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5 Zionist demolitions rip through Palestinian area of Jerusalem



9 Gulf Bank's year of distinction with 13



11 No quitting: Bollywood's Aamir Khan wants to keep acting



15 Vinicius and Bonmati named FIFA Best players of the year



CITRA, Google ink land lease deal

Cabinet reviews Khaleeji Zain 26 preparations at Jaber Stadium



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and his ministers examine preparations for Khaleeji Zain 26 during their weekly meeting held at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium on Dec 18, 2024.

KUWAIT: The Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority on Wednesday signed a land leasing contract with international conglomerate Google. The deal, the signing of which was attended by Minister of State for Communication Affairs Omar Al-Omar, aims at setting up centers for updated data for cloud services in Kuwait. The authority said in a statement that the deal is a crucial step in the efforts to update digital infrastructure and support digital transformation in the public and private sectors with advanced and safe cloud services.

It also provides flexible solutions and supports innovation and business leadership through enabling startups and business leaders to depend on an advanced digital infrastructure, the statement affirmed. The deal was signed on part of the authority by acting chairperson Abdullah Al-Ajmi and Shaimaa Al-Terkeit, Director of Google Kuwait.

Minister Al-Omar on Wednesday said the establishment of advanced data centers for safe and progressed cloud services is "a prime part of our vision

for bolstering Kuwait's status as a credible regional hub in the field". The minister said the contract is a qualitative step for enhancing digital infrastructure and support digital transformation plans in the private and public sectors. He also affirmed that the co-operation with Google mirrors Kuwait's commitment to evolve its technological and innovative potentials.

The project will enable startups and business leaders to attain flexible technological solutions that in turn would boost innovation and push forward national and regional economies. Such a strategic partnership is a foundation for supporting the state's efforts for attaining comprehensive digital transformation and strengthening technological leadership at the regional level, in tandem with "the country's vision to build a sustainable and diversified digital economy," he added.

Meanwhile, members of the Cabinet, led by HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, examined preparations for Khaleeji Zain 26 (26th Arabian Gulf Cup) during their weekly

Continued on Page 6

NEWS IN BRIEF

Kuwait police a role model

KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense and Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah affirmed that Kuwait police serve as a role model in security, traffic and humanitarian efforts within a system that strives to protect the country. Sheikh Fahad stated in a statement on the occasion of the Arab Police Day that the role played by police forces is respected and appreciated. He added they present the highest levels of dedication and loyalty in fulfilling their national duties, pointing out their firm commitment to confront violators who threaten the country's stability. Sheikh Fahad expressed his appreciation to the police forces for their efforts, driven by national and humanitarian values in facing threats. — KUNA

Court frees ex-MP on bail

KUWAIT: The criminal court on Wednesday freed ex-MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri on a KD 1,000 bail and set the next hearing for Dec 25 in the case filed against him by the interior ministry for allegedly spreading false news about Kuwait. Muwaizri returned to Kuwait on Sunday, and according to local reports, carried out the biometric registration to be allowed to enter the country and attend the court case. After Muwaizri attended the hearing, the court decided to postpone the verdict and set the next hearing for Dec 25 to allow defense lawyers to submit their arguments on the case. Muwaizri's lawyer confirmed on X platform that his client was freed.

13 killed in Mumbai boat crash

MUMBAI: An Indian navy speedboat undergoing tests in the busy seas off the financial capital Mumbai lost control and slammed into a ferry, killing 13 people, the navy and government said Wednesday. "Doctors have declared 13 people dead", Maharashtra state chief minister Devendra Fadnavis told reporters, adding more than 100 people had been rescued. The ferry was carrying passengers from the Gateway of India — a colonial-era monument on the waterfront that is symbolic of Mumbai — to the popular tourist spot of Elephanta Island, famous for its rock carvings. The 13 dead included one naval servicemember and two representatives of an equipment manufacturer taking part in the tests, the navy said. — AFP

First Deputy PM opens Kuwaiti hospital in Basra

BASRA: Kuwaiti First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense and Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah, accompanied by Iraqi Minister of Health Dr Saleh Al-Hasnawi and Basra Governor Asaad Al-Eidani, inaugurated the Kuwait Surgical Government Hospital in Basra Wednesday. Sheikh Fahad conveyed the greetings and appreciation of HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to the leadership and people of Iraq. He highlighted the deep-rooted ties

between the two nations, emphasizing Kuwait's commitment to cooperation and future joint projects. The Kuwait Surgical Hospital is a grant from Kuwait to Iraq, featuring various medical facilities, including patient wards, operating rooms, an endoscopy center and advanced ICU and emergency units.

Dr Al-Hasnawi expressed gratitude to Kuwait for funding the construction of the hospital. The Iraqi health ministry said the minister expressed gratitude to HH the Amir, the government and people of Kuwait for the serious work with the Iraqi government in this respect. It said the eight-storey hospital has a capacity of 25 beds, contains 11 major surgical wards, an intensive unit division and advanced laboratories. Kuwait has launched several aid projects in Iraq, including construction of 19 medical centers and schools. — KUNA



BASRA: Kuwaiti First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense and Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah inaugurates the Kuwait Surgical Government Hospital on Dec 18, 2024. — KUNA

UN urges 'free and fair' Syria elections; first flight takes off

DAMASCUS: The UN envoy to Syria called on Wednesday for "free and fair" elections after the ouster of president Bashar Al-Assad, as he voiced hope for a political solution for Kurdish-held areas. Assad fled Syria following a lightning offensive spearheaded by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), more than 13 years after his crackdown on democracy protests precipitated one of the deadliest wars of the century.

He left behind a country scarred by decades of torture, disappearances and summary executions, and the collapse of his rule on Dec 8 stunned the world and sparked celebrations around Syria and beyond. Years of civil war have also left the country heavily dependent on aid, deeply fragmented, and desperate for justice and peace.

Addressing reporters in Damascus, UN special envoy Geir Pedersen said "there is a lot of hope that we can now see the beginning of a new Syria". "A new Syria that... will adopt a new constitution... and that we will have free and fair elections when that time comes, after a transitional period," he said.

Calling for immediate humanitarian assistance, he also said he hoped to see an end to international sanctions levied against Syria over Assad's abuses.

Continued on Page 6



ALEPPO: A man waves an independence-era Syrian flag as passengers disembark from a Syrian Air aircraft arriving from Damascus on Dec 18, 2024, the first flight since the ouster of president Bashar Al-Assad. — AFP

Push for truce as Zionists kill more Gazans

GAZA: The United States, joined by Arab mediators, sought on Wednesday to conclude an agreement between the Zionist entity and Hamas to halt the 14-month-old war in the Gaza Strip where medics said Zionist strikes killed at least 38 Palestinians. A Palestinian official close to the negotiations said on Wednesday that mediators had narrowed gaps on most of the agreement's clauses. He said the Zionist entity had introduced conditions which Hamas rejected but would not elaborate.

On Tuesday, sources close to the talks in Cairo, the Egyptian capital, said an agreement could be signed in coming days on a ceasefire and release of captives held in Gaza in return for Palestinian prisoners held by the Zionist entity. Medics said a Zionist airstrike killed at least 10 people in a house in the northern town of Beit Lahia, while six were killed in separate airstrikes in Gaza City, Nuseirat camp in central areas, and Rafah near the border with Egypt.

In Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip, medics said four people were killed in an airstrike on a house. Zionist forces have operated in the towns of Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahia as well as the nearby Jabalia camp since October. Palestinians accuse the Zionist entity of carrying out acts of ethnic cleansing to depopulate the northern edge of the enclave to create a buffer zone.

Continued on Page 6



Local



Dr. Nasser Muhaisen and Madhi Al-Khamees with Zain's team during the ceremony.



Waleed Al-Khashti honored.



Accolades reflect Zain's excellence in advertising, media and community engagement.

Zain dominates 12th edition of Kuwait Creativity Award with five accolades

Company recognized for excellence in advertising, media, community engagement

KUWAIT: Zain was honored with five prestigious awards during the 12th edition of the Kuwait Creativity Award. The accolades highlighted the company's exceptional media campaigns, impactful commercials, and continued efforts to create positive change through its awareness initiatives and community programs throughout 2024. The awards were presented during a ceremony held by the Arab Media Forum under the patronage of Abdulrahman Bedah Al-Mutairi, Minister of Information, Culture, and State Minister for Youth Affairs.

The event was attended by Dr. Nasser Muhaisen, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Information, alongside a distinguished gathering of guests, media professionals, artists, content creators, and influencers. Zain secured awards across five categories: Creativity in Awareness, for its Ramadan TVC; National Campaigns, for its National Day TVC; Advertising Creativity, for its Eid Al-Fitr TVC; and Creativity in Social Responsibility, for the company's annual Zain Alshuhoor Rama-

dan campaign. In addition, Zain received Best PR Personality, awarded to Waleed Al-Khashti, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Affairs and Relations Officer.

The Creativity in Awareness award was presented in recognition of Zain's Ramadan TVC, which highlighted the Palestinian cause. Featuring a cast of talented children and the iconic Palestinian caricature figure, Handala, the campaign garnered over 16 million views since its launch. The project was produced in collaboration with advertising agency Joy Productions, with lyrics by Heba Hamada, music by Ihab Abdulwahed, music composition by Michael Fadel, and direction by Samir Aboud. The TVC was produced by publishing house VIP Films.

Zain also received the National Campaigns award for its National Day TVC, which celebrated the nation's heritage, unity, and achievements, amassing nearly 7 million views to date. It featured the iconic voice of Kuwaiti artist Sanaa Al-Kharraz,

with lyrics by poet Salem Sayer Al-Enzi, music by Suliman Ghannam Al-Daikhan, and production by Joy Productions.

In the Advertising Creativity category, Zain was recognized for its Eid Al-Fitr TVC, which has accumulated over 19 million views. Inspired by Al-Mutanabi's famous poem, the campaign was executed under the direction of Joy Productions, with music by Ihab Abdulwahed, music composition by Ahmed Tarek Yahya, mixing and mastering by Hani Mahrous, direction by Khaled Al-Rifai, and production by All Over Group. The Creativity in Social Responsibility award celebrated the company's Zain Alshuhoor annual Ramadan campaign. As one of Kuwait's largest and longest-running community-driven initiatives, this campaign has been a cornerstone of Zain's social outreach for over a decade.

It offers a wide range of volunteer, humanitarian, and community programs throughout the holy month of Ramadan and into Eid Al-Fitr. Zain's advertising and creative content consis-

tently reflect the values of its brand and resonate with societal trends. By addressing meaningful issues and celebrating significant moments, Zain aspires to be more than a provider of digital innovations—striving instead to be a brand that enriches all aspects of life and shares in its community's most impactful events.

The recognition at the Kuwait Creativity Award underscores Zain's dedication to excellence in marketing and advertising. As one of Kuwait's leading economic institutions, Zain understands the pivotal role of both traditional and modern media in connecting with society and influencing positive change. The Kuwait Creativity Award aims to elevate advertising standards across Kuwait and the Arab world by fostering a spirit of healthy competition and encouraging innovation. It seeks to refine the skills of professionals in the advertising industry while promoting constructive and positive ideas in creative materials.

Aviation chief discusses ties with Egyptian and Uzbek ambassadors

KUWAIT: Chairperson of the Directorate General for Civil Aviation Sheikh Humoud Mubarak Humoud Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Wednesday held separate meetings with the Egyptian Ambassador Osama Shaltut and the Uzbek Envoy Ayubkhon Yunosov on means of boosting cooperation in civil navigation. The directorate said in a statement that the meeting with the Egyptian envoy dealt with promoting the bilateral relations and touched on issues of mutual concern in the sector.

The two sides affirmed the necessity of elevating the level of the bilateral ties in civil aviation to attain optimum economic feasibility for the two sides, in addition to the prospected increase of the flights and cooperation between the Kuwaiti and Egyptian airlines. The talks with the Uzbek ambassador addressed the need to upgrade the cooperation to attain joint goals and facilitate passengers' transactions. The discussions also dealt with prospects of increasing the flights between the two countries and cementing cooperation between their airways. — KUNA



Kuwait Aviation Chief Sheikh Humoud Mubarak Humoud Al-Jaber Al-Sabah discusses promoting cooperation with Uzbek Envoy Ayubkhon Yunosov and Egyptian Ambassador Osama Shaltut (below). — KUNA photos



Kuwait congratulates Qatar on national day, affirms strong ties

DOHA: Qatar has made huge leaps in development since independence under the guidance of its leadership, Kuwaiti Ambassador to Qatar Khaled Al-Mutairi said on Wednesday. Speaking to KUNA on the advent of Qatar's national day, the ambassador lauded the strong relations with the fellow Arab country, saying that the leaderships of both countries were eager to pursue all venues for collaboration and cooperation.

The strength of ties between the two GCC countries was also reflected in the joint stances they both shared on the regional and international scenes, he indicated. The Kuwaiti diplomat expressed gratitude to Qatar's chairmanship of the 44th GCC Summit, saying that it helped bolster inter-GCC cooperation. Ambassador Al-Mutairi renewed his congratulations to the Qatari leadership and people, wishing them more progress and development.

Celebrating achievements

Qatar marks its national day on Wednesday, December 18, celebrating the country's achievements throughout the decades, which made it one of the most important countries in the GCC region, if not the world. On December 18, 1878, Sheikh Jasssem bin Mohammad Al-Thani, the founder of Qatar, succeeded his father, Sheikh Muhammad bin Al-Thani. He led the country towards unity and development. In recent years, Qatar achieved huge leaps that met the

ambition of its citizens and made the country an exemplary nation in successfully implementing plans for sustainable development.

Nationally, Qatar Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad said during the opening of the Shura (consultation) council session in October that the national economy continued to grow in 2023 with a GDP increase of 1.2 percent. The hydrocarbon sector grew by 1.4, and a 1.1 percent in the non-hydrocarbon sector. According to estimations from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the national economic growth in Qatar will reach around two percent by the end of this year with annual mid-range growth of 4.1 percent between 2025 and 2029, which would come through expansion in natural gas and transformative projects in addition to the third national development strategy.

Inflation continues to decrease during the current year, settling at 1.4 percent last July, indicated the IMF, noting that inflation was at five and three percent back in 2022 and 2023, respectively, which reflected successful financial policies by the state to ensure smooth supplies, availability of products, and control of prices. The IMF predicted that mid-range inflation numbers would be at two percent, especially with Qatar managing to lower its general debt by 73 percent from the GDP in 2020 to under 44 percent by the end of 2023.



Kuwaiti Ambassador to Qatar Khaled Al-Mutairi

NBK honors Kuwait Prize 2023 winners

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) recently honored Dr. Dina Katabi, winner of the Kuwait Prize in Emerging Specialized Sciences, in a ceremony at the bank's headquarters. The event was attended by NBK's executive management, including Isam Al-Sager, Vice Chairman and Group CEO of NBK, Salah Al-Fulaij, CEO of NBK-Kuwait, Sulaiman Al-Marzouq, Deputy CEO, NBK-Kuwait, Faisal Al-Hamad, CEO of NBK Wealth Group and Emad Al-Ablani, General Manager, Head of Human Resources Group at NBK, along with several senior leaders and officials from Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS).

This recognition celebrated Dr. Katabi's exceptional scientific and intellectual contributions. The award follows her earlier recognition by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, further acknowledging her remarkable achievements. NBK's executive management presented a commemorative shield to Dr. Katabi, along with another to Dr. Khalil Amin, winner of Kuwait Prize in Applied Sciences.

Dr. Amin, who heads the battery technology group at the US Department of Energy's Argonne National Laboratory, was recognized for his significant contributions to technological advancements. This gesture reflects NBK's deep commitment to honoring scientists, particularly in technological fields, and its dedication to fostering a culture of research and innovation. The bank continually seeks to inspire young researchers to develop innovative solutions that support societal and economic progress.

Dr. Katabi delivered an insightful lecture in collaboration with KFAS, focusing on strategies to enhance the use of technology across various sectors. During the session, she showcased presentations and shared real-world experiences to emphasize the transformative role of modern technologies in improving the quality of services in diverse fields.

The Bank also organized a panel discussion attended by its employees, where Dr. Katabi addressed several pivotal topics, including the importance of motivating individuals to pursue excellence and innovation, fostering creativity, and building resilience. Drawing from the experiences of prominent figures who have made significant contributions in their respective fields, Katabi shared her own journey, discussing the challenges she faced, the lessons she learned, and the strategies that helped her achieve success and distinction.

The Kuwait Prize is one of the most distinguished awards granted annually by KFAS. It recognizes Kuwaiti and Arab scientists who have made significant and exceptional contributions to their research fields on a global scale. The awardees are selected based on recommendations from specialized panels comprising esteemed figures in the scientific community.

NBK strongly believes in fostering a culture of innovation and creativity. It remains committed to launching and supporting pioneering initiatives across various fields and sectors, collaborating with state institutions and strategic partners to positively impact society and create an inspiring environment for the next generation. Committed to its role as the largest contributor to social responsibility in Kuwait, NBK consistently supports scientists and researchers in scientific and technical fields. The bank also provides opportunities for participation in scientific conferences, workshops, and panel discussions to showcase achievements and inspire younger generations to develop and innovate intellectually.

generations to develop and innovate intellectually.

NBK serves as a role model in fostering innovation and supporting scientific and cultural initiatives. The bank prioritizes the development of national talent through specialized educational and training programs designed to enhance competencies and skills, reinforcing its role as a key contributor to sustainable development. Dr. Katabi is a leading researcher specializing in emerging sciences and wireless networks. Her groundbreaking work bridges computer science and electrical engineering, significantly advancing the speed, reliability, and security of data transfer in Wi-Fi and cellular systems.

Moreover, her innovative research in wireless sensing for medical applications has revolutionized non-invasive health monitoring, improving patient care and enabling early detection and management of various medical conditions. She holds a bachelor's degree from Damascus University and earned both her master's and doctoral degrees from the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She is currently a professor of electrical engineering and computer science at MIT, where she also leads the Center for Wireless Networks and Mobile Computing.

Kuwait Prize, established in 1979, aims to honor distinguished scientific achievements by Kuwaiti and Arab scientists at a global level. Over the years, the award has gained significant recognition and popularity among Arab researchers. It is presented in five fields: basic sciences, applied sciences, economics and social sciences, arts and literature, and emerging interdisciplinary sciences. The first four fields are awarded annually, while the fifth field, focusing on emerging interdisciplinary sciences, is announced biennially.

First green fund

In October 2023, Qatar set the cornerstone for the expansion of the northern refinery in the Ras Laffan industrial city, a step focusing on bolstering Qatar's natural gas production internationally. Qatar also displayed interest in boosting its environmental commitments by launching the first green fund in the GCC region, an international-standard venture aimed at funding sustainable and green projects through the issuing of green government bonds at international debt markets.

On the political scale, the Qatari leadership approved back in November amendments for the permanent constitution of the country after the referendum showed 90.6 percent were in favor. In regards to foreign policy, the Qatari leadership affirmed its steadfast stances on issues pertaining to Gulf, Arab, and Islamic relations, saying that cooperation amongst the latter parties was key to facing regional and international challenges.

Qatar's reputation as a peacemaker has been more prevalent in recent years with achievements such as the September 2023 prisoners exchange between the US and Iran, the efforts to reach a humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip since November 2023, and the release of hostages adding to this reputation. Doha was the venue for several prominent events, including the December 2023 44th GCC Summit, the Expo Qatar from October 2023 to March 2024, the AFC Asian Cup in January 2024—which came after the outstanding FIFA 2022 World Cup—and more events of high magnitude that brought international attention to Qatar.

Qatar Vision 2030

As for Qatar Vision 2030, the grand plan, devised in 2008, would focus on overall sustainable development

that would achieve development, which would be deeply rooted in the country's traditions and ethos. Onwards to Qatar's relations with its GCC brothers, specifically Kuwait, the two countries had shared mutual respect and interest in the development of relations and joint projects. The strength of ties led Qatar to the name of the Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah Corridor, an infrastructural project opened in 2010 in Qatar named after the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Ties also saw rapid development in all aspects, and in 2002, the joint high committee was established to look into all venues of cooperation. Commercial exchange in the three years grew by 88 percent to reach \$2 billion in 2023 compared to \$1 billion in 2020. On joint investments, companies from both countries usually participate in business ventures.

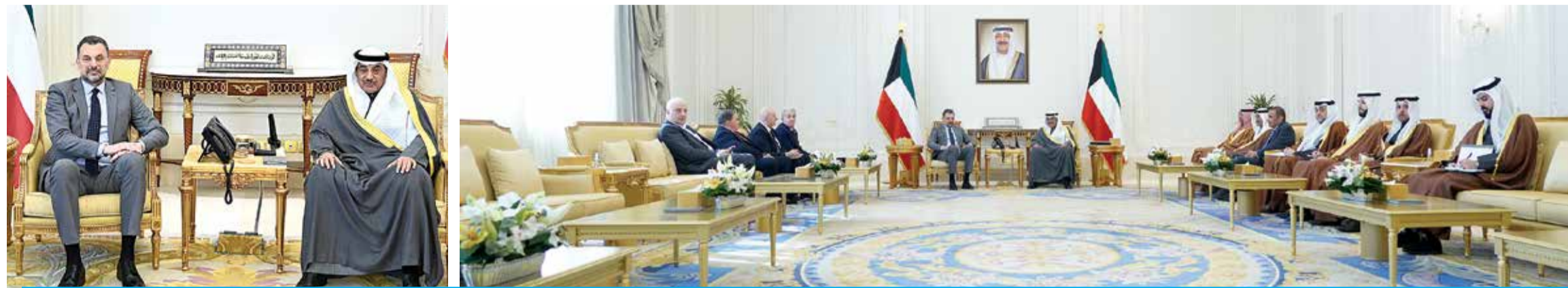
'Made in Qatar' exhibition

In the 2020 edition of the "Made in Qatar" exhibition in Kuwait, some 220 Qatari companies took part in the events, and in January of the same year, Kuwait signed a long-term 15-year agreement with Qatar to import natural gas from 2022 until 2036, with the deal involving the export of 3 million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar to Al-Zour port in Kuwait. Back in August, QatarEnergy and Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) agreed to export three million tons of LNG to Kuwait within 15 years.

In February, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah headed an official delegation to Qatar on a state visit. His Highness the Amir's Representative, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, also participated in the Third Asian Cooperation Dialogue Summit held in October in the Qatari capital, Doha. — KUNA

Kuwait and Bosnia explore investment opportunities

Bosnia foreign minister woos Kuwaiti tourists



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received visiting Bosnian Foreign Minister Elmedin Konakovic and his accompanying delegation at Bayan Palace on Wednesday. Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Yahya, His Highness the Crown Prince's Office Chief retired Lieutenant General Jamal Al-Theyab, Undersecretary of His Highness the Crown Prince's Diwan Mazen Al-Essa and Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for European Affairs Mohammad Hayati were present at the reception. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The Foreign Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Elmedin Konakovic, said that his visit to Kuwait aims at tackling common interests, investment opportunities, and future projects between the two countries. In a statement to journalists on the sidelines of his meeting with economic and investment public figures and members of the Kuwaiti Businessmen Council Association in Bosnia, Minister Konakovic expressed his thanks to Kuwait for its

support and assistance to his country in the past. The Bosnian minister stressed the need for support in projects and investments during the current period. He called on Kuwaiti tourists to visit his country, revealing a significant annual increase in the number of tourists from the GCC countries, which "broke records during the past year" to enjoy Bosnia's various tourist attractions and the diverse nature of its coasts and mountains. The minister noted that his country had

obtained the green light to start negotiations to join the European Union (EU), which is considered a great opportunity for investors to enter the European market through Bosnia and Herzegovina and benefit from skilled labor and low energy costs.

For his part, the Ambassador of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the State of Kuwait, Nusret Cancar, said that Kuwait was one of the first countries to invest in Bosnia immediately after the war through the

Public Investment Authority, specifically in a very large iron and steel factory. He added that Kuwaiti private sector investments have exceeded government investments in recent years, calling on Kuwaiti investors to seize the various opportunities in his country, especially in the fields of agriculture and renewable energy. Earlier, Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah Al-Yahya, received at Kuwait International Airport Konakovic and his accompanying delegation. — KUNA

Kuwait, Turkey military chiefs discuss relations



(From left) British Ambassador Belinda Lewis, Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and Prince Edward during their visit to Kuwait Towers.



Prince Edward poses for a group photo with members of the press.

Duke's visit highlights UK's longstanding partnership with Kuwait

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: The Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Edward, expressed his delight at visiting Kuwait for the first time as the two nations continue to celebrate 125 years of diplomatic relations and look ahead to marking 250 years of trading ties in 2025. The remarks were made during his visit to the British Embassy yesterday afternoon, followed by a reception in his honor.

Highlighting the strong historical and contemporary connections between the UK and Kuwait, the Princess Edward remarked, "Our cooperation spans a wide range of areas, including defense —

with the UK standing by Kuwait during the First Gulf War and continuing to collaborate closely to this day — and education, a field I hold dear as patron of the Duke of Edinburgh Award initiated by my late father, Prince Philip."

Emphasizing the enduring bond between the two nations, the Duke added, "At its very heart, our relationship is built on the links between our peoples, our shared values, and our mutual respect for each other's cultures. This is what has united us in the past and what makes me confident that we will continue to enjoy a close, friendly partnership for many years to come." British Ambassador to Kuwait, Belinda Lewis, described the visit as an opportunity to celebrate the warm and historic ties between the two nations, rooted in the enduring friendship between their Royal and Ruling Families. She noted the privilege of engaging with Kuwait's leadership and hearing from young people making impactful contributions to society.

The ambassador also reflected on a visit to Dick-

son House, which she said brought the nations' shared diplomatic history to life. She highlighted the importance of the garden reception in honoring groups that actively strengthen bilateral relations and support the British community in Kuwait. The Duke's visit concluded with a dinner hosted by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs. The evening evoked memories of Queen Elizabeth II's 1979 State Visit to Kuwait Towers.

During the dinner, the Duke met representatives from the Kuwait Olympic Committee, the Youth Public Authority, and the Public Authority for Sport, as well as several youth leaders, including recipients of the Kuwait Award for Youth Excellence and Creativity. A passionate advocate for youth development, the Duke discussed ways to deepen connections between young people in Kuwait and the UK, emphasizing the importance of nurturing opportunities for future generations to achieve their full potential.

ANKARA: Kuwaiti Army Deputy Chief of Staff, Air Marshal Sheikh Sabah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and his accompanying delegation visited the Turkish Defense Industry Agency (SSB) in the capital Ankara on Wednesday, where he met the agency's President Haluk Gorgun. The two sides discussed joint cooperation in defense industry and technology, as well as enhancing partnership between the two countries in the defense field, said the Ministry of Defense in a statement. — KUNA

KNG chief lauds bonds with Libya



KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait National Guard (KNG) Sheikh Mubarak Humoud Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Wednesday commended distinguished relations between Kuwait and Libya. Sheikh Mubarak Humoud made the remarks while welcoming Libyan Ambassador to Kuwait Suleiman Al-Sahili at the KNG headquarters. The Libyan ambassador congratulated the KNG chief on gaining the political leadership's trust. — KUNA



Dr Asmaa Altawari, head and consultant of the pediatric neurology unit at Al-Sabah Hospital is honored.

AAW, Roche celebrate first patient to receive gene therapy

KUWAIT: During the 8th Kuwait Pediatric Neurology Congress, Dr Asmaa Altawari, Head & Consultant of Pediatric Neurology Unit, Al Sabah Hospital, announced the first patient in Kuwait to receive the gene therapy, ushering in a new era for treating Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD) in the country. Following the recent introduction of the first approved disease-modifying therapy for Duchenne, this critical milestone is a testament to the dedicated

efforts of the Kuwait Ministry of Health, AAW, and Roche Pharmaceuticals to bring advanced medical treatments to Kuwait.

Al-Sabah Hospital Head and Consultant of Pediatric Neurology, Dr Asma Altawari, said, "We are thrilled to witness this groundbreaking step forward in treating Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. The successful administration of gene therapy to the first patient in Kuwait underscores our dedication to bringing innovative therapies to our healthcare system."

AAW CEO and Chairman, Faisal Al Mutawa said, "The successful use of Elevidys gene therapy marks a turning point in the treatment of Duchenne muscular dystrophy, offering new hope for patients with this debilitating disease. This medical milestone, made possible through our strong partnership with Roche Pharmaceuticals and the Kuwait Ministry of Health,

underscores our commitment to providing the most innovative and effective therapies, ensuring the highest standard of care for those affected by DMD."

Roche Country Manager Ahmed Tawfik stated, "This is a proud moment for all of us at Roche. The successful administration of gene therapy in Kuwait is a testament to our unwavering commitment to transforming patients' lives through science and innovation. We are honored to provide therapies that have the potential to bring substantial benefits to the Kuwaiti community." The gene therapy is designed to address the underlying cause of DMD by targeting the expression of shortened dystrophin in skeletal, respiratory, and cardiac muscles. This innovative therapy is a one-time treatment administered through a single intravenous dose, representing a major milestone in the field of DMD treatment. It offers a convenient and effective solution for patients in Kuwait.

Kuwaiti, Jordanian joint drill enhances troops' readiness

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Defense on Wednesday declared the conclusion of a drill between the army Special Force/25 and Jordanian troops, code-named "The Arrows Of Justice" (Rimah Al-Haq), that started on December 8th. The drill was carried out as part of Kuwait Army's training schedule with forces from friendly states. It was designed to elevate combat performance and readiness, exchange expertise for maximum mutual benefit. The concluding ceremony was attended by the commander of Elite Squad/25 Staff Brigadier Anas Al-Fozan, and senior Kuwaiti and Jordanian officers. — KUNA





Executive management of the company takes a group photo with the winners of the inspireU Kuwait Program.



stc celebrates 'inspireU' graduates

Over 40 businesses, entrepreneurs complete the program with 5 startups from Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company – stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, celebrated the graduates of the “inspireU” program, an entrepreneurial state-of-the-art incubator and accelerator designed to support startups and SMEs. The graduation ceremony held by stc Group in Saudi Arabia recognized 44 businesses and startups that completed the inspireU program, including 5 startups from Kuwait. This marked the successful conclusion of the program's 10th and 11th intakes, as well as the first season of the advanced inspireU program.

This year, the inspireU program focused on several areas including fintech, cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence (AI), IoT, and online gaming. These initiatives led to signing commercial agreements with stc Group, showcasing the Company's dedication to empowering start-ups and entrepreneurs to play a key role in driving economic growth. A total of 5 Kuwaiti startups from the 10th and 11th intakes of the program were featured in the graduation ceremony who shared their inspiring experiences. They highlighted the significant growth they experienced in their comprehensive journey throughout the inspireU program. These startups witnessed substantial success in their operations and hold great potential to contribute to the digital economy in line with the Kuwait Vision 2035.

The ceremony showcased some of the achieve-

ments and inspiring stories from entrepreneurs, emphasizing the significant growth they managed to achieve for their business throughout their journey within the program. The Chief Strategy Officer, Khalid AlSudairy, Chief Transformation & Synergy Officer Anowd Muthaib and General Manager of Corporate Communications, Danah AlJasem, attended the ceremony on behalf of stc Kuwait. The five Kuwaiti startups included Khalid Al Busairi –

AlJasem:
stc strongly supports the growing SMEs market in Kuwait, recognizing their significant role in stimulating the economy

Delicon Logistics Solutions, Ali Abbas and Mahdi Al Mousawi – Sparts and Rami Jaber – Vervality – from the 10th intake. Startups from the 11th intake included Abdullah Al Ateeqi and Mohammed Al Abdulsalam – Motery and Reem Al Farhan – Central Trade Company.

Danah AlJasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, said, “We would like to congratulate all those who participated and graduated from the inspireU program held by stc Group. A spe-

cial recognition goes out to the 5 Kuwaiti startups who we believe contribute greatly to supporting the local economy, drive sustainable growth and enable the digital transformation in Kuwait. stc strongly supports the growing SMEs market in Kuwait and throughout the region, recognizing their significant role in stimulating the economy. Programs that aim to educate and empower the entrepreneurial and start-up ecosystem to thrive in an evolving digital world are essential tools that can assist entrepreneurs in their journeys to success.”

AlJasem added, “We remain dedicated to supporting SMEs by presenting and identifying opportunities in which they can accelerate business growth. This commitment aligns with the Company's comprehensive corporate social responsibility program, with a strategic focus on empowering the younger generation, while promoting digital innovation in line with Kuwait Vision 2035. Having said that, we look forward to launching the 3rd season of inspireU Kuwait to continue this journey of innovation and empowerment. Our goal is to contribute to building an integrated digital ecosystem that connects startups with markets and investors both locally and internationally, driving the economy through digital and sustainable initiatives.”

It is worth noting that “inspireU” provides entrepreneurs with workspaces in both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and assists in obtaining permits and licenses for winning projects in addition to providing prac-

tical guidance and targeted trainings. Participants with winning projects will also have access to several networking opportunities through participation or visiting international conferences such as (MWC – Silicon Valley – LEAP). In addition, inspireU provides financial support, to enable startups to realize their ideas and dreams.

Inspiring success since inception

Since its launch in 2015, the inspire program has supported more than 130 startups, many of which have grown into prominent brands that expanded regionally and internationally. These achievements reflect stc's pivotal role in fostering innovation and enhancing the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Regional and global expansion

Over the past three years, inspire has established itself as a key player in the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem. It has broadened its reach to attract startups from GCC countries and across the world, while continuing to enhance its support in empowering local ventures.

A hub for venture capital

Due to its successful impact, inspireU has become one of the leading platforms for local and international venture capital funds. The platform serves as an innovative bridge that connects aspiring entrepreneurs with global investment opportunities.

Council Chief urges stronger Arab police cooperation

TUNIS: Secretary General of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers Mohammad Kuman called on Wednesday, during Arab Police Day celebrations, for stronger cooperation among Arab police and security forces to confront security threats and foster community partnerships in combating crime. In his statement, Kuman emphasized the need to support Arab police and security personnel in their efforts to combat crime, enhance their role in protecting citizens and countries, and adapt Arab security cooperation through the Council of Arab Interior Ministers to align with regional and international developments.

This day marks a significant milestone in Arab security collaboration, commemorating the first conference of Arab police and security leaders in Al-Ain, UAE, in 1972, which launched a coordinated journey to establish security and stability across the region, he added. Over the past five decades, substantial achievements have been made in security cooperation, including the establishment of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers, which stands as a model for joint efforts.

He underscored that Arab police and security leaders play a critical role in enhancing integration by building institutions, unifying policing culture, developing agreements, strategies, and laws, harmonizing security structures, enhancing information sharing, and strengthening operational cooperation among member states. Kuman further noted that this shared journey has significantly contributed to



Secretary General of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers Mohammad Kuman

promoting human rights in law enforcement and security work.

For decades, Arab police and security leaders have prioritized this issue, implementing initiatives such as an annual conference on human rights within Arab interior ministries, joint meetings between security agencies and national human rights institutions, the development of an Arab Security Code of Conduct, and the drafting of an Arab strategy to enhance human rights in security work, he explained. These efforts, among others, reflect the ongoing commitment to integrating human rights into the security framework, he mentioned. — KUNA

KFF and GCC center discuss cooperation



KUWAIT: Chief of Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) Major General Talal Al-Roumi on Wednesday held talks with the head of the GCC center for emergency management, Brigadier Dr Rashed Al-Meri, on mutual cooperation in the spheres of catastrophes, crises and emergencies. The KFF said in a statement that Maj Gen Al-Roumi received Brig Al-Meri and his accompanying delegation, lauding the cooperation between the force and GCC center. He also expressed readiness to put all resources at disposal of the center in the fire dousing and civil protection spheres. — KUNA

OIA acquires stake in Musk's company XAI

MUSCAT: The Oman Investment Authority (OIA) announced on Wednesday its acquisition of a stake in the US company XAI, specializing in artificial intelligence (AI) technology, to benefit from its global leading innovations in various fields. OIA Chairman Abdulsalam Al-Murshidi stated that this move aligns with the Authority's strategy to invest in advanced technologies across diverse sectors. XAI aims to lead AI technology by understanding and analyzing real-time data, a feature lacking in many competing models, he added.

The platform provides advanced tools and comprehensive analytics to help users explore and improve AI models, processing a wide range of visual data, including documents, charts, graphs, and photographs, he explained. Meanwhile, Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, through video conference, stated that the partnership with XAI will yield results in developing super-intelligent AI capable of solving numerous problems. He also mentioned that the company is nearing completion of training the “Grok 3” model, which will be the smartest AI model in the world.



Oman Investment Authority (OIA) announces its acquisition of a stake in the US company XAI. — KUNA

XAI is one of Musk's companies and ranks among the top five in its field, having achieved milestones such as the creation of a massive data center in the US and the launch of the upgraded “Grok 2” platform. The new version of Grok 2 is three times faster

than its predecessor, with improved answer accuracy, task execution precision, and multilingual support. OIA is also a shareholder in SpaceX, Musk's space technology company which owns the Starlink satellite communication system. —KUNA



Sudan's doctors bear brunt of war

Xi hails Macau 'world-recognized success'

Page 7

Page 6

Zionist demolitions rip through Palestinian area of Jerusalem

Palestinians face housing crisis, unable to build amid rapidly growing population

JERUSALEM: Tired and sad, Palestinian activist Fakhri Abu Diab stood amid the rubble of his home in Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem, just a narrow valley away from the famed domes of the Old City. In early November, bulldozers from the Zionist-controlled Jerusalem municipality tore down his house in the Silwan neighborhood for a second time, citing unauthorized construction. "They want to expel us from the area," said the 62-year-old, who has organized protests against the demolitions in Silwan's Al-Bustan area.

The destruction of homes built without permits — which campaigners say are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain due to the Zionist entity's restrictive planning policy — has roiled east Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied West Bank for years. Abu Diab's house was among around 115 Palestinian residential properties marked for demolition by the Jerusalem municipality, which controls both the city's Jewish-majority western part and its Palestinian-majority east, occupied by the Zionist entity since 1967.

"They want to erase our presence and drive us out," Abu Diab told AFP. "But we will stay in Al-Bustan, even in a tent or under a tree." The municipality says it aims to address "illegal construction, allow the construction of proper infrastructure and new public buildings for the neighborhood's residents", as well as to create green space. But rights group Ir Amim said Zionist authorities often abuse the designation of areas in east Jerusalem as national parks or open spaces. The group, fighting against demolitions, said the practice is "designed to suppress" Palestinian development "while enabling the seizure of their lands for (Zionist) interests".

'Wore me out'

The status of Jerusalem remains one of the most contentious issues in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. The Zionist entity conquered east Jerusalem, including the Old City, in the 1967 Arab-Zionist war, and



JERUSALEM: A Palestinian from the Abu Diab family inspects the rubble of his house after it was demolished by Zionist forces in the Al-Bustan neighborhood of the Arab town of Silwan in Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem on Dec 16, 2024. — AFP

swiftly annexed the area. Silwan begins at the foot of the Old City walls. Today, hundreds of Zionist settlers live among nearly 50,000 Palestinians in Silwan.

The settlers' homes are distinguished by Zionist flags flying from rooftops and windows as well as ubiquitous security cameras. Meanwhile, Palestinians in east Jerusalem face a housing crisis, unable to build without permits amid a rapidly growing population. Abu Diab's house was first demolished in February. He rebuilt it, but it was destroyed again in November.

"This time, they wore me out," he said, visibly

exhausted. "The original house was built in the 1950s. I was born, raised, married and raised my children here." But now, Abu Diab said that "even my children had to rent outside Silwan." Now, next to his flattened home, Abu Diab lives in a caravan, which is also under threat of demolition.

He and some of his neighbors rejected an offer from the municipality to relocate to another Palestinian neighborhood in northern Jerusalem.

Near the ruins of Abu Diab's home, 42-year-old day laborer Omar Al-Ruwaidi sat by a fire with his son, surrounded by the rubble of his own de-

molished home and those of four of his brothers. "About 30 people, including 12 children, are now homeless," he said, his voice heavy with exhaustion. "We've been battling this in court since 2004 and have spent tens of thousands (of shekels), but to no avail," said Ruwaidi. Several families who received demolition orders declined to speak to AFP, citing a fear of retribution.

'Safe space'

According to Ir Amim, demolitions in east Jerusalem have surged to unprecedented levels since the start of the Gaza war, which was sparked by a surprise Hamas attack on the Zionist entity on Oct 7, 2023. Between January and November 2024, 154 homes were demolished across the area, the group said. On Nov 13, bulldozers destroyed the Al-Bustan Association community center, whose director said it served 1,500 Palestinian residents, mostly teenagers. "The association provided various services to its members, including skill-building, capacity enhancement as well as sports and cultural training," said director Qutaiba Ouda. "It was a safe haven and a cultural lifeline in a neighborhood with no community centers."

Ouda lamented the loss, saying that the Zionist authorities did not just destroy a building, but "our memories, dreams and hard work". Following the demolition, France, which had supported activities at the association, demanded an explanation from the Zionist entity. Kinda Baraka, 15, was among those who frequented the association. "It was our safe space," she said. "When it was destroyed, I cried a lot. It felt like they could come and demolish my home next." Baraka said she believed the demolitions aimed to push out Palestinians in favor of settlers. Ruwaidi echoed those fears, but remained defiant. "We will not leave Silwan. Outside Silwan, we cannot breathe," he said. — AFP

Assad's prisoner no 3006 tells his harrowing story

SARMADA, Syria: The Syrian military intelligence officers who detained Ghazi Mohammed Al-Mohammed told him to forget his name and who he was. They took away his papers, he said, and told him: "Now you're number 3006." For five and a half months Mohammed languished in one of president Bashar al-Assad's jails, losing 40 kg, all the while under the threat of imminent execution.

Since Islamist-led rebels toppled Assad's paranoid and brutal government, numerous ex-prisoners like Mohammed are shedding light on the depths of the despair visited upon Syria's people over the past decades. Mohammed, an emaciated man propped up on cushions in front of the stove in Sarmada, near Aleppo in northwestern Syria, is a shadow of his former self.

The 39-year-old swears he was never involved

in politics in Syria, that he is a simple merchant trying to make a living along with his brothers. He was seized on a brief business trip to Damascus, and plunged into a living hell. "The moment comes when you lose all hope," said Mohammed, his beard and dark hair closely cropped. "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."

It was the "mukhabarat", the omnipotent intelligence henchmen and enforcers of Assad rule, who seized him when he visited the capital. They took him away, hands clamped behind his back, along with one of his friends, a doctor. "That was five and a half months ago," Mohammed told AFP. He doesn't know why he was arrested, but thinks it may have been because he comes from the northwestern province of Idlib, heartland of the rebels whose lightning push south forced Assad to flee on December 8.

Manacled and blindfolded, Mohammed was taken to a detention center in the upscale Mazzeh district of Damascus, home to embassies, United Nations offices and security headquarters. They took him deep into a building, and it was there that the blows began.



SARMADA: Ghazi Mohammed Al-Mohammed, a former detainee in a Damascus prison, poses for a picture with his mother at their home in Idlib province on Dec 14, 2024. — AFP

Hung by his wrists

For the first few days, he was hung by his wrists from a bar high up in a cell, his feet unable to touch the floor. Then he was lowered so at least he could touch the ground. Mohammed was beaten and fed

practically nothing. His only contact was with the jailers. "They told me to confess that my brother had joined the rebels," he said. "To be honest, I told them what they wanted to hear, even though my brother's a businessman who runs an aid organization here in Sarmada." He said he could hear the cries of women and children being tortured in front of loved ones to make them confess. After a month or so, Mohammed was handed over to military intelligence, the ones who told him that, from then on, he would only be a number. He was thrown into a narrow cell about two meters long, roughly the length of a man, and 1.2 m wide. An overhead skylight provided the only source of light.

The cell had no electricity, no water and when he needed the toilet, he said the guards forced him to go there naked, bent over and with his eyes fixed on the floor. They taunted him, saying he would be executed. "You'll have your throat slit like a sheep. Unless you prefer hanging by the legs? Or being impaled?" Towards the end, Mohammed was of course unaware of what was happening on the outside, of the rapid 11-day rebel advance from the north as Assad's forces abandoned their tanks and other equipment. — AFP

Syrians fear loved ones may be in mass graves

NAJHA, Syria: After losing hope of finding his two brothers among those freed from Syrian jails, Ziad Alaywi was filled with dread, knowing there was only one place they were likely to be: A mass grave. "We want to know where our children are, our brothers," said the 55-year-old standing by a deep trench near Najha, southeast of Damascus. "Were they killed? Are they buried here?" he asked, pointing to the ditch, one of several believed to hold the bodies of prisoners tortured to death.

International organizations have called these acts "crimes against humanity". The fate of tens of thousands of prisoners and missing people remains one of the most harrowing parts of the Syrian conflict, which claimed more than 500,000 lives. Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8 and the takeover by an Islamist-led rebel alliance, families across Syria have been searching for their loved ones.

"I've looked for my brothers in all the prisons," said the driver from the Damascus suburbs, whose siblings and four cousins were arrested over a decade ago. "I've searched all the documents that might give me a clue to their location," he added, but it was all in vain. Residents say there are at least three other similar sites, where diggers were frequently seen working in areas once off-limits under the former government.

'Peace of mind'

The dirt at the pit where Alaywi stands looks loose, freshly dug. Children run and play nearby. If the site was investigated, "it



DAMASCUS: Members of Syria's White Helmets civil defense service evacuate human remains in body bags from a warehouse in the district of Sayyida Zainab in the southern suburbs of Damascus on Dec 18, 2024. — AFP

would allow many people to have peace of mind and stop hoping for the return of a son who will never return", he said. "It's not just one, two, or three people who are being sought. It's thousands." He called on international forensic investigators to "open these mass graves so we can finally know where our children are."

Many Syrians who spoke to AFP in recent days expressed disappointment at not finding their loved ones in the prisons opened after the takeover by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). A few kilometres from Najha, a team of about 10 people, most in white overalls, was transferring small white bags into larger black ones with numbers. Syrian Civil Defense teams have received numerous calls from people claiming to have seen cars dumping bags by the roadside at night. The bags were later found to contain bones. "Since the fall of the regime, we've received over 100 calls about mass graves. People believe every military site has one," said civil defense official Omar Al-Salmo.

Safeguard evidence

The claim isn't without reason, said Salmo, considering "the few people who've left prisons and the exponential number of missing people". There are no official figures on how many detainees have been released from Syrian jails in the past 10 days, but estimates fall far short of the number missing since 2011. In 2022, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor estimated that more than 100,000 people had died in prison, mostly due to torture, since the war began. "We're doing our best with our modest expertise," said Salmo. His team is collecting bone samples for DNA tests. On Tuesday, Human Rights Watch urged the new Syrian authorities to "secure, collect and safeguard evidence, including from mass grave sites and government records... that will be vital in future criminal trials". The rights group also called for cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, which could "provide critical expertise" to help safeguard the records and clarify the fate of missing people. — AFP

Ministry of Commerce and Industry



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2021-2024

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issuing the executive by laws no.(39/2014)on Consumer Protection

International

Sudan's doctors bear brunt of war

Healthcare falls apart as bitter conflict grinds on

CAIRO: Sudanese doctor Mohamed Moussa has grown so accustomed to the constant sound of gunfire and shelling near his hospital that it no longer startles him. Instead, he simply continues attending to his patients. "The bombing has numbed us," the 30-year-old general practitioner told AFP by phone from Al-Nao hospital, one of the last functioning medical facilities in Omdurman, part of greater Khartoum.

Gunfire rattles in the distance, warplanes roar overhead and nearby shelling makes the ground tremble, more than a year and a half into a grinding war between rival Sudanese generals. Embattled health workers "have no choice but to continue", said Moussa. Since April 2023, Sudan has been torn apart by a war between army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan and his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The war has killed tens of thousands and uprooted 12 million people, creating what the International Rescue Committee aid group has called the "biggest humanitarian crisis ever recorded". The violence has turned the country's hospitals into battlegrounds, placing health workers like Moussa on the frontlines.

Inside Al-Nao's overwhelmed wards, the conflict's toll is staggering. Doctors say they tend to a harrowing array of injuries: gunshot wounds to the head, chest and abdomen, severe burns, shattered bones and amputations — even among children as young as four months. The hospital itself has not been spared. Deadly shelling has repeatedly hit its premises, according to medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) which has supported the Al-Nao hospital.

Elsewhere, the situation is just as dire. In North Darfur, a recent drone attack killed nine at the state capital's main hospital, while shelling forced MSF to evacuate its field hospital in a famine-hit refugee camp.



TOKAR, Sudan: A Sudanese doctor performs a medical check on a patient at a hospital in Red Sea State in eastern Sudan on Oct 10, 2024. — AFP

Medics targeted

Sudan's healthcare system, already struggling before the war, has now all but crumbled. Of the 87 hospitals in Khartoum state, nearly half suffered visible damage between the start of the war and August 26 this year, according to satellite imagery provided and analyzed by Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab and the Sudanese American Physicians Association. As of October, the World Health Organization had documented 119 confirmed attacks on healthcare facilities across Sudan.

"There is a complete disregard for civilian protection," said Kyle McNally, MSF's humanitarian affairs

advisor. He told AFP that an ongoing "broad-spectrum attack on healthcare" includes "widespread physical destruction, which then reduces services to the floor—literally and figuratively". The national doctors' union estimates that in conflict zones across Sudan, up to 90 percent of medical facilities have been forced shut, leaving millions without access to essential care.

Both sides of the conflict have been implicated in attacks on healthcare facilities. The medical union said that 78 health workers have been killed since the war began, by gunfire or shelling at their workplaces or homes. "Both sides believe that medical staff are co-operating with the opposing faction, which leads to

'Keep selling'

Garad Abdullahi Ali, from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, said the continued presence of plastic was due to traders stocking up before the ban. "They are allowed to continue selling... until what is in stock in the country is exhausted," he told AFP. Higher-end boutiques and supermarkets — catering to the city's small middle-class — have been more welcoming of the new legislation.

"This a positive sign. I hope all the grocers start using it too," said Ahmed Roble, a boutique owner along Mogadishu's popular Maka Al-Mukarama Road. Supermarket customer Abdurahman Omar Mohamed said he was glad to see less of something that was "killing human beings and animals". In 2019, the world produced around 460 million tons of plastic, double the level in 2000, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. And plastic production is expected to triple by 2060. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates the equivalent of 2,000 garbage trucks of plastic is dumped into seas, rivers and lakes every day. Many tons of this rubbish can be seen on the formerly bucolic beaches near Mogadishu, snaking down the sand in festering piles. Volunteers like Abdisar Arabow Ibrahim try to tackle the problem. "I think the government is long overdue in implementing this law prohibiting the use of plastic bags," he said. "People must comply," he added, "to safeguard the environment and future generations." — AFP

cheap and can replace it," said Shamsu Muqtar, a 41-year-old mother-of-five, who sells vegetables at the market. "The government should have evaluated the matter".

President-elect Donald Trump's designated envoy for hostage affairs. Trump has threatened that "hell is going to break out" if Hamas does not release its captives by Jan 20, the day Trump returns to the White House.

CIA Director William Burns was due in Doha on Wednesday for talks with Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani on bridging remaining gaps between the Zionist entity and Hamas, other knowledgeable sources said. The Zionist offensive has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians in Gaza, displaced most of the 2.3 million population and reduced much of the coastal enclave to ruins. — Reuters

Somalia struggles to rid itself of plastic despite ban

MOGADISHU: Somalia took the ambitious step of banning single-use plastic bags this year, but in a country with many economic challenges, it has proved hard to implement. It follows similar plastic bans in other east African countries including Kenya and Tanzania. But brightly-colored polythene still dominates in the markets and shops of Somalia's capital Mogadishu.

Long bedeviled by conflict, Somalia passed its law in February, but did not implement it until October. Despite a few arrests, there is little sign it is having an impact. "We are using these bags because they are cheap and people can afford them," grocer Abdikarim Hassan told AFP, from his stall stacked with plastic-wrapped goods in a central Mogadishu market. "Everybody knows the negative consequences of using these plastic bags, but the question is: What do we have to replace them?"

The price difference is stark. More eco-friendly options, such as disposable paper bags, cost around four times more: At least 4,000 Somali shillings (\$0.17 at the widely used unofficial exchange rate) compared with 1,000 shillings (\$0.04) for simple plastic bags. Meanwhile, more than half of the population lives below the poverty line, according to the government. "If we are forced to stop [using] the plastic bags, we don't have an alternative that is

Push for truce as Zionists kill...

Continued from Page 1

The US administration, joined by mediators from Egypt and Qatar, has made intensive efforts in recent days to advance the talks before President Joe Biden leaves office next month. In Jerusalem, Zionist President Isaac Herzog met Adam Boehler, US



GAZA: Palestinian children help push a car as people evacuate from their homes with their belongings at the Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip on Dec 18, 2024. — AFP

CITRA, Google ink land lease deal...

Continued from Page 1

meeting held at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium on Wednesday. Kuwait hosts the upcoming edition of the tournament from Dec 21, 2024 to Jan 3, 2025.

The Prime Minister and the accompanying ministers were briefed by Minister of Information and Culture, Minister of State for Youth Affairs and chair of the tournament steering committee Abdurahman Al-Mutairi and officials of the Public Authority for Sport about the preparedness to host the games and details of the planned opening ceremony. — KUNA

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US CEO slaying suspect charged with 'terrorism'

NEW YORK: US authorities on Tuesday charged the man suspected of gunning down a health insurance CEO in New York earlier this month with murder, including a charge of second-degree murder "as an act of terrorism". Mangione, 26, is accused of shooting UnitedHealthcare chief executive Brian Thompson on a Manhattan street on December 4, triggering a nationwide manhunt that ended last week when he was spotted at a Pennsylvania McDonald's.

The former data engineer remains jailed in that state as he fights efforts to extradite him to New York to face charges there over the killing, which brought into focus widespread public anger against the US healthcare system. Mangione "is charged with one count of murder in the first degree and two counts of murder in the second degree, including one count of murder in the second degree as an act of terrorism," said Manhattan district attorney Alvin Bragg.

Bragg said the terrorism charge was included because the shooting met the prerequisites for such a determination under New York law. "In its most basic terms, this was a killing that was intended to evoke terror and we've seen that reaction," he said. "This was not an ordinary killing." The maximum penalty for the murder charges Mangione faces is life in prison without parole, Bragg said.

UN urges 'free and fair' Syria...

Continued from Page 1

Pedersen said a key challenge was the situation in Kurdish-held areas in Syria's northeast, amid fears of a major escalation between the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkey-backed groups. Turkey accuses the main component of the SDF, the People's Protection Units (YPG), of being affiliated with Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants at home, whom both Washington and Ankara consider a "terrorist" group. The United States said Tuesday it had brokered an extension to a fragile ceasefire in the flashpoint town of Manbij and was seeking a broader understanding with Turkey. "I'm very pleased that the truce has been renewed and that it seems to be holding, but hopefully we will see a political solution to that issue," Pedersen said.

HTS military chief Murhaf Abu Qasra said Kurdish-held areas would be integrated under the country's new leadership, adding that the group rejects federalism. "Syria will not be divided," he told AFP, adding that "the Kurdish people are one of the components of the Syrian people." HTS has also vowed justice for the crimes committed under Assad's rule, including the disappearance of tens of thousands of people into the complex web of detention centers and prisons that was used for decades to silence dissent.

Syrian civil defense official Ammar al-Salmo said unidentified human remains had been discovered in a medicine warehouse just 50 meters from the Sayyida Zainab shrine in the southern suburbs of Damascus. "In the warehouse, we found a refrigerated room containing decomposing corpses," Salmo said, adding that some appeared to have died more than a year and a half earlier. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, more than 100,000 people died or were killed in custody from 2011.

The country's new rulers have sought to keep its institutions going and, on Wednesday, a commercial flight took off from Damascus airport to Aleppo, the first since Assad was toppled and fled to Russia. They have also stepped up contacts with countries that had long seen Assad as a pariah, and with international institutions. EU chief Ursula Von der Leyen said the bloc would intensify its "direct engagement" with the new administration.

their targeting," union spokesperson Sayed Mohamed Abdullah told AFP. "There is no justification for targeting hospitals or medical personnel. Doctors... make no distinction between one patient and another."

Starvation

According to the doctors' union, the RSF has raided hospitals to treat their wounded or search for enemies, while the army has conducted air strikes on medical facilities across the country. On November 11, MSF suspended most activities at Bashair Hospital, one of South Khartoum's few functioning hospitals, after fighters stormed the facility and shot dead another fighter being treated there. MSF officials say they believe the fighters to be RSF combatants.

In addition to the endless stream of war casualties, Sudan's doctors scramble to respond to another threat: Mass starvation. In a pediatric hospital in Omdurman, across the Nile from Khartoum, malnourished children arrive in droves. Between mid-August and late October, the small hospital was receiving up to 40 children a day, many in critical condition, according to one doctor. "Every day, three or four of them would die because their cases were very late stage and complicated, or due to a shortage of essential medicines," said the physician, requesting anonymity for safety concerns.

Sudan has for months teetered on the edge of famine, with nearly 26 million people — more than half the population — facing acute hunger, according to the U.N. Adnan Hezam, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, said there must be "immediate support in terms of supplies and human resources to medical facilities". Without it, "we fear a rapid deterioration" in already limited services, he told AFP. To Moussa, the doctor, some days feel "unbearable". "But we can't stop," he said. "We owe it to the people who depend on us." — AFP



Luigi Mangione

The suspect was also charged with several crimes related to his possession of a weapon, which authorities said was a 3D-printed "ghost gun". "We allege he... took out a nine-millimeter 3D-printed ghost gun equipped with a 3D-printed suppressor and shot (Thompson) once in the back and once in the leg," said Bragg. "These weapons

are increasingly proliferating throughout New York City and the entire country. Evolving technology will only make this problem worse," he said. "Last year, over 80 ghost guns and ghost gun parts were recovered in Manhattan alone."

In the wake of Thompson's killing, many social media users have lionized Mangione, with some even calling for further killings of other CEOs. Jessica Tisch, the New York City police commissioner, criticized members of the public who had praised the murder. "In the nearly two weeks since Mr Thompson's killing, we have seen a shocking and appalling celebration of cold-blooded murder," said Tisch.

Mangione was due in Pennsylvania court on Thursday for a hearing on his extradition to New York. Police say a "life-changing, life-altering" back injury may have motivated Mangione, although they added that there was "no indication" that he was ever a client of UnitedHealthcare. When he was arrested, Mangione had a three-page handwritten text criticizing the US health care system. — AFP



HOMS: People celebrate the ouster of Syria's president Bashar al-Assad around the New Clock Tower along Qawatli Street on Dec 18, 2024. — AFP

Members of the UN Security Council, which includes Assad ally Russia as well as the United States, called on Tuesday for an "inclusive and Syrian-led" political process. "This political process should meet the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians, protect all of them and enable them to peacefully, independently and democratically determine their own futures," a statement said.

It also "underlined the need for Syria and its neighbors to mutually refrain from any action... that could undermine each other's security". The Zionist entity has carried out hundreds of strikes on Syrian military assets since Assad's overthrow in what it says is a bid to prevent them falling into hostile hands. Zionist troops also occupied strategic positions in a UN-patrolled buffer zone in a move UN chief Antonio Guterres described as a breach of a 1974 armistice. — AFP

International

Xi hails Macau 'world-recognized success'

Chinese leader visits city for 25th anniversary of Chinese rule

MACAU: Chinese President Xi Jinping hailed Macau's "world-recognized success" as he arrived in the city on Wednesday, kickstarting a three-day trip as the casino hub prepares to celebrate 25 years of Beijing rule. The former Portuguese colony was handed over to China on December 20, 1999, under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework that promised autonomy and wider civil liberties than the Chinese mainland.

Xi lauded Macau's implementation of the framework after he landed at Macau International Airport on Wednesday afternoon and was greeted by the current and incoming city leaders. "Over the past 25 years, the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle with Macau characteristics has achieved a world-recognized success, and has demonstrated vitality and a unique appeal," Xi said. The Chinese president — who last visited Macau in 2019 — said he would use his trip to celebrate the anniversary with compatriots and to inspect Macau's "new developments and changes". "In the next few days, I will go around and have a look, and have extensive and in-depth exchanges with our friends from all places, and discuss plans for Macau's development," he said.

The city — the only place in China where casino gambling is permitted — has long surpassed Las Vegas to be the world's top casino hub, fueled by two decades of spending by Chinese visitors. Xi will attend the inauguration of Macau's new administration during his trip and "also conduct an inspection tour", state news agency Xinhua reported.

'Barbaric expansion'

Sam Hou-fai, the former president of Macau's highest court, will be sworn in on Friday as the city's fourth post-handover leader — and the first to be born in Chi-

na and not have a background in business. Sam has said Macau cannot rely solely on casinos — which account for 81 percent of government revenue — and noted the sector's "barbaric expansion" over the years.

Macau saw just over 29 million visitor arrivals in the first 10 months of the year, compared with its resident population of 687,000 people. Macau's economic diversification and integration into China's regional blueprint, dubbed the Greater Bay Area, will likely be the main themes during Xi's visit, experts told AFP. "(Xi) will probably want to inspect the non-gaming investments that the Macau concessionaires have promised two years ago," said Ben Lee, a casino consultant.

Hengqin Island, which is partly leased to Macau to boost its land supply for development, will also be a likely focus of the visit, Lee said. A retired teacher surnamed Cheong told AFP she was "excited" for Xi's visit and that Macau had a positive outlook, though it had not yet recovered fully from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. "(Xi) should be shown Macau's good side, but also the many things that should be improved," Cheong told AFP, citing issues around transportation and housing for young people. "A lot of people in Macau have living environments that are less than ideal," she said.

Lau, a retired civil servant, said he hoped China could do more to bolster Macau's tourist-dependent economy. Recalling the 1999 handover, Lau told AFP he had some concerns at the time, but "after 20-odd years, (Macau's) development has stabilized and so has my mood, which lets me hope for the future."

Security tight

Authorities have stepped up security measures in the casino hub, including a temporary drone ban



MACAU: Chinese President Xi Jinping greets children waving the flags of China and Macau as his wife Peng Liyuan looks on upon arrival at Macau's international airport on Dec 18, 2024. — AFP

and partial suspension of rail services. US consular services in Macau were "postponed" on Wednesday due to China's foreign ministry "refusing to issue the required visas in time for our Consuls to travel to assist US citizens resident in Macau". "Future outreach events may also be affected," the US Consulate General Hong Kong and Macau said on social media.

All About Macau, an online news outlet, said on Tuesday it "had to" take down an article that included residents' comments about the heightened security. Multiple people associated with Macau's now-dormant pro-democracy movement told AFP they were warned not to make critical remarks in public ahead of the anniversary. — AFP

Filipina on Indonesia death row arrives home to 'new life'

MANILA: A Filipina who spent nearly 15 years on Indonesia's death row tearfully reunited with family members Wednesday after arriving in Manila, where she now awaits a hoped-for pardon in a women's prison. Mother of two Mary Jane Veloso landed at daybreak, then was immediately transferred to prison following a repatriation deal between the two countries over a decade in the making. Technically still serving a life sentence, how long she remains behind bars is now in the hands of President Ferdinand Marcos.

The 39-year-old was arrested and sentenced to death in 2010 after the suitcase she was carrying was found to be lined with 2.6 kg of heroin, in a case that sparked uproar in the Philippines. Veloso wept as she hugged one of her sons and her parents Wednesday inside the Correctional Institution for Women in Manila, where she is being detained under the terms of a transfer agreement with Indonesia that removed the possibility of execution.

She flew home without handcuffs alongside Filipino correctional officials on an overnight commercial flight after a Jakarta ceremony marking "the end of a harrowing chapter in Veloso's life", the corrections bureau said in a statement. "I hope our president (Ferdinand Marcos) will give me clemency so I can go back to my family. I had been in jail in Indonesia for 15 years over something I did not commit," Veloso, her voice breaking, told reporters after undergoing a medical examination at the Manila prison. "We call on our president to grant Mary Jane clemency soon. We hope he will do this as a Christmas gift to us," her mother Celia Veloso added.

In a Wednesday statement, Marcos thanked Indonesia for turning over custody, but made no mention of a pardon or clemency. Under the agreement, Veloso's life sentence now falls under the Philippines' purview, "including the authority to grant clemency, remission, amnesty and similar measures". "Definitely, that's on the table," Justice Undersecretary Raul Vasquez told reporters on Wednesday, adding Veloso's clemency bid would be "seriously studied". She will serve out her life sentence if not pardoned, Vasquez added. Indonesia's government has said it will respect any decision made by Manila.



MANILA: Mary Jane Veloso is reunited with her sons and parents after she arrived at the Correctional Institution for Women on Dec 18, 2024. — AFP

'Reciprocity' provision

After her scheduled 2015 execution by firing squad was stayed at the last minute, Veloso became a poster child for her country's 10 million-strong economic diaspora, many of whom take jobs as domestic workers abroad to escape poverty at home. Marcos said last month that Veloso's tale resonated in the Philippines as "a mother trapped by the grip of poverty, who made one desperate choice that altered the course of her life". The reprieve was granted after a woman suspected of recruiting her was arrested on human trafficking charges and Veloso was named as a prosecution witness. The Veloso deal includes a "reciprocity" provision. "If Indonesia requests similar assistance in the future, the Philippines shall fulfill such a request," the agreement states.

There has been intense press speculation that Jakarta would seek custody of Gregor Johann Haas, an Australian detained on drug charges in the Philippines earlier this year. He is also being sought by Jakarta over drug smuggling, which could land him the death penalty. Vasquez said Wednesday that Haas' transfer was "not on the table", but that were it requested, Indonesia's decision to transfer Veloso would "be considered with great weight". Indonesia has some of the world's

toughest drug laws and has executed foreigners in the past, but new President Prabowo Subianto has agreed to fulfill some requests to hand back prisoners. Indonesia last week transferred home the five remaining members of Australia's "Bali Nine", a group of drug-trafficking convicts, two of whom were executed. It is also in talks with France over the release of Serge Atlaoui, jailed in the archipelago nation since his 2005 arrest.

'Miracle'

Before leaving Jakarta, Veloso sang the Indonesian national anthem and proclaimed her love for the country, though she is now banned from ever returning. "This is a new life for me, and I will have a new beginning in the Philippines," a tearful Veloso told reporters. "I have to go home because I have a family there, I have my children waiting for me," she said, adding she wanted to spend Christmas with them. "I am very happy today, but to be honest I am a little sad, because Indonesia has been my second family," Veloso added. In her first interview since the repatriation agreement, Veloso told AFP on Friday that her release was a "miracle". According to Indonesia's Ministry of Immigration and Corrections, 96 foreigners were on death row, all on drug charges, as of early November. — AFP

Tsunami body collector's agony 20 years on

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: Djafaruddin says he has recovered from the trauma of collecting bodies when the world's deadliest tsunami devastated Indonesia's western coast two decades ago, but he still breaks down when thinking about the orphaned children. The resident of worst-hit city Banda Aceh jumped in his black pickup truck to shift dozens of the dead, some missing limbs and others crushed, to a nearby hospital, leaving him covered in blood and mud.

"When I saw the condition in the river with bodies strewn about... I screamed and cried," he said. "I said 'what is this? Doomsday?'" A 9.1-magnitude quake near Sumatra island on Dec 26, 2004 caused the biggest faultline fracture ever recorded, pushing giant waves into the sky and killing more than 220,000 people in 14 countries. The sight overwhelmed Djafaruddin, a 69-year-old who like many Indonesians goes by one name, as he embarked on a voluntary mission to retrieve fellow locals. "It is just unimaginable that this could happen. It was as though this was the end of the world," he said.

He returned to where he pulled dead bodies out of the debris after the giant waves indiscriminately swept away the old and the young. "This is where corpses laid, mixed with woods carried by the currents," he said at a corner near Banda Aceh's Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, where he collected the bodies of at least 40 victims. "I saw children, picking them up as if they were still alive, just to find them limp and lifeless."

'Fathers, mothers cried'

Indonesia was the worst-hit country with more than 160,000 killed, although the true death toll was thought to be higher as many bodies were never recovered or identified. Aceh's provincial capital today is abuzz with scooters and tourists, but Djafaruddin described a completely different scene when the giant wave tore through its streets. "Here, we saw fathers and mothers who cried, looking for their wives, looking for their husbands, looking for their children," he said.

Then a transportation agency official, Djafaruddin was at home when waves more than 30 m high struck his city. As his road filled with people escaping, he instead went towards the disaster. His son returned from the city center screaming, "the water is rising!" but the father-of-five told his family to stay put, knowing the water wouldn't reach his home five kilometers from shore.

Elsewhere entire communities by the shore were wiped out by a disaster many had not heard of before or expected. He jumped in his car which was usually reserved for carrying traffic lights and road signs. It would soon fill up with human bodies. "It was just a spontaneity. It occurred to me that we should help," he said. He became one of the first people to arrive at a military hospital in the city with tsunami victims. As recovery efforts intensified, he was later joined in the day by the army and Indonesian Red Cross, making journeys back and forth to the hospital. When he made a final, exhausted stop at the hospital around dusk after a day of retrieving bodies, health workers offered him bread and water because of his haggard appearance. — AFP



Djafaruddin

Frenchwoman who saved a Thai school

KRABI, Thailand: After the deadliest tsunami in history claimed her only daughter, Elisabeth Zana considered taking her own life — until a nearby Thai school reignited her sense of purpose. Against the backdrop of a picture-perfect beach on Phi Phi island, the 79-year-old Frenchwoman thinks back to the "unforgettable chaos" she saw at the same spot in February 2005. "There were mountains of rubble. We walked around thinking there might be dead bodies down there. And maybe my daughter," she tells AFP. On Dec 26, 2004, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake under the Indian Ocean triggered a huge tsunami that killed more than 225,000 people in a dozen countries worldwide. In Thailand, more than 5,000 people were killed by the Boxing Day disaster according to the official toll — around half of them foreign tourists vacationing on its southern beaches — and another 3,000 left missing.

Zana's daughter Natacha, then 35, was on Koh Phi Phi when the 10-m high wall of water struck the island. The search for her body took nine months, during which Zana and her husband felt their lives had gone into "total disarray". "For us, who have no other children... Our lives were over. The temptation to commit suicide was very strong."

Run-down memorial

A run-down memorial is all that remains today on the island, itself a symbol of mass tourism, where new concrete resorts conceal the tsunami's urban scars. Locals do not want to talk about the trauma the disaster inflicted, Zana says, and some families of missing foreigners avoid the place altogether. To overcome her grief, Zana decided to stay and face it head on.

News in Brief

Two Malaysians freed from Gitmo

WASHINGTON: The US Defense Department said Wednesday that it had repatriated two Malaysian men from its Guantanamo prison, leaving 27 still held at the American base in Cuba. The two — Mohammed Farik bin Amin and Mohammed Nazir bin Lep — had pled guilty "to multiple offenses, including murder in violation of the Law of War, intentionally causing serious bodily injury, conspiracy, and destruction of property in violation of the Law of War," the Defense Department said in a statement. But they cooperated and provided testimony against the alleged mastermind of the 2002 attacks on nightclubs in Bali and the 2003 attack on a hotel in Jakarta, the department said. — AFP

Japan space rocket launch fails

TOKYO: A space rocket built by a Japanese startup blasted off on Wednesday but was later seen spiraling downwards in the distance as the company said the launch had to be terminated. It was the second attempt by Space One to become Japan's first private firm to put a satellite into orbit after an initial try in March ended in a mid-air explosion. "We do not regard this event as a failure," Space One president Masakazu Toyoda told reporters. Company director Mamoru Endo said a glitch 80 seconds after lift-off had affected the altitude of the solid-fuel Kairos rocket. Spectators, gathered near the company's coastal Spaceport Kii launch pad in Japan's rural western Wakayama region, expressed their disappointment to television cameras. — AFP

Hunt for Vanuatu quake survivors

PORT VILA: Rescue teams dug for survivors trapped in crumpled buildings in the Pacific nation of Vanuatu on Wednesday after a powerful earthquake killed at least nine people, burying some in rubble and landslides. People called out from beneath the remains of a flattened three-storey shop in the capital Port Vila, where scores of rescuers worked through the night to find them, resident Michael Thompson told AFP by satellite phone. Nine people have been confirmed dead by Port Vila's hospital and that number is likely to rise, said an update by Vanuatu's disaster management office. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has estimated 116,000 people could be affected by the worst impacts of the quake. — AFP

In 2005, she set up NAT Association to help children affected by the tsunami, donating equipment and financing infrastructure to help save Bankuankojan public school on Krabi province's mainland, which was threatened with closure. The former dance teacher, who speaks no Thai, also set up a sponsorship program for the most disadvantaged of its 180 students, aged between three and 11. Her beloved daughter's legacy lives on through Bankuankojan's alternative name, "Natacha School", and the French flags and petanque courts in the playground.



Elisabeth Zana

Music and dance

To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the tsunami, the students perform Thai music and "nora", a traditional dance from the kingdom's south. Music classes are rare in Thailand's public education system, where rural schools suffer most from inequality and a lack of resources. "Many schools are jealous," says Chanita Jitruk, 56, a teacher who has been involved with Zana's work from the beginning.

When Chanita arrived in 2005, the school had only a quarter of the pupils it has now. Today, half the school's children benefit from a monthly grant of 1,000 baht (\$30), which mainly covers compulsory uniforms, often a major expense for families. "The scholarships are important to improve our education," one of the beneficiaries, 10-year-old Korawi Kaesuk, tells AFP. The little girl, nicknamed Pam, dreams of becoming a nurse to be able to "help people". As for Zana, the school has given her new lease of life. "Little by little, a certain peace has settled in," she says. "But it took a long time." — AFP

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2024

Seeing Trump 2.0 tariffs coming, US' toymakers gird for ruckus

Toymakers brace for trade war, redesigning products

ATLANTA: With the incoming Trump administration promising an entirely new round of tariffs on US imports, Atlanta-based Kids2 and other toymakers are reviewing product lines, looking for ways to limit the cost of new levies. In the last trade war, Kids2 redesigned an infant chair so it could be converted into a rocker by adding a moving part. Design tweaks like that are almost magical: They made a 25 percent tariff disappear, because children's chairs from China carried the tax, while rockers didn't and still don't.

Kids2 and other companies that make everything from Barbie dolls to sneakers are scrambling for how to respond to Trump's latest tariff threats. Many have already moved chunks of production out of China long ago because of souring relations with that country. The result of shifting supply chains is a surge of consumer goods imports to the US from Vietnam and Mexico. Mexico became the leading source of goods imported to the US in 2023, surpassing China for the first time in over two decades.

Moves by Mattel, for one, are emblematic of that shift. CFO Anthony DiSilvestro reminded investors earlier this month that by next year, the El Segundo, California-based toy giant will get less than 40 percent of its goods from China - compared to the industry average of over 80 percent. "We have teams of people engaged today in analyzing and planning for different tariff scenarios," said DiSilvestro. "And obviously, our actions will depend upon what actually happens, which seems to change from day to day and week to week." Some companies are moving extra stocks into the US to get ahead of any new levies as well as a threat of more labor strife at East Coast ports, but that's limited - and has its own set of risks.

Jay Foreman, CEO of Basic Fun, the Boca Raton, Florida-based maker of Tonka trucks and K'nex building sets, said, "You can get yourself in trouble bringing in the wrong product too early - it uses up cash flow and fills warehouses." Foreman said moving toy production to other low-cost countries poses unique challenges, around product safety, for in-



CALIFORNIA: In an aerial view, shipping containers are stacked on a dock 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

stance. "Nobody's worried that your spatula or tennis racket or tennis shoe is going to hurt you," he said. "But everyone worries that toys might hurt their child if they're not made with good quality and tested properly." He noted that China has built up over decades a capability and track record in toys that others lack.

Reposition, redesign

Kids2 is an example of the US toy industry's deep China roots. It still produces about 90 percent in that country, including much at its own sprawling

factory complex, which it expanded during the first Trump administration. Kids2 continues to invest in its Chinese operations even as Trump promises tariffs on goods not yet touched by his first round of levies. The company said it is redoubling efforts to slash costs by automating its Chinese plant and consolidating suppliers - moves that Chief Operating Officer John Sikes says gives them a buffer against future tariffs.

Sikes estimates that, up to a point, the company could absorb new tariffs through cost cuts and other moves to minimize price hikes to consumers.

"But anything above 25 percent is going to be a challenge," he admits. Kids2 is also poised to move more work out of China if necessary. It built the ability to produce about 10 percent of its goods in Vietnam and is looking at options in India and other low-cost countries.

Companies also look for ways to design products to minimize tariffs. That became a major focus at Kids2 in the last three months, said Sikes, with engineers assigned to the task full-time along with designers and shipping experts. The company estimates it will take about another six months to go through all its products to look for ways, when possible, to do what they did with the rockers. To be sure, not all their designs can be tariff tweaked. "There are some things - like baby tubs and potties - it is what it is," says Sikes. "There's no gray area - so there's no design workarounds for some products."

Like many other toymakers, Kids2 also hopes to be insulated in any future trade war. Toys were largely spared from heavy tariffs during the first Trump administration - along with ubiquitous consumer goods like cell phones and laptops - because political leaders are loathe to increase the cost of something parents need to buy for children. Indeed, through the 2021-2023 inflation surge - the biggest since the 1980s - toy prices were one of the few categories that dodged big price increases. They have fallen nearly 4.4 percent in the last four years, according to Consumer Price Index data, whereas US consumer goods prices overall have rocketed by more than 20 percent.

Sikes said the company is pushing the message that it would be unwise to take steps that would push up toy prices - which would create new inflation pressures on cash-strapped young parents and possibly even discourage people from having children. Declining birth rates have become a concern in many parts of the world. "That's why I'm not too worried about what might happen," he said. "Because of the optics and impact it could have on what we already know is a challenge globally." — Reuters

Indians opt for lighter, lower carat jewelry as gold prices soar

MUMBAI: Soaring gold prices have led many Indian families to opt for lightweight and lower-carat jewelry to stay within their budgets, industry officials said. "I wanted to gift my daughter 80 grams of gold, but I was forced to scale it down to 50 grams because of price increase in the past two years," said Mumbai-based Shubhangi More, choosing a necklace with a traditional design for her daughter's wedding.

Gold prices in the world's second biggest buyer of the precious metal have surged 22 percent so far this year, after rising 15 percent in 2023. Most Indian buyers prefer traditional jewelry, but now they want it crafted in lightweight designs to fit their budgets, said Bachraj Bamaalva, partner at jewelry retailer Nemichand Bamaalva & Sons. "Recognizing this preference, we are stocking more lightweight jewelry sets while scaling down our inventory of heavier designs," Bamaalva said.

Advances in manufacturing technology have enabled jewelry makers to craft traditional designs in lighter weights, said Sachin Jain, CEO of the World Gold Council's Indian operations. Buyers are also switching to lower carat jewelry to reduce costs, jewelers said. Guddi Devi, a teacher from Jamalpur in the northern state of Bihar, bought 18-carat jewelry for her daughter's wedding instead of 22-carat. "I preferred the 18 carats of jewelry because it was cheaper compared to the 22 carats and is much stronger than it," she said.

Indians traditionally prefer jewelry made in 22-carat gold, which contains 91.7 percent pure gold, while 18-carat gold contains 75 percent pure gold and 25 percent other metals. — Reuters

Economic woes mount for Russia's war machine

WARSAW: Stubborn inflation, exorbitant borrowing costs, bankruptcy risks and a growth slowdown: the Russian economy is facing a slew of negative headlines, as the costs of the Ukraine war and Western sanctions mount. Since ordering an invasion in February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly touted the "failure" of sanctions and hailed strong growth in the face of unprecedented uncertainty. But going into 2025, that three-year run of mostly good economic news looks in serious doubt.

The latest setback for the Kremlin came last week, when inflation accelerated to 8.9 percent in November, according to official statistics. Prices have been rising despite the central bank having hiked interest rates to a two-decade high of 21 percent. Russian media, usually reluctant to report on any sign of social discontent, are turning increasing attention to hard-pressed families. The price of butter, up a third since the start of the year, has become emblematic, with a slew of reports on rising thefts from supermarkets.

'Root cause'

Most independent analysts say the invasion is to blame. "The root cause of the economy's problems is labor starvation and sanctions ... the symptom is an inflationary surge," said Anton Tabakh, chief economist at the Russian ratings agency Expert RA. Both those factors are directly related to the war. Labor shortages, already pressing due to Russia's demographic problems, have been exacerbated by hundreds of thousands of men joining the army, being employed by arms manufacturers or fleeing the country, as well as a tightening of migration rules.

"This is holding back GDP growth," said econ-



MOSCOW: A woman buys food at a street market in a small town in the Moscow region. Under the impact of the explosion of military orders, inflation is expected to approach 9 percent at the end of the year. The cost of credit, the engine of Russia's economic growth, has become prohibitive. — AFP

omist Yevgeny Nadorshin, a former advisor to the economic development ministry. He estimates Russia lacks around one million workers. That has contributed to rising wages, pushing up prices set by businesses. So too has the Kremlin's massive increase in military spending.

State expenditure is set to be 67.5 percent higher in 2025 compared to 2021, before Russia's military offensive. Up against those huge sums, interest rate rises have so far had only a limited effect. Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina - who has stressed the need to stop the "disease" of inflation "becoming chronic" - has signalled she will hike rates again on Friday. High rates have triggered outcry from bosses, including at state-run companies, with market borrowing costs running at 25-30 percent. "The economy can't survive like this for long," German Gref, CEO of Russia's largest lender, state-run Sberbank, said this month.

Growth slowdown Russian Railways said it will cut investment by 40 percent next year. Even Putin's

closest allies have complained. Sergei Chemezov, head of the Rostec military-industrial conglomerate and a close friend of the president, described interest rates of more than 20 percent as "madness". Analysts expect many firms, unable to refinance, will go under. "The number of bankruptcies is about to rise sharply, especially among small and medium businesses. But there will be some among large businesses as well," said Nadorshin.

Faced with such an onslaught, the central bank predicts a sharp slowdown in growth next year - to below 1.5 percent, from over 3.5 percent this year. It has ruled out the prospect of stagflation - low growth and high inflation - yet the world is being used more and more frequently in Moscow. Adding to those worries has been fresh volatility for the Russian currency, which slid to its weakest against the dollar since March 2022. The ruble tumbled after the United States introduced sanctions on key financial institution Gazprombank, which had been handling all payments for Russian gas exports. — AFP

Pokemon is back with a hit new gaming app

PARIS: With over 60 million downloads and an estimated \$180 million in revenue since late October, a new Pokemon mobile game app is enjoying worldwide success as the latest incarnation of the hit Nintendo-owned franchise. Released on October 30, Pokemon Trading Card Game Pocket is a virtual version of the collectible card game that has captivated schoolyards since the late 1990s. Developed by The Pokemon Company, a Nintendo subsidiary, it combines opening "boosters" - the equivalent of sealed card packs -- with collecting creatures and online battles.

"Pokemon TCG Pocket is showing one of the strongest performances of any mobile game of all-time," Sam Aune, an analyst at digital market intelligence firm Sen-

sor Tower, told AFP. The group estimates it generated around \$180 million through the Apple and Google app stores in just six weeks. Developed by the Japanese games studio Creatures Inc., Pokemon TCG Pocket ranks second among mobile games measured by their first-month revenue, surpassed only by another Pokemon franchise title, Pokemon Go.

The global phenomenon of 2016, Pokemon Go generated over \$200 million in its first month and drove millions of players outdoors to hunt for virtual creatures which appeared on their mobile phone screens. As well as creating vast online revenues, the new surge in interest in Pikachu and his fellow cast of characters is spilling over into the offline world. Sales of physical cards are rising - and the game is back in fashion among school children. "It brings players back into the Pokemon brand," explained Frederique Tutt, a toy market expert at Circana, a market research firm. "And physical cards remain the heart of the brand, something collectors want to own for playing and trading."



WASHINGTON: People trade Pokemon cards in Washington, DC. With more than 60 million downloads and nearly 180 million dollars (171 million euros) generated worldwide since the end of October 2024, the mobile game adaptation of Pokemon cards has enjoyed global success, not far from the records of its predecessor. — AFP

'Unchanged experience'

Popularized in the 1990s, the concept of collectible trading cards has since been adapted into many video games. From "Gwent" in The Witcher III to "Hearth-

stone" from the Warcraft universe, card games have carved out a special place in the hearts of gamers. Pokemon TCG Pocket has "very effectively brought that card pack opening and playing ex-

perience to digital," says Simon Carless, founder of the analyst firm GameDiscoverCo. "It's actually a very unchanged experience compared to the physical card game - which was smart, and that's why people love it," he added. On social media, players have been sharing videos of themselves unveiling new cards or participating in tournaments, with the hashtag #PokemonTCG amassing over 1.5 million posts on TikTok.

Other video game adaptations of the Pokemon trading card universe date back decades. A Game Boy title was released in Europe in 2000, followed by another for PCs in the early 2010s. While Pokemon TCG Pocket is free to download, players are encouraged to spend money in-app to acquire more cards. Sacha Bernard, a 33-year-old teacher from the Paris suburb Creteil, said he was drawn in by nostalgia for the characters and the "short and fast" gameplay sessions. "Since it launched, I must have spent around 70 euros," he told AFP. "It's really the first time a mobile game has made me spend that kind of money." — AFP



Salma Al-Hajjaj and Najla Aleisa receive two awards.



Mohammed Taqi receives an award from Mastercard.



Najla Aleisa receives an award from Euromoney.

Gulf Bank's Year of Distinction with 13 Global and Regional Awards in 2024

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank has marked a stellar year in 2024, achieving remarkable success across multiple fronts, from strategic initiatives and global recognition to groundbreaking innovations. As a leading financial institution, Gulf Bank reaffirmed its long-term vision by announcing its strategic shift to Islamic banking and exploring a merger with Boubyan Bank—reflecting its commitment to transformative growth in the banking sector. This year, Gulf Bank was recognized among the 'Top 100 Listed Companies in the Region' by Forbes, while The Banker named it one of the "Best 100 Arab Banks for 2024". The bank's consistent performance earned it an 'A' credit rating from the world's leading agencies, with total assets surpassing KD 7.5 billion as of Q3 2024.

A year of transformative achievements

Gulf Bank's successes include the completion of the second phase of its core banking system, the launch of its upgraded mobile banking app, and the introduction of its 2030 ESG strategy. The new app was designed with customer needs at the forefront, providing seamless navigation, faster transactions, and enhanced personalization.

Reflecting its environmental commitment, Gulf Bank initiated a transition to eco-friendly branches. The bank has implemented a series of sustainable practices aimed at reducing its environmental footprint and promoting green banking solutions. Gulf Bank's eco-friendly branches are designed with energy-efficient technologies, including LED lighting systems, automated energy management, and solar energy solutions to power select branches. Additionally, the bank is introducing digital-first approaches to reduce paper usage.

By adopting these initiatives, Gulf Bank is not only improving operational efficiency but also leading by example in supporting Kuwait's environmental goals and Vision 2035. Additionally, Gulf Bank remained closely connected to the community, organizing a wide variety of programs and events that cater to the aspirations of its customers and employees. The bank also raised the grand prize for its Al Danah Millionaire Account to KD 2 million. In recognition of these accomplishments, Gulf Bank garnered 13 prestigious awards across diverse categories:

(1) Best Next-Generation Offering Award

Gulf Bank proudly received the prestigious Best Next-Generation Offering Award at the 2024 Private Banker International Global Wealth Awards held in Singapore. This accolade is a testament to Gulf Bank's exceptional commitment to attracting, engaging, and serving the next generation of affluent clients. By understanding the unique preferences and evolving financial goals of younger wealth holders,

- Ranked among Forbes' Top 100 Regional Companies and named one of the Best Arab Banks by The Banker

- Recognized for serving next-generation affluent clients and holding Kuwait's largest tokenized debit portfolio

- Awarded for its exceptional digital platform implementation, effective compliance, and regulatory technological solutions

- Al Danah Millionaire Account secures Guinness World Records for the second time.

- Celebrated for its excellence in digital transformation, social responsibility, sustainability, and women empowerment

- Enhanced customer experience through cutting-edge technology, personalized services, and streamlined operations

Gulf Bank has successfully delivered tailored wealth management solutions that align with their dynamic lifestyles. The Bank's forward-thinking approach combines personalized financial advice with a suite of innovative investment products, providing clients with customized strategies to build, preserve, and grow their wealth. Gulf Bank remains proactive in anticipating the changing needs of this important demographic, leveraging cutting-edge tools and insights to offer seamless experiences that empower next-generation clients to take charge of their financial futures. This award highlights Gulf Bank's role as a trusted partner for wealth creation across generations, reaffirming its leadership in the competitive wealth management landscape.

(2) Highest Tokenized Debit Portfolio in Kuwait Award

Presented by Mastercard, this award highlights Gulf Bank's leadership in digital payment security through advanced tokenization technology. By enhancing transaction safety and convenience, Gulf



Bank has redefined customer trust and satisfaction in digital banking.

(3) Best Digital Platform Implementation Award

At the IBSi Global Financial Innovation Awards 2024 in Mumbai, Gulf Bank's digital transformation program was recognized for revolutionizing banking operations with innovative platforms that enhance customer experiences. The platform's intuitive design allows users to manage their finances effortlessly. The IBSi Financial Innovation Awards are internationally renowned for celebrating financial institutions, technology providers, and developers who deliver groundbreaking solutions that improve banking operations and financial services.

(4) Best Program Vision Award

Gulf Bank received this award for its forward-thinking approach to digital transformation, emphasizing innovation-driven solutions to simplify processes for customers and improve satisfaction.

(5) Excellence in Compliance and Technological Regulation: 'Digital Blueprint' Program Award

Gulf Bank's implementation of the Digital Blueprint Program by Geiom Business Solutions earned it recognition for streamlining policy management, governance, and regulatory compliance, ensuring smooth, hassle-free banking experiences for all.

(6) Guinness World Record for Al Danah Millionaire Account

For the second time, the Al Danah Millionaire Account grand prize of KD 2,000,000 (for one winner) entered the Guinness World Records as the largest cash prize linked to a bank account globally. This customer-centric initiative further elevated Gulf Bank's reputation for rewarding loyalty and enhancing savings culture. This achievement was announced during the winner's announcement ceremony of the first draw after the prize value was increased to KD 2 million, surpassing the previous record of KD 1.5 million, after the bank met all the necessary conditions to exceed the previous record.

(7) Best Implementation of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives Award

In recognition of its leadership in implementing impactful initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion both within the bank and in the broader community, Gulf Bank was awarded the "Best Implementation of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives" by MEED magazine for the Middle East and North Africa region. This award highlights the bank's commitment to sustainability, creating a diverse and inclusive work environment, and ensuring equal opportunities for all. Gulf Bank believes that fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion enhances its positive reputation, boosts performance, supports employee development, creativity, and innovation, and strengthens connections among staff, encouraging them to share ideas and experiences with one another.



(8) Best in Empowering Women Award

Gulf Bank was honored with the "Best in Empowering Women Award" in recognition of its remarkable progress and commitment to fostering gender diversity and inclusion. Through strategic initiatives and forward-thinking policies, the Bank has successfully increased female representation in leadership roles 'from 10 percent to 30 percent'. This achievement reflects Gulf Bank's dedication to breaking barriers, providing equal opportunities, and nurturing female talent across all levels of the organization.

Women now make up 42 percent of Gulf Bank's workforce, underscoring the Bank's inclusive work culture that values diversity and actively invests in the professional growth and development of female employees. In addition to its internal efforts, Gulf Bank has also demonstrated a strong focus on empowering its 'female customer base' by offering tailored financial solutions, specialized products, and educational programs designed to support women in achieving their financial goals and aspirations. This award highlights Gulf Bank's unwavering commitment to driving meaningful change, championing gender equality, and positioning itself as a leading advocate for women's empowerment in the financial sector and beyond.

(9) Best in Kuwait for Social Responsibility Award

Euromoney magazine has named Gulf Bank as the best in Kuwait for Social Responsibility at the 2024 Excellence Awards ceremony, attended by a large gathering of major companies, banks, and institutions in the region. This award recognizes Gulf Bank's outstanding commitment to social sustainability, as well as its significant efforts in supporting and empowering youth, women, and individuals with special needs, both within the bank and in the broader community. These efforts are evident through a diverse and carefully curated range of initiatives and services designed to meet their needs and aspirations. The bank takes pride in being deeply engaged with the community, ensuring its presence at various events, whether through direct participation in diverse activities or through media and social media channels. Gulf Bank is committed to organizing and sponsoring numerous community events and initiatives that align with the aspirations of its customers and the public.

(10) Best in Sustainable Workplace Development Award

Gulf Bank participated in the Second Gulf International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility 2024 in Bahrain, organized by the Bahrain CSR Society. The event, held under the theme "Strategic Practices for a Better Tomorrow" was held on June 26 and 27, 2024, and was attended by His Excellency the Minister of Social Development in the Kingdom of Bahrain, Osama bin Ahmed bin Khalaf Al Asfoor. At the conference, the Gulf International Corporate Social Responsibility Awards 2024 were announced. Gulf Bank was honored with the esteemed "Best in Sustainable

Development in the Workplace" award in recognition of its exceptional initiatives.

(11) Best Bank in Marketing and Social Media Services Awards

Global Finance Magazine has recognized Gulf Bank as the "Best Bank in Marketing and Social Media Services", acknowledging the bank's success in engaging with customers through digital channels. This award highlights the significant digital transformation the bank has achieved and its effective use of social media to improve the customer experience. Gulf Bank is dedicated to providing top-notch services, quickly and efficiently meeting customer needs through branches, mobile apps, and social media platforms. The bank has increasingly turned to social media for delivering services, marketing products, and connecting with the community. Additionally, Gulf Bank's call center employs advanced automated response technology, one of the fastest in the banking sector, with an average response time of under 20 seconds. The center manages over 5,000 calls daily.

(12) Gold Award for Best Campaign

In recognition of its commitment to delivering innovative and impactful marketing campaigns, Gulf Bank was awarded the Gold Award for Best Campaign in Kuwait by the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) for the campaign "From Hesitation to Confidence: Promoting Responsible Credit Card Usage in Kuwait." This award acknowledges the bank's year-long efforts to promote sustainable credit card usage in the country. The campaign successfully combined behavioral insights with innovative storytelling to enhance financial literacy and encourage responsible spending. As a result, it achieved significant improvements in consumer behavior and increased participation in Gulf Bank's Rewards Program, the most rewarding program in Kuwait.

(13) Silver Award for Best Campaign

The Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) also awarded Gulf Bank the Silver Award for Best Campaign in Kuwait for the "Rose Gold Credit Card: Empowering the Modern Kuwaiti Woman" campaign. This recognition highlights the campaign's focus on empowering Kuwaiti women by celebrating their personal aspirations and conveying a message of independence and individuality. The campaign successfully showcased the unique features of the Rose Gold Credit Card, aligning it with the values that represent the modern Kuwaiti woman's personality.

Notable achievements

Najla Aleisa, Chief Marketing Officer at Gulf Bank, has been appointed as the President of the International Advertising Association (IAA) in Kuwait. She is the first woman in Kuwait to hold this position, following the annual meeting held by the organization in Malaysia recently. The International Advertising Association is the only global organization dedicated to all aspects of advertising and marketing, as well as issues related to clients and advertising agencies. It is the sole entity with a clear vision aimed at developing the advertising industry.

App ranked #1 in Kuwait

Gulf Bank's mobile banking app received the highest rating in Kuwait, with a 5-star rating on both the Apple Store and Google Play.

Fastest in customer response

Gulf Bank's automated response services are some of the most advanced and fastest in the banking sector, providing a customer call response time of under 20 seconds, ensuring prompt and efficient handling of inquiries.

Business

Honda, Nissan move to deepen ties, including 'possible merger'

Merger would create a \$54 billion company

TOKYO: Honda and Nissan are in talks to deepen ties, two people said on Wednesday, including a possible merger, the clearest sign yet of how Japan's once seemingly unbeatable auto industry is being reshaped by challenges from Tesla and Chinese rivals. A combined Honda and Nissan would create a \$54 billion company with annual output of 7.4 million vehicles, making it the world's third-largest auto group by vehicle sales after Toyota and Volkswagen. The two firms already forged a strategic partnership in March to cooperate in electric vehicle development, but Nissan's deepening financial and strategic trouble in recent months has added more urgency for closer cooperation with larger rival Honda.

Nissan announced a \$2.6 billion cost savings plan last month that includes cutting 9,000 jobs and 20 percent of its global production capacity, as slumping sales in China and the United States led to an 85 percent plunge in second-quarter profit. "This deal appears to be more about bailing out Nissan, but Honda itself is not resting on its laurels," said San-shiro Fukao, executive fellow at Itochu Research Institute. "Honda's cash flow is set to deteriorate next year and its EVs haven't been going so well."

Shares of Nissan closed nearly 24 percent higher in Tokyo trade on Wednesday, while shares of Honda, whose market value of \$43 billion is more than four times bigger than that of Nissan, declined 3 percent. Shares

of Mitsubishi Motors 7211.T, in which Nissan is the top shareholder with a 24 percent stake, gained nearly 20 percent. The automakers have been grappling with challenges from EV makers, particularly in China, where BYD and others have surged ahead. The talks between Honda and Nissan, first reported by the Nikkei newspaper, could allow the companies to cooperate more on technology and help them create a more formidable domestic rival to Toyota.

The discussions are focused on finding ways to bolster collaboration and include the possibility of setting up a holding company, said the people, who declined to be identified because the information has not been made public. The companies are also discussing the possibility of a full merger, according to one of the people, as well as looking at ways to cooperate with Mitsubishi. Honda, Nissan and Mitsubishi said no deal had been announced by any of the companies, though Nissan and Mitsubishi noted the three automakers had said previously they were considering opportunities for future collaboration.

French automaker Renault, Nissan's largest shareholder, is open in principle to a deal and would examine all the implications of a tie-up, two people familiar with the matter said. A Renault spokesperson declined to comment. Renault shares were up 6.1 percent at 1217 GMT. The three Japanese automakers are expected to hold a joint news conference in Tokyo on Monday, according to a source

familiar with the matter.

Taiwan's Foxconn, which manufactures Apple's iPhones and has been seeking to expand its nascent EV contract manufacturing business, approached Nissan about a bid but it was rejected by the Japanese firm, two separate sources familiar with the matter said. Bloomberg News reported earlier on Wednesday that Foxconn had approached Nissan to take a controlling stake. Foxconn did not immediately respond to a request for comment, while a Nissan spokesperson declined to comment on Foxconn.

Changing landscape

Over the past year, an EV price war launched by Tesla and BYD has intensified pressure on any automakers losing money on the next-generation vehicles. That has pushed companies like Honda and Nissan to seek ways to cut costs and speed vehicle development, and mergers are a major step in that direction. "In the mid- to long-term, this is good for the Japanese car industry as it creates a second axis against Toyota," said Seiji Sugiura, a senior analyst at Tokai Tokyo Intelligence Laboratory.

"Constructive rivalry with Toyota is a positive for the rather stagnating Japanese car industry when it must compete with Chinese automakers, Tesla and others," S&P Global Ratings said it would take time for the synergies from a potential merger to boost the firms' creditworthiness. Differences in corporate culture and strategies may mean a merger that does not



YOKOHAMA: The emblem of Japanese automaker Nissan Motor is seen at a showroom in Yokohama. The Tokyo Stock Exchange temporarily suspended trading of Nissan shares on December 18, 2024 after several media outlets reported the auto giant would enter merger talks with Honda. — AFP

give one side control is unlikely to have meaningful results. "In our view, there have been few instances where mergers and alliances between major automakers have led to significant benefits," it said in a note. Any merger would face significant US scrutiny and President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to take a hard line on imported vehicles, including threatening 25 percent tariffs on vehicles shipped from Canada and Mexico.

He could seek concessions from Honda and Nissan to approve any deal, auto

industry officials said. Honda and Nissan both produce cars in Mexico for export to the US. Honda and Nissan would also have to work out how to integrate their different corporate cultures if they proceed with a merger, analysts said. "Honda has a unique, technology-centric culture with strengths in powertrains, so there should be some internal resistance to the merger with Nissan, a competitor with a different culture that is now faltering," said Tang Jin, a senior researcher at Mizuho Bank. — Reuters

Warmer winter melts incomes of China's ice cutters

HARBIN: Gruff men shout over an angry motor as they float huge blocks of ice towards a rusty conveyor belt on the bank of a frozen river in northeastern China. Every winter, dozens of workers brave sub-zero temperatures to hack ice from the mighty Songhua River and deliver it around Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province. It forms the building blocks for the massive sculptures that are the centerpiece of the city's Ice and Snow World, an annual festival that draws tens of thousands of visitors.

But this year, a warmer autumn has delayed the freeze and left the river ice thinner than normal. "By now, the ice is (usually) 57 or 58 centimeters (23 inches) thick," said Huang Wu, 52, who has been harvesting it for two decades. "This year, the ice has only reached about 44 or 45 centimeters," he told AFP earlier this month as he rested close to the shoreline in the pink light of dawn. Like the rest of his eight-man crew, Huang is a fisherman who trades his net for a handheld ice pick once the river freezes over.

Clad in orange life vests and knee-high work boots, his team stood in a neat line on the snow-dusted surface, with one man chanting the count as they chiseled out slabs exactly 1.6 meters (five feet three inches) long. The crew earns about two yuan (\$0.27) per brick and can produce up to 2,700 in each grueling 16-hour shift, Huang said, adding that they split their earnings equally. Despite its high quality, Huang said the relative lack of ice has hit his income so far this winter. "When the ice is thick, you make more money. When the ice is thin, you make less," he told AFP.

Warmer than normal

Once cut, the white, glossy blocks are hauled onto a motorized ramp that transports them to a line of forklifts. From there, they are loaded onto trucks and lugged to the festival about a five-minute drive away. Sculptures in recent years have included a towering palace, a tri-colored snowflake and replicas of China's iconic Terracotta Army—all illuminated in bright colors at night. The attractions delight visiting tourists, but Huang said he has "seen enough" ice to last him a lifetime. And while the frozen air chills outsiders to the bone, to hardy locals it still feels unseasonably warm.

Daytime temperatures in Harbin would usually hover around minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus four degrees Fahrenheit) by this point in the year, but lately it has got that cold only at night, Huang told AFP. Climate change has brought extreme heat to large parts of the world this year, and Europe's climate monitor has said 2024 is "effectively certain" to be the hottest ever recorded. China is the biggest emitter of the greenhouse gases that drive global warming, but has been building renewable energy infrastructure at a rapid pace and aims to become carbon neutral by 2060.

For others, however, warmer temperatures bring welcome relief from northeastern China's notoriously bitter winters. "When the wind blows, no one can stand it," said first-time ice cutter Zhu Weizhong. "When it's cold, we suffer." Zhu, a father of three who farms and works in city maintenance for most of the year, said the backbreaking labor beat sitting around at home. There was "little work for the winter" in Harbin, he said, adding that he earned around 260 yuan for each eight-hour shift. Compared to other jobs, chipping away at the frozen river was "tiring". Zhu, who is in his 50s, said. But, he added, "you finish, and you look and think, 'Ah, I've done so much today'". — AFP

Record year for coal in 2024, the world's hottest year

PARIS: World coal use is set to reach an all-time high in 2024, the International Energy Agency said Wednesday, in a year all but certain to be the hottest in recorded history. Despite calls to halt humanity's burning of the filthiest fossil fuel driving climate change, the energy watchdog expects global demand for coal to hit record highs for the third year in a row. Scientists have warned that planet-warming greenhouse gases will have to be drastically slashed to limit global heating to avoid catastrophic impacts on the Earth and humanity.

Earlier in December, the European Union's climate monitor Copernicus said 2024 was "effectively certain" to be the hottest on record - eclipsing the record set just last year. Published on Wednesday, the IEA's "Coal 2024" report does however predict the world will hit peak coal in 2027 after topping 8.77 billion tons this year. But that would be dependent on China, which for the past quarter-century has consumed 30 percent more coal than the rest of the world's countries combined, the IEA said. China's waxing demand for electricity was the most significant driving force behind the increase, with more than a third of coal burnt worldwide carbonized in the country's power plants.

Record Chinese demand

Though Beijing has sought to diversify its electricity sources, including a massive expansion of solar and wind power, the IEA said Chinese coal demand in 2024 will still hit 4.9 billion tons - itself another record. Increasing coal demand in China, as well as in emerging economies such as India and Indonesia, made up for a continued decline in advanced economies. However that decline has slowed in the Eu-

Stock markets and dollar climb

LONDON: Stock markets mostly climbed and the dollar steadied against main rivals Wednesday with the US Federal Reserve set to cut interest rates. Shares in Nissan soared more than 20 percent on reports that the Japanese car titan is in merger talks with rival Honda. The Fed is widely expected to cut borrowing costs for a third time in a row when it concludes its gathering Wednesday, leaving traders to focus on its statement for clues over the outlook. "The most important thing from the Fed's meeting will be comments on monetary policy in 2025 as the market is starting to fret about future rate cuts being less frequent," noted Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell.

With US inflation coming down, decision-makers

UniCredit ups stake in Commerzbank on takeover speculation

ROME: UniCredit, Italy's second largest bank, on Wednesday said it had increased its stake in Germany's Commerzbank from 21 percent to around 28 percent amid growing speculation of an attempted buyout. In a statement, the Italian entity said it had increased its stake through derivatives. UniCredit said that now it had a 9.5 percent direct stake in the German lender with the remainder in derivatives. The



CILEGON, Indonesia: Smoke rises from the chimneys of the Suralaya coal-fired power plant in Cilegon. — AFP

ropean Union and the United States. Coal use there is set to decline by 12 and five percent respectively, compared with 23 and 17 percent in 2023.

With the imminent return to the White House of Donald Trump - who has repeatedly called climate change a "hoax" - many scientists fear that a second Trump presidency would water down the climate commitments of the world's largest economy. Coal mining also hit unprecedented levels by topping nine billion tons in output for the first time, the IEA said, with top producers China, India and Indonesia all posting new production records. The energy watchdog warned that the explosion in power-hungry data centers powering the emergence of artificial intelli-

gence was likewise likely to drive demand for power generation up, with that trend underpinning electricity demand in coal-guzzling China.

The 2024 report reverses the IEA's prediction last year that coal use would begin declining after peaking in 2023. At the annual UN climate change forum in Dubai last year, nations vowed to transition away from fossil fuels. But its follow-up this year ended in acrimony, with experts warning that the failure to double down on that landmark pledge at COP29 in Azerbaijan risked jeopardizing efforts to fight climate change. Set up in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis, the IEA styles itself as "the world's leading energy authority". — AFP

have been able to loosen their grip on policy since September. However, with Donald Trump set to re-enter the White House next month—pledging tax cuts, deregulation and tariffs on imports from China—there are fears that prices could reignite, forcing the Fed to re-evaluate its rates timetable. Across the Atlantic, official data Wednesday showed UK inflation picked up in November, firming expectations that the Bank of England will hold off cutting its key interest rate on Thursday.

With annual inflation rising as expected to 2.6 percent, the pound also steadied. Traders also awaited conclusion of the Bank of Japan's policy meeting Thursday. Chinese stock markets and oil prices gained on hopes of more stimulus to boost China's flagging economy. Focus was also on the car sector. While Nissan shares soared, Honda fell about three percent. Mitsubishi Motors—whose top stakeholder is Nissan—accelerated almost 20 percent. Elsewhere on the corporate front, Italy's second largest bank UniCredit in-



NEW YORK: A person shops at a Whole Foods Market grocery store on December 17, 2024 in New York City. — AFP

creased its stake in Germany's Commerzbank to around 28 percent amid growing speculation of an attempted buyout. — AFP

flexibility and optionality" as it pursues what it deems "substantial value" within Commerzbank, which it said needed to be crystallized.

UniCredit said its move also reflects its "belief in Germany, its businesses and its communities, and the importance of a strong banking sector in powering Germany's economic development". It said the added investment would not affect its bid for Italian number three bank Banco BPM. Commerzbank shares were up around 3.5 percent in early trading while UniCredit gained 1.4 percent. A Commerzbank spokesperson meanwhile told AFP that the German firm had no comment save to say it acknowledged the development. Commerzbank remains focused on strategy and development implementation slated to be presented on February 13, the spokesperson said. — AFP

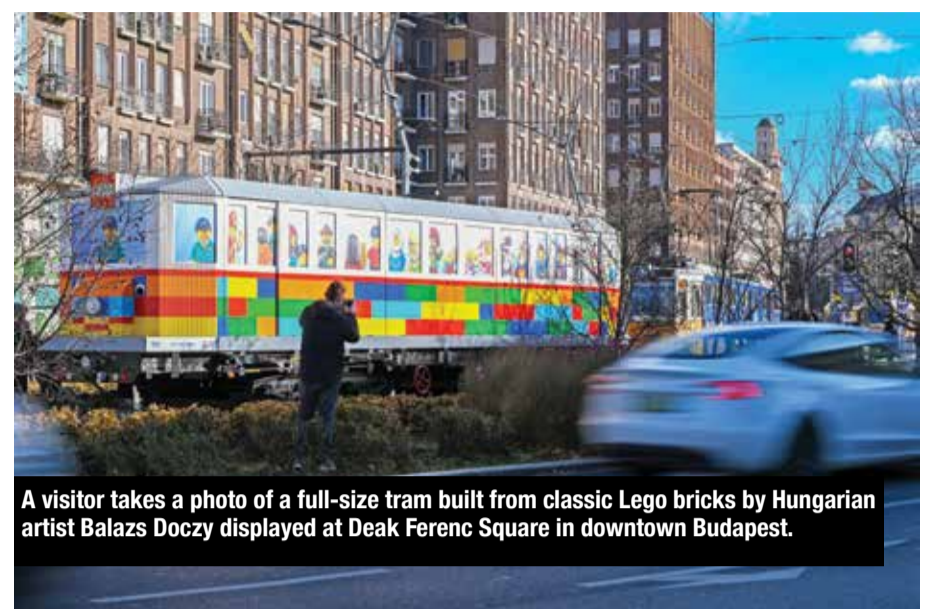
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2024



A touristic symbol of Budapest, 'Heroes Square' is seen at the Hungarian headquarters of Lego, having been built from classic Lego bricks by Hungarian artist Balazs Doczy in Budapest.--AFP photos



A touristic symbol of Budapest, the oldest bridge in the capital, 'Chain Bridge' is seen at the Hungarian headquarters of Lego, having been built from classic Lego bricks by Hungarian artist Balazs Doczy in Budapest.



A visitor takes a photo of a full-size tram built from classic Lego bricks by Hungarian artist Balazs Doczy displayed at Deak Ferenc Square in downtown Budapest.

HUNGARIAN LEGO ARTIST WOWS WITH HIS VERY GRAND DESIGNS



This photo shows a part of a giant Lego lion statue by Hungarian artist Balazs Doczy, a replica of one of the lion statues of the oldest bridge of Hungary - the Chain Bridge - in Budapest.



A stolen bronze statue of the late Hungarian medal designer Fulop O Beck is substituted by a statue made of LEGO bricks, created by Hungarian lego artist Balazs Doczy.

To build his giant Lego structures which usually take hundreds of thousands of bricks, Hungarian artist Balazs Doczy first must solve major "engineering challenges". "Every structure has an Achilles' heel. Once it is solved, the rest of the work is easy," the 48-year-old told AFP. He needed 90 helpers for one of his most recent works -- a life-sized Lego tram made up of a staggering 1.8 million pieces. Together they put in around 6,800 hours to assemble Doczy's most ambitious project that is now on display in a bustling square in central Budapest.

The 11-metre-long (36 feet) Lego tram -- commissioned by Budapest's transport companies and its tourist office to "public transport and creativity" -- has attracted droves. "We've never seen anything like this before," said Malaysian tourist Lucas Chang, 32, while dance coach Barbara Rajnai said children in her son's and daughter's kindergarten told them to check it out.

'Megastructures'

A professional Lego artist for more than 10 years, Doczy works more like an architect than a builder, relying on specialist software to draw up plans and only assembling bricks when he needs to test out a particular design. "Initially, I do preliminary sketches much like a painter, stacking bricks on each other in a digital environment," he said. "I set up the scale, identifying recognizable elements and proportioning the other parts relative to that."

For his intricate dioramas, such as his model of the Heroes' Square in Budapest, every piece has to imitate a specific detail. In "megastructures" such as the tram, imperfections even as small as a tenth of a millimeter could stack up, leading to instability, he said. "I al-



Pedestrians walk past a giant Lego lion statue by Hungarian artist Balazs Doczy, a replica of one of the lion statues of the oldest bridge of Hungary - the Chain Bridge - in Budapest.

ways compare it to quantum mechanics and gravity: in a smaller scope matter behaves differently than on a grander scale," he said.

Thus blocks are glued together, an internal frame is added for extra support, and experts are consulted to ensure structural integrity. Doczy also added some baseplates on its sides to allow people to place their own Lego bricks, which "has always appealed to me, because it allows anyone to express their creativity and transform the sculpture into a community piece".

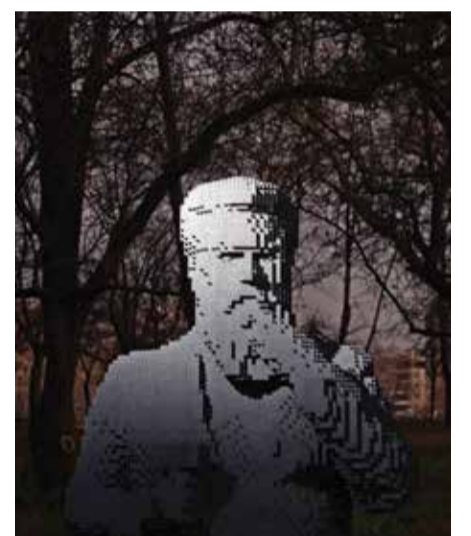
Doczy was fascinated with Lego at an early age, assembling bricks with his older brother, though Western products were in short supply in then-communist Hungary. "We begged the neighbor's kids to bring their sets too, so we could build bigger structures. We had ambitions even back then," Doczy recalled.

His childhood passion was reignited

years later when his nephew became captivated by the colorful blocks. When he looked at his brother, "our eyes lit up and we realized we should start building again," Doczy said. Moving back to Hungary from Indonesia -- where he had been teaching diving -- he and his brother set up a business called "Brick Workshop" in 2013 to create Lego designs and organize activities for children and adults.

'Too valuable to throw'

In 2014, Doczy's Lego model of Budapest's iconic St. Stephen Basilica was featured at a Guinness World Record attempt, when volunteers constructed the world's highest Lego tower at the time in front of the basilica. Three years later, he was officially recognized as a "Lego certified professional" (LCP) by the Danish company. The coveted title -- currently held by around two doz-



A stolen bronze statue of the late Hungarian sculptor Miklos Izso is substituted by a statue made of LEGO bricks, created by Hungarian lego artist Balazs Doczy.

en creators -- is awarded to talents who "create stunning, innovative designs that help push the boundaries of creativity and engineering," a Lego spokesperson told AFP.

The perks are being able to regularly consult with other LCPs and access Lego's sculpting software that allows Doczy to order "from the 14,000 different pieces in production," he said. But for some projects, he has to scour the thriving second-hand market to search for pieces. Luckily for him, even bricks from the 1970s can be found there. "As a diver, I've never seen Lego bricks pulled out of the sea," said Doczy, who divides his time between Budapest and the Spanish island of Mallorca. "They are just too valuable to be thrown away." --AFP

For real life? 'Bluey' coming to the big screen

Preschoolers and parents hooked on heartwarming animated series "Bluey" might want to take a "tactical wee" to avoid any excited accidents: there's going to be a film. A feature-length version of the adventures of sisters Bluey and Bingo, and their parents Chilli and Bandit, is set to hit cinemas in 2027, The Walt Disney Company said Tuesday. "Bluey has become a global phenomenon, uniting families everywhere with its heartfelt stories of play, imagination and connection," Alan Bergman and Dana Walden, co-chairmen of Disney Entertainment, said in a statement.

"We are so proud to... bring the magic of Bluey to the big screen -- for real life!" The Australian series, which

began in 2018, features an anthropomorphic family of Blue Heelers -- a type of Australian cattle dog -- as they navigate childhood and parenting in a Queensland suburb. Episodes offer gently instructive life lessons for youngsters on how to share or how to cope with not getting your own way.

But they are also popular with parents for their sympathetic portrayal of the real-life ups and downs of looking after little ones. The show's witty dialogue is shot through with wry observations that anyone who has ever hosted a children's party -- or just tried to get their offspring dressed and into the car -- will instantly recognize. "The door. It is right here. All we need to do is walk out of it," laments the mother in one episode. The Emmy- and BAFTA-winning "Bluey" is available in more than 140 countries, and is the most-watched series globally on Disney+, as well as the most-watched streaming show in the United States, Disney said. --AFP



(From left) Bingo, Bluey and Muffin visit the Empire State Building on November 22, 2024 in New York City. -- AFP

No quitting: Bollywood's Aamir Khan wants to keep acting

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Bollywood superstar and filmmaker Aamir Khan considered quitting cinema for good after dominating the Indian film industry for more than four decades. "It was in the middle of COVID and I was... thinking of a lot of things, and I suddenly felt that I had spent all of my adult life in this magical world of cinema," Khan told AFP in London, draped in a heavy purple shawl and sporting a handlebar moustache. He is not wrong, having helped shape Indian cinematic culture for years, becoming one of Bollywood's most popular actors.

He has amassed a formidable oeuvre of Hindi-language films, including "Lagaan", nominated for best foreign language film at the Oscars in 2002, as well as movies such as "3 Idiots", "Dangal" and "Taare Zameen Par" (Like Stars on Earth). Starting as a child actor in the 1970s and synonymous with Bollywood ever since, Khan realized he had "not really given the kind of bandwidth to my personal life that I would have liked to". "The realization that I've lost all that time was something that I was finding difficult to come to terms with and I was going through a lot of guilt... My knee-jerk reaction to that was that I've had enough of film," Khan said.

However, his family, including two children, eventually convinced him not to retire. "In my head, I quit. And then I didn't," said Khan. Now, turning 60 in March, Khan, who lives in Mumbai, wants to "continue to act and produce for some time". He also wants to use his company Aamir Khan Productions



Indian actor Aamir Khan speaks during an interview with AFP in London.

"as a platform to encourage new talent... whose sensibility is close to mine. And (who) want to tell stories which affect me."

'Jumping genres'

One of those stories was "Lost Ladies", a Hindi-language comedy about two young brides, which he co-produced with his ex-wife Kiran Rao and was recently promoting in London. It was released this year, becoming India's entry for the Oscars foreign film category. Khan and Rao's partnership on "Lost Ladies" began when Khan spotted its script at a screenwriting competition which he was judging, leading him to suggest that Rao direct the film. "I like to react organically to material that comes my way. I feel that a film should begin with the writer, the thought," Khan said.

"I like that the story should emerge from the writer and then, as a producer or as an actor, I come in at the right time, when I deserve to," he added. Many of

his films touch on social issues in India, from women's rights in rural areas and the sports industry, to the toxic culture in higher education and disability rights. However, Khan has refused to be boxed into just one type of movie or role.

"I'm happy to jump genres and, experiment with different kinds of stories. I like to surprise myself and my audience." He is also not afraid to admit slip-ups, and has been vocal about his disappointment with his last performance in "Laal Singh Chaddha". The 2022 Indian adaptation of Tom Hanks's "Forrest Gump" was a rare blip in the otherwise glowing critical reception of Khan's work. "I'm not really happy with my last performance, actually," said Khan, adding that he thought he was too high-pitched in the role. "I hope this one's better," he said of his upcoming film "Sitaare Zameen Par", which he says is a "thematic" sequel to "Taare Zameen Par", a drama about special needs education. Despite winning dozens of Indian film awards as well as India's third-highest civilian award, the Padma Bhushan, Khan still grounds his idea of success in the film itself.

"Filmmaking is very difficult... telling a story through so many art forms which come together to form cinema," he said. "So when I look at the film that we've made, and then I look at the script that we set out with, (I ask): has the film reached where we thought it would?" "And if we've reached where we wanted to, and we've made the film that we set out to, then it's a big relief." --AFP

Lifestyle



Senior popular radio presenter and Somaliland culture expert Mohamed Hassan Ali checks old tapes containing traditional songs and poetry.



A sound engineer plays some old reel tapes containing traditional songs and poetry from Somaliland at Radio Hargeisa archive room.—AFP photos



A sound engineer handles old reel tapes containing traditional songs and poetry from Somaliland.

Re-discovered tapes bear witness to Somaliland identity



Popular singer Caabi Mire Dacar performs traditional songs from Somaliland.



Hafsa Omer picks some items from a collection of old tapes containing traditional songs and poetry from Somaliland.

In a library in Somaliland, Hafsa Omer presses play on a small cassette player. The sound of a Somali lute interwoven with a woman's soft singing fills the room. Tapping her keyboard, Omer bobs with the rhythm of the pentatonic melody typical in the northern region of the Horn of Africa. Since 2021, the 21-year-old has been painstakingly archiving and digitizing a collection of some 14,000 cassettes at the Cultural Centre in Hargeisa, the Somaliland capital.

Bought back, found or donated, the tapes contain more than half a century of the musical, cultural and political life of the region. Somaliland has run its own affairs since unilaterally declaring independence from Somalia in 1991 but remains unrecognized by any country. That makes cultural heritage -- like the tapes -- vital. "Many people don't consider these things to be important, but they contain the whole history of my country," Omer told AFP. "My people don't write, they don't read. All they do is talk."

Somalis have traditionally been primarily nomadic shepherds, with culture transmitted orally from one generation to another. What is now Somaliland has long been a center of music and poetry -- art that plays a crucial, even



Popular singers Sahra Ahmed Ilays (left), Caabi Mire Dacar (center) and musician Caddi Maxamed Gahayr (right) perform traditional songs from Somaliland.

political, role in this corner of Africa.

Intimate stories

The public radio station, Radio Hargeisa, also has a collection of over 5,000 reels and cassettes, programs and music recorded in its studios since its founding in 1943. The tens of thousands of hours of tapes in the cultural center tell a less official story -- ranging from 1970s counterculture "Somali funk", to unreleased recordings of play

rehearsals and accounts of people's daily lives. With small tape recorders becoming widely available in the 1970s and 1980s, Somalilanders got into the habit of corresponding with exiled relatives via cassette.

Gathered around a tape recorder, they would recount intimacies of family life but also survival during a decade-long war that culminated in the declaration of independence in 1991. The conflict between rebels and the

Mogadishu-based military regime of Siad Barre saw around 70 percent of Hargeisa destroyed in 1988. Jama Musse Jama, director of the cultural center, described how troves of cassettes were recorded "underground" as people met clandestinely to chat, chew the stimulant khat and talk politics. "They cannot say (these things) in public," he said. "You find all what didn't end up in the ordinary, formal recordings of the state -- what was happening in the streets."

Identity

Fewer than 5,000 cassettes have been catalogued and only 1,100 digitized, leaving a titanic task for Omer and her team of four friends. But it has become a fitting cultural odyssey in a place still searching for recognition. "It's proof against those who say Somaliland doesn't exist," said Jama. He believes his and Omer's work will guide younger generations searching for their past -- a storied history that stretches beyond their regional conflict to its time as an Italian and British colony and beyond. "We need to give them an identity," he said. "All these stories that make up the identity of the Somaliland people are in these recordings."—AFP



Hafsa Omer plays an old tape containing traditional songs and poetry.



Popular musician Caddi Maxamed Gahayr plays the oud as he performs traditional songs.



Hafsa Omer plays old tapes containing traditional songs and poetry from Somaliland as she digitalizes the content and adds it to a digital archive at Somaliland Centre.

Brazil judge orders Adele song be pulled globally

A Brazilian judge has ordered a song by British pop superstar Adele, "Million Years Ago," be pulled worldwide -- including on streaming services -- over an ongoing plagiarism claim by a Brazilian composer. The injunction threatens the Brazilian subsidiaries of Sony Music Entertainment and Universal Music, Adele's labels, with a fine of \$8,000 "per act of non-compliance." The music companies, however, can still appeal the decision. The injunction was made by judge Victor Torres on Friday, in Rio de Janeiro's 6th Commercial Court, pending further activity in the continuing plagiarism case.

His preliminary injunction, obtained Monday by AFP, orders Sony Music Entertainment and Universal Music to stop "immediately and globally, from using, reproducing, editing, distributing or commercializing the song 'Million Years Ago', by any modality, means, physical or digital support, streaming or sharing platform." "It is a landmark for Brazilian music, which... has often been copied to compose successful international hits," Fredimio Trotta, the lawyer for Brazilian composer Toninho Geraes who brought the plagiarism complaint, told AFP. Trotta said his firm this week will work to ensure that radio and television broadcasters, and streaming services around the world, are alerted to the Brazilian ruling.

His client Geraes claims Adele's 2015 song plagiarized the music of his samba classic "Mulheres" ("Women"), recorded by famous Brazilian sing-



English singer-songwriter Adele poses with the award for Best Pop Solo Performance for "Easy on Me" in the press room during the 65th Annual Grammy Awards at the Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles on February 5, 2023.—AFP

er Martinho da Vila on a 1995 hit album. Geraes is suing for lost royalties, \$160,000 in moral damages, plus songwriting credit on Adele's track. Sony Music Entertainment Brazil said it did "not have a statement at this time," while Universal Music Brazil did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Trotta said the injunction should have a chilling effect on foreign singers and labels looking to rip off Brazilian tunes.

"International producers and artists who... have Brazilian music 'on their radar' for possible parasitic use will think twice, given this decision," the lawyer said. Adele was also accused by Turkish music fans of plagiarism in "Million years Ago" back in 2015. They claimed its tune was similar to one in a 1985 song by a Kurdish singer, Ahmet Kaya, called "Acilara Tutunmak" ("Clinging to Pain"). Kaya died in exile in France in 2000, and his widow said it was unlikely a global star like Adele would do such a thing. Brazil is a signatory to the 1886 Berne Convention that agrees international protection for copyrighted works.—AFP

'Moana 2' surfs to 3rd weekend lead in North America theaters

"Moana 2," the Disney sequel about the seafaring adventures of a courageous young Polynesian girl, topped the North American box office again in its third weekend out, taking in \$26.6 million, according to industry estimates. That was roughly half of last weekend's \$52 million but still helped push the domestic take of the animated film to \$337.5 million, along with \$379 million internationally, for overall earnings surpassing \$700 million, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported.

Hawaiian-born Auli'i Cravalho reprises her voice acting role as the titular Moana, who joins up with an unlikely crew to travel the rugged seas of Oceania to break the curse of an evil god. Wayne "The Rock" Johnson also returns to voice the hapless demigod Maui. Universal's film adaptation of the hit Broadway musical "Wicked," the first in a two-part series, raked in \$22.5 million in its third weekend in theaters, as it surpassed the \$500 million mark globally.

Stars Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande both received Golden Globes nominations this week, giving the film an extra boost as it gains Oscar steam. Meanwhile "Kraven the Hunter" placed a distant third, at \$11 million, a "very weak opening for a new superhero film," said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research. The Spider-Man spinoff, with Aaron Taylor-Johnson in the title role, suffered from repeated pandemic- and strike-related production delays and cost overruns and has gotten tepid reviews.

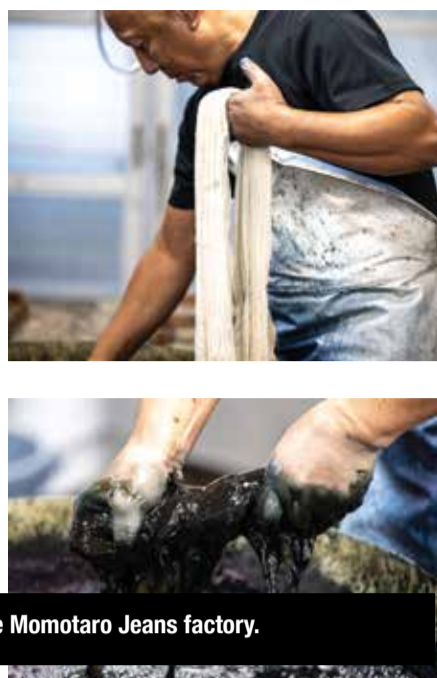
Fourth place went to Paramount's



Eva Longoria and Santiago Enrique Bastón with Moana attend the Los Angeles Premiere of Walt Disney Animation Studios' "Moana 2" at the El Capitan Theater in Hollywood, California.—AFP

"Gladiator II," at \$7.8 million. Paul Mes- cal, Pedro Pascal, Denzel Washington and Connie Nielsen star in Ridley Scott's sequel to his Best Picture Oscar-winning original. And in fifth was Warner Bros.' anime fantasy "The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim," at \$4.6 million. Set long before the Peter Jackson "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, it tells the story of King Helm Hammerhand, voiced by Brian Cox, and his family as they fight an army of invaders.

Rounding out the top 10 were:
"Red One" (\$4.3 million)
"Interstellar: Tenth Anniversary" (\$3.3 million)
"Daft Punk: Interstella" (\$2 million)
"Pushpa: The Rule - Part 2" (\$1.6 million)
"The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" (\$1.4 million)—AFP



Dyeing craftsman Yoshiharu Okamoto demonstrates the hand-dyed fabrics process at the Momotaro Jeans factory.

A staff member ironing denim fabric at the Momotaro Jeans factory.



A loom at the Momotaro Jeans factory.

True blue tradition: How Japan's coveted jeans are made



This picture shows the hands of dyeing craftsman Yoshiharu Okamoto at the Momotaro Jeans factory in the Kojima district of Okayama. — AFP photos



Craftsman Yoshiharu Okamoto demonstrates the hand-dyeing fabrics process at the Momotaro Jeans factory.



Jeans at the Momotaro Jeans factory.



A staff member working on denim fabric at the Momotaro Jeans factory.

Call it an antidote to fast fashion: Japanese jeans hand-dyed with natural indigo and weaved on a clackety vintage loom, then sold at a premium to global denim connoisseurs. Unlike their mass-produced cousins, the tough garments crafted at the small Momotaro Jeans factory in southwest Japan are designed to be worn for decades, and come with a lifetime repair warranty. On site, Yoshiharu Okamoto gently dips cotton strings into a tub of deep blue liquid, which stains his hands and nails as he repeats the process.

The cotton is imported from Zimbabwe, but the natural indigo they use is harvested in Japan -- its color far richer than synthetic imitations, according to Okamoto. He calls it a "time-consuming and costly" method, commonly used to dye kimonos in the 17th-19th century Edo period. Momotaro Jeans was established in 2006 by Japan Blue, one of a few dozen denim producers in the seaside town of Kojima, renowned for their artisan quality. "We're very strict about all aspects of manufacturing," Japan Blue's president Masataka Suzuki told AFP.

That includes "whether the sewing is done properly, and whether the dye is beautiful," making local craftspeople with traditional manufacturing skills indispensable. Their efforts do not come cheap, however. A standard pair of Momotaro Jeans retails for around 30,000 yen (\$200) while a silk-blend pair costs 60,000 yen. The brand's most expensive offering, woven by hand on a wooden kimono loom, has a price tag of over 200,000 yen.

Following in the footsteps of popular high-end Japanese denim brands



Masataka Suzuki, president of Momotaro Jeans, poses during an interview with AFP in the Kojima district of Okayama.

such as Osaka-based Evisu and Sugar Cane in Tokyo, interest in Japan Blue is growing among overseas shoppers. They now account for 40 percent of retail sales, and the company recently opened its sixth Kyoto store targeting deep-pocketed tourists.

'Niche' reputation

Denim-making flourished from the 1960s in Kojima, which has a long history of cotton-growing and textile-making. In the Edo period, the town produced woven cords for samurai to bind sword handles. It then switched to producing split-toe "tabi" socks and, later, school uniforms. Now denim from Kojima is used by international luxury fashion brands.

The market for Japanese jeans "has grown in the last 10 to 15 years", said Michael Pendlebury, a tailor operating a repair shop in Britain called The Den-

im Doctor. Although revered by denim aficionados in Western countries, they remain "not quite affordable for most" with something of a "niche" reputation, Pendlebury said.

"Mass-produced denim brands like Levi's, Diesel and Wrangler are the largest, and more worn, but the highest quality is still Japanese in my opinion," he said, adding that the weak yen and a tourism boom could boost sales of made-in-Japan jeans. Momotaro Jeans is named after a folklore hero in Okayama, where Kojima is located. It's part of the wider denim-producing Sanbi area, which also includes Hiroshima.

Another factor that makes brands like Momotaro Jeans idiosyncratic -- and expensive -- is the use of very noisy old shuttle-weaving machines, which have only a quarter of the output of the latest factory looms. They often break down, but the only people



A staff member working on denim fabric at the Momotaro Jeans factory.

who know how to repair the machines are in their 70s or older, according to Shigeru Uchida, a weaving craftsman at Momotaro. The brand uses a handful of shuttle looms made in the 1980s by a company owned by Toyota.

"There are only a few of them in Japan now" because they are no longer made, the 78-year-old Uchida said, walking back and forth between the machines to detect unusual sounds that could signal a breakdown. Despite the complexities, he says their fabric makes it worth it. "The texture is very smooth to the touch... and when made into jeans, it lasts quite a long time," Uchida said.

Suzuki says Momotaro Jeans is a "sustainable" choice because "no matter when you bring it to us, we will take responsibility for fixing it". "When people spend a lot of time in their jeans, the path of their life is left on the clothes," depending on how they wear or wash them and even where they live, Suzuki said. "We want to preserve such a mark as long as possible." —AFP



The exterior of the Momotaro Jeans factory.



Jeans at the Momotaro Jeans factory.

Sports

Third Australia-India Test ends in draw after bad weather strikes

Rohit says India's fightback means nothing for Melbourne

BRISBANE: The third Test between Australia and India in Brisbane ended in a draw after storms halted the hosts' bid for an unlikely win Wednesday to leave the series locked 1-1.

Early tea was taken on the final day at the Gabba because of bad light with India 8-0 having been set a target of 275 for victory, after Australia declared on 89-7. But a big storm swept over the ground during the break and play was abandoned, with the five-Test series now heading to Melbourne and then Sydney.

The draw badly hurts India's chances of making the final of the World Test Championship at Lord's next year, with Australia now likely to defend their title against South Africa. "Unfortunately a lot of rain, which you can't do anything about, but really happy with how the guys played," said Australia skipper Pat Cummins.

"To put 450 (first innings) on is a huge total and then felt like we're right ahead of the game for all of it." With rain causing regular disruptions throughout the Test, the chance of a result other than a draw looked to have disappeared when India avoided the follow-on late on Tuesday.

"I mean, we'll take that obviously, to have interruptions like that wasn't great," said India skipper Rohit Sharma. "But going to Melbourne with one-all pretty much gives us that confidence that we can go out there and try and pull things towards us."

Carnage

After losing most of the morning session, Australia began their second innings after lunch showing no signs of an attacking approach. But once under-pressure openers Usman Khawaja and Nathan McSweeney fell, along with the equally out-



THE GABBA: Australia's captain Pat Cummins (C) leads his team off the ground due to a rain delay on day five of the third cricket Test match between Australia and India at The Gabba in Brisbane on December 18, 2024. — AFP

of-form Marnus Labuschagne, the Australian approach seemed to change as the batsmen started to attack every ball.

Khawaja, who turned 38 on Wednesday, came into the second innings after a run of poor form which has seen him not score a century since June 2023. He spanked two fours from the first over he faced from Mohammed Siraj but it took the talis-

manic Jasprit Bumrah just one ball to get his man, the left-hander bowled off an inside edge that also clipped his pad.

Labuschagne was next to go after waiting at a wide ball from Bumrah and edging to wicket-keeper Rishabh Pant. The carnage continued when McSweeney played a cut shot off Akash Deep, edging to Pant to leave the Australians 16-3. Deep had

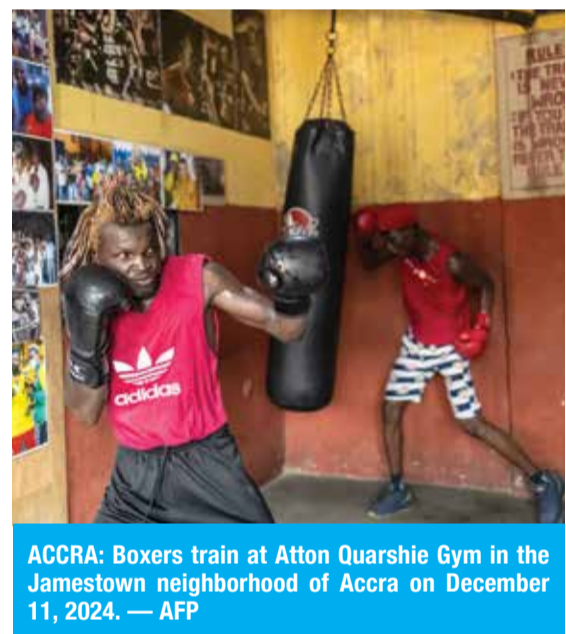
his second when Mitchell Marsh, promoted to bat at number four, also left his bat hanging and edged to Pant, with Australia staggering at 28-4.

That became 33-5 when Steve Smith was well caught by a diving Pant down the leg side off Siraj for four. Australia were obviously trying to set a target for the Indians to chase and Travis Head (17) fell going for quick runs, a wild slog off Siraj getting a top edge that flew skywards for Pant to come around for his fifth catch.

Cummins came in and smashed 22 runs off just 10 balls before miscuing an attempted pull shot off Bumrah and holing out to KL Rahul at mid-off. He sent Mitchell Starc out but declared soon after. India resumed the day on 252-9 in reply to the hosts' 445 after a 10th-wicket partnership between Bumrah and Deep late Tuesday allowed them to avoid the follow-on. They were dismissed for 260 four overs into the first session when Deep was stumped by wicketkeeper Alex Carey off part-time spinner Head.

India captain Rohit Sharma said Wednesday his team's gritty fightback against Australia with both bat and ball would not hold any significance for the Boxing Day Test. Despite being behind for much of the rain-affected third Test, India showed great determination to avoid the follow-on and then take seven quick wickets in Australia's second innings.

The match ended in a draw and the two sides now head to the Melbourne Cricket Ground with the five-match series locked at 1-1 with two Tests remaining. Rohit was dismissive when asked whether the fightbacks gave his side a psychological boost. "I don't believe in all of that," he said. "You're starting fresh every Test match you play and you have to start really, really well from ball one. "All those things that have happened in the past, are in the past. — AFP



ACCRA: Boxers train at Atton Quarshie Gym in the Jamestown neighborhood of Accra on December 11, 2024. — AFP

Hitting hard in Ghana's boxing hotspot

ACCRA: The dusty concrete floor, worn gloves and battered punching bags at Ghana's Atton Quarshie "Home of the Sweet Science" gym might not look like much. But the modest boxing club is one of a network of gyms teaching the noble art in just one small Accra district that has become known internationally as an epicenter for the sport.

Just a few meters away, another facility, Will Power Boxing Gym, welcomes those entering with the sign "Go Hard or Go Home". More than a dozen small gyms are scattered throughout the winding sidestreets of the hardscrabble Jamestown district and its Bukom neighborhood near the city's Atlantic Ocean fishing port.

Jamestown has already produced its share of champions, whose fading posters now adorn club walls, including Azumah "The Professor" Nelson, who many consider as the greatest African boxer. A new generation of Jamestown champions is on the rise.

"Ghana boxing is all about Jamestown," said John Zile, 24, a professional with a record of 15-0, fighting out of the district's Bronx Boxing Gym and who moved to Jamestown from the north. "If you want to be great you have to come here."

Boxing coaches attribute the growth of Jamestown and Bukom boxing to the tough life in the fishing community and a tradition of settling arguments the old-fashioned way: With a show of strength. That eventually evolved into the boxing business. "It became clear to this side of the country that boxing belonged to them," said Lawrence Carl Lokko, owner of Bronx Boxing and a well-known coach.

The sport is also a way into a disciplined life, away from the Jamestown streets where opportunities are few, he said. Among his stable of fighters is John "Expensive Boxer" Laryea, a WBO African champion and former national titleholder.

Nearby, the neighborhood boxing stadium hosts regular tournaments among the Jamestown clubs. At the sparse Atton Quarshie gym, just meters from the beach, coaches put sweat-drenched fighters through their paces on the bags, before a whistle marks a pause between rounds.

Inside the ring, two more boxers move around and batter focus mitts held by partners. Near the entrance, a wooden board spells out the gym rules: "Rule 1. The trainer is never wrong. Rule 2. If you think the trainer is wrong refer to Rule 1."

Photos of past tournaments and the gym's team cover parts of the peeling red and yellow walls. "They train you well," fighter Akimos Ampiah, a professional bantamweight, said between rounds on the heavy bag. "Boxing. It's a tradition here." — AFP

Ravichandran Ashwin: Accidental spinner who became India great

NEW DELHI: Spinner Ravichandran Ashwin will go down as one of India's greatest players after retiring from international cricket on Wednesday aged 38. India's go-to bowler was central to their Test dominance in the last decade with his ability to outfox top batsmen.

Ashwin finished with 537 wickets in 106 Tests since his debut in 2011 against the West Indies in New Delhi. He was also more than useful with the bat. Described as an "all-time great" by his Test captain Rohit Sharma, Ashwin earlier this year became only the ninth bowler to reach 500 Test wickets and only the second from India after Anil Kumble (619).

He also played 116 one-day and 65 Twenty20 internationals. Ashwin walked into the sunset after the drawn third Test against Australia in Brisbane. He was visibly emotional as he was hugged by Virat Kohli in the dressing room.

"There's a bit left in me as a cricketer but I would like to exploit it at the domestic and club-level cricket," Ashwin told reporters. "I have had a lot of fun, a lot of memories." He was not selected for Brisbane, with his final Test in Adelaide last week, where he took 1-53 and India were well beaten by 10 wickets.

'Legend'

India head coach Gautam Gambhir paid tribute to a player he said would be greatly missed. "The privilege of seeing you grow from a young bowler to a legend of modern cricket is something that I wouldn't trade for the world," Gambhir wrote on social media.

Team-mate Kohli said he had "enjoyed every bit of the journey" with the bowler. "Your skill and match-winning contributions to Indian cricket are second to none and you will always be remembered as a legend of Indian cricket," Kohli said.

Ashwin, who is from the southern city of Chennai, started out as an IT engineer after graduating from university and is known for his precision. The innovative Ashwin always worked on his craft, even after his

Ayub, Agha steer Pakistan to victory in first ODI

PAARL: Saim Ayub hit a superb 109 and Salman Agha starred with bat and ball as Pakistan beat South Africa by three wickets in the first one-day international at Boland Park on Tuesday. The left-handed Ayub and Salman (82 not out) shared a fifth wicket partnership of 141, rescuing Pakistan from 60 for four.

Salman, who earlier had career-best bowling figures of four for 32 as South Africa were restricted to 239 for nine, was named man of the match — but he handed the trophy to Ayub. "Without Ayub we would not have won the game," said Salman. "He was there with the new ball and he set up the game."

There were still moments of anxiety for the tourists after Kagiso Rabada had Ayub caught at fine leg with 38 runs still needed. Two more wickets fell before Salman hit the winning boundary with three balls to spare. Heinrich Klaassen made 86 off 97 balls in South Africa's total of 239 for nine but was forced to play more conservatively than usual after the innings stalled against Salman's off-spin. South Africa made a rapid start with Tony de Zorzi (33) and Ryan Rickelton (36) putting on 70 for the first wicket inside the 10-over power play.

But Salman, who had taken only 10 wickets at a cost of 50 runs each in 27 previous one-day internationals, took the first four wickets in the space of 12 balls as South Africa slumped to 88 for four. Spin bowling dominated, with slow bowlers sending



DHARAMSALA: (FILES) India's Ravichandran Ashwin bowls during the first day of the fifth and last Test cricket match between India and England at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium in Dharamsala on March 7, 2024. Ashwin announced his immediate retirement from international cricket following the third Test against Australia in Brisbane. — AFP

skill and guile led to a glittering international career.

He reached the landmark of 500 wickets in the third Test against England in February at Rajkot when he dismissed Zak Crawley. A master craftsman, Ashwin employed the full width of the crease as he delivered his off-spin from multiple angles with varying pace.

He also had a deceptive "arm ball" that goes straight on, and worked to develop a "carrom ball" that goes the other way, delivered using his knuckles. But his sometimes blunt, no-nonsense attitude has led to the occasional controversy, such as when inflicting "Mankad" runouts at the non-striker's end.

Ashwin was part of India's 2011 50-over World Cup title win at home and then the 2013 Champions Trophy, but it was three years later that he matured as a top-level bowler. He took 48 wickets in eight Tests and had 27 victims in 19 Twenty20 matches in the 2015-16 season to be named the ICC cricketer of the year. Ashwin ended with 37 five-wicket Test hauls to his name, with a best of 7-59.

'World class'

Ashwin enjoyed a healthy rivalry with his Australia counterpart Nathan Lyon, who has 533 Test wickets in 132 matches. "He's a world-class bowler and somebody I have watched closely from the start of his career," Lyon said.

Ashwin started off as a batsman who bowled medium-pace before switching to off-spin, and has called himself an "accidental spinner". "I wanted to be a batter all along. Life gave me a chance," he once said. Ashwin has recounted how he first got the chance to shine as a spinner while playing for Chennai Super Kings in the IPL.

All-time top wicket-taker Muttiah Muralitharan had declined to use the new ball so it was given to him instead—and the rest was history. The all-rounder also has 3,503 Test runs—including six centuries—from playing in the middle- and lower-order, with a career-high of 124. He formed a potent spin partnership with Ravindra Jadeja, becoming the most successful pair for India in Tests. — AFP



PAARL: South Africa's wicketkeeper Heinrich Klaassen (R) reacts as Pakistan's Shaheen Shah Afridi is bowled during the first one day international (ODI) cricket match between South Africa and Pakistan at The Boland Oval in Paarl. — AFP

down a combined 27 overs and taking seven wickets for 107 runs. Ayub, 22, followed up an unbeaten 98 in a losing cause in a Twenty20 international in Centurion last Friday with an innings of skill and maturity.

Ayub and Salman stabilized the innings before steadily increasing their scoring rate. The match swung dramatically in Pakistan's favour when Otneil Baartman returned to the bowling attack in the 35th over. Baartman had taken two for nine in five overs in his first spell but Ayub hooked his first two balls for six in an over which yielded 22 runs.

South Africa suffered a blow during the warm-

up when Keshav Maharaj, their premier spin bowler, suffered a groin strain and had to withdraw.

Brief scores:

South Africa 239-9 in 50 overs (T. de Zorzi 33, R. Rickelton 36, A. Markram 35, H. Klaassen 86; Salman Agha 4-32, Abrar Ahmed 2-32).

Pakistan 242-7 in 49.3 overs (Saim Ayub 109, Salman Agha 82 not out; K. Rabada 2-48, O. Baartman 2-37).

Result: Pakistan won by three wickets.

Series: Pakistan lead the three-match series 1-0. — AFP

Sports

Vinicius and Bonmati named FIFA Best players of the year

Bonmati picked up the Best women's player award for second year running

DOHA: Real Madrid attacker Vinicius Junior won the FIFA Best men's player of the year award at a ceremony in Doha on Tuesday, while Barcelona midfielder Aitana Bonmati picked up the women's prize for the second time.

The award comes two months after 24-year-old Vinicius was second in the Ballon d'Or, with Real electing to snub the ceremony when they found out beforehand that Manchester City midfielder Rodri was set to win the trophy.

But the Brazilian was this time on hand to collect the prize in person as he is in Qatar with his club ahead of their Intercontinental Cup final clash with Mexico's Pachuca on Wednesday. "Thank you very much. I don't know where to start. It was impossible to think of getting here. I grew up in a world of poverty, of organized crime. It's for all the children who grow up in that world. I thank everyone who voted for me," Vinicius said on stage.

"(Thank you) To my family, to the club, to my teammates, to Carletto (Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti), who always helps me. "To everyone who helped make my dream come true. I hope to be at Madrid for many years, because it is the best club in the world. To Flamengo (his first club in

Brazil). To my team-mates in my national team. And to my country, which always supports me in my work."

Vinicius succeeds Lionel Messi as the FIFA Best men's player after the Argentinian scooped up the last two editions of the award. The live wire forward scored 24 goals and laid on 11 assists in 39 matches across all competitions as he led Real to a La Liga and Champions League double last season.

Having already wrapped up his third La Liga title in May, Vinicius secured the second Champions League trophy of his career as Real beat Borussia Dortmund 2-0 on June 1. Vinicius was on the score-sheet at Wembley with a pinpoint finish inside the final 10 minutes to make the game safe for his team.

If Vinicius at times played second fiddle to clubmate Jude Bellingham in La Liga, he was undoubtedly the main man for Madrid in Europe once the going got serious. He was the top scorer for the Champions League winners with six goals in the competition, including the strike in the final and a brace in Madrid's 4-3 aggregate win over Bayern Munich in the semi-finals.

He also scored a hat-trick in a 4-1

victory in the final of the Supercopa against arch-rivals Barcelona in January. But it was not all plain sailing last season for Vinicius as he endured a disappointing Copa America with the Brazilian national team over the summer. He scored two goals in a group-stage win against Paraguay, but his side ultimately crashed out on penalties to Uruguay in the quarter-finals.

Serial winner Bonmati

The 26-year-old Spaniard Bonmati picked up the Best women's player award for the second year running, adding to the two Ballon d'Or trophies she already boasts. "I'm grateful, I'm proud to receive this award," Bonmati said via video link from Barcelona's Olympic stadium.

Last term, Bonmati led Barcelona to a historic continental quadruple of titles and claimed the Nations League with her national team. She won every trophy available to her in club football in 2023/24 -- the Spanish league, the Copa de la Reina, the Supercopa de Espana and a second-successive Women's Champions League.

Bonmati scored a goal and put in a player-of-the-match performance as Barcelona beat Lyon 2-0 in the final of the Champions



DOHA: Brazilian forward Vinicius Junior (L) receives the Best Player trophy from FIFA President Gianni Infantino during the Best FIFA Football Awards 2024 ceremony in Doha on December 17, 2024. — AFP

League to claim their third title in four seasons. Manchester United's Argentine forward Alejandro Garnacho won the Puskas

award for the best goal of the year for his spectacular bicycle kick against Everton in the Premier League. — AFP

Chelsea, Lyon top Women's CL groups with perfect records

MADRID: Catarina Macario scored two penalties in the space of five second-half minutes to lead Chelsea to a 2-1 comeback over Real Madrid in the Women's Champions League on Tuesday and confirm their status as group winners.

Eight-time winners Lyon edged Wolfsburg 1-0 thanks to a late Danielle van de Donk goal to complete their perfect record in Group A. The wins meant Chelsea and Lyon became the third and fourth sides in the history of the competition to register a perfect set of results in the group stage.

Introduced at half-time in Madrid with her side trailing to Caroline Weir's early opener for the hosts, 25-year-old Macario showed composure to convert twice from 12 yards and send Chelsea six points clear of their opponents on the last matchday of Group B.

"We were not very happy with our performance in the first half," said Chelsea manager Sonia Bompastor. "We all sat down together at half-time and told ourselves that we had nothing to lose. We have a strong mentality, and that's important to win games."

Weir's dinked finish in the seventh minute had Real going through to the quarter-finals as group winners on overall goal difference. But Macario flipped the pool on its head by levelling six minutes after coming onto the pitch and then completing the comeback on 56 minutes.

"Macario is a world-class player, she changed the game. She showed a lot of confidence by scoring those two penalties," said Bompastor. Real captain Olga Carmona—the scorer of the winning goal in the 2023 World Cup final for Spain against England—was the player who offered the English champions their way back into the tie.



MADRID: Real Madrid's Spanish forward #22 Athenea del Castillo fights for the ball with Chelsea's English defender #22 Lucy Bronze during the UEFA Women's Champions League preliminary round 1 group B football match between Real Madrid CF and Chelsea at the Alfredo Di Stefano stadium in Madrid on December 17, 2024. — AFP

She felled Macario to concede the first spot-kick, before later being penalized for a handball in the box. The result means Chelsea have now won their last nine group games in the Champions League, going back to last season.

In the pool's other match, Dutch side Twente condemned Celtic to a sixth defeat in six outings as they won 3-0 in Enschede. Lyon were already assured of top spot in their group but still laid down a statement before the quarter-finals by

beating Wolfsburg to ensure they finished nine points ahead of the second-placed Germans.

Dutch midfielder Van de Donk made it a perfect tournament so far for the French side with a flicked finish nine minutes from the full-time whistle.

Roma finished level on points with Wolfsburg by beating Galatasaray 3-0 in the Italian capital, but were already eliminated before kick-off due to their worse head-to-head record. — AFP

Koopmeiners stunner sends Juventus into Italian Cup q-finals

MILAN: Holders Juventus progressed to the quarter-finals of the Italian Cup with a 4-0 win at home to Cagliari on Tuesday. Dusan Vlahovic slotted home a first-half opener, before Teun Koopmeiners wrapped up the last-16 tie for the 15-time winners with a sensational free-kick from distance.

Francisco Conceicao and Nico Gonzalez netted late to underline an emphatic performance by the Old Lady. "It was a good performance," Juve coach Thiago Motta told Canale 5. "These lads are going through a tough situation in the right way, giving their all in every training session," he added of his players who have endured a stop-start domestic campaign as they sit sixth in the league table.

Juve join Lazio, Empoli, Bologna and AC Milan in the next stage of the cup. Serie A leaders Atalanta are in action on Wednesday against Cesena, while Roma take on Sampdoria. Reigning Scudetto champions Inter Milan complete the round of 16 when they host Udinese on Thursday.

In Turin, Vlahovic put the home side in front one minute before half-time when he swiveled smartly on a pass to feet from Kenan Yildiz and rolled the ball into the far corner. Summer signing Koopmeiners then notched up his second goal for Juve with an unstoppable left-footed free-kick from 25 meters out in the 53rd minute.

Vlahovic had the ball in the net twice more for Juve as they pressed forward in search of a third, but was on both occasions denied by the assistant's flag for offside. Conceicao eventually made it three on 80 minutes with a whipped finish after cutting in from the right flank and Gonzalez chipped home a fourth with one minute remaining. — AFP



MELBOURNE: People pay their respects as the hearse carrying the casket of Australian tennis great Neale Fraser leaves St Patrick's Cathedral after the state funeral. — AFP

Federer hails 'legend' as Australia says farewell to Fraser

MELBOURNE: Australian tennis great Neale Fraser was honored with a state funeral on Wednesday with Roger Federer among those paying tribute to "a true legend". Fraser, a former world number one and winner of 19 Grand Slam titles during the amateur era, died aged 91 earlier this month.

Australian former tennis players Lleyton Hewitt, Todd Woodbridge and John Fitzgerald were among the mourners at a service at Melbourne's St Patrick's Cathedral. Fitzgerald read out a letter from Swiss

legend Federer to Fraser's widow Thea, local media reported. "I'm deeply saddened to hear of Neale's passing... he was a true legend," Federer wrote.

"I always enjoyed his company when we met around the world," Fraser won three major singles titles, including a memorable Wimbledon final in 1960 when he beat Rod Laver, and 16 Grand Slam doubles crowns.

Speaking soon after his death, Laver called him "my dear mate" and "a true gem in a golden era of Australian tennis legends". In 1959 Fraser won all three US titles — singles, doubles and mixed — at Forest Hills and led Australia to glory in the Davis Cup, a competition he became synonymous with.

He captained the team for 24 years, steering them to four tournament wins, often saying: "I could never think of anything better than representing your country." — AFP

Renamed Super League submits plans for 96-team competition

PARIS: Super League promoters on Tuesday revealed they have asked FIFA and UEFA for "official recognition" of their proposed competition, renamed the "Unify League", leaning on a ruling from Europe's top court.

A22 Sports Management said it sent the proposal after discussions with various leagues, clubs and other stakeholders, revising its qualification system to base participation on annual domestic performances.

It has submitted plans for competitions featuring 96 teams divided into four leagues, running from September to April, followed by a knockout phase starting with the quarter-finals. In a statement, A22 argued last year's European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling meant that "any competition where qualification is inclusive and meritocratic,

and which complies with the overall match calendar can be officially established".

Promoters also said matches would be shown live for free via a streaming platform. "Our extensive engagement with key stakeholders revealed a number of pressing challenges facing the sport including increasing subscription costs for fans, an overloaded player calendar, insufficient investment in women's football, and dissatisfaction with the format and governance of the current pan-European competitions," A22 CEO Bernd Reichart said. "Our proposal is designed to directly address these challenges."

European football was hit with a bombshell in early 2021, when 12 of its biggest clubs announced they had signed up to the planned Super League, triggering a furious backlash from fans and a stark warning from UEFA that clubs and players who took parts would be barred from competitions like the World Cup.

Within 48 hours nine of the 12 rebel clubs—including six from the English Premier League—backed down and the project collapsed, but Real Madrid and Barcelona remain strong supporters of it.

McIlroy, Scheffler rout Koepka and DeChambeau in PGA-LIV duel

LOS ANGELES: Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler and third-ranked Rory McIlroy combined to give the PGA Tour a 2.5-0.5 victory over LIV Golf's Brooks Koepka and Bryson DeChambeau in Tuesday's Showdown match-play exhibition. The PGA pair captured the \$10 million top prize and tour bragging rights over the Saudi-backed upstart circuit in the four-man event at Shadow Creek in Las Vegas. "We're super happy to get the win. It's a nice way to finish the year," McIlroy said. "Scottie and I got off to a pretty good start and then from there it was just about trying to keep the momentum."

The event, played mostly after dark under special lighting, pitted four-time major winner McIlroy and two-time Masters champion Scheffler against five-time major winner Koepka and two-time US Open champion DeChambeau. "Under the lights was fun," Scheffler said. "It was

really challenging." The Showdown joined the majors as one of the few places where top players from the rival tours tested each other since the start of LIV, whose Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund backers remain in talks with the PGA about reuniting.

"It was great. I'd love to have another opportunity. Felt like it was a pillow fight from us," DeChambeau said. "It's good for the fans," added Koepka. "We didn't play that good but they played really solid." The Showdown featured a best-ball format for the duos on the first six holes, an alternate shot format on the second six and a singles format over holes 13 to 18 with McIlroy facing DeChambeau and Koepka against Scheffler for one point each.

Northern Ireland's McIlroy, who last month captured his sixth Race to Dubai crown on the DP World Tour, won the first two holes with five-foot birdie putts. McIlroy sank a 40-foot eagle putt and won the fourth hole when DeChambeau missed an eagle putt from inside five feet, giving the PGA duo a 3&2 best-ball triumph for the first point. "Rory getting off to a great start was pretty big for our team and made a statement out of the gate," said Scheffler. — AFP

Al-Mutairi inaugurates main media center for Khaleeji Zain 26

Al-Yateem: Opening ceremony is carefully prepared in line with slogan 'The Future is Gulf'



Main media center for the tournament at the Crowne Plaza Hotel.

Anything can happen at Khaleeji Zain 26: Saad Al-Houti

KUWAIT: One of Kuwait's greatest ever players has said that he is looking forward to supporting his beloved national team at the Khaleeji Zain 26 (Arabian Gulf Cup) which gets underway on Saturday evening at the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium. Saad Al-Houti captained Kuwait to Asian Cup glory in 1980, and also led his team to the FIFA World Cup finals in Spain two years later, establishing himself as one of the continent's all-time greats with more than 70 appearances for The Blues.

Speaking ahead of the start of the prestigious regional tournament, Al-Houti shared his thoughts on Kuwait's chances, who he thinks could be eventual champions and also some insights into his glorious career. "There will be a lot of psychological pressure on the Kuwait team which they will have to overcome," said the 70-year-old. "They are playing at home and in front of their own fans, which they need to use as an advantage.

"The first match against Oman on Saturday will be crucial as it will show us what we have to offer and how ready we are to compete. The team needs to be prepared both physically and mentally and we, as fans, have a role to play in supporting and making the home advantage count.

"The Argentine coach, Juan Pizzi, has only been in his position for two months so it is hard to judge progress in such a short space of time. It needs two years to make a difference." But Al-Houti shared his own experiences of being up against the odds, remembering the difficult build-up to their 1980 Asia Cup title win and also the challenges they faced in qualifying to the 1982 World Cup.



Saad Al-Houti at his home with Asian Cup 1980 ball and winner's medal.

While hoping that The Blues can advance from a tough Group A, Al-Houti believes that the UAE will be favorites after beating Qatar 5-0 in their World Cup qualifier last month. "They (UAE) looked very strong in their win over Qatar and must be considered as one of the teams who can win the title here," he said. Looking ahead to the tournament, which runs through to January 3, Al-Houti offered some wise advice to the Kuwaiti class of 2024 and reassured them that he will be their biggest supporter in the stadium.

"You must not give in to the psychological, public and media pressure," he said. "Never give up. The Gulf Cup is your gateway to the world of stardom and professionalism so be patient, keep going and if you suffer defeat, recover and bounce back in the next match. We are all right behind you."

Formerly known as the Arabian Gulf Cup, the Khaleeji Zain 26 will also see matches played at the Jaber Al-Mubarak International Stadium.

Tickets are now on sale through the Hayakom application, and also through a ticket box office located on the ground floors of the 360 Mall and Avenues Mall. The Khaleeji Zain 26 sees hosts, Kuwait, in Group A with Oman, UAE and Qatar, while reigning champions Iraq join Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in Group B.

KUWAIT: The Minister of Information and Culture, Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Chairman of the Supreme Organizing Committee of the Khaleeji Zain 26 tournament Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi inaugurated this afternoon the main media center for the tournament at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Farwaniya.

The center is equipped with the latest technical means of computers and their attachments, equipped with Internet service, and places dedicated to filming and press interviews to facilitate the task of media professionals who will flock to the country to cover the Gulf football championship, and the center includes a special "diwaniya" for media professionals equipped with a large television screen to follow the events of Khaleeji Zain 26 in addition to a Wi-Fi network, with buses allocated to transport the media from the center to the stadiums. The main media center will host pre-match press conferences, while post-match press conferences will be held at the Jaber International Stadium and Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium, which will also provide full services for journalists throughout the tournament.

For his part, the head of the Quality Control Committee, Faisal Al-Yateem, stated that: "The Supreme Organizing Committee of the Khaleeji Zain 26 tournament carefully selected a group of working committees to assume responsibility for planning, organization and implementation before and during the tournament, and decided to form a quality control committee to follow up and supervise the work of all committees, and follow up the progress of their work, and the committee submits detailed daily reports to the Supreme Organizing Committee on the progress

of the work of the various committees, the extent of what has been achieved, and the accuracy of the work done, and this new administrative approach aims to create a procedural guide and reference to be used in future international championships hosted by Kuwait, as well as its contribution to raising the efficiency of work as a whole".

Faisal Al-Yateem praised the efforts of the members of all committees under the Supreme Organizing Committee for the tournament, and said: "Everyone works hard and diligently, and we see daily progress in the work, through daily meetings, and the elimination of observations first, to reach the highest readiness before the start of the tournament."

Regarding the booking of tickets for the tournament's matches, Al-Yateem pointed out that tickets for all matches are available to everyone without exception, whether through the "Hayyakum" electronic application, or through the official account of the Gulf Football Federation on the social networking site (X) and the official account of the Kuwait Football Association, or through manual reservations at the sales centers located in the "Avenues and 360" complexes. Al-Yateem confirmed that the opening ceremony will be distinctive in all its details, prepared with great care, and fully consistent with the slogan "The Future is Gulf," adding that cooperation has been made with international companies specialized in organizing celebrations and international sports events for a distinctive opening ceremony for the Khaleeji Zain 26 tournament, and we hope that the ceremony, which will be held next Saturday evening, will win the satisfaction of everyone.

Bahraini team arrives

The Bahraini national team arrived in Kuwait on Wednesday morning to compete in the Khaleeji Zain 26 competitions which starts the day after Saturday and continues until January 3. The delegation headed to its residence at the Jumeirah Hotel, while the team held its first training in the evening at the Mohammed Al-Hamad Stadium at Al-Qadisiyah Club. "The Gulf Championship is very important for us, as it is a sporting gathering that brings together brothers, and it is also a very important regional competition for us, and for the Bahraini sports street, which holds great hopes and ambitions for the team in this tournament," said Mahmoud Riad, director of the Bahraini national team.

For his part, the media coordinator of the Bahraini team, Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar, said: "We are happy to be in our beloved Kuwait to participate in the tournament that is dear to all of us, and we aspire to achieve the second title after the first, which the Bahraini team won in 2019."

He added: "The public is thirsty for the second title, and the journey is difficult and the eye is on the matches of the UAE and Iraq, and all matches are difficult and strong, and all teams are ready, as there are 7 teams that are fully prepared, after they started their journey in the Asian qualifiers for the World Cup." The Bahraini national team will start its participation in the tournament with a strong confrontation against its Saudi counterpart next Sunday evening at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium, then meet its Iraqi counterpart on December 25, and conclude its journey in the group stage against Yemen on the 28th of the same month.

Giannis stars as Bucks beat Thunder to win NBA Cup

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo and the Milwaukee Bucks silenced the Oklahoma City Thunder in the second half to win the second edition of the NBA Cup with a 97-81 victory in Las Vegas on Tuesday.

Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo delivered a triple-double of 26 points, 19 rebounds and 10 assists along with two steals and three blocked shots for the Bucks, who drilled 17 three-pointers to complete an unbeaten run and follow in the footsteps of the Los Angeles Lakers as in-season tournament champions.

Damian Lillard scored 23 points for the Bucks, who held the potentially explosive Thunder offense to 31 points in the second half. "That's who we are," Antetokounmpo said of the Bucks' second-half dominance, which saw them push a one-point lead at halftime to as many as 20.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the Thunder with 21 points, but he connected on just eight of his 24 shots from the field, two of nine from three-point range. The triumph was a vindication for the Bucks, who were stung by the Indiana Pacers in last year's Cup semi-finals. They were the only team from last season's semis to make it back to the final four in Vegas, beating the Orlando Magic in the quarter-finals and dispatching Atlanta in the semis. Their Cup success has been part of a massive turnaround after a dismal 2-8 start to the season.

They have now won 13 of their last 16 games, and Antetokounmpo, who led the Bucks to the 2021 NBA title, indicated he considered it only a stepping stone. "It's great for our team," said Antetokounmpo, who was named MVP of the tournament. "The last 15 games we've played, we've competed. We've played team basketball. "I'm so proud of this group," he added. "Coming out of halftime we know we have 24 minutes to go, we came out in the third quarter, we set the tone. We played great team basketball."



LAS VEGAS: Damian Lillard #0 and Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks pose for a photo after the game against the Oklahoma City Thunder during the Emirates NBA Cup Championship game at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas. — AFP

'Not done'

The Bucks held the Thunder to just 14 points in the third quarter—their lowest points total in a period this season. "Most importantly we are competing defensively," Antetokounmpo said. "That's who we are. That's who we're going to continue to be—and the job's not done."

Unlike the rest of the Cup matches, the final does not count toward the regular-season record, nor do the players' performances count in their career stats. But the trophy does come with a financial reward with each player on the winning team set to pocket more than \$514,971 -- a significant chunk of money for the younger players and lesser lights on the team.

Thunder players will take home \$205,988 apiece for the runner-up finish. But they will head back to Oklahoma City disappointed with one of their worst shooting performances of the season. "We didn't shoot it well tonight," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "It's not really an excuse. There was definitely controllables tonight we could have taken care of and we didn't do so, and that's why the score looked the way it does. "We've shot bad and won games before." — AFP

Kuwait Airport to welcome 30,000 fans for Khaleeji Zain 26

KUWAIT: Kuwait International Airport is preparing to welcome 30,000 fans for the Khaleeji Zain 26, hosted by Kuwait from December 21 to January 3, said a Kuwaiti aviation official on Wednesday. Acting Deputy Director General for Aviation Safety, Air Transport, and Civil Aviation Security, and spokesperson for the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) Abdullah Al-Rajhi stated to KUNA that they are coordinating with relevant authorities to facilitate the fans entry process arriving from GCC countries.

Al-Rajhi noted that a comprehensive plan has been set to ensure smooth operations, provide necessary support to visitors, and simplify all procedures. He explained that the anticipated number of fans arriving at Kuwait Airport by additional flights, excluding regular scheduled flights, during this period is almost 30,000 with 75 expected flights. Al-Rajhi stressed that DGCA has allocated special teams in the arrival halls to guide fans and provide necessary support, adding that special reception areas for large groups have been set up, equipped with screens displaying transportation information. He affirmed DGCA's commitment to delivering top-tier services to Kuwait's guests during the tournament, praising the efforts of the airport's staff, including the Ministry of Interior, the General Administration of Customs, airlines, ground service providers, and the Gulf Cup organizing committee. Kuwait is gearing up for a historic football event by playing host to the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup titled Khaleeji Zain 26, making it the fifth time the championship is held in Kuwait.

The Arabian Gulf Cup, which began in 1970, has solidified its place as one of the most prominent sporting events in the region, obviously reflecting unity, deep-rooted relations, and shared heritage of Gulf nations. The Arabian Gulf Cup is held every two years, rotating among the member states of the Arabian Gulf Cup Football Federation, which comprises Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen. The matches of this Kuwait-hosted tournament will be played at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium and Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium. — KUNA