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Sheikh Meshal's ascension marked

Kuwait remembers Sheikh Nawaf's wise leadership



Amir receives foreign minister, new diplomats

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya at Bayan Palace on Monday. During the meeting, the minister introduced to HH the Amir the new ambassadors and consuls of Kuwait: Ambassador to Romania Abdullah Abdul-

rahman Al-Shatti; Ambassador to France Abdullah Suleiman Al-Shahin, Ambassador to Poland Saad Abdulaziz Al-Mehaini; Ambassador to Bangladesh Ali Thunayan Hamada; Ambassador to Mongolia Mutlaq Abdullah Al-Thuwamer; Consul General to the UAE in Dubai and the Northern Emirates Khaled

Abdulrahman Al-Zaabi; Ambassador to New Zealand Sheikh Sabah Nasser Hamoud Al-Malik Al-Sabah and Consul General to Saudi Arabia in Jeddah Yousef Abdullah Al-Tunaib. They took their oaths of office before HH the Amir, with senior state officials in attendance. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait marked the first anniversary of HH Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's ascension as Amir on Dec 16, 2023, following the passing of late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Sheikh Meshal was proclaimed Amir according to the constitution and assumed office as Kuwait's 17th ruler after taking the constitutional oath on Dec 20, 2023.

His six-decade career includes high-ranking positions in the interior ministry and National Guard before being appointed Crown Prince. Born in 1940, Sheikh Meshal studied in Kuwait and the UK, graduating from Hendon Police College in 1960, and later played a key role in strengthening Kuwait's security.

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The day also marked the first anniversary of the passing of Sheikh Nawaf, Kuwait's 16th Amir, whose three-year leadership was marked by efforts to enhance Kuwait's development, stability and global presence. Born in 1937, Sheikh Nawaf began his political career in 1962 and held key positions including minister of interior, minister of defense and Deputy Chief of the National Guard. He was instrumental in modernizing the military and led resistance efforts during the 1990 Iraqi invasion, ensuring the safe relocation of Kuwait's leadership. — KUNA

Kuwait shivers in subzero cold

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Meteorological Department warned on Monday that minimum temperatures in many areas of the country will witness a "significant drop" to below 3 degrees Celsius, causing frost in some areas. The sharp drop in temperature will be witnessed the most between 3 am to 8 am, mainly in desert areas.

The office said it recorded freezing temperatures in the early hours of Monday, especially in desert areas. In Salmi, the lowest temperature recorded was -3° C, the first below zero temperature in the winter season this year. In Mitriba near Abdaly, the temperature was zero Celsius Monday morning, while it was 2° C in Abdaly and also 2° C in Manageesh in the south.

In Ahmadi and Warba Island, the temperature was 3° C. In other areas, the temperature ranged between 4° and 7° C. Maximum temperatures on Monday ranged between 13° and 17° C, the office said. Weather experts forecast the cold spell to continue until the weekend, when the temperature will start rising.

The Met Office said that the drop in temperatures resulted as "the country continues to be affected by an extension of a high-pressure system, accompanied by a cold and dry air mass, supported by severe cooling" in the upper air with light to moderate northwesterly winds. "The weather is expected to be rather cold by the day, and cold to very cold at night with a chance of frost formation over agricultural and desert areas until Thursday," the office said.

Starting from Friday evening, the impact of the high-pressure system will weaken, allowing a low-pressure system to take effect with southeasterly winds, it said. Light scattered showers are expected over the weekend, it said.

Gaza martyrs top 45,000 amid carnage

GAZA: The health ministry in Gaza said on Monday that at least 45,028 people have been killed during more than 14 months of the Zionist entity's military offensive. The toll includes 52 deaths in the previous 24 hours, according to the ministry, which said 106,962 people have been wounded in the Gaza Strip since the war began on Oct 7, 2023.

In Khan Younis, relatives of Palestinians killed by the Zionist entity gathered around their white-shrouded bodies on Monday before carrying them to their graves. Palestinian health officials said on Sunday at least 20 people, including children, were killed in the strike at the school sheltering displaced families in the city in the southern Gaza Strip.

Women wept as the bodies of the family members were carried away on medical stretchers by men who laid them on the ground to perform funeral prayers. "People were safe, staying in their homes (shelters) after they prayed the dinner prayer. They were sitting, sleeping, and staying put in their places,"

said Manal Tafesh, whose brother and his children were among those killed. "Our children are gone, our children are gone. Our youth are gone. Our children are gone, and our lineage ended. When will this darkness end?" she told Reuters outside the morgue.

Zionist bombardment continued on Monday. Medics said four people were killed in an airstrike in Beit Lahiya town in the northern edge of the Gaza Strip, where the army has operated since October, while three were killed in Zionist tank shelling that hit near the cemetery of Nuseirat camp in central areas and three others in Rafah in the south.

Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he had spoken with US President-elect Donald Trump, who returns to the White House on Jan 20, about efforts to secure a release of captives. "We discussed the need to complete (the Zionist entity's) victory and we spoke at length about the efforts we are making to free our hostages," Netanyahu said in a statement on Sunday. — Agencies



GAZA: A man carries the body of a child killed in Zionist strikes on the Ahmad Abdulaziz UNRWA-run school at Masser Hospital in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec 16, 2024. — AFP

Assad claims Syria in hands of 'terrorists'

DAMASCUS: Ousted president Bashar Al-Assad broke his silence Monday after fleeing Syria, saying in a statement that he only left once Damascus had fallen and denounced the country's new leaders as "terrorists". Assad fled to Russia just over a week ago, as a lightning offensive spearheaded by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) wrested from his control city after city until the rebels reached the Syrian capital. The collapse of Assad's rule stunned the world and sparked cel-

ebrations around Syria and beyond, after his crackdown on democracy protests in 2011 sparked one of the deadliest wars of the century. Long before the emergence of HTS and jihadist groups in the Syrian war, however, Assad consistently branded his opponents, including non-violent protesters, as "terrorists".

"My departure from Syria was neither planned nor did it occur during the final hours of the battles," said a statement on the ousted presidency's Telegram channel. Assad was propped up throughout the war by Russia and Iran. "Moscow requested... an immediate evacuation to Russia on the evening of Sunday December 8" after he moved that day to Latakia, where Russia operates a naval base, the statement said.



DAMASCUS: UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen meets Hayat Tahrir al-Sham leader Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani, now using his real name Ahmed Al-Sharaa, on Dec 15, 2024. — AFP

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Local

Kuwait mourns Sheikh Nawaf on first anniversary of passing

Over 6 decades of service, the late Amir made an indelible mark on every area of leadership



Sheikh Nawaf takes the constitutional oath as Minister of Interior in 1978.



KUWAIT: Late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah takes the constitutional oath in a private session at the National Assembly on September 30, 2020, becoming Kuwait's 16th Amir. — KUNA photos



A file photo taken on February 7, 2006 shows the then Crown Prince HH Sheikh Nawaf in his car in Kuwait City.

KUWAIT: On the first anniversary of the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait and its people remember with deep gratitude the "Amir of Forgiveness," whose leadership guided the country for three years. During his reign, His Highness worked tirelessly to develop Kuwait, ensuring its stability and elevating its status regionally and internationally.

Though December 16, 2023, brought the sad news of His Highness Sheikh Nawaf's passing, his memory, virtues, and noble qualities will forever remain etched in Kuwait's history. His legacy continues to inspire future generations, instilling values of dedication, sacrifice, and selfless service to the nation's pride, security, and prosperity.

Over nearly six decades of service, the late Amir made an indelible mark on every area of leadership, particularly in empowering national cadres and enhancing Kuwait's global standing. Following the passing of his brother, the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Sheikh Nawaf became the 16th Amir of Kuwait on September 29, 2020, in accordance with the constitution and the law of succession.

Early education and career

Born on June 25, 1937, Sheikh Nawaf was the sixth son of the late Amir Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait's 10th ruler, who served from 1921 to 1950. Sheikh Ahmad's leadership set an example for his sons and the future rulers of Kuwait.

Sheikh Nawaf received his education in Kuwait at Hamada, Sharq, and Nuqra schools, later attending Al-Sharqia and Al-Mubarakiyah schools. Known for his commitment to learning, he re-



The late Amir Sheikh Nawaf walks alongside His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.



Sheikh Nawaf and Sheikh Meshal inaugurate the Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC)'s environmental fuel project in the presence of high-ranking officials.

spected his teachers and mentors, distinguishing himself through his dedication.

Following Kuwait's independence, Sheikh Nawaf began his long and distinguished political career. On February 12, 1962, he was appointed Governor of Hawally by the late Amir Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah. In 1978, he became Minister of the Interior under Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, where he modernized the country's security infrastructure and developed an integrated National hero.

In 1988, he became Minister of Defense, focusing on strengthening Kuwait's military capabilities. During the 1990 Iraqi invasion, Sheikh Nawaf played a pivotal role in the decision-making that led to the defense of Kuwait, the mobilization of forces, and the successful liberation of the country. He also led the Kuwaiti resistance and oversaw the relocation of the legitimate government to Saudi Arabia.

Following Kuwait's liberation, Sheikh Nawaf served as Minister of Social Affairs and Labor in 1991 and as Deputy Head of the National Guard in

1992, where he modernized and strengthened the Guard's capabilities. He was reappointed Minister of the Interior in 2003 and became First Deputy Prime Minister in the same year, working to improve internal security and stabilize the country.

In 2006, he was appointed Crown Prince by the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, in recognition of his integrity and competence. As Crown Prince, Sheikh Nawaf supported his brother in governance and contributed to decisions that ensured Kuwait's development and stability. — KUNA

Kuwait, Iran views 'completely aligned' at joint meeting

TEHRAN: Assistant Foreign Minister of Kuwait for Consular Affairs Ambassador Aziz Al-Daihani praised the results of the sixth meeting of the Kuwait-Iran Joint Consular Committee, which took place in Tehran on Monday. In a statement to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), Ambassador Al-Daihani, who led the Kuwaiti delegation at the meeting, said the two sides discussed several items "to further strengthen the relations between the two countries." "We found complete alignment and consensus in our viewpoints, and there was agreement on common points that reflect the historical and friendly relations between the two countries, which date back to 1961," he added.

Ambassador Al-Daihani expressed his satisfaction with the "speedy progress, which is evidence that everyone is ready to contribute and ensure that the work of the joint consular committee between the two countries is a success." The meeting was attended by Kuwait's Chargé d'Affaires ad interim at the Kuwaiti Embassy in Tehran, Counselor Meshari Al-Muzaini, as well as members of the Kuwaiti diplomatic mission and the delegation accompanying Ambassador Al-Daihani. — KUNA

Kuwait, Iraq meet on border demarcation

BAGHDAD: Kuwait's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ambassador Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah met on Monday with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein. The meeting came within the framework of Sheikh Jarrah's visit to Baghdad for the joint Kuwaiti-Iraqi technical legal committee meeting on demarcation of maritime borders beyond the 162 mark, according to a Kuwaiti foreign ministry statement. Both sides shared views on varied regional issues and possible means of coordination. Sheikh Jarrah also met with Iraqi Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Ambassador Mohammad Bahr Aloom.

The committee held its seventh meeting on Monday, with senior officials from both countries in attendance. During the meeting, it was agreed to continue the momentum of the discussions, with future sessions to be held alternately in Kuwait and Iraq. The goal is to complete the maritime boundary demarcation beyond marker 162, in line with international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sees off Crown Prince of Jordan Al-Hussein bin Abdullah II. — KUNA photos



HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled shakes hands with Crown Prince Al-Hussein.



Crown Prince of Jordan Al-Hussein bin Abdullah II is seen off by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Monday, December 16, 2024. — KUNA

Jordan's Crown Prince leaves Kuwait after official visit

KUWAIT: Crown Prince of Jordan Al-Hussein bin Abdullah II and his official delegation left Kuwait Monday after a successful official visit. Prince Al-Hussein was seen off at the airport by His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sa-

bah, Head of the National Guard Sheikh Mubarak Hamoud Jaber Al-Sabah, and First Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Saud Al-Sabah, along with senior government officials.

During the visit, Prince Al-Hussein held official talks with His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled. The discussions covered a wide range of bilateral and regional issues, emphasizing the importance of strengthening cooperation between the two countries. The talks also addressed ways to coordinate efforts to tackle regional and global challenges, as well as enhancing economic and trade relations between Kuwait and Jordan. The meeting reinforced the historical ties that have linked the two countries for decades.

Visit to the Al-Salam Palace

Crown Prince Al-Hussein also visited the Al-Salam Palace Museum, where he was welcomed by the museum's general supervisor, Sheikha Mona Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. During the tour, Prince Al-Hussein was briefed on the museum's collections, which reflect Kuwait's history and its rulers, as well as the museum's main sections, including the Kuwait History Museum, the Al-Salam Palace History Museum, and the Museum of Civilizations that have inhabited Kuwait's land. Many participants considered the visit historically significant, especially since King Hussein bin Talal, the grandfather of Crown Prince Al-Hussein, was the first visitor to the museum after its opening in 1964. — KUNA



Crown Prince of Jordan Al-Hussein tours the Al-Salam Palace Museum accompanied by the museum's general supervisor, Sheikha Mona Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah.





ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan honors Sheikh Meshal with the State Order after a welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace on May 7, 2024.



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah kisses the Kuwaiti flag during a flag-hoisting ceremony at Bayan Palace on Jan 31, 2024. — KUNA photos

Kuwait marks first anniversary of Sheikh Meshal's proclamation as Amir

Kuwait shines under Sheikh Meshal's leadership, bolstering its regional, international influence

KUWAIT: Monday marked the first anniversary of His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's proclamation as the Amir of Kuwait. On December 16, 2023, following the passing of the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Cabinet announced Sheikh Meshal's appointment as Amir in accordance with the Constitution and Article 4 of the Succession Law. Sheikh Meshal formally took the constitutional oath on December 20, 2023, becoming Kuwait's 17th Amir.

Career of leadership and service

Born in 1940, Sheikh Meshal is the seventh son of the late Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait's 10th ruler. He was educated from an early age within the House of Al-Sabah, where his family played a pivotal role in shaping his early education. His parents and other senior family members took part in teaching him the basics of reading and writing before he went on to attend Al-Mubarakiya School, Kuwait's first school. This strong foundation in education, fostered by his family's guidance, set the stage for his future achievements.

Sheikh Meshal continued his studies in the United Kingdom, where he graduated from Hendon Police College in 1960. Upon returning to Kuwait, he joined the newly-established Ministry of the Interior, rising through the ranks and becoming a key figure in developing Kuwait's security infrastructure. In 1987, he was appointed to the Public Inspection Department, where he served in various leadership roles for nearly 20 years. In 2004, Sheikh Meshal was appointed Deputy Chief of the National Guard, overseeing major reforms to enhance Kuwait's national security. In 2020, he was appointed Crown Prince, and on December 16, 2023, he succeeded Sheikh Nawaf as Amir.



KUWAIT: His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is seen off by His Highness Sheikh Meshal before his departure on a trip to Italy.



KUWAIT: Sheikh Meshal addresses parliament after taking the constitutional oath on December 20, 2023, becoming Kuwait's 17th Amir.



RIYADH: Sheikh Meshal is welcomed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud during an official visit to Saudi Arabia.

Key achievements

Over the past year, Sheikh Meshal's leadership has focused on both domestic development and regional cooperation. In May 2024, Sheikh Meshal made the historic decision to dissolve parliament and temporarily suspend certain articles of the constitution to reassess the country's democratic process. Locally, he has championed several initiatives, including the inauguration of Abdullah Al-Salem University and Sabah Al-Salem University City. He also attended several award ceremonies, honoring researchers and teachers, includ-

ing the KFAS awards ceremony held in December. In his efforts to strengthen regional ties, Sheikh Meshal has led official visits to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE. Under his leadership, Kuwait hosted the 45th GCC Summit on December 1, 2024, reinforcing cooperation among Gulf nations and addressing critical regional challenges. His advocacy for regional unity is also reflected in his support for the Palestinian cause and his commitment to protecting Arab sovereignty. Sheikh Meshal's international diplomacy has been marked by visits to Turkey, where he signed six agree-

ments, and meetings with global leaders such as UN Secretary-General António Guterres and European Council President Charles Michel. These visits underscore his efforts to promote Kuwait's global presence and work towards peaceful resolutions to international issues. As Kuwait celebrates His Highness Sheikh Meshal's first anniversary as Amir, the nation remains on a path of growth and development. His Highness's leadership has ensured that Kuwait continues to thrive regionally and internationally, building on the legacy of past rulers while shaping a prosperous future for the people of Kuwait. — KUNA

Crown Prince receives son of Bohra Sultan



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received on Monday the son of the Sultan of the Bohra Dr Husain Mufaddal Burhanuddin and his accompanying delegation. Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs at the Crown Prince Diwan Mazen Al-Issa attended the meeting. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah receives Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya and the new heads of Kuwait's diplomatic and consular missions at Bayan Palace on Monday, December 16, 2024. — KUNA

Crown Prince receives foreign minister, newly appointed diplomats

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received Monday at Bayan Palace Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya, who presented to His Highness the new heads of Kuwait's diplomatic and consular missions. The newly appointed ambassadors and consuls include Abdullah Abdulrahman Al-Shatti, Ambassador of Kuwait to Ro-

mania; Abdullah Suleiman Al-Shahin, Ambassador of Kuwait to France; Saad Abdulaziz Al-Mehaini, Ambassador of Kuwait to Poland; Ali Thunayan Hamada, Ambassador of Kuwait to Bangladesh; Mutlaq Abdullah Al-Thuwamer, Ambassador of Kuwait to Mongolia; Khaled Abdulrahim Al-Zaabi, Consul General of Kuwait in Dubai and the Northern Emirates (UAE); Sheikh Sabah Nasser Hamoud Al-Malek Al-Sabah, Ambassador of Kuwait to New Zealand; and Yousef Abdullah Al-Tunai, Consul General of Kuwait in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This meeting was held to mark the occasion of their appointment to their new roles. The meeting was attended by the Director of His Highness the Crown Prince's Office, Retired Major General Jamal Mohammed Al-Dhiab, and the Deputy Foreign Affairs Director at the Office of His Highness the Crown Prince Mazen Al-Issa. — KUNA

Annual creativity forum aims to inspire people for a better life

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: An unexpected coffee spill delayed Dr Ahmed Abdul Malik's timely start at The Inspiring People Forum, but the family medicine consultant from Kuwait turned the mishap into an opportunity to explore how human emotions shape our perceptions of life. Opening the first session of the forum with this anecdote, he posed a thought-provoking question rooted in Arab tradition: "Is spilling coffee truly a sign of good luck?"

Dr Abdul Malik and his fellow panelist Dr Mohab Megahed, a psychiatrist from Egypt, highlighted that the way we interpret events can significantly influence how the rest of the day unfolds. "If you wake up every-day programming yourself that the day is going to be a good one, you will be able to find a positive interpretation in every sign you encounter," Dr Megahed pointed out during his talk at 12th edition of the forum, which

was held Monday under the patronage of Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs.

The two doctors discussed how setting a positive intention each day can be a changemaker. "The truth is, life cannot bear to be seen as worse than it really is," added Dr Megahed. The discussion also delved into the connection between the body and the mind, emphasizing how daily lifestyle choices, such as the quality of food and sleep, impact mental well-being. "If you notice any decline in your performance in any key area of life—whether work, family, or social life—that lasts for three consecutive months, it's important to see a psychiatrist. Don't let your performance suffer further before seeking professional help," Dr Megahed stressed. They also discussed the impact of hypermasculinity on men's reluctance to seek help, noting that this often leaves them trailing behind women in addressing and recovering from mental health issues.

50 creative individuals

Organized by the Arab Media Forum, the event highlighted creativity, inspiration, and excellence across various fields. Madi Al-Khamis, Secretary-General of the Arab Media Forum, expressed the significance of gathering influential voices under one platform. "We are proud to present this annual



KUWAIT: Dr Ahmed Abdul Malik and Dr Mohab Megahed are seen during the opening session of The Inspiring People Forum.



Dr Ali Al-Haddad and Dr Kareem Ali pose for a photo at the second session of the event, focused on the role of nutrition in health.

activity. Our goal is to provide meaningful content and bring together inspiring personalities who can positively impact society," he told Kuwait Times. Al-Khamis explained the event's dual focus: morning sessions that spark dialogue and inspiration, and an evening dedicated to recognizing achievements. "The morning is filled with insightful discussions, while the evening celebrates over 50 distinguished individuals chosen for their creative contributions in various fields," he added.

The second session, Life is Beautiful, featured Dr Ali Al-Haddad, a Kuwaiti clinical nutritionist, and Dr Kareem Ali, an Egyptian international expert in therapeutic nutrition and holistic medicine, who shared their valuable insights on the crucial role of nutrition in health and well-being. They focused on the importance of a balanced diet in achieving overall life balance, emphasizing how proper nutrition directly impacts physical and mental health, and how making mindful dietary choices can lead to a healthier, more fulfilling life.

In my view

Syria's path forward



Dr Khalid Al-Saleh

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Everyone I met expressed heartfelt prayers for the Syrian people, hoping they will succeed in rebuilding their country. Perhaps this great people will learn from the experiences of other nations — from those who failed to unite their ranks and those who succeeded by coming together to build their homelands. The situation in Libya, for example, still suffers from a lack of rational leadership, with some prioritizing personal interests over the love of their homeland. On the other hand, Syria can draw lessons from Kuwait's experience. Kuwait, after being devastated by invasion and the flight of many of its citizens, saw a united return. Its people rejected division and were determined to rebuild their country.

It is beyond doubt that the phrase "Syria is the beating heart of the Arab world" holds significant truth. Unfortunately, past rulers of Syria attempted to abandon this old slogan, pledging loyalty to foreign powers, believing they could continue without the will of their people. Ultimately, the Syrian people had the final say, and Syria returned to the Arab fold.

If the current leaders of Syria are committed to keeping their country free from conflict and division, there is no doubt they can successfully defend against these challenges. I hope our Gulf countries, known for their moderation and sincere counsel, will take the initiative to engage with Syria's leaders, offering support and advice, and standing with them against those who seek to sow discord and undermine the state.

The Gulf countries, together with Egypt and Jordan, are well-positioned to assist Syria in overcoming this critical phase. I hope they will reach out directly to Syria's leadership, as I believe they already have, to hear from them away from Western reports or the narratives pushed by the fifth column — certain factions whose true motives remain unclear. Syria today stands at a crossroads. It is the Syria of the Levant, home to a unique and resilient people, whose revival is essential to the renaissance of the entire Arab nation. Let us not miss this opportunity. May Almighty Allah be with them, and with all of us.

Municipal Council consults people with disabilities on key barriers

Various government entities discuss ways to improve accessibility in special session



Ambassador Sheikhha Jawaher Ibrahim Duajj Al-Sabah.



President of the Kuwaiti Association for the Follow-up on Issues of the Disabled, Suad Al-Fares.



Chairman of the Kuwait Municipal Council, Abdullah Al-Mehri.

KUWAIT: The Municipal Council held a special session on Monday to identify the key challenges faced by people with disabilities and work towards finding appropriate solutions. The session brought together various government entities, including the Ministries of Education, Health, and Public Works, as well as the Public Authority for Disability Affairs and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, to collaborate on improving services for people with disabilities, KUNA reported. Officials heard directly from people with disabilities and their families, discussing ways to create a safer and more accessible environment for them.

Participants also explored ways to facilitate the use of digital applications for people with disabilities, alongside representatives from official bodies, NGOs, and civil society institutions. The session was organized in collaboration with the Kuwaiti Association for the Follow-up on Issues of the Disabled and the Disability Committee of the Municipal Council.

Chairman of the Kuwait Municipal Council, Abdullah Al-Mehri, highlighted some of the council's initiatives aimed at making Kuwait more accessible. The most significant of these is the "Kuwait Accessibility Code," which was officially launched in July 2024. The code is designed to ensure the implementation of engineering standards that create an accessible environment for all individuals, regardless of age, ability, or disability. He also mentioned ongoing efforts to introduce a law that would "strengthen the rights" of people with disabilities, though he did not specify the details of the law.

In a statement to KUNA, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Human Rights, Ambassador Sheikhha Jawaher Ibrahim Duajj Al-Sabah, reaf-



KUWAIT: The Municipal Council meets Monday with representatives from government agencies and NGOs, as well as people with disabilities and their families to discuss ways to create a safer environment for them. — KUNA photos

irmed Kuwait's strong commitment to enhancing the rights of people with disabilities. This is in line with the "New Kuwait Vision 2035," the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, and the government's program for 2024-2027. She praised the use of technological advancements to serve people with disabilities and emphasized the importance of fostering an environment that supports their integration into society.

President of the Kuwaiti Association for the Follow-up on Issues of the Disabled, Suad Al-Fares,

emphasized the association's role in monitoring and following up on the decisions made by the Municipal Council's Disability Committee. The association works closely with relevant authorities to ensure that buildings across both the public and private sectors are designed to be disability-friendly. Al-Fares stressed the importance of harnessing technology to improve the lives of people with disabilities and supporting their integration into the workforce and educational systems to enhance their active participation in society.

stc sponsors Kuwait Transparency Society's sustainability forum

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company—stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait—announced its strategic sponsorship of the sustainability forum organized by the Kuwait Transparency Society. The forum, bearing the slogan, "Governance and environmental sustainability: Effective methods and practices", was held at the National Library Theater under the patronage of Dr Amthal Al-Huwailah, Minister of Social

Affairs, Family and Childhood Affairs. Ahmed Al-Nuwaibet, Manager of Public Relations and Social Media at stc, addressed the attendees during the opening of the forum, where he pointed out in his speech the importance of these forums in increasing community awareness about the concept of sustainability.

stc's sponsorship comes as part of a series of initiatives organized under its sustainability program, titled "Small Move, Big Impact". Through this program, the company aims to raise awareness on various issues, while adopting long-term sustainable practices that leave a positive impact on the community and future generations. The forum, attended by members from stc's team, highlighted the objectives achieved by companies within the private sector across environmental, social and governance (ESG) initiatives. It also explored the sector's contributions towards achieving a green economy by promoting climate action and sustainable energy.

Additionally, the forum featured several panel discussions with representatives from various organizations, including Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc. Al-Jasem emphasized the importance of adopting sustainable practices through long-term initiatives aimed at creating added value for stakeholders, including customers, employees, shareholders, investors, as well



KUWAIT: Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, speaks at the sustainability forum.

private sectors have driven meaningful and impactful change across the community and we aim to continue these successful relationships. Our commitment to sustainable development is a fundamental part of our corporate values, as we believe that through collective efforts, we can make a significant and lasting contribution for future generations. When it comes to implementing such standards internally, stc has integrated sustainable practices within its operation, strategy, and environmental practices in alignment with the company's vision."



stc staff pose for a photo with Majed Al-Mutairi, President of the Kuwait Transparency Society and government officials.

as the communities that organizations engage with on a daily basis.

"At stc, sustainability is a core pillar of our strategy, which comes deeply integrated into the foundation of our operations to drive long-term success and create lasting value for our stakeholders. In alignment with this commitment, the Board of Directors and Executive Management have established a comprehensive framework for sustainable practices, ensuring its effective implementation across the organization. This approach reflects our dedication to fostering a sustainable and impactful future for our Company and all stakeholders," said Al-Jasem.

Al-Jasem highlighted stc's close collaboration with government institutions and regulators to ensure compliance with the highest standards of corporate governance, while promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical business practices across the organization. Through this comprehensive approach, stc aims to integrate sustainability into its business, creating a lasting positive impact on society and the environment. This vision aligns closely with the objectives defined under the new Kuwait Vision 2035.

Al-Jasem added: "We are proud to participate in this distinguished event, which brings together experts and specialists within the sustainability field. Our ongoing collaborations with both the public and

Majed Al-Mutairi, President of the Kuwait Transparency Society, said: "The annual sustainability forum organized by the Kuwait Transparency Society aims to shed light on critical national issues that significantly contribute to the country's development and progress. This year's forum focused on 'Governance and environmental sustainability', a vital topic that is directly linked to managing and preserving our natural resources responsibility."

Al-Mutairi added: "We are pleased with the participation and support of stc in this forum, which aims to provide a comprehensive analysis for decision makers on the importance of applying governance principles across all government institutions. In line with this strategic approach, the forum showcased different local and international case studies that could lead this shift by example."

The forum emphasized the necessary institutional developments that would enhance the public sector's capacity in advancing sustainable development plans and practices that would engage with the younger generation. Through this event, the Kuwait Transparency Society aims to offer valuable insights and successful experiences to assist decision makers in formulating an ambitious and effective national environmental strategy that aligns with international standards.



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Putin cheers 'landmark' 2024, says troops have upper hand in Ukraine

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Rescuers race to France's Mayotte as hundreds feared dead in cyclone

Crisis poses major challenge for government still only operating in caretaker capacity



MAYOTTE: This handout photograph taken on December 15, 2024 and released by the Gendarmerie Nationale on December 16, 2024 shows French gendarmes next to an armored vehicle Berliet VXB-170 (or VBRG) as they clear vegetation and debris blocking a road during an emergency rescue operation. —AFP

SAINT-DENIS DE LA REUNION: Rescuers raced Monday to reach survivors and supply urgent aid after a devastating cyclone ripped through the French Indian Ocean territory of Mayotte, destroying homes and leaving hundreds feared dead.

Images from Mayotte, which like other French overseas territories is an integral part of France, showed scenes of devastation, with homes reduced to piles of rubble. The crisis poses a major challenge for a French government still only operating in a caretaker capacity.

It erupted at the weekend the day after President Emmanuel Macron appointed Francois Bayrou as the sixth prime minister of his mandate.

The cyclone left health services in tatters, with the main hospital extremely damaged and health centers knocked out of operation, Health Minister Genevieve Darrieussecq told broadcaster France 2. "The hospital has suffered major water damage and destruction, notably in the surgical, intensive care, maternity and emergency units," she said, adding that "medical centers were also non-operational."

There was also widespread damage to telecommunications, with mobile phone networks, internet access and fixed-line services almost entirely knocked out, telecom providers in Mayotte reported. Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau travelled to Mayotte, telling officials on arrival: "For the toll we are going to need days."

Chido is the latest in a string of storms worldwide fueled by climate change, according to experts. The

"exceptional" cyclone was super-charged by particularly warm Indian Ocean waters, meteorologist Francois Gourand of the Meteo France weather service told AFP. Cyclone Chido caused major damage to Mayotte's airport and cut off electricity, water and communication links when it barreled down on Saturday. Trees were uprooted and power lines knocked down. Supplying fresh drinking water, a problem on Mayotte even in normal times, is now a major priority.

'Shanty towns flattened'

Asked about the eventual death toll, Prefect Francois-Xavier Bieuville, the top Paris-appointed official on the territory, told broadcaster Mayotte la Premiere: "I think there will definitely be several hundred, perhaps we will come close to a thousand or even several thousand." With roads closed, officials fear that many could still be trapped under rubble in inaccessible areas. The overwhelming majority of Mayotte's population is Muslim and religious tradition dictates bodies must be buried rapidly, meaning some may never be counted.

Mayotte is France's poorest region with an estimated third of the population living in shanty towns whose flimsy sheet metal-roofed homes offered scant protection against the storm. "All the shanty towns are flattened, which suggests a considerable number of victims," a source close to the authorities told AFP, asking not to be named.

And assessing the toll is further complicated by the illegal immigration to Mayotte especially from

the Comoros islands to the north. Mayotte officially has 320,000 inhabitants, "but it is estimated that there are 100,000 to 200,000 more people, taking into account illegal immigration," added the source. The source said few unregistered residents would have gone to the accommodation centers before the cyclone, "probably for fear of being checked".

'Apocalyptic scenes'

Chido was packing winds of at least 226 kilometers (140 miles) per hour when it slammed into Mayotte, which lies to the east of Mozambique. The mayor of Mayotte's capital Mamoudzou, Ambdilwahedou Soumaila, told AFP the storm "spared nothing".

One resident, Ibrahim, told AFP of "apocalyptic scenes" as he made his way through the main island, having to clear blocked roads himself. The nearby French island of La Reunion was serving as a hub for the rescue operations. Hundreds of French security personnel are being deployed to take part in the effort. As authorities assessed the scale of the disaster, a first aid plane reached Mayotte on Sunday. It carried three tons of medical supplies, blood for transfusions and 17 medical staff, according to authorities in La Reunion.

Ousseni Balahachi, a former nurse, said some people did not dare venture out to seek assistance, "fearing it would be a trap" designed to remove them from Mayotte. Many had stayed put "until the last minute" when it proved too late to escape the cyclone, she added. —AFP

Once a leading force, Baath party wiped off Mideast politics

CAIRO: The Baath party, once a powerful symbol of Arab nationalism, has become a fading relic of authoritarian rule in the Middle East after the fall of Syria's Bashar Al-Assad, analysts told AFP on Sunday. The party has suspended its activities in Syria after Islamist-led rebel forces toppled Assad's government last week, 20 years after its rival twin branch in Iraq was banned, marking the final collapse of a movement that once held sweeping power in both countries.

With Assad gone, "the Baath in Syria... is bound to fully decline," said Nikolaos van Dam, an expert on the party and author of a book about its history, "The Struggle for Power in Syria". Van Dam said he does not believe "they will ever have an opportunity for a comeback". The Arab Socialist Baath Party, officially, was founded in Damascus on April 7, 1947, seeking to merge socialist ideals and Arab nationalism. In its early years, the party recognized the important cultural role of religion for Muslims, who make up the majority in most Middle Eastern countries, while advocating a secular state that could unify the fragmented Arab world across sectarian divides. But in both Syria and Iraq, whose populations are multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian, the Baath party had become a vehicle for minority rule.

In Iraq, Sunni Muslims ruled over a Shiite majority, while Alawites - the Assad family - ruled over Syria's Sunni majority. Sami Moubayed, a Damascus-based historian and writer, said that both the Iraqi and Syrian branches failed to live up to their slogan of "Unity, Freedom and Socialism". "There was never unity, let alone freedom," he said. "Their socialism amounted to disastrous nationalizations," added Moubayed, author of "The Makers of Modern Syria: The Rise and Fall of Syrian Democracy 1918-1958".

The Baath had evolved into authoritarianism under Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Hafez al-Assad, and later his son Bashar, in Syria. "Arab nationalism, particularly secular Arab nationalism, has lost much of its appeal... and thereby also the role of the Baath Party as an Arab nationalist party," said van Dam. "State nationalism has gradually become more important than pan-Arab nationalism". In Syria, a military junta dominated by Alawites, Druze and Christian officers seized power in 1963, adopting Marxist-inspired policies. The party's founders, Michel Aflaq, a Christian, and Saleh Bitar, a Sunni, were sidelined and then fled to Iraq. —AFP

Syrian prisons were an extortion machine

SAYDNAYA: Ousted Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad's vast network of prisons was not simply a tool of his brutal crackdown on opposition to his rule, it was a money-making machine for his supporters. Desperate Syrians, clinging to the dream of seeing missing sons, husbands and sisters again, say they were systematically shaken down for bribes that together amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars. And, worse, in many cases the assorted officials, lawyers, grifters and Assad clan hangers-on demanding the cash failed to deliver news of the detainees, many tens of thousands of whom are now dead, rights monitors say.

Sanaa Omar, a 38-year-old woman from the northern city of Aleppo, came to the capital Damascus seeking news of her brother Mohammed, who went missing when he was 15. "My brother has been missing since 2011," she told AFP at a city hospital morgue where opposition fighters had deposited unidentified corpses found in Damascus prisons. "We looked in all of the prisons in Aleppo, in all of the branches. We paid everyone: lawyers would promise us they knew where he was and said they would bring documents, but they never did. "My dad would go every year to Damascus and meet with lawyers or people who would say they work with the government. They would take 200,000 or 300,000 or 400,000 (Syrian pounds) and we'd pay them," she said. "They'd say: 'You'll see him in month'. We'd wait for one month, two months, three months... but they never brought us a visitor's pass. We paid them for nearly five years, but in the end we lost hope." Two years ago, before

last week's dramatic collapse of the Assad's rule in the face of a lightning offensive by rebel fighters, a rights group tried to estimate how much detainees' families had paid over the years.

Abandoned ledgers

The Association of Detainees and Missing Persons at Saydnaya prison carried out hundreds of interviews to ask how much families had paid in return for the promise of information, a visit or a release from jail. Based on its data, the association estimated that government officials and supporters had made almost \$900 million. Hundreds of thousands of people have been detained since protests erupted against Assad's rule in early 2011.

Now, 13 years later, the gates of Saydnaya Prison, a grim, grey-walled complex squatting over an arid valley dotted with plush villas 30 kilometers north of Damascus, hang open. Instead of paying officials or intermediaries for scraps of information, relatives leaf desperately through abandoned ledgers looking for news of the missing. "I'm looking for my brother. He's been in Saydnaya since 2019," said Hassan Hashem, a thickset young man who came from the city of Hama in a last desperate attempt to find answers.

"My brother used to come and visit him, but they took him a year ago for re-investigation at Branch 28. After that we tried to follow him and people were taking money from us for information. "He'll get out today. He'll get out tomorrow." We paid more than \$12,000. He's married and has four daughters. He never did anything wrong," Hashem said, his face darkening with anger. When his brother, convicted of "international terrorism and bearing arms against the state", was moved to the Mazzeh air base in Damascus, the family was put in touch with the relative of a senior regime official. —AFP



ADRA: This picture shows a cell at the Adra prison in the town of Adra on the northeast outskirts of Damascus. — AFP

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International

Scientists struggle to explain a record surge in global heat

Extraordinary surge in heat send climate deeper into uncharted territory

PARIS: The world has been getting hotter for decades but a sudden and extraordinary surge in heat has sent the climate deeper into uncharted territory - and scientists are still trying to figure out why. Over the past two years, temperature records have been repeatedly shattered by a streak so persistent and puzzling it has tested the best-available scientific predictions about how the climate functions. Scientists are unanimous that burning fossil fuels has largely driven long-term global warming, and that natural climate variability can also influence temperatures one year to the next. But they are still debating what might have contributed to this particularly exceptional heat surge.

Experts think changes in cloud patterns, airborne pollution, and Earth's ability to store carbon could be factors, but it would take another year or two for a clearer picture to emerge. "Warming in 2023 was head-and-shoulders above any other year, and 2024 will be as well," said Gavin Schmidt, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, in November. "I wish I knew why, but I don't," he added. "We're still in the process of assessing what happened and if we are seeing a shift in how the climate system operates."

'Uncharted territory'

When burned, fossil fuels emit greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide that trap heat near the Earth's surface. As fossil fuel emissions have risen to record highs in 2023, average sea surface and air temperatures have curved upwards in a consistent, decades-long warming trend. But in an unprecedented streak between June 2023 and September 2024, global temperatures were unlike anything seen before, said the World Meteorological Organization - and sometimes by a considerable margin.

The heat was so extreme it was enough to make



WARSAW: Police officers remove climate activists and members of Ostatnie Pokolenie (Last Generation) group during the blockade of one of the main streets in Warsaw, to protest against inaction of politicians on global warming and climate change. — AFP

2023 - and then 2024 - the hottest years in history. "The record global warmth of the past two years has sent the planet well into uncharted territory," Richard Allan, a climate scientist from the UK's University of Reading, told AFP. What occurred was "at the limit of what we would expect based on existing climate models", Sonia Seneviratne, a climatologist from ETH Zurich in Switzerland, told AFP. "But the overall long-term warming tendency is not unexpected" given the amount of fossil fuels being burned, she added.

'Difficult to explain'

Scientists said that climate variability could go some way to explaining what happened. 2023 was preceded by a rare, three-year La Nina phenomenon that had a strong cooling effect on the planet by pushing excess heat into the deep oceans. This energy was released back to the surface when an opposite, warming El Nino event took over in mid-2023, boosting global temperatures. But the heat has lingered even after El Nino peaked in January. Temperatures have not fallen as fast as they rose, and November was still the sec-

ond-warmest on record. "It is difficult to explain this at the moment," said Robert Vautard, a member of the UN's climate expert panel IPCC. "We lack a bit of perspective. If temperatures do not drop more sharply in 2025, we will really have to ask ourselves questions about the cause," he told AFP.

Transformational shifts

Scientists are looking for clues elsewhere. One theory is that a global shift to cleaner shipping fuels in 2020 accelerated warming by reducing sulphur emissions that make clouds more mirror-like and reflective of sunlight. In December, another peer-reviewed paper looked at whether a reduction in low-lying clouds had led to more heat reach Earth's surface.

At the American Geophysical Union conference this month, Schmidt convened scientists to explore these theories and others, including whether solar cycles or volcanic activity offered any hints. There are concerns that without a more complete picture, scientists could be missing even more profound and transformational shifts in the climate. "We cannot exclude that some other factors also further amplified the temperatures... the verdict is still out," said Seneviratne.

Scientists this year warned that Earth's carbon sinks - such as the forests and oceans that suck CO2 from the atmosphere - had suffered an "unprecedented weakening" in 2023. This month, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said the Arctic tundra, after locking away CO2 for millennia, was becoming a net source of emissions. Oceans, which have acted as a massive carbon sink and climate regulator, were warming at a rate scientists "cannot fully explain", said Johan Rockstrom of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. "Could this be a first sign of a planet starting to show a loss of resilience? We cannot exclude it," he said last month. — AFP



BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gestures as he addresses the Bundestag on Dec 16, 2024, ahead of a no-confidence vote against himself. — AFP

Early elections as Scholz loses confidence vote

BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a confidence vote on Monday, spelling the effective end of his troubled government and putting Europe's biggest economy on the path to elections on Feb 23. Scholz had called the vote, expecting to lose it, weeks after his coalition collapsed. Later Monday he asked President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to dissolve the legislature soon and ask voters to head back to the ballot box.

Although the center-left chancellor continues in a caretaker role and with a minority in parliament, the political turmoil threatens months of paralysis until a new coalition government is formed. Embattled Scholz, 66, lags badly in the polls behind conservative opposition leader Friedrich Merz who heads the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of ex-chancellor Angela Merkel.

After more than three years at the helm, Scholz was plunged into crisis when his unruly three-party coalition collapsed on November 6, the day Donald Trump won re-election to the White House. The political turbulence has hit Germany as it struggles to revive a stuttering economy hammered by high energy prices and tough competition from China. Berlin also faces major geopolitical challenges as it confronts Russia over the Ukraine war and as Trump's looming return heightens uncertainty over NATO and trade ties.

'Deplorable state'

Those threats were at the center of a heated debate between Scholz, Merz and other party leaders ahead of the vote in the lower house, in which 207 MPs expressed confidence in Scholz against 394 who did not, with 116 abstentions. After Scholz outlined his plans for massive spending on security, business and social welfare, Merz demanded to know why he had not taken those steps in the past, asking: "Were you on another planet?"

Scholz argued that his government had boosted spending on the armed forces which previous CDU-led governments had left "in a deplorable state". "It is high time to invest powerfully and decisively in Germany," Scholz said, warning about Russia's war in Ukraine that "a highly armed nuclear power is waging war in Europe just two hours' flight from here".

But Merz fired back that Scholz had left the country in "one of the biggest economic crises of the post-war era". "You had your chance, but you did not use it ... You, Mr. Scholz, do not deserve confidence", charged Merz. Merz, a former corporate lawyer who has never held a government leadership post, lambasted the motley alliance of the chancellor's Social Democrats (SPD), the left-leaning Greens and the liberal Free Democrats (FDP). — AFP

Putin cheers 'landmark' 2024, says troops have upper hand in Ukraine

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday hailed his army's accelerating advance in Ukraine and praised 2024 as a "landmark" year in the course of Moscow's military offensive on its Western-backed neighbor. Addressing top military generals in an end-of-year meeting, the Kremlin leader struck a defiant and optimistic tone, claiming his troops had the upper hand across the entire front line. He also hit out at what he called a Western "hybrid war" and its attempts to inflict a "strategic defeat" on Moscow.

The comments come with Russia's army advancing across eastern Ukraine at their fastest pace since the first weeks of the offensive. Both Moscow and Kyiv are seeking to improve their position on the battlefield before US President-elect Donald Trump comes to power in January. The Republican has repeatedly said he could strike a ceasefire in hours, without presenting a plan, and speculation about peace talks is mounting.

'Strategic initiative'

"Russian troops are firmly holding the strategic initiative along the entire line of contact," Putin said in the televised meeting with army bosses and defense ministry officials. He said Russia's army had seized 189 Ukrainian settlements this year and called 2024 a "landmark year in the achievement of the goals of the special military operation", using Moscow's official language for its campaign. Speaking after Putin at the same meeting, Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov said Russia's troops had seized a total of almost 4,500 square kilometers (1,737 square miles) of Ukrainian territory in this year and were now gaining around 30 square kilometers a day.

He said Ukraine controlled less than one percent

Assad claims Syria in hands of...

Continued on Page 6

"When the state falls into the hands of terrorism and the ability to make a meaningful contribution is lost, any position becomes void of purpose," added the statement, released in English. Assad's fall sparked rejoicing in Syria and around the world after five decades of rule by his clan, which had zero tolerance for criticism and operated a complex web of prisons to detain anyone even suspected of dissent. To the victims of some of Assad's worst atrocities, the end of his era brought a glimmer of hope that they might find closure. As HTS and its allies advanced through Syria, they opened prison gates to free people suspected of dissent who had been held for days, months, years and even decades. "We want our children, alive, dead, burned, ashes, buried in mass graves... just tell us," Ayoush Hassan, 66, told AFP at Saydnaya, one of the prisons Assad had used to strike fear into Syrian society. She traveled to the prison in Damascus from her home in northern Syria, but could find no trace of her missing son.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 100,000 people died in Syria's jails and detention centers from 2011. Ghazi Mohammed Al-Mohammed, a survivor of detention, told AFP that officers seized him while he was on a trip to Damascus, took away his papers and said to him: "Now you're number 3006." He does not even know why he was arrested. "Towards the end I just wanted to die, waiting for when they would execute us. I was almost happy, as it would mean my suffering was over," he said.

The war sparked by Assad's crackdown on the re-



MOSCOW: Russia's President Vladimir Putin gives a speech at an expanded meeting of the Russian Defence Ministry Board at the National Defence Control Centre in Moscow on December 16, 2024. — AFP

of the eastern Lugansk region, and around 25-30 percent of the Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Russia claimed in 2022 to annex all four, despite not having full control over any of them. Russia's army said Monday it had captured another small village in the Donetsk region, as part of its latest advance. AFP analysis of Institute for the Study of War data found that in November Russian troops advanced at their fastest pace since March 2022 - the first full month of the offensive.

Putin also hailed Russia's military industry and defense enterprises in providing advanced weapons and equipment to support Moscow's army. He said Russia was working on the mass production of missile systems - including hypersonic ones like the Oreshnik missile he fired on the Ukrainian city of Dnipro last month - and indicated troops were using AI-powered systems. — AFP

volt killed more than 500,000 people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and forced more than half the population to flee their homes. Governments around the world have welcomed the fall of Assad, who came under sanctions over the abuses committed under his authority.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said Monday the bloc's envoy to Syria would travel to Damascus to make contacts, adding: "We can't leave a vacuum." On whether HTS could be trusted, she was cautious. "For us, it's not only the words, but we want to see the deeds going to the right direction," she said. "So not only what they are saying, but also what they are doing."

The UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, told HTS leader Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani Syria must have a "credible and inclusive" transition, according to a statement on Monday. Qatar's embassy is set to resume operations on Tuesday after Turkey, a key backer of some of the rebel groups that ousted Assad, reopened its embassy. Britain and the United States confirmed they were in touch with HTS, despite officially considering the organization a "terrorist" group.

Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted his country has "no interest in confronting Syria", despite launching hundreds of strikes over the past week. "(The Zionist entity's) policy toward Syria will be determined by the evolving reality on the ground," he said in a video statement. Those strikes continued Monday, with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reporting raids on military sites in the coastal Tartus region. The UK-based monitor, which relies on a network of sources inside Syria, said the raids were "the heaviest strikes" in the area in more than a decade. "It was like an earthquake. All the windows in my house were blown out," said 28-year-old Ibrahim Ahmed, an employee in a legal office who had come to a roadside viewpoint to look down on devastation. — AFP

Long COVID keeps lives on hold 5 yrs on

VIENNA: Three years ago, Andrea Vaneek was studying to be an arts and crafts teacher when spells of dizziness and heart palpitations suddenly started to make it impossible for her to even take short walks. After seeing a succession of doctors she was diagnosed with long COVID and even now spends most of her days in the small living room of her third-floor Vienna apartment, sitting on the windowsill to observe the world outside. "I can't plan anything because I just don't know how long this illness will last," the 33-year-old Austrian told AFP.

The first cases of COVID-19 were detected in China in December 2019, sparking a global pandemic and more than seven million reported deaths to date, according to the World Health Organization. But millions more have been affected by long COVID, in which some people struggle to recover from the acute phase of COVID-19, suffering symptoms including tiredness, brain fog and shortness of breath.

Vaneek tries to be careful not to exert herself to avoid another "crash", which for her is marked by debilitating muscle weakness and can last for months, making it hard to even open a bottle of water. "We know that long COVID is a big problem," said Anita Jain, from the WHO's Health Emergencies Program. About six percent of people infected by coronavirus develop long COVID, according to the global health body, which has recorded some 777 million COVID cases to date. Whereas the rates of long COVID after an initial infection are declining, re-infection increases the risk, Jain added.

'Everything hurts'

Chantal Britt, who lives in Bern, Switzerland, contracted COVID in March 2020. Long COVID, she said, has turned her "life upside down" and forced her to "reinvent" herself. "I was really an early bird... Now I take two hours to get up in the morning at least because everything hurts," the 56-year-old former marathon runner explained. "I'm not even hoping anymore that I'm well in the morning but I'm still kind of surprised how old and how broken I feel."

About 15 percent of those who have long COVID have persistent symptoms for more than one year, according to the WHO, while women tend to have a higher risk than men of developing the condition. Britt, who says she used to be a "workaholic", now works part-time as a university researcher on long COVID and other topics. She lost her job in communications in 2022 after she asked to reduce her work hours.

She misses doing sports, which used to be like "therapy" for her, and now has to plan her daily activities more, such as thinking of places where she can sit down and rest when she goes shopping. A lack of understanding by those around her also make it more difficult. "It's an invisible disease... which connects to all the stigma surrounding it," she said. "Even the people who are really severely affected, who are at home, in a dark room, who can't be touched anymore, any noise will drive them into a crash, they don't look sick," she said.

The WHO's Jain said it can be difficult for healthcare providers to give a diagnosis and wider recognition of the condition is crucial. More than 200 symptoms have been listed alongside common ones such as fatigue, shortness of breath and cognitive dysfunction. "Now a lot of the focus is on helping patients, helping clinicians with the tools to accurately diagnose long COVID, detect it early," she said. — AFP

International

Taiwan receives first batch of US-made Abrams tanks

Chinese politicians make a rare trip to Taiwan

TAIPEI: Taiwan has received 38 advanced Abrams battle tanks from the United States, the defense ministry said Monday, reportedly the island's first new tanks in 30 years. Washington has long been Taipei's most important ally and biggest arms supplier—angering Beijing, which claims Taiwan as part of its own territory. The M1A2 tanks—the first batch of 108 ordered in 2019—arrived in Taiwan late Sunday and were transferred to an army training base in Hsinchu, south of the capital Taipei, the defense ministry said.

The M1A2s are the first new tanks to be delivered to Taiwan in 30 years, the semi-official Central News Agency said. Taiwan's current tank force consists of around 1,000 Taiwan-made CM 11 Brave Tiger and US-made M60A3 tanks, technology that is increasingly obsolete. Abrams tanks, which are among the heaviest in the world, are a mainstay of the US military. Taiwan faces the constant threat of an invasion by China, which has refused to rule out using force to bring the self-ruled island under its control. China's foreign ministry on Monday urged the United States to "stop arming Taiwan... and supporting Taiwan independence forces".

"The Taiwan authorities' attempt to seek independence through force and foreign help is doomed to fail," ministry spokesman Lin Jian said. "China will firmly defend its national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity." While it has a home-grown defense industry and has been upgrading its equipment, Taiwan relies heavily on US arms sales to bolster its security capabilities. Taiwan requested the state-of-the-art M1A2 tanks in 2019, allocating the equivalent of more than \$1.2 billion for them. The rest of the order is expected to be delivered in 2025 and 2026, an army official told AFP.

While US arms supplies to Taiwan are enshrined into law, a massive backlog caused by COVID-19

supply chain disruptions and US weapons shipments to Ukraine and Zionist entity have slowed deliveries to Taiwan.

The backlog now exceeds \$21 billion, according to Washington think tank Cato Institute. Taiwan would be massively outgunned in terms of troop numbers and firepower in any war with China and in recent years has increased spending on its military. Taipei allocated a record \$19 billion for 2024 and next year's budget is set to hit a new high as it seeks to bolster its defence approach.

China has increased military pressure on Taiwan in recent years, regularly deploying fighter jets and warships around the island. Taiwanese authorities said last week that China had held its biggest maritime drills in years, with around 90 ships deployed from near the southern islands of Japan to the South China Sea. The vessels simulated attacks on foreign ships and practiced blockading sea routes, a Taiwan security official said previously. Beijing did not confirm the drills and its defense ministry did not say whether the manoeuvres had taken place when asked at a press conference on Friday.

Rare trip to Taiwan

Meanwhile, a group of Chinese politicians arrived in Taiwan on Monday for a rare visit, as relations between Beijing and Taipei remain fraught. China considers Taiwan part of its territory and in recent years has ramped up military and political pressure on the self-ruled island to assert its claims. Beijing severed high-level communications with Taipei in 2016 when former president Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party, which rejects China's claims over Taiwan, took office.

Deputy head of Shanghai's Taiwan Affairs Office Li Xiaodong and Shanghai Vice Mayor Hua Yuan arrived in Taipei on Monday for an annual



HSINCHU, Taiwan: Soldiers secure a US-made M1A2 Abrams battle tank onto a trailer at an army armor training center on Dec 16, 2024. — AFP

forum hosted this year by the Taipei City government, which is led by the Beijing-friendly main opposition party Kuomintang. They are part of a delegation of around 90 people attending the one-day event on Tuesday, which the Taipei City Mayor's Office said will see agreements signed on healthcare and red panda exchanges.

The Chinese delegation has agreed to keep a "low profile" throughout their trip. Taiwan's top China policy body, the Mainland Affairs Council,

said. The gathering comes after Taiwanese officials said China last week held its biggest maritime drills in years, with around 90 ships deployed from near the southern islands of Japan to the South China Sea. The vessels simulated attacks on foreign ships and practiced blockading sea routes, a Taiwan security official said previously. Beijing did not confirm the drills and its defense ministry did not say whether the manoeuvres had taken place when asked at a press conference on Friday. — AFP

Lanka president in India in first overseas trip

NEW DELHI: Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake vowed to bolster ties with India Monday on his first overseas visit as head of state, with a red carpet welcome by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Leaders of the island nation typically make their first visit to regional powerhouse India, which competes with China for influence in the Indian Ocean. Leftist Dissanayake, who came to power in September on a pledge to fight corruption, said the ties between the nations held a "significant place" in their foreign policy, adding that Modi had "assured us of full support".

Modi said he was "happy" that India was Dissanayake's first foreign visit, saying after their meeting it would "add new energy and speed" to ties. New Delhi has been concerned about Beijing's growing hold in Sri Lanka, and gave Dissanayake a warm welcome with a military honor guard parade at the presidential palace. New Delhi is a key trading partner for Colombo - Indian exports totaled \$4.1 billion to Sri Lanka, versus \$1.4 billion in reverse - and is pushing infrastructure projects. But China is Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender. Dissanayake is expected to travel to Beijing for talks with Chinese leaders in early 2025.

Sri Lanka suffered its worst financial crisis in 2022 when it ran out of foreign exchange to pay for essential imports



NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake meet at Hyderabad House on Dec 16, 2024. — AFP

such as food, fuel and medicines, and defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt. "We faced an unprecedented economic crisis two years ago and India supported us immensely to come out of that quagmire," Dissanayake added.

Dissanayake said he had held "productive discussions" with India's finance and foreign ministers, as well as national security adviser Ajit Doval. "Our conversations focused on strengthening Indo-Sri Lanka economic cooperation, enhancing investment opportunities, fostering regional security, and advancing key sectors such as tourism and energy," Dissanayake said in a statement. "These engagements reaffirm the commitment to deepening the partnership between our two nations." Sri Lanka sits astride the world's busiest shipping route, which links the Middle East and East Asia, giving its maritime assets strategic importance. — AFP

corrections coordination, told a press conference. She will travel home on a Cebu Airlines flight shortly after midnight on December 18, he confirmed to reporters. Foreign affairs ministry spokesman Roy Soemirat said they did not yet "have any formal information from our law enforcement agency on the details" of her transfer.

The Philippine embassy in Jakarta did not respond to a request for comment. Both Veloso and her supporters said she was duped by an international drug syndicate, and in 2015, she narrowly escaped execution after her suspected recruiter was arrested. She told AFP on Friday in her first interview since the repatriation agreement that her release was a "miracle". Muslim-majority Indonesia has some of the world's toughest drug laws and has executed foreigners in the past. At least 530 people were on death row in the Southeast Asian nation, mostly for drug-related crimes, according to data from rights group Kontras, citing official figures. According to Indonesia's Ministry of Immigration and Corrections, 96 foreigners were on death row, all on drug charges, as of early November. — AFP

sued arrest warrant should he continue to refuse. Yoon was removed by South Korea's parliament on Saturday over his short-lived attempt to suspend civilian rule, which plunged the country into its worst political turmoil in years. Fresh elections must be held within two months if his removal is upheld by the Constitutional Court. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo is serving as interim leader in Yoon's stead.

A spokeswoman for the court said on Monday judges had penciled in a preliminary hearing on December 27, which Yoon is not required to attend. "During the preparatory hearing, investigation records from the prosecution, police, and other relevant authorities will be promptly secured," spokeswoman Lee Jean told journalists. "This case will be given top priority," she said. Vast protests against Yoon, with smaller rallies supporting him, have rocked the South Korean capital since his short-lived December 3 martial law decree.

Demonstrators in both camps have vowed to keep up the pressure as the Constitutional Court considers Yoon's fate. Police arrested both the current and former heads of the Defense Intelligence Command on Sunday in connection to the insurrection allegations, Yonhap reported. Prosecutors also arrested the head of the Army Special Warfare Command Kwak Jong-keun, Yonhap said. Kwak is accused of sending special forces troops to parliament during the martial law bid, sparking a dramatic confrontation between soldiers and parliamentary staff. — AFP

Philippines ratifies key defense pact with Japan

MANILA: The Philippines ratified on Monday a key defense pact with Japan, which allows them to deploy troops on each other's soil as they boost ties to bolster against China's growing pressure. Both countries are longtime allies of the United States, which has been strengthening an arc of alliances to deter China's disputed territorial claims in the Pacific. The pact—which also allows for increased joint combat drills—was ratified by the Philippine senate

with no negative votes or abstentions, Senate President Francis Escudero said. Lawmakers in Tokyo will also need to vote through the treaty before it takes effect, Japan's embassy said.

"Ratifying the Agreement further affirms the strategic partnership between the two countries and their mutual goal to enhance contribution to regional and international peace, security and stability," the senate said in a statement. "The Agreement will expand the defense cooperation of the Philippines and Japan in the maritime domain amid shared security challenges." Negotiators from both countries finished brokering the pact in July, after seven months of talks. Whilst Japan invaded the Philippines during World War II, nowadays they have common military ties to the United States and are increasingly at loggerheads with China. — AFP

Do Cigarettes Belong in a Museum?

Museums are home to ancient artefacts and relics of bygone eras. Cigarettes belong there, but current policies to reduce smoking prevalence are not working fast enough and may be prolonging the problem. Traditional measures to end smoking focus on discouraging people from starting and encouraging existing smokers to stop, but today, these measures can be paired with other strategies to secure a smoke-free future even faster. Quitting tobacco and nicotine altogether is always the best choice, but the reality is that many don't. Smoke-free products exist to give adult smokers who don't quit a better choice than continuing to smoke.

What is the true cause of disease?

It's often misunderstood, but the high levels of harmful chemicals in the smoke of a burning cigarette are the primary cause of smoking-related disease. Smoke-free products are however, just

that - free of smoke, which means they can produce considerably lower levels of harmful chemicals. They're not risk-free and contain nicotine, which is addictive, but the potential reduction in harmful chemicals compared to cigarettes can make them a far better choice for adult smokers than continuing to smoke.

With every product, it's important to do your research, choosing an alternative that's been backed by science, tested thoroughly, and comes from a reputable retailer.

Smoke-free alternatives can play a crucial role in reducing smoking rates by informing adult smokers who don't quit to discover better alternatives. By switching to a smoke-free product, they too can leave cigarettes well and truly in the past.

Sponsored by Philip Morris Management Services (Middle East) Limited

Filipina on Indonesia death row moved to capital Jakarta

JAKARTA: A Filipina inmate sentenced to death in Indonesia was moved to capital Jakarta before she is expected to fly home on Wednesday, after the government signed an agreement to repatriate her. Mother of two Mary Jane Veloso, 39, was arrested and convicted in 2010 after the suitcase she was carrying was found to be lined with 2.6 kilograms of heroin. On Sunday, officers picked her up from a women's prison in Yogyakarta province, an AFP journalist present said, before transporting her to another prison in Jakarta more than 260 miles away.

From there she will be flown back to the Philippines early Wednesday morning, I Nyoman Gede Surya Mataram, acting deputy for immigration and

South Korea's Yoon resists questioning over martial law

SEOUL: Impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol resisted investigators' calls on Monday for him to answer questions over his failed bid to declare martial law this month. Yoon, suspended from office by parliament since Saturday, faces concurrent probes over alleged insurrection by both South Korean prosecutors and a joint team of police, defense ministry and anti-corruption investigators. South Korea's Constitutional Court began proceedings against Yoon on Monday and has around six months to determine whether to uphold the impeachment.

Yoon and some of his inner circle face possible life imprisonment, or even the death penalty, if found guilty and he remains under a travel ban. Prosecutors issued Yoon with a second summons on Monday for questioning over insurrection and abuse of power allegations after he "refused to comply" with a similar request a day earlier.

The joint investigation unit also asked that the suspended president appear to answer questions on Wednesday but were rebuffed by his office, Yonhap news agency said. Investigators could seek a court-is-



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Bitcoin hits record high amid Trump's pro-crypto stance

Bitcoin tops \$106,000, hopes grow for strategic reserve • Bitcoin buyer MicroStrategy joins Nasdaq 100

WASHINGTON: Bitcoin hit a record high above \$106,000 on Monday after President-elect Donald Trump suggested he plans to create a US bitcoin strategic reserve similar to its strategic oil reserve, stoking the enthusiasm of crypto bulls. Bitcoin, the world's biggest and best-known cryptocurrency, hit a high of \$106,533 and last traded up 2.6 percent at \$103,917 at 1215 GMT. Smaller crypto ether was up 0.4 percent at \$3,918. "We're in blue sky territory here," said Tony Sycamore, an analyst at IG. "The next figure the market will be looking for is \$110,000. The pullback that a lot of people were waiting for just didn't happen, because now we've got this news."

Investor sentiment also got a lift from the inclusion of MicroStrategy into the tech-heavy Nasdaq 100 index that will likely lead to more inflows for the software firm turned bitcoin buyer. Bitcoin and crypto have been catapulted into the spotlight as investors wager the incoming Trump administration will usher in a friendlier regulatory environment, boosting sentiment around the alternate currency. Bitcoin is up 192 percent for the year.

"We're gonna do something great with crypto because we don't want China or anybody else - not just China but others are embracing it - and we want to be the head," Trump told CNBC late last week. When asked if he plans to build a crypto reserve similar to oil reserves, Trump said: "Yeah, I think so." Governments around the world held 2.2 percent of bitcoin's total supply as of July, according to data provider CoinGecko, with the United States possessing nearly 200,000 bitcoins valued at more than \$20 billion at current levels.

China, UK, Bhutan and El Salvador are the other countries with a significant amount of bitcoins, data site Bitcoin Treasuries showed. Other countries have also been considering cryptocurrency strategic re-



CALIFORNIA: A CoinFlip Bitcoin ATM is seen in a gas station in Pasadena, California. The price of Bitcoin has skyrocketed following the US Presidential election with the price of a single Bitcoin eclipsing the \$100,000 mark last week for the first time. — AFP

serves. Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier this month said the current US administration was undermining the role of the US dollar as the reserve currency in the global economy by using it for political purposes, forcing many countries to turn to alternative assets, including cryptocurrencies. "For example, bitcoin, who can prohibit it? No one," Putin said.

There are skeptics though, with Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell likening bitcoin to gold earlier this month. Analysts also point out that any such

move will take time to implement. "I think we still need to be cautious on a BTC strategic reserve, and at least consider that this is not likely to happen anytime soon," said Chris Weston, head of research at Pepperstone. "Of course, any comment from Trump that offers an increased degree of hope that plans for a strategic reserve are evolving are an obvious tailwind, but this would come with consequences which would need to be carefully considered and well telegraphed to market players."

Crypto boost

Bitcoin has surged more than 50 percent since the Nov 5 election that saw Trump elected along with many other pro-crypto candidates. The total value of the cryptocurrency market has almost doubled over the year so far to hit a record over \$3.8 trillion, according to CoinGecko. Trump - who once labeled crypto a scam - embraced digital assets during his campaign, promising to make the United States the "crypto capital of the planet." Trump this month named a White House czar for artificial intelligence and cryptocurrencies, former PayPal executive David Sacks, a close friend of Trump adviser and megadonor Elon Musk.

Trump also said he would nominate pro-crypto Washington attorney Paul Atkins to head the Securities and Exchange Commission. On Friday, exchange operator Nasdaq said MicroStrategy, led by chief executive Michael Saylor, will be added to the Nasdaq-100 Index, with the change coming into effect before the market opens on Dec 23. MicroStrategy, an aggressive investor in the world's largest crypto asset, has seen its shares soar more than six-fold this year, taking its market value to almost \$94 billion. It is now the largest corporate holder of the cryptocurrency.

As part of the Nasdaq 100, investors would buy MicroStrategy shares to mirror the holdings of the broader index, thereby driving up the value of the stock and allowing the company to buy more crypto, through debt and equity offerings. Matthew Dibb, chief investment officer at crypto asset manager Astronaut Capital, said. "The inclusion seems a bit unexpected, but that hasn't stopped the excitement of what many believe to be the start of a looping cycle of capital that could potentially drive up the spot bitcoin price," he said. Bitcoin surges above \$106,000. — Reuters

Pakistan central bank cuts key rate by 200 bps, fifth in a row

KARACHI: Pakistan's central bank cut its key policy rate by 200 basis points to 13 percent on Monday, it said in a statement, its fifth straight reduction since June as the country keeps up efforts to revive a sluggish economy with inflation easing. Pakistan's latest move makes this year's cuts the most aggressive among emerging market central banks in the current easing cycle, barring outliers such as Argentina.

"Overall, the Committee assessed that its approach of measured policy rate cuts is keeping inflationary and external account pressures in check, while supporting economic growth on a sustainable basis," the bank's monetary policy committee said in a statement announcing its decision. The bank noted that it expected inflation to average "substantially below" its earlier forecast range of 11.5 percent to 13.5 percent in 2025.

It added that the inflation outlook was susceptible to risks, including measures to meet government revenue shortfalls as well as food inflation and increased global commodity prices. "Inflation may remain volatile in the near term before stabilizing in the target range," the bank said. The South Asian country is navigating a challenging economic recovery path and has been buttressed by a \$7 billion facility from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in September. The bank noted that "considerable efforts and additional measures" would be required for Pakistan to meet its annual revenue target, a key focus of the IMF agreement.

All 12 analysts surveyed by Reuters had expected a 200 bps cut, after inflation fell sharply, slowing to 4.9 percent in November, largely due to a high base a year earlier, coming in below the government's forecast and significantly lower than a multi-decade high of around 40 percent in May last year. Monday's move follows cuts of 150 bps in June, 100 in July, 200 in September, and a record cut of 250 bps in November, that have taken the rate down from an all-time high of 22 percent, set in June 2023 and left unchanged for a year. It takes the total cuts to 900 bps since June. — Reuters



MISRATAH: Workers pick ripe 'Majhul' dates from a palm tree in a field in the coastal city of Misrata, east of the Libyan capital. Mejhoul dates, native to Morocco's semi-arid regions, are famed for their large size, tender texture and rich sweetness. — AFP photos

Libya farmer breaks new ground with outlier date variety

MISRATA: In the Libyan countryside, farmer Ismail Ben Saoud has launched an agricultural experiment, banking on Mejhoul dates - a premium variety cherished across the Arab world but untested in such a humid coastal climate. Ben Saoud's five-hectare farm in Misrata, western Libya, stands out in the landscape that is dotted by olive and citrus trees. Eight years after taking the leap, he says his 700 palm trees now produce high-quality Mejhoul dates which he hopes will reach international markets soon.

"People have claimed that these palms couldn't survive here, especially near the sea," said Ben Saoud, 42. "But with persistence and careful experimentation, we are proving them wrong." Mejhoul dates, native to Morocco's semi-arid regions, are famed for their large size, tender texture and rich sweetness. Traditionally thought unsuitable for Mediterranean climates, the variety has exceeded Ben

Saoud's expectations. Using organic fertilizers and refining techniques over time, Ben Saoud now anticipates reaching full production capacity in just two years. "The harvest has been very satisfactory," he said about this year's output. "Another year or two and it will be optimal. We improve from year to year."

For Libyans and others across the Arab world, dates are a treasured food. A staple sweet during festivities, they hold cultural as well as religious value, traditionally eaten to break the daily fast during the Muslim month of Ramadan. Mejhoul dates go for up to 80 Libyan dinars (around \$16) per kilogram in local markets, far more than the price tag attached to other varieties, as low as six and up to 20 dinar. But for many customers, Mejhoul prices match their quality, with an unwavering demand among Libyans preferring locally produced goods.

'Growing interest'

The country has faced a host of woes since a 2011 NATO-backed uprising overthrew and killed long-time dictator Moamer Kadhafi, plunging Libya into instability and conflict. Even before that, decades of near-exclusive reliance on oil revenue left many of Libya's sectors underdeveloped. But many have been striving to bring around Libyan agriculture. In

Misrata, a major port city and commercial hub about 200 kilometers from the capital Tripoli, supermarkets are stocked with a variety of date products.

They run the gamut from molasses and pastes used in traditional pastries like makrouds, to novel concoctions such as stuffed dates smothered in chocolate. "The quality of Libyan dates has improved noticeably since the 2011 war," said Najwa, an Egyptian nurse on vacation, shopping for her favorite varieties. "There's more care put into growing and preparing them now." Salah Shagan, a Libyan agriculture expert, said that "more Libyans are turning to farming in recent years", with a "growing interest" in olives, vegetables and dates.

"These efforts not only bring income, but also revive our connection to the land." Libya now has over 10 million date palms, producing more than 50,000 tons of fruit annually, according to the agriculture ministry. Much of this production satisfies local demand, but farmers also aim to make it to international markets. For Ben Saoud, exporting Mejhoul is his next major bet. "Our local demand is already strong, so we must ensure we can meet that before expanding further," he said, walking through his orchard with his two young daughters, their mouths full of fresh dates. — AFP

With Assad gone, Syrian pound starts to recover

DAMASCUS: The Syrian pound has begun to recover against the dollar after president Bashar Al-Assad's ouster, moneychangers and traders said Monday as foreign currencies again became available on the local market. On December 7 - the day before Damascus fell to a rebel coalition led by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group - the rate had plunged to 30,000 pounds to the dollar, halving the value of the local currency compared to just months previously. On Monday, however, the exchange rate was between 10,000 pounds and 12,000 pounds to the dollar, a moneychanger, jeweler and a hotel receptionist all told AFP.

A Lebanese taxi driver said he exchanged cash at 9,000 pounds to the dollar before crossing the border. For the first time in years, the black market rate and the official rate are now equal, in the absence of exchange offices. "In every other country the currency falls when the regime falls. But here in Syria it seems the opposite applies," said jeweller Raghd Mansur in the Damascus souk. "There's no fixed rate yet, but the pound is progressively regaining its value," the 74-year-old added. Professor Qusay Ibrahim, of the economics faculty at Damascus University, says the rise of the pound is linked to "both political and economic factors". He cited the "influx of dollars" from the zones that had been rebel-held and from "all the foreign journalists and organizations" flocking to Syria after Assad's downfall.

At Bekdash, Damascus's celebrated ice cream and pastry maker where there was a long queue of people



MISRATAH: A worker arranges a box of 'Majhul' dates harvested from palm trees at fields of the Akmam Al Nakhil company, in the coastal city of Misrata.



LAHORE: A vendor sells dry fruits waits for customers in Lahore on December 16, 2024. — AFP



DAMASCUS: A teller stands next to a pile of Syrian pound banknotes as he serves customers at a commercial bank affiliated with Syria's central bank in Damascus on December 16, 2024. — AFP

on Monday, prices are listed in Syrian pounds, Turkish lira and US dollars. The former government forbade transactions in any currency other than the Syrian pound, with those caught flouting the law facing up to

seven years in prison. People even avoided saying the word "dollar" in public or on the phone for fear of arrest. The Syrian pound plunged when the civil war erupted in 2011, losing up to 90 percent of its value. — AFP

Business

Disaster insurance to test Italy's business backbone

Rome spends €4-5bn per year on disaster compensation

ROME: Italian companies are preparing to comply with a requirement to take out natural disaster insurance from next April, although some fear it will be hard to enforce and too costly. Many small and medium-sized firms, which form the backbone of Italian business, have until now bet on government support to weather increasingly frequent climate-related disasters.

Italy's northern region of Emilia-Romagna has recently been particularly hard hit by floods, with four since May 2023. The first and most devastating caused 8.5 billion euros (\$8.93 billion) of damage. With the euro zone's second-highest public debt, Italy can ill afford to foot the bill and is set to end this reliance on the state, potentially resulting

in considerable savings. The law obliges firms to insure assets such as equipment, buildings and land in Italy, where environmental research and protection institute ISPRA says some 94 percent of towns are at risk from landslides, floods or coastal erosion.

Italy spends around 4-5 billion euros a year on compensation for natural disasters, figures from insurance watchdog IVASS show, around 0.25 percent of gross domestic product. And while the Italian market is growing, with insured assets impacted by natural disasters totaling a record of around 6 billion euros (\$6.30 billion) in 2023, data from industry association ANIA shows, only 5 percent of Italian firms had cover.

"Using the money saved for preven-

tion plans and better infrastructures is the central point," said Andrea Bellucci, who teaches valuation of insurance companies at Perugia University. Although the law has been cautiously welcomed by most firms, some are concerned that policies will be onerous and complex. "We want it to be tailored to companies' needs to reflect the extent of the risks, and not one-size fits all to boost the revenue of insurers," said Stefano Valvason, general director of API, an association of small and medium-sized businesses.

Mauro Di Nunzio, who runs a company that produces dried fruits in Italy's southern region of Puglia, welcomed the new rules, saying paying for insurance was preferable to relying on "slow, inad-

equate and inefficient" state compensation. Bruno Panieri, director of economic policy at small business lobby Confartigianato, said clarity was key and called for the creation of a single, price-comparison website. Analysts say another challenge will be enforcing the new regulation, which has been criticized by some as lacking an effective system of sanctions. And if take-up remains low, it will undermine risk-sharing and drive up premiums.

Start over

The law may offer larger insurers an advantage as they can spread risk among more clients and regions. Stefano Frazzoni, senior partner at business consultancy Prometeia, said. Five insur-

ance groups currently provide about 70 percent of natural disaster coverage in Italy, where the ratio between insured losses and total economic losses is 69 percent, compared with 20 percent in France and 27 percent in Germany, data from Swiss Re SRENHS shows.

The state will act as re-insurer, enabling insurance companies to tap into guarantees from the publicly owned insurance and advisory group SACE, to offload some risks. Nicola Bertone, whose carpentry business in the north-western Liguria region was uninsured when it suffered 80,000 euros of damage in a flood in October, supports the new rules. "Being covered helps to keep your spirits up when you have to start over," he said. — Reuters

China says planned US tariff hikes 'pile errors onto errors'

BEIJING: Beijing said Monday that plans by the United States to hike tariffs on more Chinese imports "pile errors onto errors", after Washington homed in on products including crucial solar panel components. The moves announced Wednesday by the US Trade Representative's office cap a review of tariffs imposed during President-elect Donald Trump's first administration. Rates for solar wafers and polysilicon are set to double to 50 percent next month, while those on certain tungsten products will rise from zero to 25 percent, in an effort to counter China's "harmful policies and practices", US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said.

China hit back on Monday, saying the hikes "pile errors onto errors" and would only "harm the interests of US consume." "The US tariff measures will not only fail to resolve the US trade deficit and industrial competitiveness issues, but will also push up domestic inflation in the United States," a spokesperson for Beijing's commerce ministry said in a statement. The moves "seriously undermine the global trade order and the security and stability of global industrial and supply chains", the statement said. It urged Washington to "immediately correct its wrong practices and cancel the additional tariffs on China", adding that Beijing would "take necessary measures to defend its own rights and interests".

The world's two largest economies have long tussled over trade policy. Trump, who will be inau-



OAKLAND: In an aerial view, container ships sit docked at the Port of Oakland, in Oakland, California. US President-elect Donald Trump is threatening new tariffs on multiple countries as his second term approaches, after making tariffs a signature of his 2024 Presidential campaign. — AFP

gurated for a second term on January 20, engaged in an escalating tariff war with Beijing during his first stint as president and has threatened similar action this time around. Incumbent Joe Biden has taken a targeted approach when it comes to tariff hikes on Chinese goods, although he did not roll back increases imposed by his predecessor. Tai said last week that the latest rises would complement domestic investments made under Biden to boost the United States' clean energy economy.

A notice by the USTR's office said Chinese

tungsten imports have undercut US domestic production, and the tariff hikes would make domestic producers more competitive while also reducing national security risks from overreliance on China. It added that while the tariffs on solar wafers and polysilicon may trigger higher prices initially, in the longer run they would help domestic manufacturers compete against China's "massive excess capacity". China has consistently opposed what it calls unilateral tariffs by Washington and has rejected the overcapacity claims. — AFP

But "with the disinflation process well on track, and downside risks to growth", the ECB could loosen its monetary policy and soften its messaging, Lagarde said. Inflation in the euro-zone stood at 2.3 percent in November, having hit highs of over 10 percent in late 2022. And in new economic projections published last week, the ECB said it expected the inflation rate to decline to 2.1 percent in 2025 and 1.9 percent in 2026. There was now a greater risk that inflation would fall even further due to a "weaker-than-expected growth outlook" and "geopolitical events", Lagarde said.

If the United States took a protectionist run on trade under Trump, "growth in the euro area is likely to take a hit", she said. On the campaign trail, Trump threatened blanket tariffs of at least 10 percent on all imports when he returns to the Oval Office. Even if the European market was not targeted directly, euro-zone manufacturers were "particularly sensitive to shifts in confidence about world trade", Lagarde said. At the same time, "a rise in geopolitical tensions could push energy prices and freight costs higher in the near term". The ECB's governing council will hold its first rate-setting meeting of 2025 on January 30, 10 days after Trump's inauguration. — AFP



LE RELECO-KERHUON: A trader at the Credit Mutuel Arkea monitors the stock market index in the trading room of the Credit Mutuel Arkea group, in Le Relecq-Kerhuon, western France. — AFP

it rate down to three percent from an all-time high of four percent. The central bank's stance remained "restrictive", Lagarde said, meaning it would act as a brake on business activity in the euro-zone - the ECB's main lever for tamping inflation.

Lagarde: ECB will continue to cut interest rates

FRANKFURT: European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde said Monday euro-zone policymakers would keep cutting interest rates and warned that higher US tariffs under President-elect Donald Trump could hit growth in the bloc. "Even though we are not there yet, we are close to achieving our target" of two-percent inflation, Lagarde said in a speech at the Bank of Lithuania. "If the incoming data continue to confirm our baseline, the direction of travel is clear and we expect to lower interest rates further," she said.

The ECB cut rates again last week as inflation looked to be coming under control and the euro-zone economy showed signs of weakness. The quarter-point move was the Frankfurt-based central bank's third cut in a row and its fourth since June. The easing cycle has brought the ECB's key depos-

UK's Starmer to push green energy ties on Norway trip

LONDON: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer will visit Norway on Monday where he is expected to tout a "green industrial partnership" on renewable energy and carbon capture to tackle climate change. It comes as Starmer's new Labor government seeks ways to meet its commitments to completely decarbonize the UK's electricity production by 2030, reduce emissions by at least 81 percent compared to 1990 levels by 2034 and become carbon-neutral by 2050.

To be formally signed in the spring, the agreement with Oslo would help Britain "seize the opportunities from a new era of clean energy, driving investment into the UK and boosting jobs both now and in the future", Starmer was cited as saying in a statement from his office. Precise details of the partnership's contents were not made available ahead of Starmer's meeting with his Norwegian counterpart Jonas Gahr Store.

At the beginning of October, the Labor government announced 22 billion pounds (\$28 billion) in investment over 25 years to develop carbon capture and storage on two former industrial estates in the north of England. Carbon capture, utilization and storage is a technology that seeks to eliminate emissions created by burning fuels for energy and from industrial processes. The carbon is captured and then stored permanently in various underground environments. "Our partnership with Norway will make the UK more energy secure, en-



HORDALAND: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer (left) and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store are shown the workings of the Northern Lights Carbon Capture and Storage facility by Tim Heijn, Executive director of Northern Lights and Anders Opedal, CEO of Equinor during a visit of the British Prime Minister to discuss climate, energy and defense cooperation in Bergen, Norway, on December 16, 2025. — AFP

suring we are never again exposed to international energy price spikes and the whims of dictators like (Russian President Vladimir) Putin," said Starmer. Quoted in the Downing Street release, Norway's Prime Minister Store hailed the agreement as "important to facilitate more green jobs both in Norway and the UK, and for advancing the green transition". The two North Sea countries already have extensive energy ties, with Norway being one of the UK's main suppliers of gas. Several Norwegian companies already have a strong presence in the British market.

Norwegian energy giant Equinor has partnered

with BP in a number of carbon capture and storage projects in the UK, while Vagronn is also involved in a floating wind farm project in Scotland. The UK's ambition to become "a world-leader in carbon capture" comes despite doubts over the technology's effectiveness at tackling global warming given the costs and complexity involved. It has however been advocated by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the International Energy Agency (IEA), especially for reducing the CO2 footprint of difficult to decarbonize industries like cement and steel. — AFP

Greece's parliament adopts 2025 budget

ATHENS: Greece will almost double its defense spending after parliament approved the 2025 state budget Sunday with a roll-call vote, traditionally regarded as a vote of confidence in the government. With 159 out of a total of 299 votes cast, the State budget for the fiscal year 2025 was ratified while the defense expenditure was approved by a larger majority. Spending for the defense ministry will rise to 6.1 billion euros (\$6.5 billion) from 3.6 billion euros, due to the increase in equipment deliveries in 2025.

"Compared to 2019, by 2025, spending on health will have increased by 74 percent and spending on defence by 73 percent, underlining the government's priorities", Minister of Economy and Finance Kostis Hatzidakis had said late November on submitting the budget to parliament. Major opposition parties, PASOK and SYRIZA as well as the Hellenic Solution party, had said before the vote that they would approve the increased defense spending.

Nikos Dendias, the defense minister, told parliament Saturday that the spending is essential because of the challenges the country faces, especially from historic rival Turkey. "Is this spending too much? Whoever is positioning themselves on this needs to explain on what criteria they are considering. Is the country threatened? And where is the main threat to the country coming from?" he said, noting that Turkey spends 26.8 billion euros on armaments.



Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis

Greece spends around three percent of its annual economic output on defense, higher than most EU states, mainly because of long-running tension with Turkey. Greek armed forces had a 20-billion-euro shortfall during the country's decade-long debt crisis, Dendias said in November, when he announced a shake up of defense forces to sideline older weapons in favor of drones after lessons drawn from Ukraine's war against Russia.

Defense dome

Among the main changes in the radical overhaul is the creation of an anti-air and anti-drone defense dome covering the whole of Greece. "Greece today is charting its own roadmap in terms of stability and growth in an international environment of instability," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said Sunday, hailing the backing of opposition groups.

Mitsotakis drew a parallel with the difficulties the governments of "big countries" such as France and Germany in particular and also Italy were now facing in seeking majority support for their own budgets amid political or economic turmoil. The Greek prime minister also announced five measures to rectify the operation of banks for the benefit of citizens. Among them are the end of charges for many banking transactions, including bill payments, as well as the contribution of EUR100 million to a program for the construction of new schools by the four largest Greek banks.

Hatzidakis said during his closing speech on Sunday that what the government is seeking is "to have a healthy banking system on the one hand and on the other hand a banking system that actually works for the economy and society - without making citizens feel excluded from it, or more importantly, victims of it." Greece's financial crisis saw an EU bailout conditional on severe austerity measures and structural reforms and policies, with Hatzidakis saying Greek citizens paid for the survival of the banks out their pockets. — AFP

Business

NBK hosts Masterclass titled 'Leading in an Age of Uncertainty' for its employees

Reflecting bank's belief in importance of investing in human capital



Najla Al-Sager

Investing in our employees is a strategic pillar to maintain our excellence and leadership

NBK enjoys a unique work environment promoting a sustainable career

We always seek to provide the best training opportunities in innovative ways to meet the changing market dynamics

KUWAIT: Underscoring its belief in the importance of investing in the human capital and increasing employees' efficiency, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) hosted a Masterclass titled "Leading in an Age of Uncertainty" by Prof. Jill W Paine, faculty member of IE Business School, IE University, which was attended by employees from different departments. In the Masterclass, Paine shared with participants practical strategies that leaders can utilize to enhance engagement and productivity within work teams during periods of change and uncertainty, and the importance of organizational change as a pivotal factor in any global organization.

The Masterclass addressed how leaders can enable organizational change and motivate the team, especially in an increasingly dynamic environment, through practical experiences using various techniques such as analysis, group discussions, simulations, and exercises. It also highlighted the radical shifts in business models due to the changing environment as a result of fast-paced technological development and changes in consumer behavior, in addition to the geopolitical tensions and the climate crisis, and organizations' plans to adapt to all these changes at all levels.

Paine shared insights on effective change leadership to motivate employees. The class also included interactive discussions to encourage employees to exchange ideas and experiences on how to apply

the concepts presented in the work environment. These Masterclasses reflect NBK's dedication to developing the capabilities of its employees, which helps improve organizational performance and create a positive work environment that fosters innovation and development.

Speaking on this, Najla Al-Sager, Head of Talent Management and Learning, Group Human Resources at National Bank of Kuwait, said, "We firmly believe that investing in our employees is a key strategic pillar to achieve sustainable growth and maintain our excellence and leadership. Therefore, we are always striving to provide the best training opportunities in innovative ways to meet the changing market dynamics, thus building an agile and dynamic workforce that can meet the challenges in the future." "All programs and courses delivered to employees are designed within an integrated training plan developed according to methodological and scientific standards to meet the needs of all relevant departments, in cooperation with prominent banking experts and reputable international training agencies," she noted.

"NBK enjoys a unique work environment offering distinguished training and development programs to employees to help them build a thriving and sustainable career. We harness all our capabilities to develop employees and always seek to unlock their creativity and innovation, which positively reflects on



Emad Ablani and Jill W Paine pose for a group photo with the bank team.

their performance, and help maintain our leadership position, both locally and regionally," she added.

Jill earned a PhD and master's degree in Social-Organizational Psychology from Columbia University, a bachelor's degree (magna cum laude) in English literature from the University of Colorado, Boulder in the US and has also obtained a GPCL from Harvard Business School. She has extensive experience including working as a Visiting Scholar, University of Maryland, Robert H. Smith School of Business, and a Teaching Assistant for courses including Organizational Change, Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management, Columbia University.

Professor Paine has more than 23 years of experience working with firms in multiple industries including legal and financial services, technology, manufacturing and public relations. Her partners, clients and former employers include Pfizer, General Electric, Schroders, Omnicom Media Group, Bryan Cave, LLP and venture-backed technology start-ups. Founded in 1973, IE Business School is considered one of the leading and top ranked business schools in the world according to international magazines and newspapers including Forbes, The Economist, Financial Times and Bloomberg.

Fear of 'total crisis' as Bolivia economic model implodes

LA PAZ: Housewife Yola Chura worried about high food prices while shopping at a market in Bolivia's highland city of El Alto, where she and many others are struggling with rising prices, stagnant wages and a scarcity of dollars that has put the long-stable Andean economy on edge. "We are in a total crisis. Salaries don't increase and so everything is expensive," Chura told Reuters at the market in the city that perches in the mountains above Bolivia's political capital La Paz.

"With the excuse that there's no diesel or gasoline, the price of everything has gone up." Inflation is its highest level in over a decade in Bolivia, which was heralded for its commodities-backed "economic miracle" in the 2000s. Now the country faces its worst economic crisis this century with natural gas exports tumbling while the dominant socialist party's spend-to-grow economic model has imploded.

Bolivia's gas exports, the key source of foreign income, have halved in the last decade as producers have not found new gas fields to replace those that have been tapped out. Central bank hard currency reserves have drained to nearly zero, which has hit imports of fuel, pushed up prices and strained the boliviano currency. Frustrated motorists often wait in long lines for fuel. Wary investors have pushed bond yields up toward record highs.

A black market for dollars, common in crisis-hit neighbor Argentina, has grown in Bolivia for the first time in decades, with savers paying a 60 percent premium to the official exchange rate. The economic slide has turned Bolivian politics nasty. In June a military faction failed in a dramatic coup attempt. President Luis Arce is locked in a bitter fight with his powerful former ally and boss Evo Morales, who accused Arce of trying to kill him in late October. Anger at the ruling party and in-fighting fueled a recent protest in La Paz. "Where is the diesel, the fuel, the dollars?" farmer Margarita Llanque said at the march.

Stock markets retreat as China data disappoints

LONDON: Major stock markets and oil prices retreated Monday after an unexpected slowdown in retail sales reinforced worries about China's struggling economy. The dollar mostly rose as traders looked ahead to interest-rate decisions this week from the US Federal Reserve, Bank of Japan and Bank of England. Bitcoin hit a new record high at \$106,493.43. "China remained the central focus for Asian markets in another show of economic weakness which sent markets lower," noted Richard Hunter, head of markets at Interactive Investor.

"The highlight of the week... will be the interest rate decision from the Fed on Wednesday." Observers also tracked developments in Seoul after South Korean lawmakers impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol at the weekend in the wake of his short-lived declaration of martial law this month. Hong Kong and Shanghai indices closed lower after figures showed that Chinese retail sales grew 3.0 percent last month, much slower than October and well off the five-percent forecast.

The figures highlighted the work China's leaders had in store as they try to kickstart consumption and reignite the world's number two economy. Officials unveiled new promises at the weekend to boost the battered property sector and tweak monitoring of equity markets. That came after investors were left unimpressed last week with Beijing's pledge to introduce measures aimed at "lifting consumption vigorously" as part of a stimulus drive.



EBEBDA: A general view of cocoa pods on a tree in Ebedda. — AFP

Ghana president-elect plans to reform cocoa sector, restructure

ACCRA: Ghana's president-elect, John Dramani Mahama, has pledged to revamp the cocoa sector and reorganize the state-run regulator, aiming to stimulate growth and improve efficiency in the world's second-largest cocoa producer. In an interview with Reuters on Friday, he criticized the cocoa industry structure where the cocoa marketing board (COCOBOD) competes with farmers for profits. "Can we have a state enterprise that is the regulator and quality controller, and that creates an opportunity where the farmer is getting his money directly?" Mahama said. "We will see how to restructure it (COCOBOD)."

The COCOBOD controls all aspects of cocoa production in Ghana — from seedlings to jute bag supplies for packing beans for exports. Previous attempts to break it up have failed. Mahama said his government would work out the modalities of a restructure, hinting at private sector involvement in some areas handled by COCOBOD. A former president, Mahama secured a decisive victory in the Dec 7 election, driven by voter dissatisfaction with the rising cost of living, instability and falling production in the country's key cocoa and gold sectors.

As leader of the National Democratic Congress party, which also secured a wide majority in the parliamentary election, Mahama will take office on Jan 7, as the economy recovers from its worst crisis in a generation. Mahama said one of his priorities would be to revamp cocoa and crude oil output to help lift growth and increase non-tax revenue. Ghana's cocoa production hit its lowest level in decades last season, dragged down by climate change, tree disease and wildcat gold mining. COCOBOD's spending has also come under scrutiny after it emerged that its administrative costs more than tripled between 2018 and 2023.

Mahama blamed what he described as COCOBOD's wasteful spending for depleting cocoa production funds and depriving farmers of optimal prices, leading many to turn to illegal mining or seek alternative livelihoods. His proposed reforms aim to increase efficiency across the cocoa sector's value chain, with the farmer as the primary beneficiary, not the bureaucracy. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is administering a three-year, \$3 billion rescue package with Ghana, has prompted COCOBOD to propose a turnaround plan to cut costs and increase farmers' share of cocoa revenues. "We're willing to work with anybody if it'll make the cocoa sector more efficient and bring back our cocoa production to what it was before," Mahama said. — Reuters



SALAR DE UYUNI, Bolivia: A salt sculpture is seen at the Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat, in Uyuni, southern Bolivia. — AFP

'From gas to debt'

Dollars have been getting scarcer for a decade, but the currency crisis exploded last year. Central bank data showed net foreign currency reserves are under \$2 billion, down sharply from \$15 billion in 2014. Most of the reserves are actually in gold, with liquid hard currency at just \$121 million. "Financial institutions don't have dollars," said local economic analyst Jaime Dunn. He blamed spending by socialist governments that have largely led the country this century, first under Morales and now former economy minister Arce.

Flagging gas exports were now making that spending unsustainable. "Their model has now gone from gas to debt," Dunn said. "Default is a ghost that is circling Bolivia." Bolivia's government says it will meet its debt payments. The Ministry of Economy says external debt stands at some \$13 billion, equivalent to 27 percent of GDP. It plans to issue \$3 billion of sovereign

bonds next year to help meet its obligations. The ministry declined a Reuters request for comment. The dearth of reserves, however, has distorted the local currency that has been pegged to the US dollar for years.

"Getting dollars is hard," said Arash Masoudi, citing restrictions put on paying overseas with Bolivian bank cards. "Cards won't accept purchases over \$100... It's impossible to pay even if you have millions of bolivianos in your account." The crisis has hit importers and companies operating in the market, including airlines. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) warned this month that airlines were facing increasing issues getting revenues out of Bolivia. "There's a lack of dollars, of diesel and, if this continues, there will be a lack of food," said Jean Pierre Antelo, representative of CAINCO, a major business association in the country. "We need an economic rescue." — Reuters



ZAOZHUANG: A worker checks on parts in a guitar factory in Zaozhuang, eastern China's Shandong province. — AFP

France downgrade

In Europe, the Paris stock market dropped after Moody's downgraded France's credit rating Saturday, following months of political crisis and the appointment of centrist Francois Bayrou as prime minister. European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde on Monday said euro-zone policymakers would keep lowering interest rates and warned that higher US tariffs under President-elect Donald Trump could hit growth in the bloc.

The ECB cut rates again last week as inflation looked to be coming under control and the eurozone economy showed signs of weakness. The Fed is widely expected to cut interest rates again Wednesday but there are fears it will have to slow its pace of easing next year owing to sticky inflation and bets that Trump's tax cuts and tariffs will reignite prices. On

the corporate front, three spinoffs from French right-wing tycoon Vincent Bolloré's Vivendi media empire debuted on stock markets, with mixed results. Shares in the Canal+ television and film group tanked 15 percent in London.

The other two spinoffs had a better start: Book publisher Louis Hachette soared 25 percent on the Euronext Growth in Paris while advertising agency Havas was up six percent in Amsterdam. Shares rose in the remaining Vivendi company, which stayed on the Paris stock exchange. Elsewhere, Britain's centuries-old Royal Mail is set to pass into foreign ownership after the UK government approved the takeover of its parent company by Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky's EP Group. The takeover of International Distribution Services is worth £3.6 billion (\$4.5 billion). IDS shares climbed nearly one percent in late morning deals. — AFP

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024



A youth holds a Syrian independence-era flag inside a shopping mall in the town of Al-Dana, near Sarmada, in the northern Syrian province of Idlib. — AFP photos



Women stand outside a shopping mall in the town of Al-Dana.



A woman shops at a store in the town of Al-Dana.

Shopping spree in Syria's former rebel heartland



People shop at a store in the town of Al-Dana.

Crowds of visitors wander brilliantly lit shopping aisles, stunned by the abundance of goods on offer in the heart of the former rebel stronghold in northwest Syria. Dana, near Sarmada in Idlib province, is less than 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of second city Aleppo, but had been cut off from the rest of the country until the fall of president Bashar al-Assad less than a week ago. It is a major shopping center because of its proximity to the border with Turkey.

You can pay for your purchases in Turkish lira or in US dollars, and all the big names are available, brought in from Syria's powerful neighbor. Everything from clothes to electrical goods to furniture is on display in main street stores and four shopping malls with gleaming windows. "It's a long time since I have seen so many things," said 54-year-old mother Aisha Darkalt, visiting from Aleppo with her family. "The kids, they don't know where to look... It's hard to imagine all this was so close. We never left Aleppo anymore." Aleppo, the first city to be taken by the rebels in their lightning offensive that ended decades of rule by the Assad clan, still has just three hours of electricity a day.

But bright lights, pink fabric flowers and flashy garlands adorn the shopping malls of nearby Dana after 13 years of deprivation in the rest of the country, which has been ravaged by a civil war that broke out in 2011.

Close to Turkey

The Sarmada region was relatively well off while Aleppo and much of the



This aerial picture shows traffic moving in the town of Al-Dana.

rest of Syria was engulfed in conflict and poverty under Assad rule, squeezed for taxes and rife with corruption. Unlike Idlib, the rebel "capital" that was subject to Russian bombardment until the start of the month, Sarmada was generally spared because it is so close to neighboring Turkey.

In 2021, the Carnegie Middle East Center said the region's prosperity dated to the outbreak of the war in 2011 and the rupture between Damascus and Ankara, when Assad stopped the importation of goods from Turkey. Local businessmen were well used to cross-border dealings, and benefited from an influx of displaced people into an area where just 15,000 inhabitants lived previously.

A flourishing commercial hub was born, one that the Islamists of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) rebel group was careful not to oppose. But it still remained out of bounds to the rest of the country—until now. In recent days, people have been flocking to the area to shop, arriving from Aleppo, Hama, Homs and even the capital Damascus.

Maher Al-Ahmad, 42, runs a store selling household goods and carpets. "People are surprised," he said amid a shopping frenzy worthy of sales time at department stores in the West. "They thought we lived in a dangerous place full of criminals, and then they come here! We have electricity, we have everything they need."

Return to normal

Imad Fares, 40, has lived in Dana for the past three years after leaving his hometown of Maaret al-Numan, which was devastated by the conflict. "The people from Aleppo look miserable and tired. You can tell from their faces that they lived in a prison," he said. "They're shocked at how we live here." It is the beginning of a return to normal.

Ahmad loaded two flat-screen televisions and toys he had bought into the boot of his ancient car.

"You can find anything," the 42-year-old said. "But the most important thing is knowing you can get back home without being robbed by Assad's people on the way." His vehicle was a stark contrast to the shiny new cars and SUVs with Idlib plates that popped up in the streets of Aleppo this week. Because bringing cars in from Turkey was banned, Syrians often pushed their own ageing vehicles to the limit.

A doctor from Aleppo said he got his car in 2013, and 11 years later it was still considered new. "A week ago I got \$50,000 for it," he said. "But now you can buy a new one in Sarmada, it wouldn't be worth more than \$8,000." He looked on at friends who had come to do their shopping in the former rebel bastion, where prices were up to three times lower than in the city. "We just didn't understand that we were the unfortunate ones," he laughed. —AFP

'Eyelash viper', leaf-nosed bat among new species found in Mekong

A viper with scales that look like eyelashes and a leaf-nosed bat are among dozens of new species identified in Southeast Asia's Mekong region last year, WWF said Monday. The environmental group regularly publish a list of newly discovered flora and fauna in the region to highlight the area's biodiversity but also the risks it faces. "The region is still a fertile ground for scientific exploration," WWF said, warning that "many species are likely to go extinct before they are even discovered" because of mostly human-linked pressures, including deforestation and the wildlife trade.

The Greater Mekong, which comprises Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, is a well-known biodiversity hotspot, home to tigers,



This undated handout photo shows a newly discovered species of snake named as the limestone eyelash pit viper.

elephants and dolphins. In all, 234 new species of vertebrates and vascular plants -- a category that excludes mosses, algae and fungus -- were identified in the region in 2023. Some

were located in remote natural habitats, while others were identified from specimens preserved in natural history museums and botanical gardens across the world.

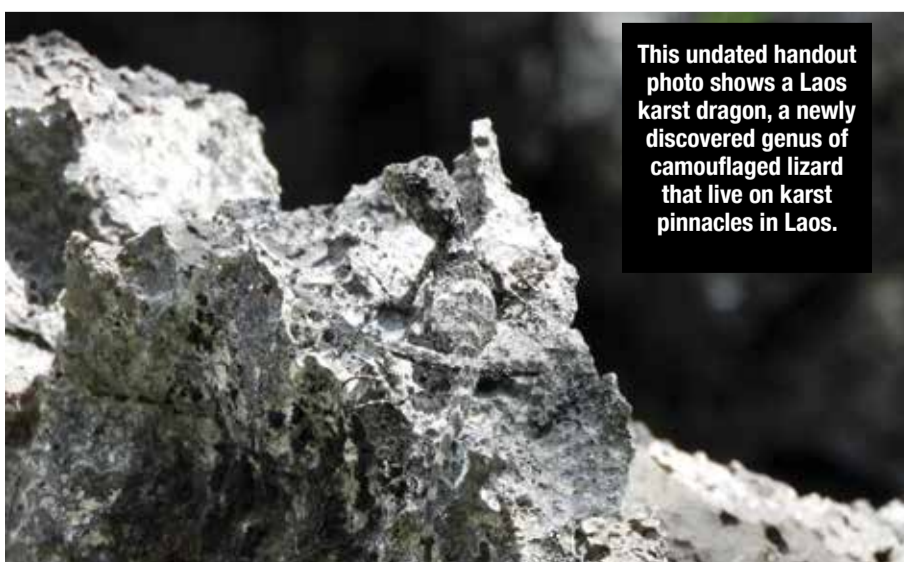
Among them is an Asian pit viper whose chocolate-brown and mint-green scales give it the appearance of eyelashes around its eyes, WWF said. Found in limestone formations in a Thai national park, it has been named the limestone eyelash pit viper as a result of its distinctive habitat and markings. Similarly striking is a bat that weighs in at between five and seven grams and features a distinctive leaf-shaped nose, used for echolocation. It was documented in Thailand, but is also found in Malaysia, WWF said. Around half of all the new species were found in Viet-

nam, with 106 endemics to the country, the highest number of any nation in the Greater Mekong region.

Among them is a new species of gymnure -- furry members of the hedgehog family -- and a snake found at 2,600 meters on Mount Fansipan in northern Vietnam by two porters from the Hmong ethnic minority. Scientists are concerned that the forest where the snake was found is being degraded by the collection of fuelwoods for the tourism industry, and by livestock grazing. "It may also be vulnerable to climate change, since species restricted to high elevations have little opportunity to move to higher ground as their habitat gets warmer," the report warned. —AFP



This undated handout photo shows a newly discovered leaf-nosed bat in the Mekong Region.



This undated handout photo shows a Laos karst dragon, a newly discovered genus of camouflaged lizard that live on karst pinnacles in Laos.



This undated handout photo shows a newly discovered species of tree frog.



This undated handout photo taken at an undisclosed location in Myanmar and released by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) on December 16, 2024, shows a newly discovered species of pit viper. —AFP photos

Lifestyle



Inhabitants of Fouban greet each other with their machetes.



An inhabitant of Fouban points his machete towards the ground.



Members of the secret society (Moungou) leave the Court of Acts of the Kingdom after the judging ceremony.

The trial of a king
Ancient royal ritual
in Cameroon
promotes peace



An inhabitant of Fouban reacts during the 548th edition of the Nguon festival of the Bamoun people in Fouban. — AFP photos



Warriors and members of the royal guard (Tu Npanka) prepare their weapons.



Warriors and members of the royal guard (Tu Npanka) stand on the Court of Acts of the Kingdom after the judging ceremony.



Inhabitants of Fouban pose for a portrait.

Chatter muffled as members of a secret society, masked and garbed in honey-colored robes, entered the court of Fouban, the historic capital of a centuries-old kingdom nestled in hilly northwestern Cameroon. The 20th king of the Bamoun people, Mouhammad Nabil Mfourifoum Mbombo Njoya, stood up from his ornate throne -- a replica of the original, now at a German museum -- for the ancient ritual to get under way.

The nearly 600-year-old tradition sees him put on public trial over his governance -- with local chiefs reading out indictments destined to put his popularity to the test. The tradition is part of a set of rituals taking place over a week in a bid to promote dialogue, harmony and peace. The ceremony is a first for Mbombo Njoya, 31, who took over the throne after his father died in 2021. If deemed to have failed, the monarch could be fined or removed from office. But if he succeeds, he is granted a new



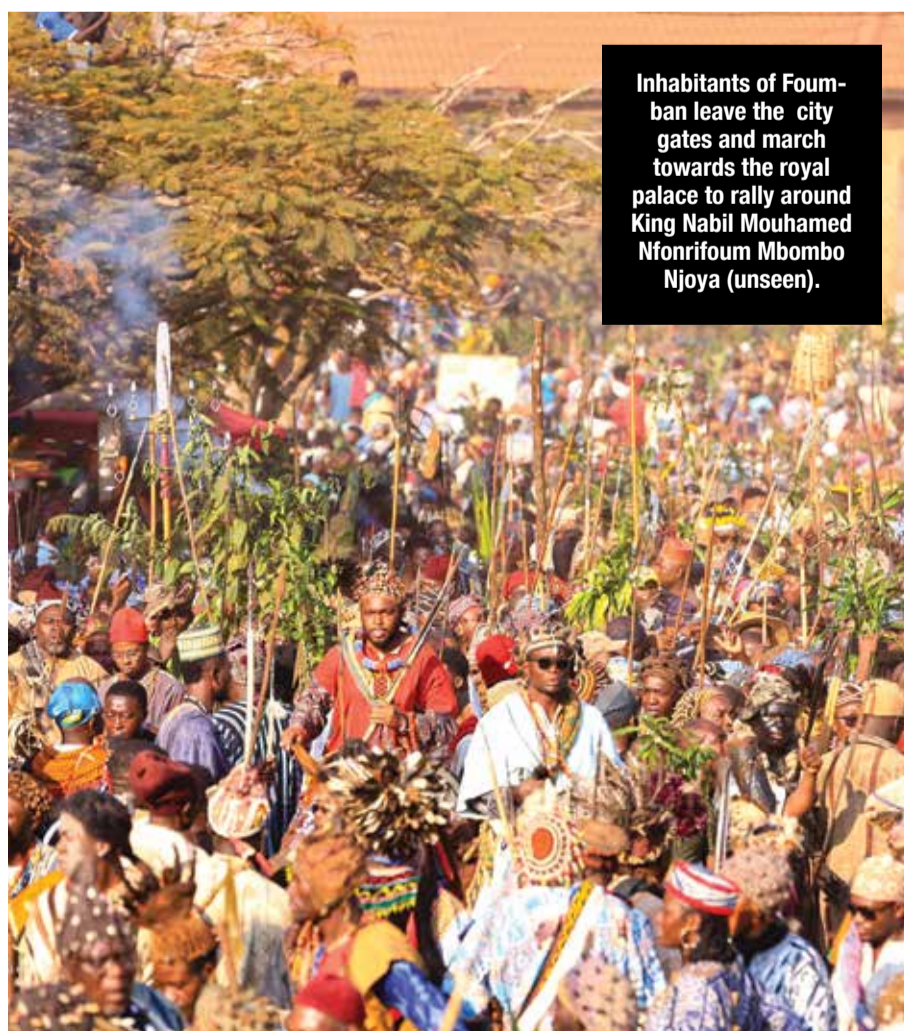
An inhabitant of Fouban points his machete towards the ground.

mandate and allegiance. Tourists and officials flocked to the remote, grassy region of the West African country to attend Nguon, a set

of royal rituals that date back to 1384, when the kingdom was founded. The rites, which are followed by celebrations, had not taken place in six years

Grievances

Constituents of the brotherhood shrouded in secrecy planted their spears into the ground as the young ruler braced for his people's opinions and grievances. "Your Majesty, the people are very preoccupied with the dilapidation of the kingdom's property assets," a Bamoun lawmaker told his monarch before the attentive crowd. "So far there is only one queen by the king's side in the court," said another parliamentary, as laughter and clapping broke out. But the king survived the session and earned the approval of his people. Warriors and members of the royal guard fired their rifles into the air in celebration.



Inhabitants of Fouban leave the city gates and march towards the royal palace to rally around King Nabil Mouhamed Nfonrifoum Mbombo Njoya (unseen).



People's deputies (Fonan Nguon) look on as they stand in the courtyard of the palace of the Bamoun Kings.



Inhabitants of Fouban march towards the city gates following King Nabil Mouhamed Nfonrifoum Mbombo Njoya's (unseen) call to rally around him.



Inhabitants of Fouban leave the city gates and march towards the royal palace.



Traditional chiefs from other regions attend the 548th edition of the Nguon festival of the Bamoun people in Fouban.



King Nabil Mouhamed Nfonrifoum Mbombo Njoya (center) sits on one of his thrones next to members of the royal family.



Queen of the Bamoun Kingdom Neh Njpuouo Chetou (center) walks in the Court of Acts of the Kingdom ahead of the judging ceremony.



Inhabitants of Fouban dance.



An inhabitant of Fouban poses for a portrait.



King Nabil Mouhamed Nfonrifoum Mbombo Njoya (center) stands during the judging ceremony.



An inhabitant of Fouban reacts during the 548th edition of the Nguon festival of the Bamoun people.



Inhabitants from Fouban dance.

'Role reversal'

"I really enjoyed how there is this role reversal and he is judged by his people. I thought it was just going to be a pretend judgment but the judgment was really severe, I was surprised," said Roly Allen, a 46-year-old businessman who travelled from London to attend. "There was a lot of good humor and I thought it really demonstrates a real love between the kingdom and the king," said the British tourist, proudly boasting a traditional Bamoun head-dress. For some locals, the ritual is an important occasion to connect with their culture.

"I am very proud to be Bamoun, these are moments that allow us to learn about our culture and pass it on to our children," said Amadou Njoya, a 21-year-old native of Fouban. Cameroon's 270 ethnic groups, with various customs and languages, are organized into more than 80 kingdoms and sultanates. The importance of customary law and the sense of belonging to these chiefdoms have withstood the test of time and remain key parts of the lives of many of Cameroon's 28 million people. "The first Nguon of the 20th king was an event not to be missed," said Mariam Poughouo, a Bamoun company manager based in France.

Poughouo, who is passionate about tradition, described the king as "a great fighter who fights for the preservation of culture". Yet the chiefdom is still missing its original throne, said Hami-



Inhabitants of Fouban dance near the city gates.

dou Ntieche, an elderly village chief in Bamoun territory.

'Lobbying' for throne

Like many African cultural antiques, the treasured artefact was taken to Europe under unclear circumstances during the colonization of Cameroon. The colorful, pearl-inlaid wooden chair is now exhibited at the Humboldt Forum Museum in Berlin, after its transfer during the Germany colonial period in Cameroon. The monarch visited it last year -- and sat on the heirloom that once belonged to his great-grandfather. But the Bamoun people are attempting

to recover the original, Azize Mbohou, the Bamoun palace's communications advisor, told AFP.

In April, the royal family inaugurated the spacious Museum of the Bamoun Kings, a building shaped like its imposing coat of arms -- a two-headed snake and a furry spider -- and designed to house thousands of objects spotlighting its rich heritage. Alexis Njivah Mouliom, general secretary of the Nguon foundation, hopes that becoming UNESCO-listed can bring "publicity" to the Bamoun community and "strengthen lobbying for the return of the throne". --AFP



Inhabitants of Fouban react after the call of King Nabil Mouhamed Nfonrifoum Mbombo Njoya (unseen) to rally around him.



Inhabitants of Fouban pose for a portrait.



King Nabil Mouhamed Nfonrifoum Mbombo Njoya (center) holds the double bell to call his followers for important events in the Court of Acts of the Kingdom.



People from Fouban attend an event in the Court of Acts of the Kingdom.

Indian tabla drum maestro Zakir Hussain dies aged 73



Teachers and students light candles to pay tribute to Indian musician, percussionist and tabla exponent Zakir Hussain at a university in Amritsar.--AFP photos

Indian musician Zakir Hussain, a four-time Grammy award winner credited with turning tabla drums into an instrument loved globally, has died at the age of 73, officials said Monday. Hussain collaborated with musicians including George Harrison from The Beatles, Mickey Hart from The Grateful Dead and jazz musician John Handy in a career spanning decades. He died of a lung disease in the United States, local media reported, quoting a statement from his family.

Tributes poured in with fellow musician Amjad Ali Khan -- who plays the Indian lute-like sarod -- saying Hussain would "continue to bring the house down in the heavens". Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he would be "remembered as a true genius who revolutionized the world of Indian classical music". Modi said he "brought the tabla to the global stage, captivating millions with his unparalleled rhythm".

Hussain was born in India's financial hub Mumbai, then known as Bombay, in 1951 to Alla Rakha, a tabla maestro himself. He moved to the United States in 1970 and later formed the fusion band "Shakti", or "Power", with British guitarist John McLaughlin.

This year, the group won the Grammy for best global music album for their record "This Moment". The tabla, Hussain said in an interview with news agency Press Trust of India last year, was a "mate, a brother, a friend". "I find myself at a place where I cannot imagine that I can exist without it. It motivates me to get up in the morning and say, 'hello'," he said. --AFP



Indian musician, percussionist and tabla exponent Zakir Hussain performs during a concert at the Indian Music Experience (IME), the country's first interactive music museum, in Bangalore.

Sports

N Zealand march towards big win in third Test after Williamson century

Rain wiped out the first session at Seddon Park

HAMILTON: England made a wretched start to their unrealistic chase of 658 to win the third Test on Monday after a Kane Williamson century rammed home New Zealand's advantage. The tourists were 18-2 after openers Ben Duckett and Zak Crawley were both removed in the six overs bowled before stumps on day three in Hamilton.

It left New Zealand, dismissed late in the day for 453, needing eight more wickets to secure a consolation victory after England easily won the first two Tests. It may only be seven wickets required, with doubt over whether the injured Ben Stokes will bat.

The England captain is being assessed for a hamstring injury suffered while bowling which forced him to immediately leave the field. Any prospect of England reaching what would be a world-record fourth-innings score were quickly quashed when Duckett charged down the pitch and played on for four.

It handed a first wicket of the match to seamer Tim Southee, playing his 107th and final Test before retiring. Crawley was trapped lbw for five to complete a miserable series in which he fell to paceman Matt Henry in all six of his innings, totalling just 52 runs in the process.

Jacob Bethell was at the crease on nine and Joe Root was yet to score. "We wanted to try to get more wickets and then set ourselves something that we were going to be realistic that we could smash down," England batting coach Marcus Trescothick said. "We're still in with an opportunity but it's obviously pretty tough."

Masterful Williamson

Rain wiped out the first session at Seddon Park but it didn't prevent Williamson advancing from his overnight 50 to a 33rd Test ton, before departing for 156. Williamson put on 105 for the third wicket with Rachin Ravindra (44) and departed after tea when top-edging a sweep off Shoaib Bashir (2-170).

New Zealand's greatest run-scorer struck 20 fours and one six as he took his tally of Test runs at Seddon Park to 1,614, the most by any batter at any New Zealand venue. He has scored centuries in five successive Tests at the ground, where he boasts an average of 94.94 from 21 innings.

Williamson warned victory wouldn't necessarily come easily and hopes spinner Mitchell Santner could be a decisive figure. "When they bowled some spin it sort of spun and bounced, but the wicket is still a good one," Williamson said.

"As the ball gets a bit softer and the wicket becomes a bit friendlier to bat on, there'll be some hard yards out there. "It has to be a big push tomorrow." Daryl Mitchell hit out near the end of New Zealand's innings, caught in the deep for 60 to hand part-time spinner Bethell a first Test wicket and, ultimately, England's best bowling figures for the innings of 3-72.

Santner holed out off Root on 49 to fall just short of back-to-back half-centuries for the match. Southee scored two in his last Test knock, failing to add to his career tally of 98 Test sixes. Williamson wants New Zealand to send Southee out a winner.

"He's just an outstanding servant of the game



HAMILTON: New Zealand's Daryl Mitchell bats while being watched by England wicketkeeper Ollie Pope (R) on day three of the third cricket Test match between New Zealand and England at Seddon Park in Hamilton — AFP

and a huge player for us over the years, those achievements are there for everybody to see," Williamson said. "His leadership and how he carried

himself throughout his Test career, it's been a big part of why this team's been in a pretty strong place for some time." — AFP

Stokes limps off in fresh injury blow

HAMILTON: Visibly distressed England captain Ben Stokes suffered a recurrence of a hamstring injury on Monday while bowling during the third Test against New Zealand in Hamilton. Stokes, who suffered a torn hamstring on the same left leg in August, was to undergo a scan on Monday night or Tuesday morning after hobbling off midway through the afternoon session clutching his leg. The inspirational 33-year-old is a doubt to bat in the fourth innings of the Test at Seddon Park, where England have been set a nominal target of 658 to win.

They were 18-2 at stumps on day three. Batting coach Marcus Trescothick said it was "tough" for Stokes to accept he was injured again. "It's the same hamstring as he's had before," he told reporters. Stokes's 23 overs in New Zealand's first innings was the most he has bowled in a single day in his 110-Test career. Stokes was bowling his 13th over of the second innings when he pulled up with a grimace, clutching his leg in his follow-through before hobbling to the dressing room. He did not return.

Trescothick said: "He's been going so well and he's been bowling and playing the role that he does, as an all-rounder and captain. "He's shown signs during the course of this series of getting back to fitness." Stokes missed the entire three-Test home series against Sri Lanka in August-September and was only deemed fit enough to join the October series in Pakistan for the second Test after tearing his hamstring. His 66.3 overs in this series is the most he has sent down in a series as captain.

He pulled up with a back problem during the first Test in Christchurch but there had been no doubt about his availability for the two remaining matches. "We didn't see it coming. You don't see any signs of these things generally, they just happen," Trescothick said. "He's pretty realistic about these things when they happen. It's always tough at the start when you realize you're injured again. "He works dramatically well at what he does with his fitness to get into that shape where he can be. "We just have to look at how we can manage it." — AFP



BRISBANE: Australia's Pat Cummins (L) celebrates the wicket of India's Rohit Sharma (front R) during the third day of the third cricket Test match between Australia and India at the Gabba, in Brisbane. — AFP

Bumrah urges patience with India team 'in transition'

BRISBANE: Brisbane's weather came to India's rescue as most of Monday's play was lost because of rain on the third day of the third Test against Australia at the Gabba. A rattled India limped to 51-4 at stumps on a day when the Australians were only able to bowl 17 overs at the visitors and players left the field seven times due to downpours. KL Rahul was on 33 at the end of a wet day along with skipper Rohit Sharma, who was yet to score. Needing 245 to avoid the follow-on, India lost three early wickets in the first session, after earlier bowling Australia out for 445.

Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill and Virat Kohli all fell to Australia's opening bowlers Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood. They then lost Rishabh Pant just before tea, which was called early because of another downpour that then kept the players off the field for over two hours. When they did return, bad light saw the Australians throw the ball to off-spinner Nathan Lyon and part-timer Travis Head. But after only 2.5 overs, umpires Richard Kettleborough and Richard Illingworth decided that the light was not good enough and called an end to play.

With most of the first day also lost to rain Saturday, Head and Steve Smith's second-day centuries ensured that India cannot realistically win the Test. More rain is forecast for Tuesday and Wednesday,

raising India's hopes of salvaging a draw and heading to Melbourne with the series locked at 1-1. However, Australian batsman Mitchell Marsh stressed there was enough time for a result. "We know we have to take 20 wickets to try and win this Test match," he said. "I guess all the conversations and all the planning will be how we do that. "There's two days to go so there's still plenty of time to get a result, so let's hope the weather stays away over the next two days."

Bumrah a bright spot for India

Australia resumed the third day on 405-7 and were eventually bowled out for 445, wicketkeeper Alex Carey the last man out after an enterprising 70. Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, who was easily India's best bowler with 6-76, said the younger bowlers of his team were on a steep learning curve. "We as a team are going through a transition as new players are coming in and it's not the easiest place to play cricket over here," Bumrah said. "It's my job to help the others - I have played a bit more than them so I am trying to help them."

India's first target was to avoid the follow-on and so raise their chances of holding out for a draw. But their reply got off to a terrible start when Jaiswal, who edged Starc's first ball for four runs through gully, chipped the next ball straight to Mitchell Marsh at square leg. Fellow opener Rahul got a nasty hit on the wrist from a Hazlewood ball that rose sharply off a good length, but after treatment he was able to continue. In Starc's next over, Gill edged to gully and Marsh took a brilliant catch, diving high to his left to leave India in tatters at 6-2. — AFP

'Zero communication': Gillespie opens up on Pakistan exit

BRISBANE: Jason Gillespie said Monday he felt no longer wanted as Pakistan's Test coach and was left out of major decisions, having quit the post last week. The 49-year-old Australian former fast bowler was appointed in April for two years but differences with the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) took their toll. Gillespie said he was not informed of the decision to remove performance coach Tim Nielsen, also an Australian.

"Nielsen was told his services were no longer required and I had zero communication from anyone and that was the moment I thought: well, I'm not really sure they actually want me to do this job," Gillespie told Australian broadcaster ABC in Brisbane. He added: "For a decision to then be made (about Nielsen) and the head coach doesn't get a text message, phone call or email about a decision that's a pretty big decision. "It just left me thinking well I'm really not sure if the PCB wants me."

The PCB accepted Gillespie's resignation, the second in two months after former South Africa opener Gary Kirsten quit as white-ball coach over differences with selectors. Gillespie had the worst possible start to his coaching stint when Pakistan were whitewashed 2-0 by Bangladesh. That was followed by an innings defeat against England in the first Test in Multan. The defeat prompted the PCB to make sweeping changes, removing Gillespie from the selection panel and dropping star players Babar Azam, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah.

Pakistan won the remaining two Tests to seal the series 2-1. Gillespie refused to join the team for the two-Test series in South Africa starting in Centurion from December 26. Gillespie said he was upset over the reduction of his role. "In essence I was basically hitting catches and that was about it on the morning of a game," he told ABC. "You want to be able to have clear communication with all stakeholders, including selectors and knowing what the team is as head coach at least a day before the game so you can help plan and prepare the players." The exits of Gillespie and Kirsten means Pakistan have now had seven different coaches across formats in the last three years. — AFP

Toulouse demolish Exeter 64-21

PARIS: Toulouse ran in 10 tries in a 64-21 demolition of Exeter in the Champions Cup on Sunday to leave the holders with maximum points through their opening two games. Antoine Dupont touched down first for Toulouse at Sandy Park with Matthis Lebel and Pierre-Louis Barassi both scoring twice as the Top 14 leaders took complete control. They led 35-7 at half-time as Julien Marchand, Thibaud Flament, Theo Ntamack, Blair Kinghorn and Paul Graou also crossed the whitewash in an emphatic performance. Thomas Ramos added 14 points with the boot after hitting seven conversions.

It was the second weekend running in which Toulouse have topped 60 points after their 61-21 mauling of Ulster to kick off their title defense. "We had fun," said Barassi. "Honestly we were guilty of a few errors which didn't allow us to ram it home even more. Sixty points at Exeter is incredible all the same. "There's still a long way to go in the competition but we're not doing too badly right now." Exeter, who got two tries from Tommy Wyatt and another from Josh Hodge, have lost all seven Premiership games and remain without a point in Pool 1 in the Champions Cup.

Saracens, helped by the ill-discipline of Stade Francais, overcame a slow start to win 28-17. From the kick-off in Paris, Stade pinned their English visitors back. Peniasi Dakuwaqa scooted over untouched in the corner after three minutes. Zack

Henry converted. When he added a penalty after 12 minutes, Saracens had barely completed a pass or escaped their half. The match changed after 21 minutes when flanker Sekou Macalou first tripped Ivan van Zyl as he picked the ball up from a scrum. Macalou then dived on the fallen scrum-half, catching the South African's head with an arm. Referee Hollie Davidson opted for a red card.

"We know nowadays that the slightest lapse can be costly and can be red or yellow," said Stade assistant coach Morgan Parra. "That's what's frustrating. We felt we were in the game. "Against one of the best teams in Europe... you can't win with a numerical disadvantage," he added. Two minutes after the French international was sent off, Liam Williams, making his second Saracens debut after returning from a stint in Japan, swerved through the defense and slid over the line. Fergus Burke converted and booted two penalties to give Sarries a 13-10 half-time lead.

Saracens again punished Stade for a card early in the second half. Stade lock Tanginoa Halaifonua caught winger Rotimi Segun in the head with his shoulder and saw yellow. Hooker Jamie George then touched down after Saracens mauled forward from a lineout. Saracens lost Rhys Carre for 10 minutes for leading with an elbow. After he returned, Burke booted his team to an 11-point lead. Stade, a man short, rallied. Fullback Leo Barre looped round from a scrum to score and then converted. But after the home team collapsed a maul in the 73rd minute and Hugo N'Diaye received a yellow, Saracens kicked to the corner and again drove over the line from the lineout. Replacement hooker Theo Dan touched down and Burke con-



EXETER: Toulouse's French full-back Thomas Ramos (right) passes the ball during the European Rugby Champions Cup, Pool 1, rugby union match between Exeter Chiefs and Toulouse on December 15, 2024. — AFP

verted to seal the first home loss suffered by a French club in this year's competition. Saracens rose to second in Pool 3, a point behind Northampton.

Bath paid for rotating their squad as they lost 22-21 away to Treviso. Treviso raced into a 15-point lead after 15 minutes with tries from fullback Rhyno Smith and winger Louis Lynagh. Hooker Niall Annett replied for Bath. But a breakaway try from an interception by Smith

put the hosts 17-7 up at half-time. Bath made a host of changes and fought back. Flanker Josh Bailey touched down after 52 minutes and prop Thomas du Toit soon added another. Orlando Bailey landed his third conversion to put Bath four points ahead. Treviso were not done. They pressed furiously and after bungling a series of chances, won the game in the last minute when Bautista Bernasconi scored an unconverted try. — AFP

Sports

Doncic triple-double lifts Mavs over Warriors in a record duel

LeBron James makes a triumphant return

SAN FRANCISCO: Luka Doncic reeled off a triple-double with 45 points, 13 assists and 11 rebounds to spark the Dallas Mavericks over Golden State 143-133 in a record-shattering NBA match-up on Sunday. The Mavericks and Warriors combined for an NBA single-game record of 48 made three-pointers, breaking the old mark by four, with Golden State sinking 27-of-54 shots from beyond the arc and Dallas hitting 21-of-41 three-point attempts. "No team could miss."

They had 18 threes at half-time and we were still up, which is insane," Doncic said. "Felt like nobody could miss. It was a fun game. Lot of makes. But it was a physical game too." Doncic made 16-of-23 shots from the floor, including 6-of-11 three-pointers, and the 25-year-old Slovenian guard added three steals and two blocked shots to his ninth career 40-point triple-double. "The guy never ceases to amaze me," said teammate Klay Thompson. "He never rushes, plays at his own pace. Had 45 points easy as pie he made it look like."

It was the three-point sharpshooting that made the contest historic, crushing the old mark for combined three-pointers in an NBA game of 44 set in February 2023 by Sacramento and the Los Angeles Clippers, and matched two nights ago by Phoenix and Utah. The Mavericks, who won for the eighth time in nine starts, and Warriors combined for a one-half NBA record of 30 three-pointers in the first half, which ended with Dallas ahead 81-74. Dallas made 12-of-25 from three-point range in the first half while the Warriors matched another NBA record with 18 three-pointers in a half, coming on 32 shots.

That set the stage for ex-Warrior Thompson to sink the record-breaking 45th combined three-pointer with 4:32 remaining in the fourth quarter off an assist from Doncic. "I've had a great

history of shooting the ball well here so I try to tap into that every time I come back," Thompson said. Thompson had a season-high 29 points, 12 in the last quarter, and sank 9-of-14 shots from the floor and 7-of-11 from three-point range against a club with which he won four NBA titles. "Legendary stuff. Now it's time to do some legendary stuff in Dallas," he said. "I truly believe in this team. We have all the ingredients to do something special."

LeBron back, Lakers win

LeBron James made a triumphant return after missing two games with a sore left foot as the Los Angeles Lakers beat Memphis 116-110, snapping the Grizzlies' four-game win streak. Anthony Davis led the Lakers with 40 points and 16 rebounds while James, the oldest active NBA player who turns 40 on December 30, added 18 points, eight rebounds and eight assists. Jayson Tatum scored 28 points and grabbed 12 rebounds to lead the reigning NBA champion Boston Celtics over league-worst Washington 112-98, but an injury to Kristaps Porzingis dimmed the joy of a road victory.

Porzingis, a 29-year-old Latvian center who missed the first month of the season following left ankle surgery, played only 11 minutes before leaving for good with right heel pain in the second quarter. Porzingis has played in only seven games this season, averaging 20.3 points and 7.8 rebounds. The Wizards fell to 3-21 while Boston improved to 21-5, second-best in the NBA to Cleveland (22-4). At Orlando, the New York Knicks delivered the first home loss of the season to the Magic as Jalen Brunson scored 31 points and Karl-Anthony Towns added 22 points and 22 rebounds in a 100-91 victory. Reserve Mo Wagner scored 32 to lead Orlando, which fell to 10-1 at home.



LOS ANGELES: LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers drives to the basket during the game against Memphis Grizzlies on December 15, 2024. — AFP

At San Antonio, Minnesota's Anthony Edwards scored 26 points to lead the Timberwolves over the host Spurs 106-92. French star Victor Wembanyama led the Spurs with 20 points and added 12 rebounds and five assists. Host Phoenix got 28 points from Devin Booker plus 20 from Kevin Durant to power the Suns

over Portland 116-109. At Indianapolis, Pascal Siakam scored 22 points to lead the Indiana Pacers over New Orleans 119-104.

The Pacers obtained Miami center Thomas Bryant in a trade deal while the Brooklyn Nets sent German guard Dennis Schroder to Golden State for forward De'Anthony Melton. — AFP

Indian chess king Gukesh returns to hero's welcome

CHENNAI: India's chess star Gukesh Dommaraju returned to a hero's welcome in his home city on Monday after becoming the youngest world champion aged only 18. Hundreds of fans crowded the arrivals area of Chennai airport, cheering alongside banks of television cameras as Gukesh made his way out of the airport after victory in taking the World Chess Championship title. "It means a lot to bring back the trophy to India," Gukesh told reporters, with garlands of flowers draped around his neck, brandishing the glittering trophy in his hand. "I can see the support and what it means to India, I am glad to be here," he added, as celebratory petals thrown into the air smothered his hair.

Gukesh downed China's Ding Liren in a dramatic endgame in Singapore last week - becoming a sudden superstar in a nation where sporting fans are usually only obsessed with cricket. The scenes in the south Indian city of Chennai were reminiscent - albeit on a smaller scale - of this year's triumphant homecoming of the country's cricket stars with the T20 World Cup trophy. Young fans, mainly from Gukesh's school, held placards and photos of their new hero - whose victory has given a boost to dreams of pursuing chess as a professional sport.

When he won in Singapore - after nearly three weeks and 14 games of intense battle against the 32-year-old Ding - Gukesh burst into tears. Gukesh, who is usually reserved and more used to quiet and cerebral tournaments than wild celebrations, looked almost overwhelmed by the rock star welcome on Monday. "You guys are amazing," he told fans, before he was swiftly ushered into a car



CHENNAI: India's Gukesh Dommaraju (center) stands beside his parents as he shows his World Chess Championship trophy during a press conference in Chennai on December 16, 2024 after his win at the FIDE World Chess Championship Singapore 2024. — AFP

smothered in posters of him, alongside his father. "You gave me so much energy".

'Inspired millions'

Gukesh's father, a doctor, has been by his son's side in a rollercoaster ride that took off when he became India's youngest grandmaster aged 12 years, seven months and 17 days - among the youngest in the history of the game. In April, he became the youngest-ever winner of the prestigious Candidates Tournament, clinching his entry into the world championship. Gukesh surpassed a record held by Russia's Garry Kasparov, who won

the title at age 22, after Ding, 32, faltered at the final hurdle of his title defense.

He is the second Indian to hold the title after five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand, who also hails from Chennai. Gukesh will be honored by the government of his home state Tamil Nadu, and is expected to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the capital New Delhi later this month. Modi has already praised his "remarkable accomplishment", saying in a statement that "his triumph has not only etched his name in the annals of chess history but has also inspired millions of young minds to dream big and pursue excellence." — AFP

Josh Allen leads Bills past Lions, Mahomes injured in Chiefs win

LOS ANGELES: Josh Allen delivered another barnstorming performance with two rushing touchdowns as the Buffalo Bills handed the Detroit Lions only their second defeat of the season with a 48-42 NFL victory at Ford Field on Sunday. The blockbuster clash between the two high-scoring potential Super Bowl contenders did not disappoint, with Bills quarterback Allen once again underscoring his credentials as the front-runner for this season's Most Valuable Player award.

Allen, who rushed for three touchdowns and threw three more in Buffalo's defeat to the Los Angeles Rams last week, was in commanding form with 362 passing yards from 23-of-34 attempts. Bills running back James Cook also played a key role with two touchdowns and 105 rushing yards, which included one 41-yard sprint to the end zone in the second half.

Although Buffalo were always in control after racing into an early 14-0 lead in the first quarter, Detroit's offense kept the Lions in touch, with quarterback Jared Goff throwing five touchdowns and 494 passing yards in a game that saw the two teams combine for nearly 1,100 yards of offense. The Bills improved to 11-3 with the win, while Detroit fell to 12-2, to leave the Lions tied in the NFC with the Philadelphia Eagles, who defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers 27-13 on Sunday. Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts threw for 290 yards with two touchdowns and rushed for one more to set up the Philadelphia win. — AFP



PARIS: Lyon's French midfielder #08 Corentin Tolisso (right) kicks the ball in front of Paris Saint-Germain's Ecuadorian defender #51 Willian Pacho (center) during the French L1 football match between Paris Saint-Germain and Olympique Lyonnais on December 15, 2024. — AFP

PSG beat Lyon to extend lead in Ligue 1

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain outclassed in-form Lyon on Sunday, winning 3-1 to extend their lead at the top of the Ligue 1 table to seven points. Ousmane Dembele opened the scoring at the Parc des Princes and Vitinha added a penalty as PSG raced into a two-goal lead in what was expected to be one of the biggest tests of their credentials domestically this season. Georges Mikautadze pulled one back for Lyon before the break but they never really looked like equaliz-

ing and substitute Goncalo Ramos wrapped up the points for PSG late on.

The game was also notable for a brief stoppage in play in the second half due to derogatory songs being sung by the PSG support, with home captain Achraf Hakimi having to go across and plead with the crowd to stop. PSG could face disciplinary action due to the chants which have already been heard at previous games this season at the Parc des Princes, but otherwise it was a satisfying night for Luis Enrique's team. The win for Paris comes after nearest challengers Marseille and Monaco were both held to draws on Saturday, putting them in an even stronger position to go on and retain their title.

PSG now head to Monaco on Wednesday in a rearranged fixture which will give them the chance to finish 2024 with a 10-point advantage over their nearest rivals. "We were up against a very good Lyon team on a good run but it was

very important for us to take advantage of the fact that the teams immediately behind us didn't win this weekend," said Luis Enrique. The coach did not even name striker Randal Kolo Muani among the substitutes, while he also left top scorer Bradley Barcola out of the starting line-up.

Centre-forward Ramos was also dropped despite finding the net in the midweek win at Salzburg in the Champions League. Desire Doue also scored in that match after coming off the bench and the 19-year-old did start here, making a huge impact as he played a part in both goals scored by PSG in the opening quarter hour. He produced a devastating turn on the left wing to get away from Ainsley Maitland-Niles before advancing to the byline and cutting the ball back for Dembele to sweep home. That made it 1-0 inside eight minutes, and Doue was then brought down in the box by Corentin Tolisso, allowing Vitinha to roll in a penalty for 2-0. — 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, **KHAJA MOHIDDIN**, holder of Indian Passport No. T8280602 having permanent address: H.NO. 190 Paddamol Sirvoi, Quepem South Goa-403705, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (given name) **KHAJA MOHIDDIN** and (surname) **MULLA**.
#6610 16/12/2024

Blue always in spotlight, all set to compete for title: Al-Husseini

Kuwait announces national team lineup for Khaleeji Zain 26



Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium

KUWAIT: The Facility of Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium which host Khaleeji Zain 26 matches received widespread praise from officials and players following the first operational match between Kuwait Sports Club and its Sulaibkhat counterpart on Sunday which ended in a 2-2 draw.

The operational scene of Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium came in the best possible way, starting with the easy entry of the fans to their designated places in the stands, with the help of volunteers, through the entry of the players on the field, and the use of modern technologies during the match, and ending with the departure of all attendees, each from the gate assigned to them in an ideal manner. The local and Gulf media began their tasks in the places assigned to them at Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium completely smoothly, helped by the excellent organization of the working committees.

Sara Fleitah, Deputy Director of Public Authority for the Sports Facilities Sector, said: "We witnessed with great joy the success of the actual operational experience of Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium, which has a capacity of 15,000 spectators, and the experience revealed full readiness to host the Gulf Championship, as modern technical devices were tested, whether used around or outside the stadium, in addition to checking the organizational process of

entering and exiting the sports fans, and we thank everyone who contributed to the success of the experience, which proved our full readiness to receive Kuwait's guests from our brothers in the Gulf."

For her part, Director of Facilities and Maintenance Department Rasha Al-Sayegh emphasized that the floors of Jaber Al-Ahmad and Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadiums are among the best in the world, due to their high quality, after they were equipped according to the latest technological equipment adopted globally, and the issues that previously plagued the floors of stadiums were addressed with the best technological solutions.

"With the support of Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, and the follow-up of the Acting Director of the Public Authority for Sport, Bashar Abdullah, and the concerted efforts and team spirit, we were able to accomplish all the necessary requirements to host the Gulf Cup," Al-Sayegh said.

For his part, Ayman Al-Husseini, a member of the Board of Directors of the Football Association, stressed that everyone seeks the success of "Khaleeji Zain 26", whether as a player or within the technical, administrative and medical staff of the team and the working committees, as well as the participating brotherly teams, as everyone hopes that it will ap-



Players of Kuwait Sports Club and its Sulaibkhat counterpart greet after the match which ended in a draw.



Sara Fleitah

pear in a wonderful way, because of the special status that the Gulf Cup tournaments occupies for everyone, praising the tireless efforts of the organizing committee and its keenness to provide a suitable atmosphere for the competitions of the tournament dear to the hearts of athletes.

On the chances of our national team in "Khaleeji Zain 26", Al-Husseini, who headed the Blue delegation in the Doha preparatory camp, said: "The Kuwaiti national team is still at the top of the table. The Kuwaiti national team is still at the top of the most awarded teams, having won the title 10 times out of 25 tournaments, which puts the blue in the circle of media attention, and its players are always required to compete for the title, or appear in a manner befitting the reputation of Kuwaiti football at the very least," pointing out that preparations for hosting the Gulf Cup began months ago, and said: "With the support of Minister of Information and Culture

and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, and the follow-up of the Acting Director of the Public Authority for Sport, Bashar Abdullah, and the concerted efforts and team spirit, we were able to accomplish all the necessary requirements for hosting the Gulf Cup."

Earlier, the Kuwait Football Association announced on Monday the national team lineup for the upcoming Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26), hosted by Kuwait from December 21 to January 3.

The Association said on its social media platform (X) that coach Juan Pizzi selected 26 players, including Khaled Al-Rashidi, Salman Abdulghour, Abdulrahman Al-Fadhli Hamad Harbi, Ahmad Al-Dhafiri, Mubarak Al-Faneeni, Yousef Nasser, Nasser Khudhur, Hassan Hamdan and Yousef Majed. The list also features Ali Khalaf, Khaled Ibrahim, Mishari Ghanam, Mohammad Daham, Sami Al-Sanea Rashed Al-Dosari, Salman Al-Awadhi, Bandar Borelli, Moath Al-Dhafiri, Faisal Zayed, Fahad Al-Hajeri, Sultan Al-Enezi, Redha Hani, Eid Al-Rashidi, Moath Al-Osaimea and Fawaz Ayeed. Kuwait leads Group A for being the host, alongside Oman, UAE and Qatar. Group B includes Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Yemen. This marks the fifth time Kuwait hosts the Gulf Cup, as well as the most winning team in the tournament's history with ten titles. —KUNA and Agencies



Volunteers attending the training program.

Volunteers well-trained to deliver memorable 'Khaleeji Zain 26'

KUWAIT: Thousands of volunteers are looking forward to delivering a memorable Khaleeji Zain 26 that will be a sporting and cultural celebration from December 21-January 3. Up to 5,000 citizens and residents have stepped forward to volunteer on the event in a variety of roles, and at a training session held at the Jaber Al-Mubarak International Stadium, the finishing touches were being made to ensure they provide a first-class welcome to the tens of thousands of fans expected to pour into Kuwait from across the Gulf.

Each volunteer is put through several training sessions which include class-room theoretical presentations mixed with on-the-job practical training at the venues. Both stadiums have been fitted with the latest crowd-management technology to ensure a smooth flow of spectators from the outer perimeter fences to the stadium bowl and seats.

Tickets, which are available to buy through the Hayakom application, will be scanned for the first



Volunteers being given theoretical presentations mixed with on-the-job practical training at the venues.

time at the outer perimeter, before a second scan at the entry turnstiles into the stadium. Formerly known as the Arabian Gulf Cup, the Khaleeji Zain 26 will get underway on Saturday with a stunning Opening Ceremony, followed by the first match between hosts Kuwait and Oman at the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium.

Atyab Al-Marshoud's equestrian event will be held for 11th season

KUWAIT: The Higher Organizing Committee of the "Atyab Al-Marshoud" International Showjumping Championship, organized annually by Walid Al-Marshoud, has put the final touches to host the championship, which will be held on January 8 at the Kuwait Equestrian Center in Sabhan with the participation of riders representing all local clubs, and the championship is held under the supervision of the International Equestrian Federation (Federation Equestre Internationale de l'Equipe).

It is noteworthy that Ali Al-Kharafi won the title of the tenth edition, while Abdulrahman Al-Fuzai won the title of the ninth edition, and Abdullah Al-Awadi won the title of the eighth edition. Waleed Sulaiman Al-Marshoud, Chairman of the Supreme Organizing



Waleed Al-Marshoud.

Committee, said: "The current edition of the championship is witnessing the participation of a large number of international riders. The tournament has become part of the annual calendar of tournaments held in Kuwait and praised the support of the private sector for local tournaments, which encouraged the riders to compete strongly to win the first places."

He explained that the Al-Marshoud Championship is an international competition that all riders are keen to participate in, and he thanked the Kuwait Equestrian Federation and the management of the Kuwait Equestrian Center who spare no effort in supporting this sport, which has begun to spread rapidly, especially among young age groups in recent years.

Leganes stun Liga leaders Barca as Atletico move level

BARCELONA: La Liga leaders Barcelona stumbled 1-0 at home against Leganes on Sunday as they suffered another blow in the Spanish title race.

Atletico Madrid pulled level on points with the Catalans with a 1-0 victory of their own against Getafe earlier on, their 11th straight win across all competitions. Leganes defender Sergio Gonzalez headed home from a corner after four minutes for the visiting minnows and Barcelona missed a host of presentable chances as they failed to mount a comeback.

After a superb start to the season, Barcelona have lost three of their last six league games and won just one of those, seeing their lead whittled away. Hansi Flick's side lead third-place Real Madrid by a single point, after the champions drew at Rayo Vallecano on Saturday, having played one extra game than both their closest title rivals.

"It was a messed-up game, it's impossible to be happy. I think we started the game half asleep," Pedri told DAZN. "We woke up, we created chances but we

didn't have the spark we needed to get the goal... We have to be better in front of goal if we want to win points, we're in a bad run in the league and we have to turn it around." Barcelona started in the worst possible way as their former youth player Munir El-Haddadi broke in down the right and forced a fine save from Inaki Pena at his near post. From the resulting corner Leganes took the lead, with Sergio Gonzalez powering a header home to stun the Olympic stadium into silence. From there Barcelona dominated against the visitor's 15th and created several chances but found an inspired Marko Dmitrovic in their way.

The Serbian goalkeeper twice denied La Liga's top goalscorer Robert Lewandowski in the first half and produced a stunning save to thwart Raphinha, tipping his powerful effort against the crossbar. Barcelona's teenage wing wizard Lamine Yamal hurt his ankle in a challenge in the first half but despite the pain, continued to play and was his team's most potent threat as usual. Neither Lewandowski nor Dani Olmo were on song and Barca replaced the pair with Torres and Fermin Lopez for the final 25 minutes, but Leganes held firm. Raphinha whipped a stoppage time freekick over the crossbar to end a thoroughly frustrating night as Leganes earned a first away win at Barca. Barcelona host Atletico in their final match of the year next weekend. —AFP