spanish royals as they board their plane to leave the central Syrian city of Aleppo during their official visit to Syria. — AFP

ception overseas. Fashion bible Vogue called her the "Desert Rose". But her reputation crumbled when she stood by her husband's side as he cracked down on anti-government protests that erupted in 2011, turning into full-scale civil war in June 2012.

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GAZA: A Palestinian woman and a child stand at the door of a house next to a building destroyed in a Zionist strike in the Nuseirat camp in central Gaza on Dec 10, 2024. — AFP

Zionists kill at least 53 in Gaza massacres

CAIRO: Zionist strikes across the Gaza Strip killed at least 53 Palestinians overnight and on Tuesday, medics said, as Zionist tanks pushed into areas in central and southern parts of the enclave. A Zionist airstrike killed at least 25 people in Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza, where Zionist forces have operated since October, and injured dozens of others in a multi-floored building, medics said.

The Palestinian Civil Emergency Service said most of those killed were from the same family, including women and children. Images posted online showed the bodies lined up in a single mass grave in the town. Another airstrike on a house in the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza killed at least seven people. It wounded several others, medics and the Palestinian Civil Emergency Service said, while another killed two people in Rafah south of the enclave.

In Deir Al-Balah near the coast, Zionist naval forces detained six Palestinian fishermen who tried to sail into the Mediterranean Sea earlier on Tuesday, according to residents. More than 44,700 Palestinians have been killed in the 14-month-old Zionist military campaign on Gaza, Gaza health authorities said.

Ceasefire efforts by Arab mediators Egypt and Qatar, backed by the United States, have failed to find agreement, but recent signs of optimism among Zionist and Palestinian officials have suggested a deal to end the war could be closer. On Monday night, Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Hamas' increasing isolation after the downfall of Syria's Bashar Al-Assad could open the door to a deal to return captives but it was too early to say if efforts would succeed.

On Tuesday, a Hamas official declined to disclose the content of negotiations but told Reuters mediators had recently stepped up their efforts, citing the group's willingness to show the flexibility needed "to end the aggression on our people". A Palestinian official with knowledge of the mediation effort said Hamas had asked other Gaza factions to list the names of Zionist and foreign captives in their custody, whether dead or alive, signaling potential progress in the talks.

Hamas wants a deal that ends the war and sees the release of Zionist and foreign hostages held captive in Gaza as well as Palestinians jailed by the Zionist entity, while Netanyahu has vowed the war can only end once Hamas is eradicated. — Reuters

International

Brazil's president 'stable' after emergency surgery

Lula da Silva had emergency surgery for 'intracranial hemorrhage'

SAO PAULO: Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was in "stable" condition after emergency surgery for an "intracranial hemorrhage" and should leave hospital next week, his doctors said Tuesday. Lula, 79, was transported overnight to Brazil's top medical facility, the Hospital Sirio-Libanés in Sao Paulo, after experiencing headaches that medics found was related to a fall he suffered in October.

The leader of South America's largest country was conscious after his operation and eating, the doctors told a news conference. Vice President Geraldo Alckmin had taken over Lula's workload in the meantime. The hemorrhage was linked to a fall Lula suffered on October 19, the hospital said. Lula had hit his head after falling in a bathroom at the presidential residence in the capital Brasilia and received several stitches. After experiencing a headache on Monday, a medical examination in Brasilia found the intracranial hemorrhage.

Lula was swiftly transported to the Hospital Sirio-Libanés, where surgeons performed a trepanation - drilling into the skull to relieve pressure. "The bleeding was between the brain and the dura mater membrane," a thick protective layer under the skull, and was located on the left side, above the frontal lobe and the parietal lobe, said Marcos Stavale, a doctor on the medical team. "The brain was decompressed and neurological functions were preserved," he said. "He didn't have brain damage" from the emergency, added another doctor, Roberto Kalil.

'Serious' fall

Back in October, Lula canceled a planned trip to Russia for a BRICS summit on medical advice following his fall, instead joining the meeting online. He also failed to attend the United Nations COP29 climate summit in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, as planned. Lula described his accident as "serious" at the time, during a telephone call with an official from his Workers' Party that was shared on social media.

"I am fine, I had an accident, but it was my fault. It was serious but it did not affect any sensitive area," Lula said in the call. "I'm taking care of myself... The doctors said I had to wait at least three or four days to find out how much damage the blow had done," Lula said. Since then, the Brazilian leader has maintained a busy schedule, including last month hosting the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Brasilia. Lula has frequently talked about his good health and has said he wants to "live to 120."

But the Brazilian leader has faced other health issues in the past. Lula underwent a successful hip operation in September 2023, which he hoped would put an end to pain that had become unbearable and put him "in a bad mood". He was also diagnosed with throat cancer in 2011, from which he recovered the following year after undergoing radiotherapy and chemotherapy. Lula, who led the country from 2003 to 2010, won another term in office when he defeated then far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in October



SAO PAULO: Facade of the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital where Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is hospitalized in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on December 10, 2024. — AFP

2022 elections after a hard-fought campaign.

He has not said whether he will run again in 2026 elections, telling CNN last month that "I'm going to think about 2026 in 2026." "It's not the youth that's going to solve the world governance problems. What's going to solve the world governance prob-

lem is the competence of the ruler, the mindset of the ruler, the health of those," Lula said. "I will be willing to run again. But I hope it won't be necessary. And I hope that we'll have other candidates and so that we can have great political renovation in the country and in the world," he added. — AFP

Mob makes billions from Italy's tourism sector: Report

ROME: Italy's mafias make more than three billion euros a year from the tourism sector and are primed to pocket even more from large-scale upcoming events, a research institute warned on Tuesday. Organized crime groups preying on vulnerable companies from hotels to restaurants are currently taking home 3.3 billion euros (\$3.5 billion) a year and are set to cash in on the Catholic Church's Jubilee celebrations in Rome and the Winter Olympic Games, the Demoskopika research institute said. "Italian tourism is under attack. The 2026 Milan-Cortina Olympics and the 2025 Jubilee whet the appetites of the mafia," Demoskopika president Raffaele Rio said in a report.

The powerful 'Ndrangheta mafia, which is rooted in Calabria, alone accounts for half of the entire turnover, the report said. The Campania-based Camorra, the Sicilian Mafia and organized crime groups in the region of Puglia also rake in large amounts of money from tourism. While those mob heartlands are in the south of Italy, the groups made almost 1.5 billion euros out of tourism in the country's wealthy north, the report added. "More than seven thousand vulnerable companies risk becoming tasty prey for criminal associations," Rio warned, saying that nearly 15 percent of the 48,000 businesses in the sector were struggling with liquidity and debt crises, which made them vulnerable to mob "offers" of help.

The organized crime groups loan money to businesses under punishing conditions, and use them to clean ill-gotten gains. "The mafias are building a criminal welfare system that crushes entrepreneurs in difficulty," Rio said. — AFP

Gambian fishing village seeks elusive statehood

GHANA TOWN: As Paul Techy queued with dozens of others in his coastal Gambian fishing village, he hoped to move one step closer towards finally belonging in the only country he had ever called home. Gambian citizenship has long been an elusive goal for many residents of Ghana Town, most of whom were born in the tiny West African country but whose parents or grandparents emigrated from Ghana decades ago. Lacking either Ghanaian or Gambian documentation, most are trapped in a legal limbo where they struggle to access basic services such as healthcare or formal employment. "We recognize ourselves as Gambians, but Gambians don't recognize us as Gambians," said 46-year-old Techy, who was born in the village on the shores of the Atlantic.

"They said you are a Ghanaian born in The Gambia, you are still a foreigner... this is how they categorize us," he said. Under The Gambia's constitution, a person is granted citizenship if they are born in the country — but only if one of their parents is a Gambian citizen. Ghana Town sprung up in the late 1950s, when a group of Ghanaian fishermen travelled to The Gambia in search of lucrative waters and a better market. The village's cinder block and corrugated metal houses are now home to around 2,000 people, including many of the original fishermen's descendants.

The UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) says residents are "at risk of statelessness". Being undocumented is not the same as being stateless, the UNHCR says, but having no legal records puts people at risk as they cannot prove links to any state. Together with the Gambia Commission for Refugees, the UNHCR conducted an assessment in November to see if Ghana Town's residents could be considered for naturalization. "Most of their fundamental human rights like access to nationality and access to social amenities are somehow difficult," said Omar T Camara, a government representative working with The Gambia Commission for Refugees.



GHANA TOWN: An aerial view of Brufut, Ghana Town. Gambian citizenship has long been an elusive goal for the residents of Ghana Town, most of whom were born in the tiny West African country but whose parents or grandparents emigrated from Ghana decades ago. — AFP

Prevented from leaving

A team spent four days conducting interviews with residents such as Techy, after which conclusions and recommendations will be drawn up and sent to lawmakers in the parliament. Camara said the exercise could pave the way for legal reform. The UNHCR says that statelessness worldwide is driven by a number of factors including discrimination based on race or gender, as well as legislative shortcomings. It estimated in November that there were nearly a million stateless people in Africa, including more than 930,000 in West Africa, leaving them vulnerable to marginalization and abuse.

Millions more are at risk because of conflicts in the volatile Sahel region, it said. While Gambia has ratified two UN conventions on ending statelessness, there is no process for formally recognizing stateless people in the country. Ghana Town resident Gideon Money, 20, graduated top of his class and won a scholarship to study medicine in India, but said a lack of legal identity prevented him from going. "My fellow students have left because they are termed as Gambians," he told AFP. "For me, when I went to the immigration department, they said I am Ghanaian from Ghana Town and they de-

nied me from getting a passport," he added.

'Foreigners'

For those of Ghana Town's residents who choose to stay, well-paid and stable jobs are often out of reach. Mary Ennie, 44, said she had graduated from high school but could only make a meagre living as a hairdresser as she did not have a national ID card. She worried for her six children who also lack legal Gambian identity, despite being born in the country. Ennie said she even travelled to Ghana three times to try to find work there, but was told she couldn't as she was classed as Gambian.

Despite being given land when they first arrived, Ghana Town's residents say they must each pay a 2,500-dalasi (\$35) yearly "alien permit" to prevent raids from the immigration department. They say they also have to pay more money than Gambian citizens for medical care. Kobina Ekaum, 79, arrived in Ghana Town as a child in the 1950s and went on to become the first "Alkalo", or head of the village. "Imagine, since independence, we are still regarded as foreigners," he said despondently as he sat on a mattress on the floor of his home. — AFP

Syria rebels name interim PM...

Continued from Page 1

The civil war that led up to it killed 500,000 people and forced half the country to flee their homes, millions of them finding refuge abroad. Jolani, who now uses his real name Ahmed Al-Sharaa, vowed: "We will not hesitate to hold accountable the criminals, murderers, security and army officers involved in torturing the Syrian people." He held talks on Monday with outgoing prime minister Mohammed Al-Jalali "to coordinate a transfer of power that guarantees the provision of services" to Syria's people, according to a statement on Telegram.

Further complicating prospects, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it had recorded more than 300 Zionist strikes on the country since Assad's fall. Pedersen, the UN special envoy for Syria, called on the Zionist entity to stop. "We are continuing to see (Zionist) movements and bombardments into Syrian territory. This needs to stop," he said.

The Observatory, which relies on a network of sources around Syria, said Zionist strikes had "destroyed the most important military sites in Syria". The monitor said the strikes targeted weapons depots, naval vessels and a research center that Western governments suspected of having links to chemical weapons production. In the port city of Latakia, smoke was still rising Tuesday from the wreckage of naval vessels half under water in the harbor, an AFP correspondent reported.

Zionist Defense Minister Israel Katz confirmed the military had been operating in Syria in recent days to "destroy strategic capabilities that threaten (the Zionist entity)". "The navy operated last night

to destroy the Syrian fleet with great success," he said. The Zionist entity, which borders Syria, also sent troops into the UN-patrolled buffer zone east of the Zionist-annexed Golan Heights.

The Zionist entity's backer the United States said the incursion must be "temporary", after the United Nations said the Zionist entity was violating the 1974 armistice. The Zionist defense minister said the military had orders to "establish a sterile defense zone free of weapons and terrorist threats in southern Syria, without a permanent (Zionist) presence."

Syria must never be divided again, and Turkey will act against anyone seeking to compromise its territory. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Tuesday. "From now on, we cannot allow Syria to be divided again," said the Turkish leader. "Any attack on the freedom of the Syrian people, the stability of the new administration, and the integrity of its lands will find us standing against it."

On Sunday, Turkey's top diplomat, Hakan Fidan, warned Kurdish fighters not to try to extend their influence in Syria by "taking advantage of the situation" created by Assad's ouster. Over the past 10 days, Turkish-backed forces in northern Syria have fought an offensive in the north, seizing several Kurdish-held areas.

Turkey has also denounced the Zionist entity for expanding into Syrian territory, reiterating its support for Syria's "territorial integrity". "In this sensitive period, when the possibility of achieving the peace and stability that the Syrian people have desired for many years has emerged, (the Zionist entity) is once again displaying its occupying mentality," Ankara said in a statement.

The fall of Assad has sparked a frantic search by families of the tens of thousands of people held in his security services' jails and detention centers. As they advanced towards Damascus, the rebels released thousands of detainees, but many more

remain missing. A large crowd gathered Monday outside Saydnaya jail, synonymous with the worst atrocities of Assad's rule, to search for relatives, many of whom had spent years in captivity. Crowds of freed prisoners wandered the streets of Damascus, many maimed by torture, weakened by illness and emaciated by hunger.

Rebel fighters told AFP they found around 40 bodies bearing signs of torture inside a hospital morgue near Damascus on Monday, stuffed into body bags with numbers and sometimes names written on them. "I opened the door of the morgue with my own hands, it was a horrific sight: about 40 bodies were piled up showing signs of gruesome torture," Mohammed Al-Hajj, a fighter with rebel factions from the country's south told AFP by telephone from Damascus.

AFP saw dozens of photographs and video footage that Hajj said he took himself and showed corpses with evident signs of torture: Eyes and teeth gouged out, blood splattered and bruising. The footage taken in Harasta hospital also showed a piece of cloth containing bones, while a decomposing body's rib cage peaked through the skin.

The bodies were placed in white plastic bags or wrapped in white cloth, some stained with blood. Corpses had pieces of cloth or adhesive tape bearing scribbled numbers and sometimes names. Some seemed to have been killed recently. While some of the dead were wearing clothes, others were naked.

The United Nations said whoever ended up in power in Syria must hold Assad and his lieutenants to account. UN investigators who for years have been gathering evidence of horrific crimes called Assad's ouster a "game-changer" because they will now be able to access "the crime scene". While Syrians were celebrating Assad's ouster, the country now faces enormous uncertainty, and it is unclear whether the dreams of democracy so many sacrificed their lives for will be realized. — Agencies

Jordanian, Lebanese men back home...

Continued from Page 1

"Today I feel like I can breathe again. The best thing in this world is freedom," Hamawi, 61, told AFP, visibly tearing up from joy. Hamawi's release gave renewed hope to hundreds of families in Lebanon who have demanded to know the fate of thousands of prisoners believed to have disappeared at the hands of Syrian troops who entered Lebanon shortly after the outbreak of the 1975-1990 civil war.

Hamawi said he was moved from one prison to another, even spending time in the notorious Saydnaya facility where he wrote poetry, before ending up in a jail in the coastal Latakia region. His love for his wife Josephine Homsy and for his son fueled him during his time in prison. "I was far away but she was my source of strength, the other was my son," he said.

Homsy was overjoyed to be reunited with her husband. "Thirty-three years ago, they came to this house, knocked on our door one evening and told my husband: We need to talk to you. Then he disappeared for 11 years," Homsy said. After she managed to track him down, she spent more than a decade visiting him in Syrian prisons, she said, hoping they would one day be reunited.

Rights groups say thousands of men, women and children disappeared at the hands of Hafez Al-Assad, Bashar's late father, during Lebanon's civil war. Hamawi's twin Nicolas told AFP seeing his long-lost brother had given him a new sense of purpose. "Today, we've been reborn," he said, adding the pair now felt "truly like twins" again. "My brother is more than a hero. He endured life in prison, and today he has returned to live in freedom like he has been longing to for 33 years," he said.

For three decades, Syria was a dominant military and political force in Lebanon, before withdrawing its troops in 2005 under international pressure after the assassination of Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafic Hariri. "I waited a lot, I suffered a lot, but I achieved freedom," Hamawi said. — AFP

International

Taiwan: Beijing carrying out huge maritime deployment

Pentagon chief slams China's 'coercive behavior'

HSINCHU: China is deploying dozens of ships in its biggest maritime mobilization around Taiwan in years, Taipei said Tuesday, after Beijing voiced fury at President Lai Ching-te's recent visit to the United States. Taiwanese forces were on high alert in anticipation of Beijing's People's Liberation Army (PLA) staging war games in response to Lai's US stopovers and call with Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson. Taiwan's defense ministry said the number of Chinese ships in the waters around the island exceeded Beijing's maritime response to then US House speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei in 2022, which was the largest-ever war games.

In those drills, Beijing deployed ballistic missiles, fighter jets and warships in what analysts described as practice for a blockade and ultimate invasion of Taiwan—and was a display of how far China's military had come since the last Taiwan Strait crisis in the mid-1990s. Nearly 90 Chinese naval and coast guard ships were currently in waters along the so-called first island chain, which links Okinawa, Taiwan and the Philippines, a senior Taiwanese security official told AFP. Taiwan's defense ministry said earlier it had also detected 47 Chinese aircraft near the island in the 24 hours to 6:00 am.

That was the highest number of aircraft detected in a single day since a record 153 reported on October 15, after China staged major military drills in response to Lai's National Day speech days earlier. China—which regards Taiwan as its territory and has not ruled out using force to bring it under its control—has held four large-scale military exercises in just over two years, including the drills in response to Pelosi's visit and two since Lai took office in May. "It can indeed be said that the scale of these maritime forces exceeds the four drills since 2022," defense ministry spokesman Sun Li-fang told reporters.

Sun said the latest exercises drew forces from three separate Chinese regional commands, while another defense ministry official said China's actions were "not solely directed at Taiwan". There has been

no public announcement by the PLA or Chinese state media about increased military activity in the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea or Western Pacific Ocean, where Taiwan said Chinese ships had been detected. However, a Beijing foreign ministry spokeswoman said Tuesday that China will "resolutely defend" its sovereignty.

The lack of an announcement from Beijing was unusual and, if drills were under way, could be a "deliberate strategy to sow confusion and exert psychological pressure," Duan Dang, a Vietnam-based maritime security analyst, said. "China's current movements resemble what we would see during preparations for real combat, exceeding the scale of previous exercises," he added. Taipei-based security analyst J Michael Cole said the mix of PLA navy vessels and coast guard ships highlighted Beijing's efforts to "increase interoperability" between the two. "Such efforts also blur the lines between civilian and military components and thus complicate Taiwan's ability to respond proportionally," Cole told AFP.

Austin vows support

Beijing has asserted its claims over contested territories in the region far more boldly in recent years, as its military strength has grown. The escalating actions—over islands in the East China Sea claimed by Japan, self-ruled Taiwan, and reefs and islands in the South China Sea that are also claimed by Southeast Asian nations—have come as Beijing's rivals have drawn closer to the United States. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Monday that China was the "only country in the world that has the intent and, increasingly, the capability to change the rules-based international order."

"We want to see this region, this area remain open to freedom of navigation and the ability to fly the skies and international airways whenever we want to," Austin said in a speech aboard the USS George Washington, an aircraft carrier stationed in



AT SEA: This handout photograph taken by the Taiwan Coast Guard shows a Chinese coast guard ship (center) seen past Taiwan Coast Guard vessels (left and right) in waters east of Taiwan. — AFP

Japan. "We're going to continue to work with our allies and partners to ensure that we can do just that." The United States is Taiwan's most important backer and biggest supplier of arms, but has long maintained "strategic ambiguity" when it comes to putting boots on the ground to defend the island.

'Coercive behavior'

China's "coercive behavior" threatens regional stability, US Defense Secretary said Tuesday, after Taiwan said Beijing was carrying out its biggest maritime mobilization around the self-ruled island in years. The Pentagon chief is in Tokyo on what will likely be his last official Asia-Pacific trip, as the United States and Japan prepare for a new era shaped

by incoming president Donald Trump's protectionist policies. Trump, who will be sworn in next month, hopes to replace Austin with Pete Hegseth, a former military officer and Fox News presenter.

"Now we're clear-eyed about the challenges to peace and stability in this region and worldwide," Austin said as he met his Japanese counterpart Gen Nakatani on Tuesday evening. "That includes coercive behavior by the People's Republic of China in the East China Sea and the South China Sea and elsewhere in the region," Austin said. "It includes Russia's reckless war of choice in Ukraine, and it includes the DPRK (North Korea) support for Moscow's war, as well as its other destabilizing and provocative activities," he added. — AFP

Nobel Peace Prize winner calls for a 'nuke-free world'

OSLO: Japan's atomic bomb survivors' group Nihon Hidankyo accepted its Nobel Peace Prize on Tuesday, urging countries to abolish the weapons resurging as a threat 80 years after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. One of the three co-chairs of Nihon Hidankyo who accepted the prize, 92-year-old Nagasaki survivor Terumi Tanaka, demanded "action from governments to achieve" a nuclear-free world.

The prize was presented at a formal ceremony in Oslo's City Hall at a time when countries like Russia—which has the world's largest nuclear arsenal—increasingly brandish the atomic threat. "I am infinitely saddened and angered that the 'nuclear taboo' threatens to be broken," Tanaka told the assembled dignitaries and guests, some clad in traditional Norwegian bunads or Japanese kimonos. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly made nuclear threats in a bid to deter the West and prevail in the war in Ukraine, and signed a decree in mid-November lowering the threshold for using atomic weapons.

In a strike on the Ukrainian city of Dnipro a few days later, the Russian army demonstratively fired a new hypersonic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, although in this instance it fired a regular

payload instead. Nihon Hidankyo works tirelessly to rid the planet of the weapons of mass destruction, relying on testimonies from survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, known as "hibakusha". The US bombings of the two Japanese cities on August 6 and 9, 1945 killed 214,000 people, leading to Japan's surrender and the end of World War II.

Burnt bodies

Tanaka was 13 years old when Nagasaki was bombed, the hypocenter just three kilometers west of his home. Five members of his family were killed. He was upstairs reading a book when the A-bomb was dropped. "I heard the explosion and all of a sudden saw a bright white light, which surrounded everything and everything became silent," he recalled. "I was really surprised. I felt my life in danger." Rushing to the ground floor, he lost consciousness when two glass doors, blown out by the detonation, fell on him, though the glass did not break.

Three days later, he and his mother left in search of their relatives. That was when they realized the scope of the disaster. "When we reached a ridge over the hills, we could look down over the city and that was when, for the first time, we saw that there was absolutely nothing left. Everything was black and charred." He saw gravely wounded people fleeing the city, burnt bodies on both sides of the road. He and his mother cremated his aunt's body "with our own hands." "I was numb, not able to feel anything," Nihon Hidankyo's ranks are dwindling with every passing year. The Japanese government lists



OSLO: Terumi Tanaka, co-chair of the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Japan's atomic bomb survivors' group Nihon Hidankyo, gives a speech after the group was awarded with the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 2024. — AFP

around 106,800 "hibakusha" still alive today. Their average age is 85.

For the West, the nuclear threat also comes from North Korea, which has increased its ballistic missile tests, and Iran, which is suspected of developing nuclear weapons though it denies this. Nine countries now have nuclear weapons: Britain, China, France, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the United States, and, unofficially, (Zionist entity). "Our movement has undoubtedly played a major role in creating the 'nuclear taboo'," Tanaka said. — AFP

S Korea slaps travel bans on top officials

SEOUL: South Korean authorities banned more top officials from leaving the country Tuesday, in the wake of President Yoon Suk Yeol's bungled attempt to impose martial law. A day after Yoon himself was hit with a travel ban, his party was meanwhile forging a "resignation roadmap" that reportedly could see him step down in February or March before fresh elections, while the opposition plans to organize an impeachment vote every Saturday.

Yoon suspended civilian rule a week ago and sent special forces and helicopters to parliament, before lawmakers forced him to rescind the decree in a country assumed to be a stable democracy. Investigators are probing the president and a cabal of allies—many from the same school—for alleged insurrection over the sequence of extraordinary events. On Tuesday Cho Ji-ho, commissioner general of the Korean National Police Agency, and two other top police officials became the latest to be barred from foreign travel, police told AFP.

Already under a travel ban are the former defense and interior ministers and martial law commander General Park An-su, who along with other top brass was grilled by lawmakers on Tuesday. Yoon narrowly survived an impeachment effort in parliament on Saturday as tens of thousands braved freezing temperatures to call for his ouster. The motion failed after members of Yoon's ruling People Power Party (PPP) walked out of parliament, depriving it of the necessary two-thirds majority.

The offices of ruling party lawmakers were being vandalized, local media said Tuesday, with one image showing a door covered in what appeared to be ketchup and eggs and flour scattered on the floor. Protesters were also sending condolence flowers to the offices, typically reserved for funerals, to express their opposition to the boycott, with signs that read "insurrection accomplices". Local police in Seoul's Dobong district told AFP that an unspecified "weapon" was found in front of PPP lawmaker Kim Jae-sub's residence, and he has requested personal protection measures from the police. — AFP



TEL AVIV: Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu enters the district court in Tel Aviv at the start of his hearing on corruption charges on December 10, 2024. — AFP

Zionist PM testifies in corruption trial

TEL AVIV: Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in court in Tel Aviv on Tuesday to testify for the first time in his corruption case. Netanyahu, who has repeatedly sought to delay his appearance in court, is the first Zionist sitting prime minister to face a criminal trial. He faces charges of bribery, fraud and breach of public trust in three separate cases. At Tuesday's hearing, the premier is expected to take the witness stand for the first time, responding to the allegations and testimonies made against him, including from former close aides.

Several people, including anti-Netanyahu protesters and his supporters, gathered outside the court, while some right-wing lawmakers attended the session, which was held in an underground chamber for security reasons. An AFP journalist outside the court reported that the prime minister's supporters chanted "Netanyahu, the people support you", while protesters who have been rallying against him for months chanted "Bibi to prison". "I

will speak in court. I am not running away," Netanyahu said at a press conference Monday evening. "It has been eight years that I have waited for this day, eight years of wanting to present the truth, eight years waiting to completely demolish these absurd and baseless accusations against me," he said, labeling it a "relentless witch hunt".

The trial, which has been delayed many times since it first began in May 2020, is scheduled to last for several months, with an appeals process that could further prolong matters. Netanyahu, who filed multiple requests to delay the proceedings on the basis of the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, denies any wrongdoing. In the first case, Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, are accused of accepting more than \$260,000 worth of luxury goods such as cigars, jewelry and champagne from billionaires in exchange for political favors. Among the alleged benefactors are Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan and Australian business executive James Packer. The other two cases allege that Netanyahu attempted to negotiate more favorable coverage in two Zionist media outlets. One involves alleged attempts by the prime minister to reach a deal with Arnon Mozes, publisher of the popular daily Yedioth Ahronoth, for better coverage by agreeing to weaken the status of a rival daily newspaper. — AFP

News in Brief

Russia to recognize Taliban

MOSCOW: Russia moved a step closer towards recognizing the Taliban government of Afghanistan on Tuesday as parliament voted in favor of a law that would make it possible to remove the Taliban from Moscow's list of banned terrorist organizations. Parliament's lower house, the Duma, approved the bill in the first of three required readings. Interfax news agency said. No country currently recognizes the Taliban government which seized power in August 2021 as US-led forces staged a chaotic withdrawal after 20 years of war. But Russia has been gradually building ties with the movement, which President Vladimir Putin said in July was now an ally in fighting terrorism. — Reuters

Congressman shot dead

MEXICO CITY: A Mexican congressman who was a member of the ruling coalition was shot dead in coastal Veracruz state on Monday, officials said. "Benito Aguas Atlahua has passed away as a result of wounds caused by an aggression with a firearm," the state prosecutor's office said in a statement. The body of a man identified as Agustin Linares was also found at the scene of the attack in Zongolica municipality, the statement added. Authorities have not provided further information as to the circumstances or number of attackers. Aguas Atlahua had been taken to hospital in serious condition after the shooting, according to an earlier report. — AFP

4 killed in Colombia airstrike

BOGOTA: Four suspected members of Colombia's biggest drug cartel were killed last week in airstrikes on their bases, President Gustavo Petro announced Monday. The bombardments of the Gulf Clan in the country's northwest are the first against the group under Colombia's left-wing president. Writing on the social network X, Petro said the raids in the department of Antioquia "left four dead among the cartel's members" and added that eight rifles were seized. He said that the bombardments had "seriously damaged" the Gulf Clan's attempts to build up its forces in the region. Petro also confirmed that four soldiers were accidentally killed in the operation while descending from a helicopter. — AFP

Brazil evacuates diplomats

BRASÍLIA: Brazil on Monday pulled its ambassador and diplomats out of Syria, ordering them to neighboring Lebanon amid the tensions left by the fall of Bashar Al-Assad's regime, a government official said. Ambassador Andre Luiz Azevedo dos Santos and the "small group" of diplomats who worked in the embassy are now in Beirut, where they will stay until the security situation in Syria's capital stabilizes, the official said on condition of anonymity. The government of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva took the decision after several state buildings and other embassies in Damascus were stormed and vandalized, the official said. The Brazilian embassy itself was not targeted, the official said. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2024

Social media giant warns against shopping scams

Criminal gangs running online scam farms in Philippines



MANILA: Policemen watch as employees of a Chinese-run scam farm cover their faces during a raid at an office tower in Manila. — AFP

SAN FRANCISCO: Social media giant Meta has announced a worldwide anti-scam awareness campaign aimed at protecting users from fraudulent schemes during the holiday shopping season. The company, which owns Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, revealed it has taken down over two million accounts linked to scam centers in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, the UAE, and the Philippines this year. In another example, the company said its enforcement efforts have removed 15,000 phishing URLs in Vietnam and 9,000 in Singapore this year.

Working with cybersecurity firm Graphika, Meta identified three major scam campaigns targeting holiday shoppers: fake Christmas gift box promotions, fraudulent holiday decoration sales, and counterfeit retail coupons. Working in several languages, scammers are using sophisticated tactics, including AI-generated voiceovers and fake customer testimonials to lure victims, the company added. "Scammers constantly evolve their tactics to evade detection and rarely target one single platform," Meta said in its announcement.

This ensures that "any one company can only see

a small piece of these scam campaigns," it added. The company has partnered with Rachel Tobac, a prominent Internet safety expert and ethical hacker, to educate users about online threats. Meta has also expanded its Fraud Intelligence Reciprocal Exchange (FIRE) program, originally launched in the UK and Australia, to include banks worldwide. The initiative facilitates information sharing about potential scam activities between financial institutions and Meta's platforms.

Scammers change tactics

Meanwhile, criminal gangs running online scam farms in the Philippines are downsizing in a change of tactics to avoid a sweeping crackdown, officials said Tuesday. President Ferdinand Marcos in July announced a total ban by end-2024 on so-called Philippine online gaming operators (POGOs) that Manila says were being used as cover by organized crime for human trafficking, money laundering, online fraud, kidnappings and even murder.

Justice Undersecretary Felix Nicholas Ty said government raids were ongoing as scammers contin-

ue to traffic foreign and local workers, forcing them to pitch clients around the world on fake investment schemes. But they no longer operate in huge compounds or office complexes in large cities, having relocated to the provinces using less conspicuous buildings. "The MO (modus operandi) right now of these operations is to have a guerrilla-style, smaller-scale (operations) in resorts, maybe even residences," Ty told a security forum, adding some also switched to hardware that are not "top of the line".

"We're seeing the evolution from big-scale operations to smaller operations," agreed Senator Sherwin Gatchalian, who also spoke at the forum. Gatchalian said the scam farms were employing other guises, including a recently raided outfit that was masquerading as a business process outsourcing but was found to be running "scamming software". Ty said that while there were signs "that their resources are in decline," the scam operators "remain entrenched," and it would be "unrealistic for us to get them all" due to limited government resources and manpower.

Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, is "ground zero for the global scamming industry," the

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's deputy regional representative Benedikt Hofmann told UN News earlier this year. The Washington-based think-tank United States Institute of Peace said in a May 2024 report that these scammers target millions of victims around the world and rake in annual revenues of \$64 billion. "These crime groups are coming from largely mainland China and ... they started operating in the online gambling space" before branching out into the more lucrative scamming, Jason Tower, a principal author of the study, told the Manila forum.

It estimates the industry employs half a million workers, including 15,000 in the Philippines, who were recruited mainly via social media and were then forced to work on the scams, facing torture if they fail to meet quotas. It said the largest group of scam workers were in Myanmar with 120,000. Ty said the syndicates have invested "a lot of sunk costs" in their Philippine-based operations and may want to recover some of them. "That's why they persist in operating the way they're operating now, even if it is in a smaller scale and perhaps less profitable manner than it was before." — AFP

AIQab appointed as vice president of 'InvestGB'

KUWAIT: Gulf Capital Investment Company, "InvestGB," the investment arm of Gulf Bank, has announced the appointment of Nouf AIQab as Vice President – Financial Brokerage. This strategic move reaffirms the company's commitment to empowering national talents and enhancing the role of women in the financial and investment sector in Kuwait. AIQab has extensive experience in the investment sector, spanning 19 years.

She previously held several positions at Global Investment House and Kuwait Finance and Investment Company (KFIC), which contributed to building her extensive expertise and enhancing her track record



Nouf AIQab



Sara AlMuzaini

of success in this field. AIQab holds a Bachelor's degree in Accounting and Business Administration from Kuwait University. She has also earned numerous prestigious certifications specializing in finance and the rules and regulations of the Kuwait Capital Markets Authority.

On this occasion, AIQab stated, "I am delighted to be part of 'InvestGB', and I look forward to contrib-

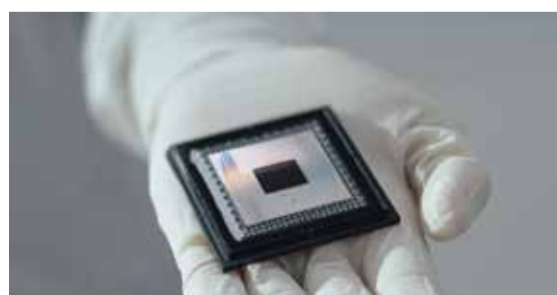
uting to achieving its strategic goals and delivering exceptional services to our clients, while contributing to the company's continuous growth and success." Sara AlMuzaini, Senior Vice President – Human Resources at InvestGB, stated: "We are delighted to welcome Nouf AIQab to 'InvestGB'. Nouf will lead efforts to strengthen InvestGB's brokerage services, ensuring clients receive first-class tailored solutions. Her extensive experience will be a valuable addition to our operations, further enhancing the efficiency and success of our investment initiatives."

AlMuzaini added, "Nouf AIQab's appointment aligns perfectly with our strategic vision to empower local talents for long-term success. Her extensive expertise will play a pivotal role in strengthening our competitive position and leadership in Kuwait's investment sector." Emphasizing the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion, AlMuzaini concluded, "Diversity is a cornerstone of our company, women make up 46 percent of our workforce, and we maintain a 71 percent Kuwaiti representation."

been investing heavily in the area, while Washington has also placed restrictions on the export of the sensitive technology.

Olivier Ezratty, an independent expert in quantum technologies, told AFP in October that private and public investment in the field has totaled around \$20 billion worldwide over the past five years. Regular computers function in binary fashion: they carry out tasks using tiny fragments of data known as bits that are only ever either expressed as 1 or 0. But fragments of data on a quantum computer, known as qubits, can be both 1 and 0 at the same time - allowing them to crunch an enormous number of potential outcomes simultaneously.

Crucially, Google's chip demonstrated the ability to reduce computational errors exponentially as it scales up - a feat that has eluded researchers for nearly 30 years. The breakthrough in error correction, published in leading science journal Nature, showed that adding more qubits to the system actually reduced errors rather than increasing them - a fundamental requirement for building practical quantum computers. Error correction is the "end game" in quantum computing and Google is "confidently progressing" along the path, according to Google director of quantum hardware Julian Kelly. — AFP



CALIFORNIA: This undated image courtesy of Google shows the company's new quantum computing chip 'Willow'. Google on December 9, 2024, said the chip was a major breakthrough that could bring practical quantum computing closer to reality. — AFP

A quantum computer that can tackle these challenges is still years away, but Willow marks a significant step in that direction, according to Neven and members of his team. While still in its early stages, scientists believe that superfast quantum computing will eventually be able to power innovation in a range of fields. Quantum research is seen as a critical field and both the United States and China have

Google announces quantum computing chip breakthrough

SAN FRANCISCO: Google on Monday showed off a new quantum computing chip that it said was a major breakthrough that could bring practical quantum computing closer to reality. A custom chip called "Willow" does in minutes what it would take leading supercomputers 10 septillion years to complete, according to Google Quantum AI founder Hartmut Neven. "Written out, there is a 1 with 25 zeros," Neven said of the time span while briefing journalists. "A mind-boggling number."

Neven's team of about 300 people at Google is on a mission to build quantum computing capable of handling otherwise unsolvable problems like safe fusion power and stopping climate change. "We see Willow as an important step in our journey to build a useful quantum computer with practical applications in areas like drug discovery, fusion energy, battery design and more," said Google CEO Sundar Pichai on X.

OpenAI releases Sora AI video generator to public

SAN FRANCISCO: OpenAI has released the latest version of its highly anticipated Sora video generator to the public, stepping into an increasingly crowded field of AI tools that has raised concerns about disruption to creative industries. The company behind ChatGPT said its latest version, dubbed Sora Turbo, offers significant speed improvements over the February preview model and can create high-definition videos lasting up to 22 seconds. While tech giants Google and Meta have also announced similar video tools, none have yet met the huge expectations set for AI since the launch of ChatGPT two years ago.

In a launch demonstration, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman acknowledged the video technology's early stage but insisted that "it's going to get a lot, lot better." The service will be available to ChatGPT Plus and Pro subscribers, though notably absent from European and British markets for now. "We're going to try our hardest to be able to launch there," Altman said in a livestream. Basic subscribers can generate up to 50 videos monthly at standard definition, with options to create content in various aspect ratios and incorporate existing media.

OpenAI has implemented safeguards against misuse, including verification metadata and visible watermarks. The company is temporarily restricting the generation of videos featuring real people while it strengthens anti-deepfake measures. Despite the launch, Sora still faces technical challenges. Early reviews note inconsistent realism and difficulties with complex sequences. An OpenAI employee tempered expectations in the announcement livestream: "If you come into Sora with the expectation that you'll just be able to click a button and generate a feature film, I think you're coming in with the wrong expectation." — AFP

Business

'No winners' in trade war with US, China's Xi warns

China export surge slows as leaders eye economic revamp

BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping warned Tuesday that there would be "no winners" in a trade war with the United States and vowed the country would hit its growth goals for the year. Former US president Donald Trump — who returns to the White House next month — unleashed a grueling trade war with China during his first term in office, lambasting alleged intellectual property theft and other "unfair" practices. He has pledged to impose even higher tariffs on China after taking office on January 20, as Beijing is grappling with a shaky post-pandemic economic recovery.

"Tariff wars, trade wars, and technology wars go against historical trends and economic rules, and there will be no winners," Xi said of China-US relations while meeting several heads of multilateral financial institutions in Beijing, according to state broadcaster CCTV. "China is willing to maintain dialogue with the US government, expand cooperation, manage differences and promote the development of China-US relations in a stable, healthy and sustainable direction," said Xi.

Beijing is targeting annual growth this year of around five percent, despite sluggish domestic consumption, high unemployment and a prolonged crisis in the vast property sector. Xi also said during Tuesday's meeting that China had "full confidence" in achieving its 2024 growth goal, state media reported. His remarks came as official data showed the country's exports rose last month at a slower rate than expected while imports shrunk further, underscoring the challenges China is still facing. The latest reading reinforced the need for more support a day after top officials pledged to bolster stuttering growth.

Trade war looms

Overseas shipments this year have represented a rare bright spot in the Chinese economy, with domestic spending mired in a slump and persistent woes in the property sector spooking investors. Exports jumped

6.7 percent on-year to \$312.3 billion last month, China's General Administration of Customs said. But the figure was much slower than the 8.7 percent anticipated by economists in a Bloomberg survey and well down from the 12.7 percent leap in October, which was the strongest in more than two years. The data showed exports grew 5.4 percent on-year in January-November. "China's exports were perhaps the biggest upside surprise for the economy in 2024," wrote Lynn Song, chief economist for Greater China at ING. This is "one of the main reasons China is set to achieve its 'around five percent' growth target" for this year, he added.

Analysts have suggested the recent surge in shipments is because foreign buyers fearing another trade standoff were racing to beat any possible tariffs on Chinese goods by Trump. "We could see some frontloading of exports in the coming few months but momentum is likely to soften after this is done, unless the outcome of tariff negotiations is surprisingly positive," wrote Song. The 3.9 percent drop in imports last month extended a slide in the previous month — and was much worse than the 0.9 percent rise forecast — as domestic demand continues to be dampened by lacklustre consumer spending.

The readings come as investors closely watch signals from Chinese leaders, who are convening this week in Beijing for a series of key meetings on economic planning for the coming year. The Politburo, China's top decision-making body, on Monday urged "vigorous" support for consumption and a loosening of monetary policy in 2025. But observers are still waiting for the announcement of specific policies, particularly any measures to significantly bolster consumption. Zhang Zhiwei, president and chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management, said in a note that another key meeting on economic policy — expected to take place in the coming days — could "shed more light, particularly on the fiscal policy front".



LIANYUNGANG: A container ship sails from the port at Lianyungang, in China's eastern Jiangsu province on December 10, 2024. Chinese President Xi Jinping warned on December 10 that there would be "no winners" in a trade war with the United States and vowed the country would hit its growth goals for the year. — AFP

Meanwhile, Chinese exports rose in November at a slower rate than expected while imports shrunk further, official data showed Tuesday, reinforcing the need for more support a day after top officials pledged to bolster the stuttering growth. Overseas shipments have this year represented a rare bright spot in the Chinese economy, with domestic spending mired in a slump and persistent woes in the property sector spooking investors. However, observers pointed out that the recent

spike in exports could be down to companies ramping up stockpiles amid fears of another China-US trade war when Donald Trump takes the White House next month. Exports jumped 6.7 percent on-year to \$312.3 billion last month, China's General Administration of Customs said. The reading was much slower than the 8.7 percent anticipated by economists in a Bloomberg survey and well down from the 12.7 percent leap in October, which was the strongest in more than two years. — AFP

European stock markets drop but Seoul rebounds

LONDON: European stock markets dropped Tuesday after Seoul rebounded as traders focused on political upheaval in France and South Korea in addition to China's latest stimulus plans. Commodity markets were steadier after oil and gold won strong support Monday owing to an uncertain future for Syria and the wider crude-rich Middle East. The Paris stock market retreated and the euro fell versus the dollar, as French party leaders were set to gather at President Emmanuel Macron's Elysee Palace office to chart a route towards a new government.

Wall Street on Monday pulled back from all-time highs as investors awaited key US inflation data this week. Stock markets struggled "amid concerns that China's economic stimulus measures might not have a long-lasting effect", noted Dan Coatsworth, investment analyst at AJ Bell. Official data Tuesday showed Chinese exports rose in November at a slower rate than expected while imports shrunk further, reinforcing the need for more support a day after top officials pledged to bolster the stuttering growth.

Following the data's release, Chinese President Xi Jinping said: "China has full confidence to achieve this year's economic growth target and will continue to play its role as the biggest engine of world economic growth." The growth plan comes as Beijing contemplates Donald Trump's second term in the White House. The US president-elect has indicated he will reignite his hardball trade policies, fuelling fears of another standoff between the superpowers.

Leaders have battled for almost two years to kickstart China's economy, which has been battered by weak domestic consumption and a debilitating property sector crisis. "Beijing kept its stimulus measures very modest in 2024, because the goal was to stabilize the economy and rehabilitate confidence," said Shehzad Qazi, managing director at consultants China Beige Book. "Now, Beijing is almost singularly focused on protecting China from the onslaught of forthcoming Trump tariffs." The Shanghai stock market ended higher and Hong Kong fell. Seoul's Kospi index rallied more than two percent after tumbling since President Yoon Suk Yeol declared short-lived martial law on December 3. — Agencies

Key issues driving China's economic policy pivot

BEIJING: China's leaders are expected to meet this week to flesh out economic targets for next year, after Beijing announced a major policy shift in a bid to stimulate growth. Here's what you need to know about the government's changing approach and the problems facing the world's second-largest economy:

How has China's policy changed?

The leadership said Monday that Beijing would implement a "moderately loose" monetary policy and a "more proactive" fiscal policy next year. The terminology represented a shift away from the government's previous commitment to a more cautious approach. And analysts said the announcement marked the boldest such pivot since Beijing adopted fiscal prudence in 2011 to address the fallout from the global financial crisis. The disclosure showed the government recognized the urgency of its economic woes and was willing to



Burgan Bank launches 2nd round of investment and management academy

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank launched the second round of the Investment and Wealth Management Academy; a program dedicated to fostering an environment of continued learning which is held in collaboration with global professional education and training leader Fitch Learning. The three-week intensive program is designed to help staff from across key departments acquire the latest tools and knowledge, enabling them to remain competitive and deliver an outstanding service to Burgan's Private Banking and Wealth Management clients.

This comes as part of Burgan Bank's dedicated human capital development strategy and commitment to advancing Kuwait's professional talents. "Our year-long learning and development efforts are designed with care to fulfill our promise of creating an environment where employees are constantly growing professionally and personally, which ultimately enables us to continue providing our retail customers and corporate clients with the best banking experience possible," said Fatma Ahmad - Senior Manager - Learning and Development at Burgan Bank.

"To guarantee that employees on all fronts receive equal opportunities for growth and development, we are proud to partner with the best educational institutions in Kuwait and worldwide to tailor specialized training programs that address our staff's varying learn-

ing needs." Sixteen promising employees from Private Banking, Retail Banking, Risk Management, and Operations were selected to attend the Academy's three-week program, which focuses on advanced investment and wealth management strategies and is designed in accordance with the international market's standards.

The program aims to help the participants acquire the knowledge and develop the skills required to obtain the Chartered Institute for Securities and Investment - London (CISI) certification and prepare for the International Introduction to Securities and Investment (IISI) exam. As a certified Great Place to Work, Burgan Bank continues to offer its employees numerous channels for personal and professional growth, tailored to suit individuals' learning styles and interests.

Besides its leading training and learning programs, such as Ro'ya and Entelaqah, Burgan Bank also provides less formal spaces for self-paced development, including the Burgan Talk podcast and Lean-In Circle for Women Empowerment. Owing to its dedication to expanding its

learning and development scope, Burgan Bank received several accolades including the prestigious Brandon Hall Group Human Capital Management (HCM) Gold Award of Excellence in the "Learning and Development" category for the "Best Use of Social Collaborative Learning".

Fatma Ahmad

Challenges economy faces

A debt crisis in the crucial housing sector, chronically low consumption and high youth unemployment are some of the key issues that have dragged on Chinese growth since the end of the pandemic. Beijing faces an uphill struggle to expand gross domestic product by its target of around five percent this year — itself a far more modest figure than its double-digit growth around a decade ago. The picture is expected to darken further after US President-elect Donald Trump takes office next month and renews a trade war that would see imports from China subjected to high additional tariffs.

China's GDP could fall by 1.5 percent in the "next few years" if Trump imposes his threatened tariffs of 60 percent, according to analysts at ANZ. Qazi, of China Beige Book, said growing geopolitical tensions would leave markets "salivating for more and more stimulus". But if Beijing excessively supports the supply side, "it'll only worsen the overcapacity problem, lead to more cheap Chinese goods being dumped abroad, and only raise trade tensions" even further, he added. President Xi Jinping said Tuesday that the government had "full confidence" in meeting the annual target — and warned that any trade war with Washington would have "no winners". — AFP

News in Brief

French power supply disrupted

PARIS: Some 2.5 gigawatts (GW) of French power production was disrupted by a strike by workers at nuclear and hydro facilities operated by state-owned power giant EDF on Tuesday, data from the company showed. Almost 1 gigawatt of hydro power production was taken offline along with 1.5 GW from two reactors at the Paluel nuclear plant northern France, EDF data showed. EDF was not immediately available for comment. This equates to near 4 percent of French power production at 1045 GMT, data from grid operator RTE showed. France is expected to remain a net exporter throughout the day, RTE data showed. — Reuters

Spain tackles offshoring

MADRID: Spain's leftist government on Tuesday unveiled a draft bill designed to prevent manufacturing companies from moving jobs out of the country, especially if they have received public aid. The draft law, which was approved by cabinet, requires any company "wishing to cease its industrial activity" in Spain, to inform the government of this "at least nine months beforehand", the industry ministry said in a statement. If a company which plans to relocate abroad has received more than three million euros (\$3.15 million) in public aid, they would have to repay it if they reduced their output in Spain by more than 65 percent, or their workforce by 500 people or more, the statement added. — AFP

IMF and Ecuador reach deal

WASHINGTON: IMF staff and Ecuador have reached agreement on a loan program review, clearing the way for the disbursement of around \$500 million to help safeguard macroeconomic stability, the major financial institution said Monday. "Program performance has been strong," the International Monetary Fund announced in a statement, adding that the Ecuadorian authorities had met all the relevant "quantitative performance criteria and indicative targets" under an existing 48-month loan agreement. "They have also made substantial progress on the implementation of their ambitious structural reform agenda supported by the program," the IMF statement added. The announcement marks the first review of the loan program, signed in May this year, which is worth a total of around \$4 billion. — AFP

UK, Cyprus target cash flow

NICOSIA: Britain and Cyprus pledged on Tuesday to fight illicit Russian cash flows during a visit by UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, in an endorsement of the pro-west tilt the Mediterranean island has taken since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A former British colony, Cyprus has worked hard to shake off a reputation as a haven for Russian businesses and light-touch regulation, aligning with the West over Russia and the growing turmoil in the Middle East. Britain is providing know-how in helping Cyprus establish a new national sanctions implementation unit, and will launch education programs for law enforcement teams next year, Downing Street said. "Together with the Republic of Cyprus, we are stemming the flow of illicit finance through Europe to starve (Russian President Vladimir) Putin's war machine and protect global stability," Starmer said in a statement. — Reuters

Business

NBK offers customers a unique digital experience, first of its kind in Kuwait

KUWAIT: In line with its dedication to meeting customers' needs and providing exceptional services and rewards that live up to their expectations, National Bank of Kuwait's (NBK) is launching a one-of-its-kind digital experience to get NBK Visa Infinite Credit Card and link it with Al Jawhara or Al Jawhara Savers Account for an exclusive range of benefits. NBK announced that customers can open an Al Jawhara or Al Jawhara Savers Account and get the NBK Al Jawhara Miles Credit Card through the NBK Mobile Banking App free for life when depositing and blocking KD 3,000 or more in Al Jawhara or Al Jawhara Saver Account.

The bank mentioned that cardholders also get Welcome Miles 3x the card's credit limit up to 150,000 NBK Miles Points. The NBK Al Jawhara MilesCredit Cardholders also get 3x chances in Al Jawhara draws, thus increasing their chances to win in the weekly and monthly as well as grand prize draws held three times a year. NBK continues to offer customers new levels of convenience and excellence. Now, with just a few taps, they can instantly issue any of the credit cards through the NBK Mobile Banking App, and enjoy an integrated digital experience empowered by cutting-edge technology.

These cards are easily and securely issued against their account balances or term de-



Al-Nusif:

- We seek to enrich customer banking experience by providing top-notch products and offers that meet their expectations
- Opening an Al Jawhara or Al Jawhara Saver Account to get the NBK Visa Infinite Credit Card instantly through NBK Mobile Banking App
- This unique digital experience links NBK Miles Program's exclusive benefits with Kuwait's biggest draws program 'Al Jawhara', in addition to launching the NBK Al Jawhara Miles Credit Card
- Customers can enjoy an integrated digital experience where they can issue any of the credit cards instantly through NBK Mobile Banking App

positing, providing flexibility and efficiency that meets the evolving needs of the modern world. Commenting on this, Hisham Al-Nusif, GM - Consumer Banking Group, at National Bank of Kuwait said, "NBK always seeks to enrich customer banking experience by providing top-notch products and offers that meet the expectations of different segments and offer them an exceptional banking experience."

Al-Nusif mentioned that all customers can now open Al Jawhara or Al Jawhara Saver Account to get the NBK Al Jawhara Miles Credit Card instantly through the NBK Mobile Banking App, thus

benefiting from NBK Miles Program which gives cardholders 3 miles for every KD 1 spent locally and 5 miles for every KD 1 spent abroad. Other benefits also include unlimited complimentary airport lounge visits with one guest, Purchase Protection, Extended Warranty and getting the chance to enter various draws, adding that NBK Credit Cards offer the best payment method.

It is worth mentioning that Al Jawhara draws offer the biggest prizes in Kuwait, with KD 20,000 prize weekly, KD 125,000 monthly, and grand prizes worth KD 1 million each, three times a year. NBK also provides Al Jawhara Saver Account



holders a bonus interest rate up to 1.5 percent for the first year, in addition to the chance to enter the monthly and grand draws if savings reach KD 5,000 and above. The bank also offers customers who have been banking with it for more than 2 years double chances in case they were not eligible to earn the existing double chances.

Brainy, normal guy: The suspect in US CEO's slaying

WASHINGTON: The suspect in the high-profile killing of a health insurance CEO that has gripped the United States graduated from an Ivy League University, reportedly hails from a wealthy family, and wrote social media posts brimming with cerebral musings. Luigi Mangione, 26, was thrust into the spotlight Monday after police revealed he is their person of interest in the brutal murder of United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson, a father of two, last week in broad daylight in Manhattan in a case that laid bare deep frustration and anger with America's privatized medical system.

News of his capture in Pennsylvania - following a tip from a McDonald's worker - triggered an explosion of online activity, with Mangione quickly amassing new followers on social media as citizen sleuths and US media tried to understand who he is. While some lauded him as a hero and lamented his arrest, others analyzed his intellectual takes in search of ideological clues.

A photo on one of his social media accounts includes an X-ray of an apparently injured spine. No explicit political affiliation has emerged. Meanwhile, memes and jokes proliferated, many riffing on his first name and comparing him to the "Mario Bros." character Luigi, sometimes depicted in AI-altered images wielding a gun or holding a Big Mac. "Godspeed. Please know that we all hear you," wrote one user on Facebook. "I want to donate to your defense fund," added another.

According to Mangione's LinkedIn profile, he is employed as a data engineer at TrueCar, a California-based online auto marketplace. A company spokesperson told AFP Mangione "has not been an employee of our company since 2023." Although he had been living in Hawaii ahead of the killing, he originally hails from Towson, Maryland, near Baltimore. He comes from a prominent and wealthy Italian-American family, according to the Baltimore Banner. The family owns local businesses, including the Hayfields Country Club, its website says.

Standout student

A standout student, Mangione graduated at the top of his high school class in 2016. In an interview with his local paper at the time, he praised his teachers for fostering a passion for learning beyond grades and encouraging intellectual curiosity. A former student who knew Mangione at the Gilman School told AFP the suspect struck him as "a normal guy, nice kid." "There was nothing about him that was off, at least from my perception," this person said, asking that their name not be used. "Seemed to just be smiling, and kind of seemed like he was a smart kid. Ended up being valedictorian, which confirmed that," the former student said.

Mangione went on to attend the prestigious University of Pennsylvania, where he completed both a bachelor's and master's degree in computer science by 2020, according to a university spokesperson. While at Penn, Mangione co-lead a group of 60 undergraduates who collaborated on video game projects, as noted in a now-deleted university webpage, archived on the Wayback Machine.

On Instagram, where his following has skyrocketed from hundreds to tens of thousands, Mangione shared snapshots of his travels in Mexico, Puerto Rico and Hawaii. He also posted shirtless photos flaunting a six-pack and appeared in celebratory posts with fellow members of the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity. However, it is on X (formerly Twitter) that users have scoured Mangione's posts for potential motives. His header photo - an X-ray of a spine with bolts - remains cryptic, with no public explanation.

Finding a coherent political ideology has also proved elusive, though he had written a review of Ted Kaczynski's manifesto on the online site godreads, calling it "prescient." Kaczynski, known as the Unabomber, carried out a string of bombings in the United States from 1978 to 1995, a campaign he said was aimed at halting the advance of modern society and technology. Mangione called Kaczynski "rightfully imprisoned," while also saying "violence never solved anything" is a statement uttered by cowards and predators. — AFP

Air passenger numbers to top 5bn in 2025

GENEVA: Air passenger numbers are forecast to top five billion for the first time next year and the sector's revenues will break the trillion-dollar barrier, the global aviation body IATA said Tuesday. "Passenger numbers are expected to reach 5.2 billion in 2025, a

6.7 percent rise compared to 2024 and the first time that the number of passengers has exceeded the five billion mark," the International Air Transport Association said in a statement. Total industry revenues are meanwhile forecast at \$1.007 trillion, helped by falling oil and fuel prices. "the first time that industry revenues top the \$1 trillion mark," it added. Revenues will be up 4.4 percent from 2024, it said.

"All of this gives us a financial performance which I think is absolutely worth popping the champagne" after a post-pandemic bounce-back, IATA chief economist Marie Owens Thomsen told a news conference in Geneva. IATA's Director General Willie Walsh said in the statement that IATA expected

profits of \$36.6 billion despite "persistent supply chain challenges, infrastructure deficiencies, onerous regulation and a rising tax burden".

IATA represents around 340 companies that account for 80 percent of world air traffic. Airlines have been hit by rising fuel costs since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 but IATA said it expected this factor to ease next year, with the cost of jet fuel averaging \$87 a barrel, down from \$99 in 2024. "Lower oil prices and resulting fuel costs are a major driver of improved prospects for airlines in 2025," it said. "Should these not materialize for any reason and considering the industry's thin margins, the outlook could change significantly." — AFP

President's push to scrap gold mining ban causes outcry in El Salvador

SAN SALVADOR: El Salvador's gang-busting strongman President Nayib Bukele has set out on a new mission: to kickstart his country's sputtering economy by inviting back the mining companies that were barred seven years ago. El Salvador was the first country in the world to ban the mining of metals in 2017, warning of the harmful effects of the chemicals used in mining, like cyanide and mercury.

The move by Bukele's predecessor, former left-wing rebel Salvador Sanchez Ceren, reflected the growing rejection of mining by rural communities in central America, devastated by the industry's adverse health and environmental effects. Costa Rica and Honduras have both banned open-pit mining and Panama declared a moratorium on new mining concessions last year after mass protests over plans for a huge copper mine. But on November 27, the populist Bukele signaled he wanted to change course.

In a series of posts on the social network X he claimed that El Salvador, a country of 6.6 million people, had "potentially" the largest gold deposits per square kilometer in the world. "God placed a gigantic treasure underneath our feet," he wrote, arguing that the mining ban was "absurd." Bukele cited a study - written by unknown authors and which he did not publish - that he said showed that mining a mere 4 percent of the country's gold deposits would bring in \$131 billion, "equivalent to 380 percent of GDP." "If we make responsible use of our natural resources, we can change the economy of El Salvador overnight," he added a few days later.

'Huge risk'

Since El Salvador dollarized its remittances-reliant economy in 2001, it has registered annual growth of between just 2 and 3.5 percent. Twenty-seven percent of Salvadorans live in poverty, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and 70 percent of the workforce operates in the informal sector. Bukele, in power since 2019, took a huge gamble by investing hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayer money in bitcoin and making the cryptocurrency legal tender in 2021 - the first country in the world to do so.

India mandates local-only solar energy components from 2026

NEW DELHI: Indian clean energy companies will only be able to use solar modules built locally from June 2026, according to a government order apparently aimed at reducing Chinese imports. Clean energy sector leaders in India, including ventures by conglomerates Reliance Enterprises and Tata Power, rely on Chinese vendors as their major suppliers. As much as 70 percent of India's solar power generation capacity is powered by Chinese equipment, according to industry estimates.

Indian companies are already required by law to use locally made solar panels in government projects. The new rule mandates that only modules made from locally built photovoltaic cells, which convert light energy into electricity, can be used in projects with a bid deadline after Monday's order. "This condition will have to be followed irrespective of the date of commissioning," said the order, issued by India's renewable energy ministry. The government is yet to issue the list of approved manufacturers of solar cells because "the installed capacity of solar cells in the country was lower than demand".

But "with installed capacity of solar cells in the



SANTA ROSA DE LIMA: View of the abandoned San Sebastian mine in Santa Rosa de Lima, La Union department, El Salvador. — AFP

But most Salvadorans have shunned the cryptocurrency. Additionally, the country's adoption of bitcoin hampered Bukele's talks with the International Monetary Fund over a \$1.3 billion loan. He now appears to be pinning his hopes for a recovery on mining. But he faces a stiff challenge from environmentalists who have won several victories over mining companies. "It's one thing to put a mine in the Atacama Desert (in Chile) and another thing to open an open-pit mine in Chalatenango," said Pedro Cabezas, leader of the Central American Alliance Against Mining. Chalatenango is a community north of the capital San Salvador that successfully opposed a gold mine project in 2006. Antonio Pacheco, of the Association of Economic and Social Development NGO, which has pioneered the fight against mining, said that Bukele's proposal to mine areas along the mighty Lempa River, which supplies water for San Salvador, represented a "tremendous risk" to residents.

'Generate employment'

In the former gold mining town of Santa Rosa de Lima, where US miner Commerce Group had its

environmental licence revoked in 2006 over river pollution, Bukele's plan elicited a mixed response. "I think that this could cause the area to prosper... it would generate employment," Ruben Delgado, a 55-year-old construction worker, told AFP. Jose Torres, a 72-year-old artisanal miner who extracts gold nuggets from disused mining tunnels by hand, said he feared losing his income to multinationals.

The nearby San Sebastian River was contaminated by industrial mining, and remains polluted to this day as artisanal mining continues. Economist Carlos Acevedo, former president of the Central Bank of El Salvador, commented that the "spectacular" figures presented by Bukele created the impression that El Salvador "is sitting on a gold mine." He said that the 50 million ounces of gold touted by Bukele as a fraction of the country's reserves could pay off El Salvador's external debt - which accounts for 85 percent of GDP - four times over. But he added that there was "no recipe for generating growth from one day to the next" and that any boon for El Salvador would depend on how much royalties mining companies paid. — AFP

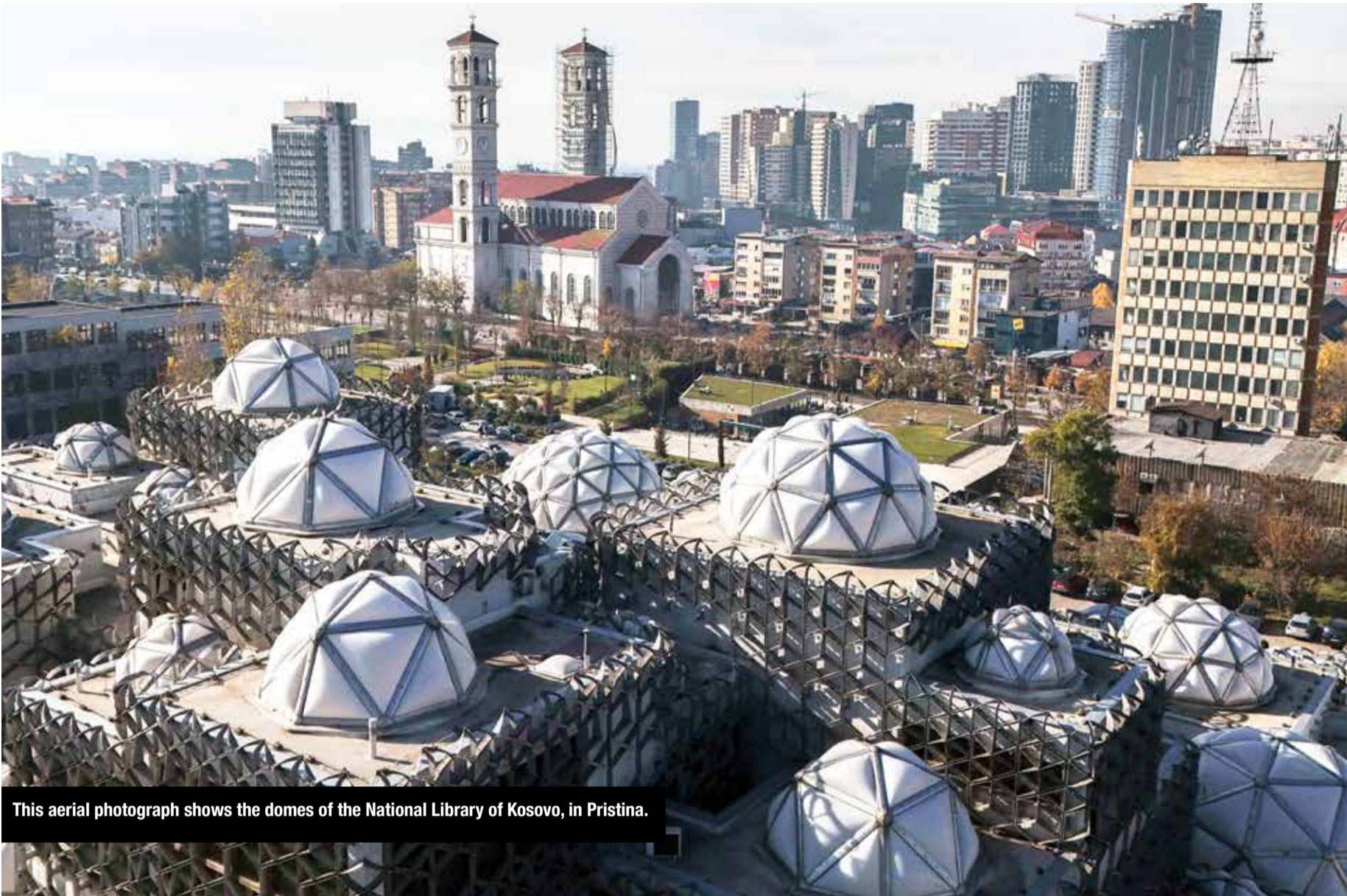


GREATER NOIDA: Photo shows an aerial view of solar panels installed by SunSource Energy at a food processing plant in Greater Noida. — AFP

country expected to increase substantially in next year", a list of approved manufacturers will not be released, the order said. India's solar equipment manufacturing space has made rapid strides in recent years. A report by Bengaluru-based consulting

firm Mercom India said the country's solar panel production was expected to reach 95 gigawatts by the end of 2025. India added 13.3 gigawatts of solar equipment manufacturing capacity in the first half of 2024, according to the same report. — AFP

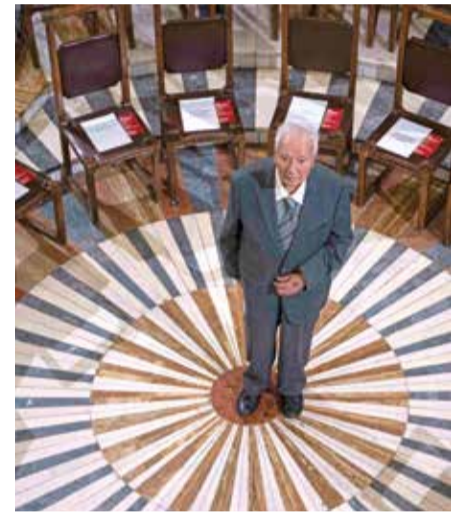
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2024



This aerial photograph shows the domes of the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina.



This photograph shows an amphitheater of the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina.



The architect of the National Library of Kosovo Croatian Andrija Mutnjakovic poses in the library in Pristina.

Ugly or awesome? Kosovo national library stirs never-ending debate



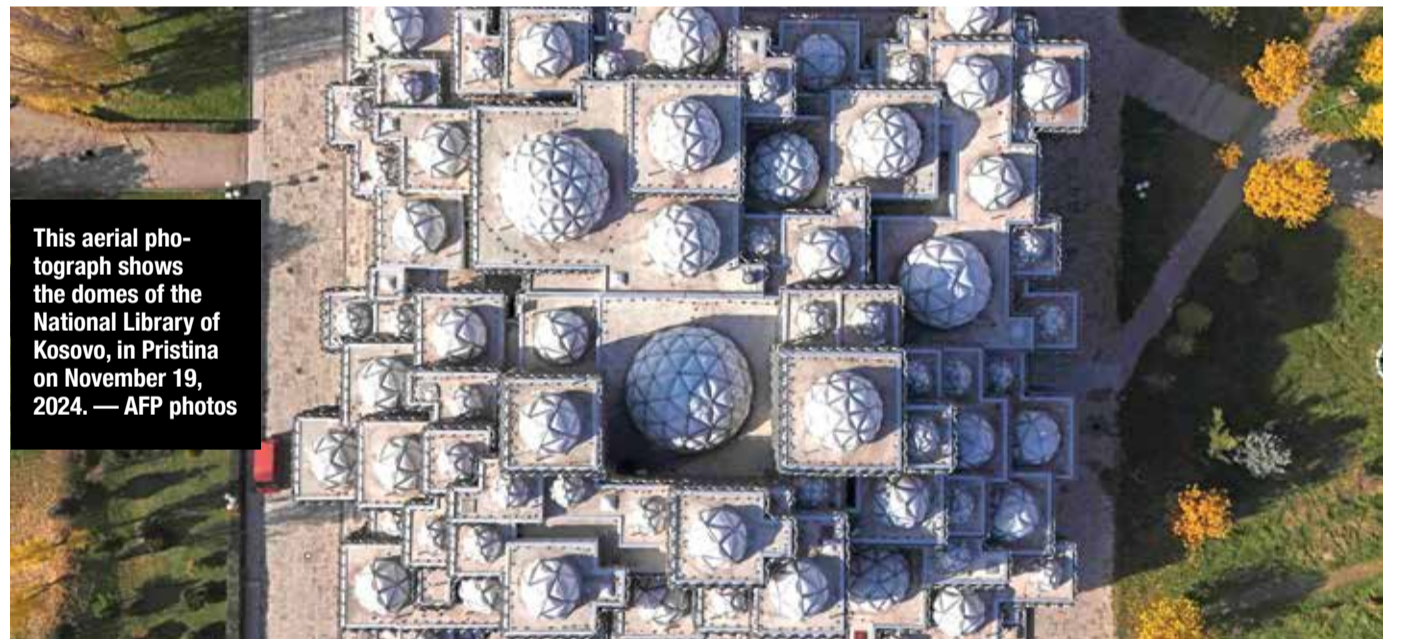
The architect of the National Library of Kosovo Croatian Andrija Mutnjakovic poses under one of the domes of the library in Pristina.



A visitor walks inside the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina.

Smack in the middle of Kosovo's capital Pristina, the national library is all but impossible to miss. To some it is an architectural wonder, with its bubble domes and shimmering steel lattice. "It's the cherry on the cake of Pristina, and of Kosovo," declared local tourist guide Muamer Hasani. Whenever you "search for something about Pristina, the first photo that comes up is of the national library," he added. But for others, the building is an abomination. "It's so ugly that it blinds you," said a middle-aged Pristina resident who asked not to be named. "We've been living with it for decades and it hasn't been renovated yet. It's annoying, but what can we do?" Opened in 1982, the library has witnessed Kosovo's occasional highs and bitter lows -- from the breakup of Yugoslavia to the bloody war with Serbia in the late 1990s, independence and all the turbulent history since.

'Iconic object'
Its 74 translucent domes were designed to provide natural lighting for the reading rooms below. The grid of steel covering its brutalist exterior deflects sunlight, cooling the building and protecting the books inside. Croatian architect Andrija Mutnjakovic, who oversaw the design, said he was trying to reflect Kosovo's diverse culture and history. "Like any architect, I am in love with my building. I am glad to see that 40 years after its construction, it is as beautifully preserved as if it opened yesterday," Mut-



This aerial photograph shows the domes of the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina on November 19, 2024. — AFP photos

njakovic told AFP. He has little time for those who criticize it. The library's director Blerina Rogova Gaxha agrees. "It is an iconic object of Kosovar culture, giving Pristina itself identity because it is the main object in the capital that catches the eye," Rogova Gaxha told AFP. Its design pays homage to the ancient cultures that had once ruled Kosovo, she said -- Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans and Illyrians.

'Gelatinous eggs'
But for newcomers to the Kosovo

capital, the cultural references and architectural brilliance are not always apparent at first, or even second, glance. The Lonely Planet travel guide called the library "easily one of Pristina's most notable buildings". "Think gelatinous eggs wearing armor," it added. "The building looks quite strange. It is brutalist architecture but interesting," said Julie, a student from Warsaw, who was photographing the library from several angles. "Maybe it is not the prettiest because it has a lot of concrete and is grey from the outside," said Paula Gers, a student visiting from

Germany. "I wouldn't rank it among the ugliest. I've seen much worse." For the library's director, the ongoing debate over its aesthetics is a blessing in disguise. "There are not as many readers as there used to be, but there are an extraordinary number of local and foreign visitors," Gaxha said. Everyone wants to come and have a look for themselves, she said, trying to work out "why is it considered the ugliest", wanting to see it from the inside as well as from outside. —AFP



This photograph shows an outside view of the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina.



This photograph shows the view from the reading room of the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina.



This photograph shows a dome of the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina.



Visitors walk inside the National Library of Kosovo, in Pristina.

Lifestyle

RARE ROMAN COIN SELLS FOR 1.98 MILLION EUROS AT AUCTION

A rare Roman coin featuring the portrait of Brutus, the assassin of statesman Julius Caesar, sold Monday at a Geneva auction for 1.98 million euros, according to organizer Numismatica Genevensis.

The historic item was purchased by a "European collector following intense bidding among eight online bidders" for more than 1.83 million Swiss francs (\$2.09 million), the dealer said in a statement.

The coin was originally priced at more than 800,000 euros. Weighing eight grams and similar in size to a euro, it is "a piece of history" marking the last chapters of the Roman Republic,

Frank Baldacci, director of Numismatica Genevensis told AFP ahead of the sale. The coin was minted in 43-42 BC by Brutus and his supporters who murdered Julius Caesar in March 44 BC, Baldacci explained.

It features the profile of Brutus surrounded by laurel wreath on the front and has war symbols on the reverse to celebrate his military victories.

The wreath in particular is a sign of "someone who wants to promote himself as emperor", Baldacci said, adding its circulation offered "propaganda value" for Brutus. It is one of only 17 known artefacts of its kind, the auction house said.

It resurfaced in the 1950s, published in a private collector's catalogue and later appeared in a 2006 auction in Zurich where it was sold to another private collector for 360,000 Swiss francs.—AFP

A rare Roman gold coin bearing the image of Brutus, the famed assassin of Julius Caesar is displayed at the Numismatica Genevensis (NGSA) auction house in Geneva on December 4, 2024.—AFP



(From left) Director, Jon M Chu, Ariana Grande, Cynthia Erivo, Ethan Slater and Peter Dinklage attend as Universal Pictures presents special New York City WICKED Screening at Metrograph on December 03, 2024 in New York City.



(From left) Fred Hechinger, Connie Nielsen, Paul Mescal and Denzel Washington attend a SiriusXM Town Hall with the cast of "Gladiator II" with host Mike Muse at SiriusXM Studios on November 21, 2024 in New York City.—AFP photos

Gl-icked? Movie theaters pin hopes on big 'Wicked,' 'Gladiator' weekend

US movie theaters are hoping the lightning-in-a-bottle magic of last year's "Barbenheimer" phenomenon can strike again this weekend, with the simultaneous release of two of 2024's most hyped films: "Wicked" and "Gladiator II."

"Wicked" is the movie adaptation of the hit Broadway musical, starring pop sensation Ariana Grande, while "Gladiator II" marks Ridley Scott's return to ancient Rome, 24 years after his epic original won the best picture Oscar.

Whether audiences will embrace the tongue-in-cheek "Glicked" (or "Wickiactor") memes being hopefully circulated by marketing departments -- or even dress up in witch hats and togas -- remains to be seen.

But cinema lobbies and shopping malls across the country are being daubed in the pink-and-green shades of the "Wicked" witches, and kitted out with cardboard miniature Colosseums, ahead of a period that analysts say will be crucial for the industry.

"I am certain that this is going to be the biggest Thanksgiving the industry has ever seen," said Jordan Hohman, an executive at Phoenix Theatres. "Wicked" alone is "the biggest opening film in terms of advance sale tickets" in the US chain's 24-year history, currently pacing 63 percent ahead of "Barbie," added president Cory Jacobson.

While rival Hollywood studios have traditionally been wary of launching two major films on the same weekend, the record-breaking summer of 2023 showed it can be mutually beneficial -- with the right movies. Like "Barbie" and "Oppenheimer," the female-skewing "Wicked" and male-focused "Gladiator II" are "oriented to different audiences," said analyst David A. Gross, of Franchise Entertainment Research.

"Wicked" has inspired promotional tie-ins like a makeup line and a cupcake kit, while "Gladiator" ads have been ubiquitous during NFL telecasts. "There is zero issue in terms of stepping on each other's feet," said Gross.

Still, matching the heady heights of "Barbie" and "Oppenheimer" will be a tough ask. Those films took \$245 million combined on their opening weekend in North America alone. "Barbenheimer" was an example of two films massively over-performing... an unexpected best-

case scenario," cautioned Daniel Loria, senior VP of content strategy for Box-office Media. But part of the industry's current bullishness comes from another massive film, Disney's "Moana 2," which will join "Wicked" and "Gladiator II" in multiplexes just a week later. "I don't think this is a two-picture experience. I think it's a three-picture experience," said Jacobson.

Marketing blitz

Should the next few weeks live up to hopes, it will come at a much-needed time for Hollywood. Despite a profitable summer featuring hit sequels like "Inside Out 2" and "Deadpool & Wolverine," 2024 has been a mixed bag for an industry still dreaming of a return to pre-pandemic numbers.

The first five months of the year were hampered by a thin release schedule, stemming from the production delays caused by Hollywood strikes and Covid. The fall has also been a disappointment, with box office dud "Joker: Folie A Deux" foremost among a series of flops and middling releases.

But the early signs for this weekend look promising. "Gladiator II" opened in dozens of other countries last week, taking a whopping \$87 million overseas. Paramount will be hoping for similar numbers in the US this weekend.

"Wicked," from Universal, the studio behind "Oppenheimer," is predicted to take north of \$100 million this weekend in North America alone. Both movies have benefited from long, expensive marketing campaigns.

At a major Las Vegas movie theater convention in April, Paramount began their annual presentation with an executive riding into the Caesars Palace arena on a chariot flanked by Roman soldiers. Universal's presentation ended with thousands of plastic flowers held aloft by audience members to create a giant green-and-pink "Wicked" themed electronic lightshow.

Eight months later, both studios will learn if those strategies have converted into ticket sales. "When something really catches fire, and it's not just a marketing campaign flogging it, honestly it can just take off and go higher than anybody can predict," said Gross. "So let's see what happens."—AFP

French film director denies child actor abuse in landmark trial

A French filmmaker accused of sexually assaulting actor Adele Haenel when she was 12 denied the charges Monday as his trial opened in Paris, five years after her allegations fired France's #MeToo movement. Haenel shot back, saying "you are a big liar, Mr Ruggia, and you know it very well." Christophe Ruggia is accused of sexually assaulting the star of "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" in the early 2000s when she was between 12 and 14 and he was in his late 30s. Haenel, now 35 and retired from cinema, was the first prominent actor to accuse the French film industry of turning a blind eye to sexual abuse.

"There had to be a French #MeToo and it landed on me," former directors' union chief Ruggia, 59, told the court, calling the allegations "pure lies". Facing up to 10 years in prison and a fine of 150,000 euros (\$159,000) if found guilty of assaulting a minor, he has denied all charges. "He said that he had created her," that he "loved her, that others couldn't understand, that he'd been unlucky to fall in love with her, that she was an adult in a child's body," the judge read, referring to Ruggia.



French director Christophe Ruggia (left) arrives at the Paris Courthouse in Paris.

In 2019, Haenel went public about the assaults, stunning the French film industry, which had been slower than Hollywood to react to the #MeToo movement. Ruggia directed Haenel in the 2002 movie "The Devils", a tale of an incestuous relationship between a boy and his autistic sister. It was her first film role.

The film contains sex scenes between the children and close-ups of Haenel's naked body. In excerpts shown at the trial, one scene showed the 12-year-old actor getting out of the shower and walking down a long corridor naked. In another, the camera zooms in on her as she caresses herself. Haenel looked shaken and at one stage wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. Ruggia watched all the extracts.

Investigators said the actor told them about sequences that made her feel "very uncomfortable" and others that were "violent". "I realized that the film was painful for Adele, that she was shocked by the shooting," Ruggia told the court. He also

said he had the "same relationship" with a child actor playing the brother. Investigators said before the trial that members of the film crew had told them of their "unease" with Ruggia's behavior on set.

'Adele, you're not alone'

Between 2001 and 2004, the teenager went to see Ruggia nearly every Saturday. She told the court he would caress her thighs and touch her. To "act as if it were normal, as if nothing was happening", he "interspersed" words between his gestures, she testified.

"And I would tense up, curl up in a corner of the sofa," she continued angrily. "When he thought I was resisting too much, he would look at me: 'what, well what', and he would continue." Before taking her back to her parents, he would give her a "snack" -- biscuits and an Orangina drink.

It was Haenel herself who "asked to come" to his home, Ruggia said in the dock, wearing jeans and a grey jacket. He said the two "talked about cinema, chatted, most of the time we spent an hour or an hour and a half in front of the shelves of DVDs".

Ruggia added that Haenel "has reconstructed things, she may have interpreted" the interactions as sexual. Asked by the judge why the actor might now bear a grudge against him, the director suggested that she had become "radicalized".

"Look at what she's been doing for the past five years. It started with me, then it's the Cesar (awards) with Polanski" -- all the way to saying that "every minister in the government is a rapist," a visibly aggrieved Ruggia said.

In 2020, Haenel stormed out of the industry's Cesars award ceremony in protest against a prize awarded to veteran director Roman Polanski, who is wanted in the United States for statutory rape. Ruggia denied ever being "sexually attracted" by Haenel as a child. Ruggia's lawyers chose not to cross examine Haenel. The trial resumes Tuesday.

About 50 people, mainly women, gathered outside the court before the hearing chanting: "Adele, we believe you. Rapists we see you". They carried placards with slogans such as: "Adele, you're not alone".

The actor, who has won two Cesars -- the French equivalent of an Oscar -- said she was leaving the industry last year over what she called its complacency towards sexual predators. Cinema legend Gerard Depardieu, 75, is to stand trial in March accused of sexually assaulting two women. He denies the accusations.

Actor Judith Godreche said this year two French directors -- Benoit Jacquot and Jacques Doillon -- had sexually abused her when she was a teenager. Both deny the charges.—AFP



French actor Adele Haenel (center) looks on, next to her lawyer Anouck Michelin, as they arrive for the trial of French director Christophe Ruggia.—AFP photos

Award-winning US poet Nikki Giovanni dies aged 81

Award-winning US poet Nikki Giovanni, who was at the forefront of the Black Arts Movement, died aged 81 after a long battle with cancer, local media reported Tuesday.



Nikki Giovanni speaks during the 61st New York Film Festival - Deep Focus at Elinor Bunin Munroe film center on October 01, 2023 in New York City.—AFP

Widely regarded as one of the most prolific African-American poets, Giovanni received numerous awards and a Grammy nomination for her work on civil rights, gender and race issues.

Giovanni, whose most famous poems included 'Knoxville, Tennessee' and 'Nikki-Rosa', died following her third cancer diagnosis, the media reported.

She "died peacefully on December 9, 2024, with her life-long partner, Virginia (Ginney) Fowler, by her side," her friend and fellow writer Renee Watson said in a statement to CNN.

"We will forever be grateful for the unconditional time she gave to us, to all her literary children across the writerly world," poet Kwame Alexander told US media.

The Black Arts Movement, which flourished between 1965 and 1974, saw a wave of Black culture and literature championed by writers including Maya Angelou, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde.

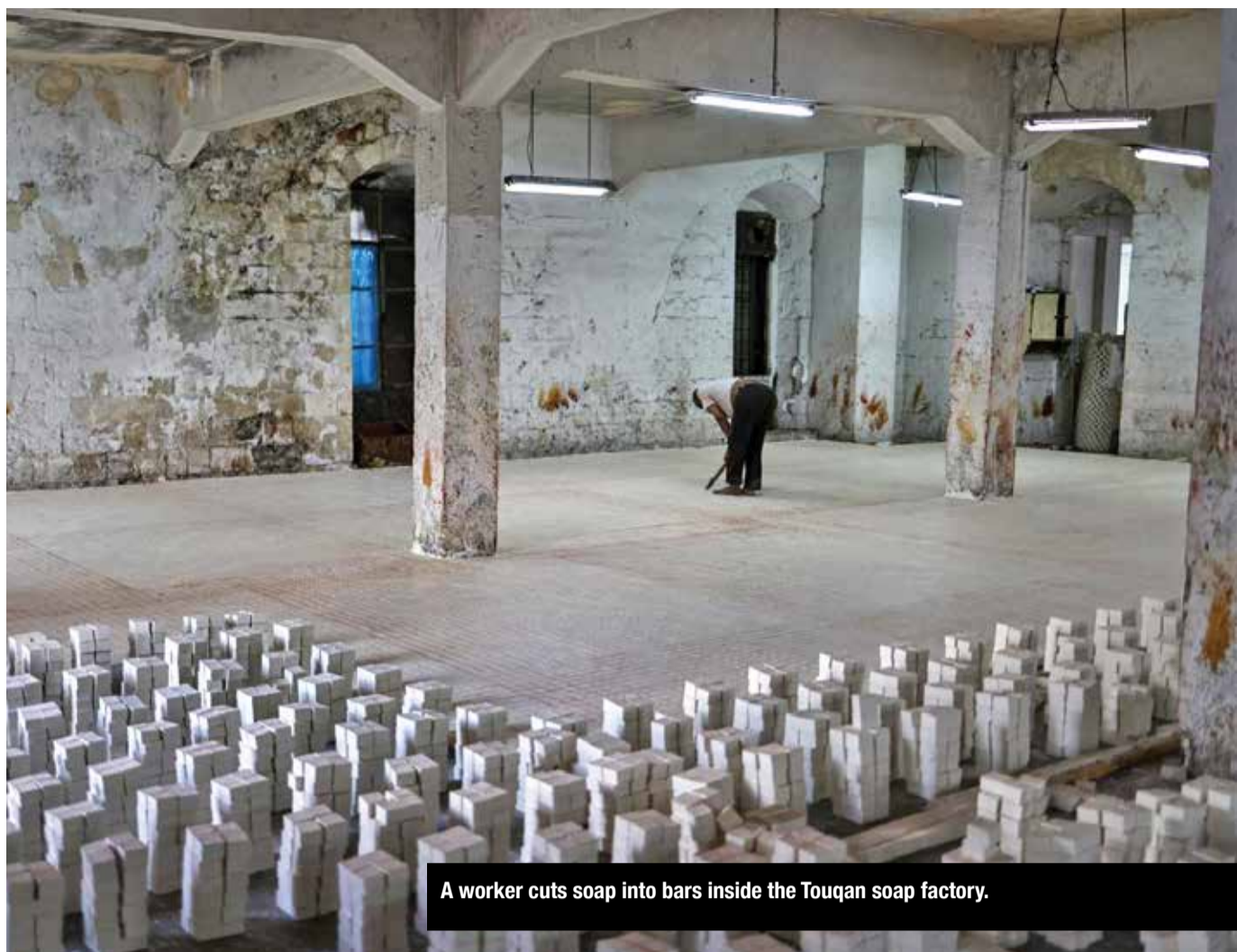
In her writing, Giovanni reflected on her childhood growing up in Tennessee and Ohio, pushed for Black and civil rights, and described her long struggle with lung cancer.

"As one of the cultural icons of the Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements, she became friends with Rosa Parks, Aretha Franklin, James Baldwin, Nina Simone, and Muhammad Ali, and inspired generations of students, artists, activists, musicians, scholars and human beings, young and old," Watson said in her statement.

Giovanni went on to teach creative writing and literature at Virginia Tech and received numerous awards including the NAACP Image Award, the Rosa Parks Award and the Langston Hughes Award for Distinguished Contributions to Arts and Letters.

In 2004, she received a Grammy Best Spoken Word Album nomination for 'The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection'.

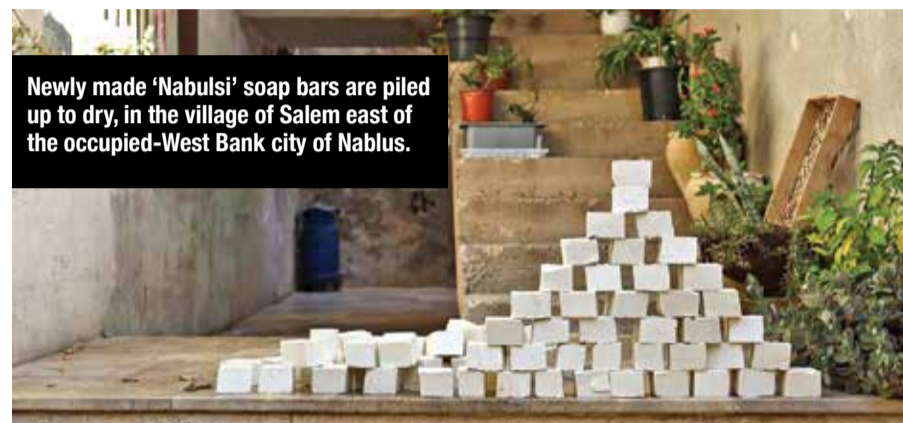
In a brief biography on her website, Giovanni wrote: "I wanted to be a writer who dreams or maybe a dreamer who writes but I knew one book does not a writer make."—AFP



A worker cuts soap into bars inside the Touqan soap factory.



Posters of Palestinians killed by the Zionists are pasted on the outer wall of the Touqan soap factory.



Newly made 'Nabulsi' soap bars are piled up to dry, in the village of Salem east of the occupied-West Bank city of Nablus.

Secrets of Palestinians' UNESCO-listed Nablus soap



A worker cuts soap into bars inside the Touqan soap factory.



A Palestinian woman piles up newly made 'Nabulsi' soap bars to dry in the village of Salem.



A worker wraps soap bars inside the Touqan soap factory.



Palestinian women melt the ingredients for making traditional 'Nabulsi' soap.



A Palestinian woman cuts the soap paste into bars, as she makes traditional 'Nabulsi' soap.

Initiated into the thousand-year-old practice of Nablus soap making by a distant relative, Umm al-Abed is now passing on the secrets of the practice newly designated by UNESCO as intangible world heritage. Umm al-Abed handcrafts soap at her home in the village of Salem, east of Nablus, in one of many small soap workshops across the Zionist-occupied West Bank. The process is rudimentary, involving a plastic bucket in a concrete courtyard and just three ingredients: olive oil, water and lye.

"The person who taught us to make the soap was an elderly relative from the village of Immatin. A long time ago, around 20 to 30 years, she came here and made soap," Umm al-Abed said.

"When she cooked the oil, I watched how she did it. I learnt the processes and I began to make soap myself. I made it for all the residents" of the village, she said.

Behind Umm al-Abed, the women were hard at work. One poured olive oil from a container, then added the lye. Using a long stick, she stirred the mixture with one hand and poured in water with the other. As she did so, the mixture gradually turned vibrant green.

The cooking is done in an oil drum over a wood fire. When the mixture is ready, it is poured into large, plastic-lined trays and left to cool and harden. The giant block is then marked by hand before being cut into small bars of soap with a giant metal sheet. The artisanal process, handed down from generation to generation, was recently added to UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage.

'Need to preserve it'

It joins other Palestinian entries like hikaye, a tradition of female storytelling,



Workers pack bars of soap at a local soap factory in the old city of Nablus, in the occupied West Bank, on November 28, 2024. — AFP photos

the traditional dabkeh dance and embroidery. According to the UN's cultural organization: "The use of olive oil reflects people's strong relation to nature, and many people use their homemade soap as a personal gift for celebrations such as weddings and birthdays."

"Most families in Palestine share the tradition, with both men and women taking part" in all stages of production and children helping to cut and pack it. In Nablus, the Touqan soap factory, established in 1872, continues to churn out bars. It was founded "in the Ottoman pe-

riod and has made soap ever since", said Nael Qubbaj, the factory chief.

He sat in his office, surrounded by faded portraits of suit and fez-wearing men, all members of the Abdul Fattah Tuqan family, co-founders of the factory.

The site's output is considerably higher than that of Umm al-Abed's artisanal workshop. On the factory floor, a layer of soap covered the whole room from wall to wall. A barefoot soap maker slowly walked backwards across the room slicing the vast soap carpet into perfectly sized individual blocks.

The thousands of individual soaps were then stacked into hollow round towers to dry before being individually wrapped. Recognition by UNESCO of Nablus soap "is an acknowledgement by the global community... of the significance of this craft and the need to preserve it," said Qubbaj. Doing so was especially important "given the (Zionist) occupation's efforts to undermine these traditional industries," he said. — AFP



A Palestinian woman melts the ingredients for making traditional 'Nabulsi' soap.



A traditional liquorish drink vendor walks past the Touqan soap factory.



A worker cuts soap into bars inside the Touqan soap factory.



People walk past the Touqan soap factory.



A Palestinian woman pours the ingredients for making traditional 'Nabulsi' soap into a barrel in the village of Salem.

Sports

Undeterred by injuries, Magic battle Bucks in NBA Cup quarterfinals

Karl-Anthony takes over late, Knicks top Raptors

MILWAUKEE: NBA Cup quarterfinal play gets underway on Tuesday night, with the Milwaukee Bucks hosting the Orlando Magic. The Magic enter Milwaukee following a 115-110 win over Phoenix on Sunday to remain the only team undefeated at home this season (10-0). Jalen Suggs led the way with 26 points, including 14 in the final quarter. Goga Bitadze added 21 points and 16 rebounds.

"It was by committee. Each person that played stepped up, gave to the group," Magic coach Jamahl Mosley said. "That's what we said this team is, we're gonna defend, pull for one another and try to play the right way for one another." The Bucks return home from a two-game trip to Boston and Brooklyn. They snapped a two-game skid with a 118-113 win over the Nets on Sunday.

Giannis Antetokounmpo dropped 34 points along with 11 boards. Bobby Portis and Gary Trent Jr. added 23 and 20 points off the bench, respectively, and Damian Lillard scored 15 while dishing 11 assists. "They had that stretch where they were about to get away from us, and Giannis took the game over," Bucks coach Doc Rivers said. "That's what makes him so great, he sensed that. Stayed aggressive, made the right plays."

Antetokounmpo leads the NBA with 32.5 points per game and is first on the Bucks in rebounding at 11.6. Lillard leads Milwaukee in assists at 7.5 per game. Franz Wagner, who is out with a torn oblique, leads Orlando with 24.4 points, 5.7 assists and 1.7 steals per game. Bitadze is the Magic's top rebounder (7.3) and shot blocker (1.6).

On the injury front, Wagner went down on Dec 7 and will be re-evaluated in January, joining young star Paolo Banchero (torn oblique) on the sidelines. After Sunday's game, Mosley gave an update on Banchero: "He's responded to the things that we're having him do, but we'll take it one day at a time and see how he responds each day."

Mosley did not give an updated timeline for

Banchero's return. Jonathan Isaac and Gary Harris missed Sunday's game for Orlando with hamstring injuries. Harris will also miss Tuesday's game, while Isaac is questionable.

Despite Orlando's injury woes and a 3-6 start, it has surged to first place in the Southeast Division thanks in large part to its defense. The Magic entered Monday third in the NBA with a 105.7 defensive rating. Milwaukee is more balanced, ranking 10th in offensive rating (113.9) and 14th on defense (113.0), although it excels from deep, ranking third in 3-point percentage (39.4 percent) entering Monday.

The Bucks are fully healthy after Khris Middleton made his season debut on Friday in Boston. The three-time All-Star scored 11 points in 20 minutes on Sunday. The Bucks lead the all-time series 73-55. They had a 14-game win streak over Orlando going into last season, when the teams split four games. The Magic have not won a season series over Milwaukee since a four-game sweep in the 2011-12 season. The winner will head to Las Vegas on Saturday to compete in the NBA Cup semifinals against the winner of Wednesday night's New York Knicks-Atlanta Hawks matchup.

Earlier, Karl-Anthony Towns scored the go-ahead layup in the final minute and had 24 points and 15 rebounds as the visiting New York Knicks defeated the Toronto Raptors 113-108 on Monday night. Towns followed his key basket with a 3-pointer to clinch New York's fifth win in its past six games.

Mikal Bridges added 23 points for New York. Jalen Brunson had 20 points and 11 assists, Josh Hart scored 10 points, and former Raptor OG Anunoby had 14 points and three blocked shots. Former Knick RJ Barrett scored 30 points for the Raptors. Scottie Barnes scored 15 points before leaving the game with an ankle injury in the third quarter. Jakob Poeltl had 10 points and 12 rebounds and Ja'Kobe Walter scored a career-best 19 points off the bench.

The Knicks led 34-27 after one quarter and used a 7-0 spurt to lead by 11 points with 7:18 to play in



NEW YORK: (FILES) Karl-Anthony Towns #32 of the New York Knicks drives against Cody Martin #11 of the Charlotte Hornets during their game at Madison Square Garden in New York City. -- AFP

the second quarter. Toronto scored 13 straight points to take a 55-53 lead with 2:35 remaining. The Raptors led 61-60 at halftime after Brunson missed two free throws with six seconds remaining.

Barnes hit consecutive 3-pointers to give Toronto a five-point lead with 8:23 to play in the third quarter. Barnes and Towns were both down on the floor after tangling feet with 6:47 to play in the third. Barnes, who was called for a foul on the play, limped to the dressing room. Towns stayed on the court and made two free throws. Barnes (sprained right ankle) did

not return. Toronto led 86-83 after three quarters.

New York took a two-point lead on a 3-pointer by Towns with 5:12 to go in the game. Barrett tied the game on a layup and Davion Mitchell's 3-pointer gave Toronto a 104-101 lead. Brunson converted a four-point play to put New York ahead by one with 3:03 left. Toronto regained the lead on Mitchell's layup but Bridges answered with a 3-pointer with 1:38 left. Barrett's layup tied the game with 42 seconds remaining, setting up the final sequence in which Towns put the game away. — Reuters

South Africa turn to Pakistan for white-ball series

DURBAN: While South Africa's Test team were on the field against Sri Lanka in Gqeberha, a separate group of players were in Pretoria preparing for a Twenty20 series against Pakistan. The T20 squad, captained by Heinrich Klaasen, flew to Durban on Sunday where the first T20 international will be played on Tuesday — the day after South Africa wrapped up a Test win in Gqeberha.

It is the first of six white-ball matches — three T20 internationals and three one-day internationals — to be played by Pakistan before they meet South Africa in two Test matches. Only Ryan Rickelton of the current South African Test team is due to play in the T20 series — although regular white-ball captain Aiden Markram as well as Tristan Stubbs, Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen would all be likely choices in a full-strength team.

Pakistan, too, will make multiple changes between formats, with only white-ball captain Mohammad Rizwan, Babar Azam, Saim Ayub and Salman Ali Agha due to play in all three series. South African white-ball coach Rob Walter has called up fast bowler Anrich Nortje and left-arm wrist spinner Tabraiz Shamsi for the T20 series.

Nortje and Shamsi were South Africa's leading bowlers at the T20 World Cup, helping the team reach the final. But they have opted out of national contracts in order to play in franchise tournaments around the world. Despite their successful World Cup campaign, Walter is under pressure because of South Africa's poor record in bilateral series — they have lost five and drawn two of seven series — but he has seldom been able to field a full-strength team.

Pakistan are coming off a white-ball tour of Zimbabwe, where they won both the one-day and T20 series. Before that they were in Australia where they lost all three T20 matches but won a one-day series 2-1. Pakistan will field a strong fast bowling line-up in both white-ball series, including Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf, who are not part of their Test squad. The T20 squad includes left-arm wrist spinner Sufyan Moqim, who took five wickets for just three runs in the second T20 international against Zimbabwe in Bulawayo last Tuesday. — AFP

Blackhawks sink Rangers

NEW YORK: Blackhawks sink Rangers, snap out of cold spell. Taylor Hall scored the tiebreaking goal with 13:44 remaining and added an assist as the visiting Chicago Blackhawks stopped a season-worst five-game losing streak with a 2-1 victory over the struggling New York Rangers on Monday night.

Outscored 21-10 during their skid, the Blackhawks gave interim coach Anders Sorenson his first win in two games since he replaced Luke Richardson on Thursday. Chicago also stopped a six-game road losing streak (0-5-1) and earned its fourth win in 15 games (4-10-1).

Tyler Bertuzzi also scored for the Blackhawks, who won for just the second time in 19 games this season when scoring two goals or fewer. Chicago goaltender Arvid Soderblom made 29 saves a day after Petr Mrazek went on injured reserve with a groin ailment. Soderblom highlighted his ninth career victory (and second this season) with a left skate save on Artemi Panarin during a New York power play in the second.

Red Wings 6, Sabres 5 (SO)

Lucas Raymond had a goal and an assist and also scored during a shootout as visiting Detroit snapped a five-game losing streak by topping slumping Buffalo. Andrew Copp had two goals and Moritz Seider supplied a goal and an assist. Detroit goalie Sebastian Cossa, the 15th overall pick

Girls gymnastics team to partake in championship

KUWAIT: The delegation of the Kuwaiti team for rhythmic gymnastics for girls left for Tunisia to participate in the Mediterranean Federation Championship, which will be hosted by the Tunisian capital from December 9 to 13, as this participation comes at the request of the Arab Gymnastics Federation to allow Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to join this version of the championship.

The team's delegation is headed by Fahad Al-Soula, president of the Arab and Kuwaiti Federations, and includes 5 players: Sarah Al-Bannai, Lian Behbahani, Raya Al-Qassar, Nabila Al-Kharafi and Amina Al-Kandari, along with Ukrainian coaches Irina Kovalchuk and Victoria Vysok, and administrator Loujain Al-Asfour.

The Mediterranean Federation Championship is considered one of the strong competitions in light of the participation of advanced countries in the game such as Spain, Portugal and Greece, in addition to several Arab countries, as this gathering is a suitable opportunity for Kuwaiti players to rub shoulders and gain experience.

Paris Olympic discus champ Stona among 14 new NFL hopefuls

NEW YORK: Reigning Olympic discus champion Roje Stona of Jamaica was among 14 international athletes named Monday to the NFL's International Player Pathway's 2025 class, all hopeful of an American football career.

The 25-year-old Jamaican, who set a personal best and Olympic record of 70.0 meters to capture Paris gold, was invited to mini-camps last May by the Green Bay Packers and New Orleans Saints after not playing American football in college.

The NFL global player program, which began in 2017, gives athletes from beyond US borders the opportunity to train at top levels in hopes of starting a gridiron career. Australian Jordan Petaia, a 24-year-



NEW YORK: Jason Dickinson #16 of the Chicago Blackhawks takes a second period shot against the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden. — AP

old of the 2021 draft, recorded the win in relief while making his NHL debut. The Red Wings entered the contest on a 0-3-2 skid. Jason Zucker had two goals and an assist for Buffalo, which has lost seven straight games (0-4-3).

Patrik Laine recorded a goal and an assist in regulation before host Montreal won in a shootout against Anaheim. Kirby Dach also scored and Sam Montembeault made 27 saves, including four in overtime, for the Canadiens, who improved to 3-1-0 on their five-game homestand. Troy Terry scored both goals and Lukas Dostal made 19 saves for the Ducks, who lost for the sixth time in their past eight games (2-4-2). — AFP



KUWAIT: Rhythmic gymnastics girls team with Ukrainian coaches.

old rugby union star, was announced earlier this month as being among the group hoping to make the jump to the NFL.

Also coming from rugby union is Ireland's Aaron Sexton, a wing for Ulster, and Zimbabwe's TJ Maguranyanga of French side ASM Clermont Auvergne. The selected athletes will begin a 10-week training program on and off the field at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, then display their skills in March before NFL team scouts.

Players can be signed as free agents or taken in the 2025 NFL Draft if eligible, with each NFL team allowed one roster exemption for an international player during pre-season training and players then can be signed to a practice squad roster spot.

Past players have come from such sports as rugby, athletics, basketball and Gaelic football. Others chosen for the program include Australian rugby league player Lailia Moeceidreke and rugby union player Laki Tasi, Fijian rugby union player Jeneiro Wakeham, German offensive tackle Leander Wiegand,

French cornerback Maceo Beard, French rugby union player Joachim Trouabal, New Zealand basketball player Nathaniel Salmon, British US college football safety Dante Barnett, British-Zambian defensive end Mapalo Mwansa and rugby union player Paschal Ekeji Jr., with a background from Lesotho, Nigeria and South Africa.

"The Class of 2025 is an exciting one and we are delighted to welcome these talented athletes from around the world," said NFL executive vice president international Peter O'Reilly. "Focusing on our global football development efforts and fostering international talent is crucial to growing our game globally."

Kickers and punters from other nations will join the group in the coming weeks. Since the program began, 41 international athletes have signed with NFL clubs and 23 are currently on NFL rosters, including Britain's Efe Obada, a defensive end for the Washington Commanders, and Australian Jordan Mailata, an offensive tackle for the Philadelphia Eagles who came from rugby league. — AFP

City's hearing into 115 Premier League charges concludes

LONDON: Manchester City's long-awaited hearing into 115 breaches of Premier League rules has concluded, according to reports on Monday, but a verdict is not expected until 2025. The Daily Mail reported that closing arguments in the case, which opened on September 16 at London's International Dispute Resolution Centre, were made to an independent panel on Friday.

City strongly deny any wrongdoing, but face severe sanctions if found guilty, including potentially being relegated from the Premier League. Everton and Nottingham Forest suffered points deductions last season for breaches of the league's profit and sustainability rules.

The English champions stand accused of 80 breaches of financial rules between 2009 and 2018, plus a further 35 of failing to cooperate with a Premier League investigation. Since a 2008 takeover from Sheikh Mansour, a member of the United Arab Emirates royal family, City

have been transformed into the dominant force in English football.

They have won eight of the last 13 Premier League titles, including a record four consecutive league crowns in the past four seasons. City also lifted the Champions League for the first time in 2023. Those achievements have been clouded in controversy, with opposing fans often making reference to the charges City face.

However, the club have always protested their innocence and vowed to clear their name. The Premier League brought the charges in February 2023 but there has been a long wait for the case to proceed before an independent commission.

City stand accused of failing to provide accurate financial information between 2009 and 2018, including revenue from sponsors and salary details of managers and players. Other charges relate to breaches of both UEFA and the Premier League's financial sustainability regulations.

Even if City are found guilty of some or all of the charges by the commission, the club would likely appeal that decision, which would further delay the imposition of any sanctions. On the field, Pep Guardiola's men are going through a lean spell with just one win from their last nine games in all competitions. — AFP

Sports

Draw specialists Juventus under fire ahead of Man City visit

All I do is keep working with the boys to improve and face our opponents with right attitude: Motta

MILAN: Manchester City might be deep in a crisis which is unprecedented under iconic coach Pep Guardiola but on Wednesday the wobbling English champions take on a Juventus team with troubles of their own. Juventus were booed and whistled by their supporters on Saturday night when they struggled back from two goals down to draw 2-2 at the death with mid-table Bologna.

Fans, who were expecting a change of tune when coach Thiago Motta left Bologna to replace Massimiliano Allegri in the summer, have been frustrated by a run of four straight draws which have left Juve off the pace at home and in Europe.

Had Juve not been in such uninspiring form Wednesday would have been a perfect opportunity to leapfrog City in the Champions League table, where the Italians sit 19th, behind their Premier League opponents on goal difference.

"I don't think there is a best time to play Manchester City, but we will face the match as we always do, by trying to stop them from playing their football and impose our own play on them," said Motta on Saturday. Juve have drawn 11 of their 20 matches in all competitions this season and are seven points behind new Serie A leaders Atalanta after 15 matches, not the start that the club were hoping for.

Two wins from nine matches in all competitions, a run which includes a fully deserved home defeat

to Stuttgart in October, have set the alarm bells ringing to the point that Agnelli family figurehead John Elkann visited the club's Continassa training ground on Monday.

Elkann is the CEO of Exor, the holding company of the Agnellis who have long controlled Juve and are as close to a royal family as Italy has had since the country became a republic in 1946. "I leave it to you to judge my work," said Motta to reporters. "All I do is keep working with the boys to improve and face our opponents with the right attitude."

Motta has not been helped by a huge injury crisis which has ravaged his squad in the first half of the campaign and looked on Saturday to have also taken full-back Andrea Cambiaso. Fortunately for Motta Cambiaso's ankle knock, which led to him being substituted early against Bologna, is less serious than initially feared and the Italian could be fit for Wednesday night, while Douglas Luiz should be back for selection in midfield after two months on the sidelines.

Weston McKennie is also set to return to the Juve squad after missing their last three matches, but Motta is still without at least four players with defenders Gleison Bremer and Juan Cabal unavailable until the end of the season.

Motta does at least have a recognized center-forward as Dusan Vlahovic returned to club



TURIN: Juventus' Turkish midfielder #10 Kenan Yildiz attends a training session with teammates at the Continassa training ground in Turin, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League football match between Juventus and Manchester City. — AFP

action against Bologna and provided the pass from which Samuel Mbangula levelled in stoppage time. Vlahovic's deputy Arkadiusz Milik has been sidelined with an injury to the meniscus in his left knee since June, the Pole undergoing in November a second operation to resolve the problem. — AFP

Lewandowski leading Barca CL charge on Dortmund return

BARCELONA: Robert Lewandowski's revival has been a key to Barcelona's strong start to life under Hansi Flick as the striker returns to Dortmund to face Borussia in the Champions League on Wednesday.

The 36-year-old Pole has netted 23 goals in 21 games across all competitions this season, taking Barcelona top of the Spanish league and up to third in the European standings. They lead last year's Champions League finalists Dortmund, who like Barcelona have four victories from five games, on goal difference before their meeting in Germany.

Lewandowski cut his teeth in top level European football with Dortmund between 2010 and 2014, driving them to the 2013 final, where they lost to rivals Bayern Munich at Wembley. A year later he joined Bayern and finally claimed the Champions League with them in 2020.

Lewandowski arrived at Barcelona in 2022 and after a strong first campaign, his performance dipped last season. Flick's arrival gave both the team and the veteran striker fresh impetus and until a recent wobble in form, both have thrived.

Lewandowski reached a career century of Champions League goals in Barcelona's 3-0 win over Brest in November. He trails only all-time top goalscorer



Robert Lewandowski

Cristiano Ronaldo and former Barcelona great Lionel Messi. Lewandowski is top scorer both in Spain and in the Champions League, where he boasts seven goals from five matches, two more than any other player. Despite his lethal form in front of goal, Lewandowski's presence in Barcelona's side does have one drawback.

Pressing doubts

In part given his age, the striker has not been able to maintain his team's objective of pressing opponents as consistently as Flick would like. A drop in pressing intensity has recently exposed Barcelona's high defensive line more than at the start of the season.

"It's clear that we made mistakes, but I insist, it's not the fault of the back four, it starts up front," said

the coach after a shock 2-1 loss to minnows Las Palmas in La Liga at the start of December. Barcelona also recently threw away a two-goal lead at Celta Vigo, with Real Madrid gobbling up the distance between the sides at the top of the table that the Catalans had established.

Barca's recent issues will be thoroughly analyzed by Dortmund ahead of the clash at the Westfalenstadion, with Flick also admitting his team have struggled on the road. Barcelona twice let a lead slip in a 2-2 draw at Real Betis on Saturday in which Lewandowski scored. They were overwhelmed at times by the hosts.

"We have the quality to win every match but we also have to show that," said Flick. "(In) the away matches we have to be much stronger than we played here." Given Flick's drive to make Barcelona a more robust team, the questions is how long Lewandowski can continue to shine as the minutes rack up.

The coach rested the striker for a recent 5-1 romp over Mallorca which suggested Barcelona might not be dependent on the forward in the same way they are on 17-year-old winger Lamine Yamal. However, Flick has backed Lewandowski since arriving and even if the Pole's work-rate has dipped, the coach believes.

"Robert is an absolute professional player, working hard on his fitness, this body he has, it's not this age," said the coach earlier in the season. After some frustrating displays last season, Lewandowski has rolled back the years under Flick and Dortmund fans will fear the return of the devastating forward who wore their colors a decade ago. —AFP

stage. The success sparked the idea of using football as a platform to enhance the nation's reputation.

For sociologist Abderrahim Bourquia, the infrastructure improvements for the tournament offer economic benefits while also granting Morocco global confidence. Spectators from all over the world "will associate Morocco with the sport's positive values", he said.

The project also aligns with Morocco's ambition to cultivate stronger ties continentally. In recent years, the kingdom has increasingly sought to deepen its diplomacy with other African countries, bolstered by its return to the African Union in 2017.

The country has signed some 44 partnership agreements with African football federations. Morocco was due to stage the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) in 2015 but pulled out of hosting the tournament because of concerns about the spread of Ebola amid an outbreak in West Africa.

However, it will stage the next AFCON, beginning in December next year and running into January 2026. It also hosted the Women's Cup of Nations in 2022 and has been the host of the Club World Cup on several occasions. These events have become a key tool for Morocco to achieve what El Yazghi describes as "football diplomacy". — AFP

Morocco sets stage for 2030 WCup with Spain and Portugal

RABAT: After decades of unsuccessful bids, Morocco will finally achieve its long-cherished dream of hosting the football World Cup in 2030, along with Spain and Portugal, in what the North African country hopes will boost its international image and economy.

FIFA is set to formally ratify the trio's candidacy on Wednesday, with Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay also hosting a game each to mark a century since the very first World Cup was staged in South America. It will have taken over 40 years since Morocco became the first African nation in 1987 to bid for the World Cup, aiming to host the 1994 edition. Rabat has made five failed bids in total, including one for 2026 but also 2010, when it narrowly lost out to South Africa for the right to host the first World Cup on the continent.

"This is a unique opportunity to accelerate na-

tional economic growth, create jobs, and boost the country's tourism," said Fouzi Lekjaa, head of Morocco's 2030 World Cup Committee. Speaking after a cabinet meeting chaired by King Mohammed VI, Lekjaa emphasised the transformational potential of hosting the world's biggest sporting event. The Moroccan government has unveiled ambitious plans to modernise infrastructure in six host cities: Rabat, Casablanca, Fes, Tangier, Marrakesh and Agadir. This includes expanding airports, roads and transportation networks, as well as boosting hotel and commercial services, according to an official statement.

Six stadiums in the host cities are already undergoing renovation work, said the statement. Additionally, a new 115,000-seat stadium near Casablanca, costing 480 million euros (\$507 million), is also in the works as the kingdom banks on the state-of-the-art venue to host the final. "These projects will leave a lasting legacy for future generations," said Moncef El Yazghi, a researcher specialising in sports policy.

'Football diplomacy'

Morocco's interest in hosting the World Cup dates back to its groundbreaking performance at the 1986 tournament in Mexico, where it became the first African and Arab nation to reach the knockout

Sahin warns of 'unbearable' fixture list

BERLIN: Borussia Dortmund coach Nuri Sahin on Tuesday lamented how the crowded fixture list has put an "almost unbearable" strain on players as his injury-hit side prepare to host Barcelona midweek. Sahin announced center-back Niklas Sule would miss "several months" with an ankle injury, the latest addition to Dortmund's overcrowded sick bay.

"The strain is almost unbearable, especially for international players. I don't know when they are supposed to have a break," said Sahin. In addition to Sule, last season's Champions League finalists are missing midfielders Julian Brandt and Karim Adeyemi, forward Maximilian Beier along with defender Waldemar Anton, all who have played for Germany in recent seasons.

The 36-year-old, who played for Real Madrid and Liverpool as well as Dortmund before becoming a coach, said travel and the style of modern football were also to blame. "They travel from A to B, from B to C, and when they get back I'm bombarding them with information about their next opponents," he said.

"On top of that, the game has changed completely in recent years... 10 to 15 years ago, the game was different, fewer sprints and a lot less running. "Nowadays you have to push yourself to the limit in every game."

Several other players and coaches have hit out at the fixture schedule, with some floating the idea of industrial action. Spain and Manchester City midfielder Rodri said players were considering striking earlier in the year, weeks before he went down with a season-ending ACL tear.

Sahin pointed out that many of Europe's biggest clubs, including Bayern, Barcelona and Real "had a lot of injuries this year". "Neither Pep (Guardiola) nor Jurgen Klopp were able to change that after speaking at press conferences, so if Nuri Sahin says something, it's very likely FIFA will not say 'we will change it'," he added. "But the workload is simply too high." Dortmund and Barcelona are level on 12 points, with the Spanish side sitting in third, one spot ahead of Wednesday's hosts, on goal difference. — 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, KADAPA BABAIAH, holder of Indian Passport No. R8274438 having permanent address: Andhra Pradesh, India - 516504 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (given name) Abdulla and (surname) Kadapa. #6609-11/12/2024

I, Venkataramana Gounthala holder of Passport No. W0765999 having permanent address H No. 12/169 Santhi Nagar, RLY Kodur, YSR District, Andhra Pradesh, India residing in Kuwait at present, do hereby change my name to Venkataramana (given name) Gounthala (surname). #6607-10/12/2024

I, HOZEFA has Changed My Name HOZEFA, holder of Passport No. S5885711 to hereby change his name to HUZFEFA (as Given name) NOORJI (as surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name HUZFEFA NOORJI and I also

undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. 10/12/2024

I, Riyaz Kuvale Mammad Basha, (old name) holder of Indian Passport No. N3914243, S/o Basha Koopilera Kareem, permanent resident of 313, Gundikera, Kottoli Village, K. Boikeri Post, Virajpet Taluk - 571218, Kodagu District, Karnataka State, India, at present residing in Kuwait, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as: Riyaz Koopilera Basha (new name) for all purposes vide affidavit dated 03.12.2024 sworn before Notary V P Ramesh, Kodagu. #6605-09/12/2024

I, Thiagu Devadoss, holder of Indian Passport No. N5395283, son of Devadoss, having permanent address at Door No. 3/248C, M.P.R. Nagar, Kavanur, Madurai 625014, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as Thiayagu (given name) and Devadoss (surname). #6605-9/12/2024

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is 1889988

Bowen eases pressure on West Ham boss Lopetegui to leave O'Neil in danger

West Ham's first win in three games lift them nine points clear of relegation zone



LONDON: West Ham United's English striker #20 Jarrod Bowen (C) shoots the ball and scores his team's second goal during the English Premier League football match between West Ham United and Wolverhampton Wanderers at the London Stadium. — AFP

LONDON: Jarrod Bowen eased the pressure on West Ham boss Julen Lopetegui as his superb strike sealed a vital 2-1 win that pushed Wolves manager Gary O'Neil closer to the sack on Monday. In a showdown dubbed "El Sackico" due to the intense scrutiny surrounding the futures of Lopetegui and O'Neil, it was the Hammers chief who earned some much-needed breathing space thanks to Bowen's moment of magic.

Bowen bagged a priceless winner in the second half at the London Stadium, just moments after Wolves defender Matt Doherty had cancelled out Tomas Soucek's opener. West Ham's first win in three games lifted them nine points clear of the relegation zone, while second bottom Wolves remain four points adrift of safety after their 10th defeat in 15 league matches.

In the aftermath of last week's 3-1 loss at Leicester, Lopetegui was reported to have survived a board meeting about his position. But the Spaniard, who replaced

David Moyes in the close-season, must build on this valuable victory over the team he managed in the 2022-23 season before he can fully relax.

"I don't talk about noise, I talk about football. If you ask me about football, I will. A win is always good for me," Lopetegui said. "The fans have supported us a lot through the bad times. I'm happy for them." O'Neil, who played for West Ham from 2011 to 2013, heard Wolves fans call for his dismissal during their 4-0 thrashing at Everton on Wednesday.

Now he will anxiously await the verdict from the Wolves board on his future, which looks bleak after the latest blow to Wolves' survival hopes. "An awful lot of decisions went against us in a big game, big moments. You need some of them to go your way but they didn't," O'Neil said.

"I'm not concerned. People above me are supportive, but the supporters want to be successful. I understand I have to take responsibility." West

Ham were rocked at the weekend by the news that their Jamaica striker Michail Antonio had been in a serious car crash that left him needing surgery on a lower limb fracture.

The 34-year-old had to be cut out of his Ferrari following the accident, with Lopetegui admitting it was a "miracle" he survived. "It wasn't an easy week. We dedicate the victory to Michail," Lopetegui said. Hammers fans held a minute's applause for Antonio in the ninth minute to match his shirt number.

Composed Bowen

That emotional moment was in stark contrast to the turgid first half fare produced by two teams wracked with nerves and undermined by a chronic lack of quality in possession. Wolves should have broken the deadlock when Matheus Cunha's pin-point pass sent Doherty racing away for a teasing cross that Joao Gomes slashed over from close-range.

It was a costly miss as Soucek put

West Ham in front from a 54th minute corner, the unmarked Czech midfielder rising to loop his header over Sam Johnstone from six yards. O'Neil was fuming again after Wolves were controversially denied a penalty for Emerson's push on Goncalo Guedes.

Doherty gave O'Neil hope in the 69th minute when the defender met Rayan Ait-Nouri's cross with a half-volley that flashed past Lukasz Fabianski from 10 yards. But Bowen restored West Ham's lead three minutes later as the England forward danced into the Wolves area before guiding a fine finish into the far corner.

On a night when Antonio was never far from West Ham's thoughts, Bowen celebrated his crucial winner by holding aloft his team-mate's shirt. In a dramatic finale, Wolves had another penalty claim rejected when Konstantinos Mavropanos tripped Jean-Ricner Bellegarde, before Fabianski denied Mario Lemina to leave O'Neil facing the axe. — AFP

Sheikh Nasser ready to receive guests for 'Khaleeji Zain 26'

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The Public Relations Committee of the Supreme Organizing Committee of the "Khaleeji Zain 26" tournament has completed its initial preparations to host the guests of the tournament, after it completed an integrated plan at the end of November, which includes providing all means of comfort for the brothers from the first day they enter Kuwait, until the time they leave their second country.

Sheikh Nasser Fahad Al-Sabah, Chairman of the Public Relations Committee, confirmed that the committee started its work early, in order to address any obstacles that may stand in its way or affect the proper conduct of its work, and said: "We formed several teams of volunteers, to carry out all the required tasks and duties, as there is a team of public relations that will be present at the airport to receive guests, and other teams will be present at all hotels where the participating delegations reside, and for the referees' committee, in addition to escorts for each team, and public relations members will be present in the VIP box of Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium and Jaber Mubarak Al Hamad to organize during tournament matches."

He stated that members of the Public Relations Committee will be present around the clock throughout the days of "Khaleeji Zain 26"; in order to ensure the comfort of Kuwait's guests, to provide them with the best services, and to overcome any obstacles they may encounter, stressing: "This is our duty, which we are proud to present in the best possible way."

He praised the continued support of the Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, Chairman of the Supreme Organizing Committee for "Khaleeji Zain 26", and the follow-up of the President of the Kuwait Football Association Sheikh Ahmed Al-Yousef, saying: "The great support and continued encouragement by various leaders in all ministries facilitated our task a lot, and gave us a double responsibility that we hope to succeed in performing it in the best possible way."

Abdullah Al-Adwani, head of the volunteer committee, said that the door for volunteering for Khaleeji Zain 26 closed last Thursday after the total number of volunteers reached more than 4,400. "Volunteers will play a vital role in the tournament, as they will provide various aspects of help and assistance to the fans, starting from facilitating their entry into the stadiums, being there for them during the matches for any emergency and facilitating their departure from the stadium," Al-Adwani explained, adding: "We received the last batch of volunteers on Tuesday, and quite a few applicants were accepted after meeting all the required criteria," he said, pointing out that a special training will be held for the last batch on Wednesday, and there will be training for all volunteers next Friday and Saturday at Jaber International Stadium and Jaber Al Mubarak to prepare them optimally and distribute the tasks and duties to be carried out before and during the tournament.



Sheikh Nasser Fahad Al-Sabah

Argentine court drops rape case against French rugby players

MENDOZA: An Argentine court on Tuesday dismissed rape charges against two French international rugby players accused of assaulting a woman after playing a match in the country in July. Hugo Auradou and Oscar Jegou, both 21, were arrested two days after winning their first international caps for France against Argentina in the western city of Mendoza.

A 39-year-old woman, whom they met in a nightclub accused them of a vicious assault in a hotel room. Auradou, a lock with French club Pau, and Jegou, a flanker with the club La Rochelle, insisted they had consensual sex with the woman after a night of drinking following their July 6 match.

A judge in Mendoza dismissed the case on the advice of the prosecution, which called for the charges to be dropped over inconsistencies in the woman's version of events. "As we expected, the French players have been acquitted because the (sexual) act was consensual, meaning there was no crime and no doubt that they are innocent," defense attorney German Hnatow announced.

The French rugby federation expressed "relief and satisfaction" at the outcome of the case and said that it paved the way for Auradou and Jegou to be selected again for the national team "if their sporting performances allow for it." The players were kept in preventive custody for a little over a week in Mendoza and then under house arrest for nearly a month before being allowed to return to France in September after prosecutors said the case against them appeared flimsy.



MENDOZA: (FILES) French rugby players Hugo Auradou (L) and Oscar Jegou leave the house in which they served house arrest in Mendoza, Argentina, on August 12, 2024. An Argentine court on Tuesday dismissed rape charges against two French international rugby players, Hugo Auradou and Oscar Jegou, who were accused of assaulting a woman after a match in the country, the players' lawyers said. - AFP

Auradou, a lock with Pau, and Jegou, a flanker with La Rochelle, were not present in Argentina for Tuesday's ruling. Their Parisian lawyer, Antoine Vey, on Tuesday hailed their "judicial rehabilitation." He added that for the players' "clubs, families and the (French rugby) federation, it was a day they have been waiting for and, which, I hope, will close the difficult chapter that they experienced."

The complainant has not yet announced whether she plans to appeal the decision. The accusations against Auradou and Jegou, coupled with racist remarks by full-back Melvyn Jaminet, for which he was sent home and given a 34-week suspension, overshadowed the French team's

summer tour of Argentina. French rugby federation president Florian Grill last month announced an overhaul of disciplinary measures in the wake of the scandals.

He also vowed to put an end to the kind of "fourth and fifth half" post-match celebrations that took place in Mendoza. "There will be financial or sporting sanctions" in the future, he continued regretting in previous years "a form of acceptance of these excesses which could sometimes even be organized." "We cannot take all the positives from rugby, ask brands and partners to associate their image with our presupposed values and not respect them," he added. — AFP