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Mideast marks somber Xmas

No festive decorations in Bethlehem • HTS assures Syrians after tree burned



BETHLEHEM: Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Pierbattista Pizzaballa delivers a speech on Dec 24, 2024 near the Church of the Nativity. — AFP



KUWAIT: People stand near a Christmas tree at a hotel on Dec 24, 2024. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

BETHLEHEM: Hundreds of people gathered at the Church of the Nativity in the holy city of Bethlehem on Tuesday to mark another solemn Christmas overshadowed by the war in Gaza. Missing for a second consecutive year were the festive decorations, and the crowd paled in comparison to the throngs of tourists and pilgrims of Christmases past — a reflection of the somber mood as the Zionist war in the Gaza Strip drags on.

At Manger Square, the heart of the Palestinian city dominated by the revered church that marks the site where Christians believe Jesus Christ (PBUH) was born, a group of scouts held a small parade that broke the morning's silence. "Our children want to play and laugh," read a sign carried by one of them, as his friends whistled and cheered.

The Zionist war in Gaza has left 45,338 people dead, mostly civilians. Traditionally in Bethlehem, a grand Christmas tree would light up Manger Square, but local authorities opted against elaborate celebrations for a second year.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

11 killed in Turkey factory blast

ISTANBUL: A powerful blast ripped through an explosives plant in northwestern Turkey on Tuesday, killing 11 people and injuring seven others. Shards of glass and metal were scattered outside the plant north of the city of Balikesir, where ambulances stood by. The governor of Balikesir province said the blast happened because of a "technical malfunction" on a production line at the factory, which produces munitions and explosives for civilian use. An investigation has been opened and the theory of sabotage has already been ruled out. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan offered his condolences and as well as the interior minister, he also sent defense and labor ministers to the scene. — AFP

Zionists kill 2 in West Bank raid

TULKAREM: Palestinian officials reported Zionist forces killed two Palestinians, including a woman, during a raid at a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday. According to the Palestinian ministry of health, 53-year-old Khawla Ali Abdullah Abdo was killed in an air strike at the Tulkarem camp, while 18-year-old Fathi Said Awda Ubaid was fatally shot in the chest and abdomen. The Palestinian Red Crescent said its ambulances faced challenges accessing the scene. Residents of the Tulkarem camp reported that the raid, which began in the early hours of Tuesday, involved bulldozers destroying roads. — AFP

Iran lifts WhatsApp, Google Play ban

TEHRAN: Iranian authorities lifted on Tuesday a ban on Meta's instant messaging platform WhatsApp and Google Play as a first step to scale back Internet restrictions. "Today, we took the first step towards lifting Internet restrictions with unanimity and consensus," Minister of Communications Sattar Hashemi said on X. "The restrictions have achieved nothing but anger and added costs to people's lives," presidential adviser Ali Rabiei said on X Tuesday. "President Masoud Pezeshkian believes in removing restrictions and does not consider the bans to be in the interest of the people and the country. All experts also believe that this issue is not beneficial to the country's security," Vice President Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Tuesday. — AFP

Zionists force patients out of Gaza hospital

GAZA: Zionist troops forced the evacuation of the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza and many patients, some of them on foot, arrived at another hospital miles away in Gaza City, the territory's health ministry said on Tuesday. The Indonesian Hospital is one of the Gaza Strip's few still partially functioning hospitals, on its northern edge, an area that has been under intense Zionist military pressure for nearly three months.

Palestinians accuse the Zionist entity of seeking to permanently depopulate northern Gaza to create a buffer zone. Munir Al-Bursh, director of the health ministry in the Gaza Strip, said the Zionist army had ordered hospital officials to evacuate it on Monday, before storming it in the early hours of Tuesday and forcing those inside to leave. He said two other medical facilities in northern Gaza, Al-Awda and Kamal Adwan Hospitals, were also subject to frequent assaults by Zionist troops.

Zionist forces have operated in the vicinity of the Kamal Adwan hospital since Monday, medics said. Officials at the three hospitals have refused orders by the Zionist entity to evacuate their facilities or leave patients unattended since the new military offensive began on Oct 5. Hussam Abu Safiya, director of the Kamal Adwan Hospital, said

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GAZA: Members of the civil defense mourn over the bodies of their colleague Najib Sukkar and his son Mohammed, who were killed in a Zionist strike, during their funeral in Gaza City on Dec 24, 2024. — AFP

Syrian armed groups agree to disband, merge

DAMASCUS: Syria's new leaders announced Tuesday that they had reached an agreement with the country's rebel groups on their dissolution and integration under the defense ministry. Absent from the meeting were representatives of the US-backed, Kurdish-led forces that control swathes of Syria's northeast.

The meeting between the rebel groups and Syria's new leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa "ended in an agreement on the dissolution of all the groups and

their integration under the supervision of the ministry of Defense", said a statement carried by the SANA news agency and the authorities' Telegram account. The announcement comes just over two weeks after president Bashar Al-Assad fled Syria, following a lightning offensive spearheaded by Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group.

On Sunday Sharaa, long known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani, had said the new authorities would "absolutely not allow there to be weapons in the country outside state control". That also applied to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), he said. Last week, the military chief of HTS told AFP that Kurdish-held areas would be integrated under the new leadership, and that "Syria will not be divided".



DAMASCUS: A member of the security forces sorts firearms surrendered by former soldiers, police members and civilians at a center for handing over weapons and security registration with the new authorities on Dec 24, 2024. — AFP

Blast sinks Russia cargo ship in Med

MOSCOW: Two crewmembers are missing after a Russian defense ministry-owned cargo ship sank in international waters in the Mediterranean following an explosion on board, Moscow said Tuesday, giving few

details on the ship's mission or what caused the deadly incident. The Ursa Major sank "after an explosion in the engine room", the Russian foreign ministry's crisis unit said on Telegram. It added that out of the 16 Russian crewmembers, 14 had been rescued and taken to the Spanish port of Cartagena and two were missing.

The Ursa Major is listed on MarineTraffic.com as a 124.7-m-long general cargo ship that was sailing from the Russian city of Saint Petersburg to Vladivostok in Russia's Far East.

Russian transport investigators announced they had opened a probe into the "incident" over possible maritime safety violations, without giving details. The ship sent a distress call Monday morning from off the coast of southeastern Spain in bad weather, reporting it was listing and sailors had launched a lifeboat, Spain's sea rescue service said in a statement.

Spain sent out a helicopter and rescue boats and took the survivors to port, the service said. A Russian warship then arrived and took charge

of the rescue operation since the ship was between Spanish and Algerian waters, after which the Ursa Major sunk overnight. "According to the survivors' account, the cargo ship was carrying empty containers in the hold and two cranes on deck," the Spanish rescue service said.

The ship is owned by a subsidiary of Russia's Oboronlogistika, which belongs to the defense ministry and also provides civilian transport and logistics, the Russian foreign ministry said.

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Souq Al-Mubarakiya: A popular stop for Khaleeji Zain 26 fans

Landmark market comes alive with fans' passion for football



KUWAIT: Fans from across the Arabian Gulf region enjoy Souq Al-Mubarakiya during the Khaleeji Zain 26 football tournament. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: Souq Al-Mubarakiya has become a top destination for football fans attending Khaleeji Zain 26, the regional football tournament bringing together the eight Gulf nations. Taking place from December 21 to January 3 in Kuwait, the tournament has attracted supporters from Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, the UAE, and Qatar. These fans have come not only to enjoy the football matches but also to immerse themselves in the rich culture of Kuwait. While the tournament is the main attraction, many visitors have also explored Kuwait's famous landmarks, such as The Avenues Mall and the newly developed Blajat waterfront project. However, Souq Al-Mubarakiya in the heart of Kuwait City remains one of the most popular spots. Located in the Qibla area, the souq is a vibrant historical market that showcases Kuwait's cultural heritage.

As Kuwait's oldest and most famous market, Souq Al-Mubarakiya holds a special place in the hearts of locals. The market offers a wide variety of goods, from spices and textiles to perfumes, antiques, and jewelry. Visitors can wander through its winding alleys, enjoying the traditional atmosphere and shopping for unique items.

During Khaleeji Zain 26, the souq has become even more lively, as fans from across the Gulf



bring their passion for football into the market. Many have been posting videos on social media, showing themselves supporting their teams, singing chants, and even playing impromptu games of football in the alleys of the market. These playful moments have added to the festive atmosphere, blending the excitement of the tournament with the market's rich cultural backdrop. The videos

shared online highlight the unity and enthusiasm of the fans, with many showcasing the community spirit that defines the tournament.

In addition to its role as a popular tourist destination, Souq Al-Mubarakiya is a symbol of Kuwait's history as a trade and cultural hub in the Gulf. The market, which dates back over 120 years, has preserved much of its traditional

charm, making it a bridge between Kuwait's past and present. For visitors attending Khaleeji Zain 26, a trip to Souq Al-Mubarakiya is a great way to experience both the excitement of the tournament and Kuwait's cultural heritage. Whether it's sampling local dishes, shopping for souvenirs, or simply enjoying the atmosphere, the market offers a memorable cultural experience.

MoH urges caution with heaters amid winter weather

KUWAIT: While winter offers an opportunity for many to enjoy the cooler weather, ensuring public safety requires caution and awareness to avoid the risks associated with improper heating device use. Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad, the official spokesperson for the Ministry of Health, emphasized the importance of following safety guidelines when using heating devices—whether traditional or modern—at home or in camps.

Dr Al-Sanad highlighted that carbon monoxide is one of the main hazards tied to traditional heating methods such as charcoal and wood. This gas is colorless, odorless, and produced by the incomplete combustion of organic materials. Inhaling carbon monoxide can lead to symptoms like headaches and nausea, and in severe cases, it can cause unconsciousness or even death. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over 400 deaths occur annually in the United States due to carbon monoxide poisoning, alongside more than 100,000 emergency room visits.

He further explained that inhaling smoke from burning charcoal or wood indoors poses significant risks to the respiratory system, particularly for individuals with asthma or chronic lung diseases. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that pollution from solid fuels contributes to 3.2 million premature deaths globally each year. These statistics underscore the need for safe heating practices and proper ventilation to prevent the buildup of harmful gases and smoke in enclosed spaces.

When discussing electric and gas heaters, Dr Al-Sanad noted that they are generally safer options if used correctly. However, he stressed the importance of regular maintenance to ensure that these devices are working properly and that there are no faults that could lead to gas leaks or electrical hazards. He also advised placing heaters in stable locations, away from flammable materials such as curtains or furniture, and urged people to never leave them unattended, especially when sleeping or leaving the house.

Dr Al-Sanad also emphasized the need to monitor electrical wiring to prevent fire risks and recommended regular ventilation when using gas heaters to avoid the accumulation of harmful combustion gases. Although these steps may seem simple, they are critical in ensuring safety and preventing accidents, he said.



KUWAIT: A tourist from the United Arab Emirates tours the Hussein Al-Bloushi Museum. — KUNA photos



The Golden medal, Iraq's national team won in the ninth 1988 Gulf Cup held in Riyadh.



The football jersey of Kuwaiti player Ali Budustoor, which he wore during a match with Sporting Lisbon in 1980.

Al-Bloushi Museum honors Kuwait's Gulf Cup glory

KUWAIT: The personal museum of Kuwaiti sports historian Hussein Al-Bloushi is the first of its kind in Asia, dedicated exclusively to football history. It showcases the rich sporting heritage of Kuwait, with a particular focus on the country's triumphs in the Arabian Gulf Cup tournaments, culminating in Kuwait's hosting of the 26th edition of the competition (Khaleeji Zain 26).

Al-Bloushi, speaking to KUNA, said the museum, located in his home in the Abdullah Mubarak area, is open daily to visitors. Fans attending Khaleeji Zain 26 can enjoy a journey through history, reliving the glory days of Kuwaiti sports and exploring a wide

array of artifacts from the Gulf and Arab football scene, as well as international football history, collected over decades.

The museum houses more than 10,000 items, including rare and exceptional sports memorabilia dating back to the early days of Kuwait's sports movement and past Gulf Cup tournaments. Among the exhibits are trophies, medals, player jerseys worn by football legends, match balls from decisive games, and footwear worn by prominent Gulf stars in various tournaments.

Additionally, the museum holds an extensive archive of articles, media reports, and interviews conducted by Al-Bloushi throughout his career in sports journalism. This archive includes coverage of major events like the Gulf Cup, the Olympics, and the FIFA World Cup, as well as interviews with players, coaches, and sports officials.

The collection also features historic documents, old match tickets, and programs from tournaments held in Kuwait since the 1950s, alongside rare archival photos of Kuwait's first football teams and players who have become icons in Kuwaiti sports history. — KUNA



The medal designated for the winning team in the fifth Gulf Cup held in 1979 in Iraq.



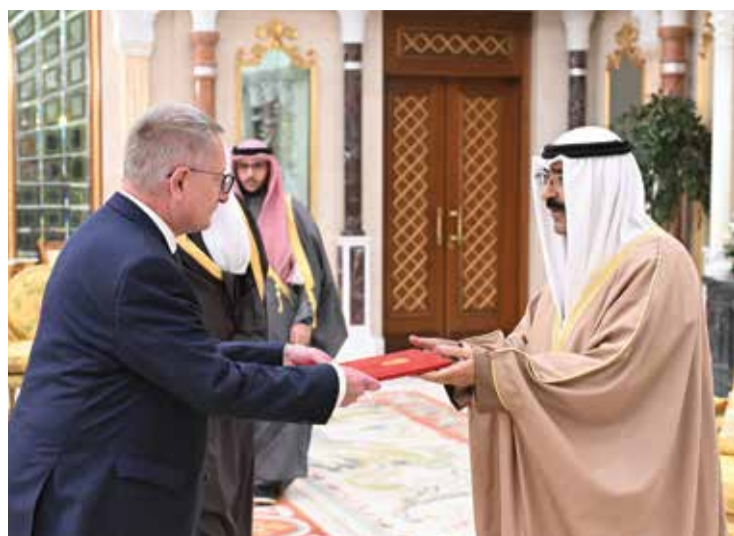
The award designated for the top scorer of the tenth Gulf Cup held in Kuwait in 1990.



A football used in a match between Kuwait and Bahrain's national teams in 1974.



Kuwaiti sports historian Hussein Al-Bloushi



Amir receives credentials of new envoys

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Tuesday credentials of newly appointed ambassadors to the country, (clockwise from top left) Ambassador of Austria Ulrich Frank, Ambassador of Peru Carlos Enrique Tomas Jimenez Gil-For-toul, Ambassador of Cuba Alain Perez Torres, Ambassador of Japan Mokai Kenchiro and Ambassador of Lesotho Manthabiseng Phohleli during a ceremony at Bayan Palace. Attending the ceremony were senior state officials. — KUNA



Kuwait, Pakistan discuss military ties

Crown Prince receives Pakistan's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff



KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets Pakistan's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Lieutenant General Sahir Shamshad Mirza. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace on Tuesday First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Saud Al-Sabah and Pakistan's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Lieutenant General Sahir Shamshad Mirza, along with his accompanying delegation. Attending the meeting were Chief of His Highness

the Crown Prince's office, Retired Lieutenant General Jamal Al-Thayab, Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs at the Crown Prince's Diwan Mazen Al-Essa and Deputy Chief of Staff Sheikh Sabah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Lieutenant General Mirza also met with Undersecretary of the Kuwait National Guard Lieutenant General Hashim Al-Rifai on Tuesday. The officials discussed ways to enhance military cooperation.



Undersecretary of the Kuwait National Guard Lieutenant General Hashim Al-Rifai shakes hands with Lieutenant General Mirza.

This came in a press statement issued by the National Guard following Al-Rifai's reception of Gen. Mirza and his accompanying delegations during their official visit to Kuwait. Al-Rifai conveyed greetings from National Guard Chief Sheikh Mubarak Humoud Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and Deputy Chief Sheikh Faisal Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah to the visiting delegation, the statement added. — KUNA

Scholarship for Kuwaiti teachers at Japan univs

KUWAIT: The Japanese Embassy in Kuwait announced on Tuesday the launch of its government scholarship (MEXT 2025 Teacher Training Program), which allows Kuwaiti teachers to conduct research on school education at designated Japanese universities. On qualifications and eligibilities, the embassy revealed that Kuwaiti applicants must be born on or after April 2, 1990.

The embassy added applicants must be graduates of universities or teacher training schools and have worked as teachers at elementary, middle or secondary schools in Kuwait for at least five years. In-service faculty members in higher education institutions are not eligible.

"Applicants should be physically fit to participate in the program... must be interested in Japan and be willing to deepen their understanding of Japan after arriving there. Applicants must also have the ability to do research in Japan and adapt to living there," added the embassy. It also noted that applications must be submitted to the Embassy of Japan by hand and after receiving the applications, the embassy would conduct the document screening, written exam in English and Japanese, and personal interview in order to select the scholarship awardees. The embassy indicated that the deadline for submitting applications is Thursday, Feb 6, 2025 at 03:00 pm. — KUNA



NBK and KOC officials are seen in this photo.



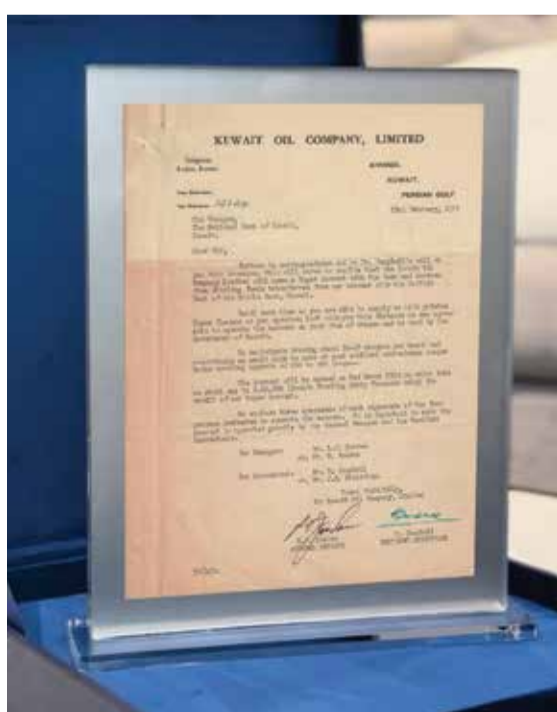
Salah Al-Fulaij, Chief Executive Officer of NBK Kuwait and Ahmed Al-Eidan, CEO of Kuwait Oil Company, pose for a photo.

NBK marks KOC's 90th anniversary with special present

KUWAIT: A delegation from National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), headed by Salah Al-Fulaij, Chief Executive Officer of NBK Kuwait, visited the headquarters of Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) to extend congratulations on the company's milestone 90th anniversary. On this occasion, Al-Fulaij presented a commemorative souvenir symbolizing the deep-rooted historical ties between the bank and KOC—a document marking the opening of the company's first account with NBK. KOC opened a current account with NBK shortly after the bank's inauguration, making it one of the first 500 accounts in NBK's history, opened within just two months of the bank commencing operations.

Commenting on the occasion, Al-Fulaij stated: "We are honored to be here today to celebrate the 90th anniversary of this esteemed and pioneering institution in the field of oil and gas exploration, a leader not only in Kuwait but across the entire region." Al-Fulaij highlighted the enduring partnership between NBK and KOC, emphasizing that it dates back to the earliest days of the bank's founding and the commencement of its operations over 70 years ago. He noted that the opening of KOC's first current account at NBK marked the beginning of a long-standing relationship, built over decades, between two of the most prominent and pioneering economic entities in Kuwait and the GCC.

He underscored NBK's deep-rooted and excep-



KUWAIT: A document marking the opening of KOC's first account with NBK was presented to KOC in celebration of the company's 90th anniversary.

tional relationship with the oil sector, highlighting the bank's active role in developing the skills and potential of young professionals within the sector, reinforcing its commitment to supporting the growth and sustainability of this vital industry. "Throughout the years, NBK has been instrumental in financing the oil sector, spearheading numerous significant deals for

major projects. This has firmly established the bank as the leading partner for sector companies in driving their expansion initiatives. With a dedicated and highly specialized team focused on the oil industry, NBK provides efficient and timely financing solutions," Al-Fulaij added.

Furthermore, he highlighted that the bank's commitment to actively participating in financing oil sector projects, including those of KOC, reflects its confidence in the robust financial position of KOC and its subsidiaries. He further emphasized the exceptional management expertise within KOC, which is well-equipped to execute its growth plans in alignment with the 2040 strategy.

Ahmed Al-Eidan, CEO of Kuwait Oil Company, expressed pride in the decades-long historical relationship with NBK, commending the bank's financing services for their positive impact on the company's growth journey. Al-Eidan highlighted NBK's pivotal role as a key partner to KOC in advancing the sustainability agenda, a priority area that the company holds in high regard.

He commended NBK's leadership in delivering top-tier services and innovative financing solutions, underscoring the longstanding and robust collaboration between the bank and the company—a partnership rooted in decades of shared success and mutual commitment.

KOC was officially launched on December 23, 1934, under the name Kuwait Oil Company Limited. This establishment resulted from a partnership between two international companies: "Anglo-Iranian Oil Company," now known as British Petroleum (BP), and "American Gulf Oil Company," which is today recognized as Chevron. In that year, the company was granted the concession to explore for oil in Kuwait, marking the beginning of the country's oil industry.

Health experts warn of e-cigarette risks

By Abdellrif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Dr Khalid Al-Saleh, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Kuwait Society for Combating Smoking and Cancer, highlighted the alarming global rise of vaping, particularly among young people. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the use of e-cigarettes has spread rapidly across all regions, with the number of young people aged 13 to 15 who use tobacco estimated at 37 million worldwide, surpassing the rates among adults.

Dr Al-Saleh shared that the society's smoking cessation clinic has observed that while regular cigarette smokers are increasingly motivated to quit due to awareness of its harmful effects, there is a significantly lower percentage of e-cigarette users seeking help. In 2024, the clinic treated 121 patients of all ages, including 12 percent women. Of those, 6 percent successfully quit smoking, with ongoing follow-up and counseling sessions provided.

He emphasized that the relatively low number of e-cigarette users visiting the clinic could be attributed to the misconception promoted by media that e-cigarettes are a healthier alternative to traditional cigarettes. This misunderstanding has led many to believe there is no need to quit or seek help. Dr Al-Saleh warned that e-cigarettes are just as harmful as regular cigarettes. Scientific studies, including research published on the American medical platform PubMed, have linked e-cigarette use to an increase in sudden deaths, though the exact cause remains undetermined.

Dr Husna Majid Al-Shaheen, representative of the Kuwait Society for Combating Smoking and Cancer in the National Anti-Smoking Program at the Ministry of Health, praised the program's ongoing efforts to fight smoking. Al-Shaheen emphasized the importance of enacting laws to protect youth from the dangers of smoking, which not only harm health but also hinder the development of countries striving for growth across all sectors.

Namaa Charity helps Syrian refugees in southern Turkey

ANKARA: The Kuwaiti Namaa Charity concluded on Tuesday a comprehensive humanitarian program aimed at providing support and relief to 4,880 Syrian refugees in the regions of Urfa, Gaziantep, Kilis, Antakya, and Reyhanli in southern Turkey. Khaled Al-Shammari, an official with the charity, stated in a statement to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) that the program included the distribution of food baskets, winter clothing for orphans, heating materials to help them face the harsh cold, and vouchers for the most needy families, allowing them to purchase their essential needs.

Al-Shammari pointed out that this program is part of a campaign launched by Namaa Charity to provide relief to those in need in winter in the most affected countries. He emphasized that Namaa is committed to reinforcing Kuwait's leading role in humanitarian work, providing essential assistance, and embodying the foundation's vision in promoting values of cooperation and humanitarian solidarity. — KUNA



ANKARA: Young Syrian girls dressed in Kuwait's national colors wave Kuwaiti flags in gratitude to Namaa Charity's humanitarian assistance. — KUNA photos



People gather to receive relief supplies as part of a campaign organized by Namaa Charity to support 4,880 Syrian refugees in Southern Turkey.

Center organizes lecture on countering extremist ideologies

KUWAIT: The Center for Promoting Moderation, affiliated with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, organized a seminar titled "Protecting Children" on Tuesday to raise awareness about the dangers of extremist ideologies and ways to combat them. The event was held under the patronage of the Minister of Justice and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Dr. Mohammad Al-Wasmi. Dr. Abdullah Al-Sharika, Director of the center, told KUNA that this seminar is part of a series of activities aimed at educating the public and families about the dangers of extremist thought, identifying behaviors indicative of being influenced by such ideologies, and focusing on the role of family-based solutions to address these issues.

Al-Sharika emphasized the importance of being vigilant in dealing with social media and statements that may lead to crimes under domestic and international law. He also pointed out that there are effective family-based interventions to promote tolerance, moderation, and a correct understanding of Islam, rejecting extremism. He expressed gratitude for the support of the political leadership, the state, and officials concerned with combating extremism, which poses a threat to the thoughts and behaviors of the younger generation. The seminar was held at the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs' theater, with the participation of the center's director, as well as experts and specialists who stressed the importance of raising awareness and combating extremist ideologies in society. — KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Men stand near a Christmas tree on Christmas eve at a hotel in Kuwait City on December 24, 2024. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait's unity seen through the eyes of its first pastor

Weekly diwanis hosted by the church bring Muslims and Christians together

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: Kuwait's first Christian pastor, Emmanuel Benjamin Gharib, who has been shepherding the National Evangelical Church for 25 years, recalled how he started his journey of deepening his faith and knowledge of Christianity in 1986. It was then that he felt he received what he called "God's calling," urging him to make a life-changing decision by quitting his job in the petroleum sector and pursuing a theology degree at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo.

Ever since, his goal has been to continue spreading love and peace within the Kuwaiti community, which he describes as an already "open and tolerant society." Reflecting on Kuwait's unique social fabric, he noted: "Since its early days, Kuwait has been a melting pot of cultures, with people arriving from neighboring countries like Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, and later from other parts of the world. That is the secret to Kuwait's success as a homeland of security, peace, and love."

This harmony between Muslims and Christians, which he says has existed since Kuwait's inception, is exemplified in the weekly diwanis held every Monday in the church. These gatherings welcome guests



Kuwaiti pastor Emmanuel Gharib, Chairman of the National Evangelical Church Kuwait, leads a Christmas mass at a church in Kuwait City on December 24, 2018. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

from all religions and segments of society to discuss various matters. Gharib follows the biblical principle that states: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

Gharib also expressed his gratitude for the free-

doms Christians enjoy in Kuwait, particularly the ability to practice their faith openly. "We thank God for the freedom we have as Christians to conduct our religious practices in Kuwait," he said. He also highlighted the government's efforts, particularly those of the Ministry of Interior, in ensuring the safety of churches during special occasions. "We coordinate with officials who deploy patrols to ensure that worshippers can pray in safety and joy during these happy occasions," he added.

The pastor extended his best wishes to all those celebrating religious occasions. "On these occasions, we congratulate everyone celebrating and pray that God grants them days filled with joy and happiness. It's also a time to remember those in need and, by God's grace, meet their needs to bring smiles to their hearts and joy to their lives." Finally, Gharib emphasized the importance of staying rooted in religious values. He believes that adhering to these principles is essential for safeguarding oneself from impurities and harmful influences, particularly "in a world increasingly dominated by materialism, atheism, and moral deviations." According to him, straying from these values inevitably leads to the decay of social values and morals.

Bursa Kuwait solidifies partnership with Kuwait Red Cross

KUWAIT: Reaffirming its commitment to corporate social responsibility, Bursa Kuwait has strengthened its strategic partnership with the Kuwait Red Crescent Society as a Humanitarian Partner, sponsoring the Society's "Basic Education" initiative for the fourth consecutive year and its "College Education" initiative in 2024. The Kuwait Red Crescent Society's "Basic Education" initiative aims to provide education for children from low-income families in Kuwait who face challenging living conditions. These circumstances often force families to deprive their children of an education because of the high costs of tuition fees. Meanwhile, the "University Education" initiative focuses on covering tuition fees for students at the Arab Open University, offering scholarships to support them throughout their academic journey.

Bursa Kuwait's sponsorship of these initiatives stems from its firm belief in the vital role of education as a cornerstone of sustainable development and economic prosperity and has been a central pillar of the company's Corporate Sustainability Strategy since its inception. "Bursa Kuwait is proud to support initiatives that create a positive and lasting impact on the community. Our strategic partnership with the Kuwait Red Crescent Society reflects this commitment, and we are honored to sponsor the 'Basic Education' initiative for the fourth consecutive year, along with the 'College Education' initiative for 2024. These efforts further strengthen our collaboration with the Society and its mission to improve living conditions and build a brighter future for Kuwaiti society. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Kuwait Red Crescent Society for its exceptional efforts and vital role in serving the community and implementing humanitarian projects within Kuwait and beyond," said Senior Director of Marketing and Corporate Communication Naser Meshari Al-Sanousi.

The Kuwait Red Crescent Society is a humanitarian, volunteer-based organization dedicated to



KUWAIT: Bursa Kuwait and Kuwait Red Crescent Society officials pose for a photo.

aiding and supporting the most vulnerable cases, whether arising from specific social circumstances, wars, or natural disasters, without discrimination based on religion, sect, nationality, gender, or race. Operating autonomously and serving as an auxiliary body to official authorities in humanitarian efforts, the society strives to promote the concept of social responsibility among private sector institutions, reinforcing their crucial role in supporting humanitarian causes.

Commenting on the continued partnership, General Manager of the Kuwait Red Crescent Society Abdulrahman Mohammad Al-Oun said: "The Kuwait Red Crescent Society takes great pride in its enduring partnership with Bursa Kuwait, a collaboration that exemplifies our shared commitment to improving the lives and creating a brighter future for individuals in Kuwaiti society. We value Bursa Kuwait's unwavering support

as one of the key contributors to our initiatives, setting a remarkable standard of leadership and generosity in advancing humanitarian and community-focused efforts."

The Kuwait Red Crescent Society firmly believes in the power of partnerships to achieve its mission and implement impactful projects and initiatives that benefit civil society while fostering a strong sense of social responsibility. Additionally, the Society's collaborations with the private sector are characterized by exceptional management and strategic planning, enabling the delivery of high-quality services to those in need. Bursa Kuwait's sponsorship of these initiatives forms part of its efforts to create a lasting meaningful impact on the communities where it operates as part of its Corporate Sustainability Strategy and is in line with Goal 4 – Quality Education – and Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities – of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



Global hunger monitor: Famine in war-torn Sudan is spreading

Bangladesh protesters enter television station

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Syrian street vender Abou Ali sells juice at the Khan el-Khalili bazaar area in the old Islamic quarter of Cairo on August 29, 2024. — AFP

Syrians face uncertain future in Egypt

Cairo suspends Syrian residency renewals pending security checks

25,000 Syrians returned home since Assad's fall

ISTANBUL: More than 25,000 Syrians have returned home from Turkey since Bashar Al-Assad was overthrown by Islamist-led HTS rebels, Turkey's interior minister said Tuesday.

Turkey is home to nearly three million refugees who fled the civil war that broke out in 2011, and whose presence has been an issue for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. "The number of people returning to Syria in the last 15 days has exceeded 25,000," Ali Yerlikaya told the official Anadolu news agency. Ankara is in close touch with Syria's new leaders and now focusing on the voluntary return of Syrian refugees, hoping the shift in power in Damascus will allow many of them to return home. Yerlikaya said a migration office would be established in the Turkish embassy and consulate in Damascus and Aleppo so that the records of returning Syrians could be kept.

Turkey reopened its embassy in Damascus, nearly a week after Assad was toppled by forces backed by Ankara, and 12 years after the diplomatic outpost was shuttered early in Syria's civil war. Yerlikaya said one person from each family will be given the right to enter and exit three times from January 1 to July 2025 under regulations to be drafted upon Erdogan's instructions. Syrians returning to their country will be able to take their belongings and cars with them, he added. — AFP

Somalia, Ethiopia hold talks after deadly clash

MOGADISHU: Ethiopia and Somalia held talks on Tuesday and tried to move past a deadly border region clash the day before and keep a fragile detente on track. Somalia's state minister for foreign affairs, Ali Mohamed Omar, met his Ethiopian counterpart, Mesganu Arega, after their forces clashed in the Somali border state of Jubaland on Monday.

Sources in Jubaland, a semi-autonomous state that has clashed violently with the Somali federal government in recent weeks, says the Ethiopian troops were protecting a group of its local politicians from an attack by Somali forces in the town of Doolow. The Somali minister expressed the government's "protest and condemnation of the conduct of Ethiopian forces in Doolow," according to a statement.

Ethiopia's foreign ministry put out its own statement denying that it had done anything wrong, instead blaming "third parties... intent on destabilizing the Horn of Africa", without offering any detail.

The Jubaland state government says Somali federal troops in Doolow tried to shoot down a plane containing its politicians and that Ethiopian forces, stationed at the airstrip as part of its counter-insurgency mission, had intervened to stop them. But both Ethiopia and Somalia appeared keen on Tuesday to keep a recent rapprochement brokered by Turkey on track. — AFP

CAIRO: Syrian refugees and residents in Egypt face an uncertain future as new regulations may jeopardize their right to remain in the country after Bashar Al-Assad's ouster earlier this month. European countries quickly suspended Syrian asylum applications after the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham swept into Damascus on Dec 8, forcing Assad to flee after a 13-year civil war.

Other countries are also responding to the changing political landscape. Egypt last week ratified a new law giving the government the power to determine refugee status. A decision has not been made on whether Syrians in Egypt would qualify as refugees under the new law, security sources told Reuters.

The UN refugee agency UNHCR estimates six million Syrians are living as refugees around the world, primarily in neighboring countries. It expects 1 million to return in the next six months, but some Syrian refugees fear being forced to return home.

Egypt is also suspending the renewal of existing residency permits, held by many Syrians for tourism, education, or business, pending a security check, security sources told Reuters. Syrian residents who spoke to Reuters were mostly unaware of the new rules, and many were also cautious about returning home. "The situation there is not stable and we still do not know what will happen," said Ahmed Al-

Akhras, owner of a car spare parts business, who said his children's schooling and his shop were other reasons to stay. He said his residency permit renewal was delayed so, like a number of other Syrians, he recently applied for UNHCR refugee status.

"If I go back to Syria, it won't be now," he said. "We are afraid of the unknown, we don't know who the new person that took over is, we don't know the future," said another Syrian who had been in Egypt for 12 years. Residency decisions would be based on security considerations, the sources said. One cited concerns about Egypt's own internal security after Assad's replacement by the rebels.

Egypt has taken a diplomatic approach to the upheaval in Syria, but state-linked media have referred to the rebels as "terrorist" groups. With Egypt tackling an economic crisis of its own, officials have often described refugees in the country, which they number at 10 million, as a burden.

The UNHCR puts the number of refugees in Egypt at around 800,000, including about 159,000 Syrians. Hundreds of thousands more Syrians have residency permits in Egypt, and many own businesses.

"There is no other country in the globe hosting this number of refugees while receiving the same treatment as Egyptian citizens despite the fact we are not a rich country," Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr

Abdelatty told reporters last week, citing the absence of refugee camps and access to free education, healthcare, and subsidies. "This law strikes a balance between upholding our international commitments, while preserving the national security of Egypt."

The law, ratified on Dec 17, transfers the asylum system to the government from the UN, and allows the government to collect more data on the number of refugees. "Of course, the increase in numbers of registered refugees will contribute in providing more aid (from the international community) to Egypt. This is not a bad thing," said lawmaker Freddy Elbaady. The law includes provisions protecting refugee rights to work, health, and education and freedom from exploitation.

Rights groups have criticized the new law. They point out that the definition of a refugee is ambiguous, and authorities have the right to deport anyone they deem does not qualify. While there was no sign of a sudden deportation of Syrians, it was likely Cairo would change its perception of Syrians as a group in need of protection as the situation stabilizes, said Karim Ennara of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, an independent human rights organization. In response to questions by Reuters, the UNHCR said it would continue to advocate for clear asylum procedures in Egypt. — Reuters

How Finnish youth learn to spot disinfo

HELSINKI: Finland is consistently ranked as Europe's most media literate country and the skills needed to spot on-line hoaxes are on the school curriculum, amidst a boom of mis- and disinformation campaigns. "Who knew what a troll was before?" literature and Finnish language teacher Saara Varmola asked her 14 to 15 year-old students who all promptly raised their hands during a class at a Helsinki school in November. "Who produced the material that you watch, what do you produce yourself and whether you have an ethical responsibility," Varmola tells AFP, as she lists the critical questions to ask when living in a global information environment increasingly characterized by misleading information.

By teaching its citizens how to critically engage with media content to debunk hoaxes, mis- and disinformation, as well as to produce content of their own, Fin-

land wants to promote media literacy as a civic skill. The Nordic country was among the first in Europe to outline a national policy for media literacy in 2013. Updated in 2019, the national policy ensures media literacy is integrated in subjects throughout education from early childhood to upper secondary classes. To enhance skills among adults and the elderly, libraries and NGOs are offering courses.

"Media literacy is essential to building societal resilience, and Finland realized this quite early on," Anders Adlercreutz, Minister of Education, told AFP. "As traditional media is responsible for less and less of the information we receive, it's especially important to be able to critically evaluate what you read," he added.

Considered a forerunner, Finland has been ranked first on the European Media Literacy Index every year since it was first published in 2017 by the Bulgarian Open Society Institute. The index compares 41 countries' resilience to disinformation based on indicators such as quality of education, media freedom and trust in society.

Neighbours Denmark, Norway, Estonia and Sweden trailed Finland's top ranking last year.



Students attend a class on media literacy at the Hiidenkiven Koulu school on November 19, 2024 in Helsinki, Finland. — AFP

A collaborative approach between many sectors help explain Finland's success in promoting media literacy among its 5.5 million residents, according to Adlercreutz. "It's not just the school, it's the media, the newspapers, businesses, the libraries, museums. Everybody sort of takes part in this work," he said.

According to Leo Pekkala, Deputy Di-

rector of Finland's National Audiovisual Institute (KAVI) -- an institution mandated to implement the country's media literacy policy -- it also boils down to Finns' trust in its societal institutions. "We Finns still have a very strong trust in the defence forces, the army, the police and the government. We trust our politicians and we also trust the media", he said. — AFP

Trump blasts Biden over death sentence commutations

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump hit out Tuesday at Joe Biden for commuting the sentences of almost every American federal prisoner on death row, as the president-elect prepares to replace the Democrat in the White House. President Biden, in his final month in office, announced Monday he was converting the sentences of 37 of the 40 federal inmates awaiting

execution to life without the possibility of parole.

They included nine people convicted of murdering fellow prisoners, four for murders committed during bank robberies and one who killed a prison guard. "Joe Biden just commuted the Death Sentence on 37 of the worst killers in our Country," Trump posted on Truth Social, his social media platform.

"When you hear the acts of each, you won't believe that he did this. Makes no sense. Relatives and friends are further devastated. They can't believe this is happening!" Biden had imposed a moratorium on the federal death penalty but was under pressure to act further before leaving the White House on January 20, amid signals from Republican Trump that he would

resume the practice.

Biden rebuked the inmates he had spared and "their despicable acts," but said he had been guided by "my conscience and my experience" to prevent the incoming Trump administration from resuming executions. He excluded three men from his order, however—one of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombers, a gunman who murdered 11 Jewish worshippers in 2018 and a white supremacist who shot nine Black churchgoers dead in 2015. Trump confirmed he would direct the Justice Department to "vigorously pursue the death penalty to protect American families and children from violent rapists, murderers, and monsters." "We will be a Nation of Law and Order again!" he added. — AFP

International

Global hunger crisis deepens as major nations skimp on aid

UN projects at least 117 million will go without aid in 2025

NEW YORK: It's a simple but brutal equation: The number of people going hungry or otherwise struggling around the world is rising, while the amount of money the world's wealthiest nations are contributing toward helping them is dropping.

The result: The United Nations says that, at best, it will be able to raise enough money to help about 60 percent of the 307 million people it predicts will need humanitarian aid next year. That means at least 117 million people won't get food or other assistance in 2025.

The UN also will end 2024 having raised about 46 percent of the \$49.6 billion it sought for humanitarian aid across the globe, its own data shows. It's the second year in a row the world body has raised less than half of what it sought. The shortfall has forced humanitarian agencies to make agonizing decisions, such as slashing rations for the hungry and cutting the number of people eligible for aid.

The consequences are being felt in places like Syria, where the World Food Program (WFP), the UN's main food distributor, used to feed 6 million people. Eyeing its projections for aid donations earlier this year, the WFP cut the number it hoped to help there to about 1 million people, said Rania Dagash-Kamara, the organization's assistant executive director for partnerships and resource mobilization.

Dagash-Kamara visited the WFP's Syria staff in March. "Their line was, 'We are at this point taking from the hungry to feed the starving,'" she said in an interview. UN officials see few reasons for optimism at a time of widespread conflict, political unrest and extreme weather, all factors that stoke famine. "We have been forced to scale back appeals to those in most dire need," Tom Fletcher, UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, told Reuters.

Financial pressures and shifting domestic politics are reshaping some wealthy nations' decisions about where and how much to give. One of the UN's largest donors — Germany — already shaved \$500 million in funding from 2023 to 2024 as part of general belt

tightening. The country's cabinet has recommended another \$1 billion reduction in humanitarian aid for 2025. A new parliament will decide next year's spending plan after the federal election in February.

Humanitarian organizations also are watching to see what US President-elect Donald Trump proposes after he begins his second term in January. Trump advisers have not said how he will approach humanitarian aid, but he sought to slash US funding in his first term. And he has hired advisers who say there is room for cuts in foreign aid.

The US plays the leading role in preventing and combating starvation across the world. It provided \$64.5 billion in humanitarian aid over the last five years. That was at least 38 percent of the total such contributions recorded by the UN.

The majority of humanitarian funding comes from just three wealthy donors: the US, Germany and the European Commission. They provided 58 percent of the \$170 billion recorded by the UN in response to crises from 2020 to 2024.

Three other powers — China, Russia and India — collectively contributed less than 1 percent of UN-tracked humanitarian funding over the same period, according to a Reuters review of UN contributions data. The inability to close the funding gap is one of the major reasons the global system for tackling hunger and preventing famine is under enormous strain. The lack of adequate funding — coupled with the logistical hurdles of assessing need and delivering food aid in conflict zones, where many of the worst hunger crises exist — is taxing efforts to get enough aid to the starving. Almost 282 million people in 59 countries and territories were facing high levels of acute food insecurity in 2023. Reuters is documenting the global hunger-relief crisis in a series of reports, including from hard-hit Sudan, Myanmar and Afghanistan.

The failure of major nations to pull their weight in funding for global initiatives has been a persistent Trump complaint. Project 2025, a set of policy proposals drawn up by Trump backers for his second



El-Fasher: A handout file photograph, shot in January 2024, shows a woman and baby at the Zamzam displacement camp, close to El-Fasher in North Darfur, Sudan. — Reuters

term, calls on humanitarian agencies to work harder to collect more funding from other donors and says this should be a condition for additional US aid.

On the campaign trail, Trump tried to distance himself from the controversial Project 2025 blueprint. But after winning the election, he chose one of its key architects, Russell Vought, to run the US Office of Management and Budget, a powerful body that helps decide presidential priorities and how to pay for them. For secretary of state, the top US diplomat, he tapped Florida Senator Marco Rubio, who has a record of supporting foreign aid.

Project 2025 makes particular note of conflict — the very factor driving most of today's worst hunger crises. "Humanitarian aid is sustaining war economies, creating financial incentives for warring parties to continue fighting, discouraging governments from

reforming, and propping up malign regimes," the blueprint says. It calls for deep cuts in international disaster aid by ending programs in places controlled by "malign actors."

Billionaire Elon Musk has been tapped by Trump to co-lead the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), a new body that will examine waste in government spending. Musk said this month on his social media platform, X, that DOGE would look at foreign aid. The aid cuts Trump sought in his first term didn't pass Congress, which controls such spending. Senator Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican and close Trump ally on many issues, will chair the Senate committee that oversees the budget. In 2019, he called "insane" and "short-sighted" a Trump proposal to cut the budget for foreign aid and diplomacy by 23 percent. — Reuters

Tsunami detection buoys safeguarding lives in Thailand

BANGKOK: Almost 1,000 kilometers off the Thai coast devastated by a tsunami 20 years ago, engineers lower a detection buoy into the waves—a key link in a warning system intended to ensure no disaster is as deadly again. On December 26, 2004, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake under the Indian Ocean triggered a huge tsunami with waves up to 30 meters (100 feet) high.

Only a rudimentary warning system was in place at the time, with no way to alert the millions of people living around the Indian Ocean in advance. More than 225,000 people were killed in a dozen countries. In the years following the disaster, multiple governments developed a global tsunami information system, building on the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) network of six detection buoys in the Pacific.

Known as Deep-Ocean Assessment and Reporting of Tsunamis (DART), the system now has 74 buoys around the world. Each floats on the surface while tethered to the seabed, monitoring signals from a seismic sensor on the ocean floor and changes in the water level.

Installed in some of the toughest working environments anywhere on the planet, the battery-powered buoys must be replaced every two years. Only 50 of the devices are currently operational but the network has been designed to provide coverage regardless. The Thai research vessel MV SEAFDEC crew gently



SEAFDEC ship crew pulling a rope to bring tsunami buoy Thai 23461 back onto the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) ship in the Andaman Sea. — AFP

lowered a replacement buoy—a yellow cylinder about two meters in diameter—this month into the Indian Ocean 965 kilometers (600 miles) offshore.

The same team also sought to replace a closer buoy in the Andaman Sea, 340 kilometers from the coast, but were unsuccessful and will mount a new mission in the coming weeks. Shawn Stoecckley, a mechanical engineer from buoy manufacturers Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), calibrates the system from his laptop on board before it is deployed. "I feel that it has a lot of purpose, that it can save coastal lives," he told AFP.

The 2004 tsunami killed more than 5,000 people

in Thailand, according to official figures, with 3,000 missing. Now the country's two DART buoys are linked by satellite to a nationwide network of 130 alarm towers equipped with sirens and loudspeakers that can broadcast in five languages in coastal provinces. Residents in disaster-prone areas also receive an SMS alert of an imminent tsunami, warning them to evacuate quickly. Before 2004, it would take anywhere from 15 to 50 minutes before an alarm could be issued, says Laura Kong, director of UNESCO's International Tsunami Information Center. "Today it's typical we would get something within five to seven minutes," she said. — AFP

S Korean oppn puts off plan to impeach acting president

SEOUL: South Korea's opposition said Tuesday it would hold back a decision to impeach acting president Han Duck-soo until later in the week. The opposition Democratic Party earlier said it would introduce an impeachment motion against Han on Tuesday to protest against the interim leader's refusal to sign into law special bills to investigate his impeached predecessor. "We have decided to exercise patience, taking into account the sentiments of the people, and wait until the 26th (Thursday) to determine whether our demands are met," floor leader Park Chan-dae said.

The party originally set Christmas Eve as the deadline for Han to promulgate two special bills investigating suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived imposition of martial law, as well as graft allegations surrounding his wife, Kim Keon Hee. The conservative leader was stripped of his duties by parliament on December 14 following his brief declaration of martial law 11 days earlier, which plunged the country into its worst political crisis in decades.

Yoon is now waiting for a decision by the Constitutional Court, which requires six votes in favor from its nine-member bench in order for the impeachment motion to be passed. Currently three seats are empty, and can be appointed. But Han, who stepped in to replace Yoon, rejected the opposition's demand at a cabinet meeting on Tuesday, insisting on bipartisan agreements for the two bills.

Han's stance "left us no other option but to interpret it as his intention to continue the insurrection by delaying proceedings," Park told a press briefing earlier. Yoon is currently under investigation by a joint team comprising police, the defense ministry, and anti-corruption investigators.



An effigy of South Korea's impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol is seen in a mock prison as protesters take part in a rally calling for Yoon's ouster in front of the Gwanghwamun Gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul. — AFP

On Tuesday, Yoon Jong-kun, the Democratic Party spokesperson told reporters that the impeachment motion against Han had been "unanimously adopted" as the party's official stance. The reasons for impeachment include not only rejecting the two bills but also "actively participating in and supporting the insurrection" and "attempting to exercise another form of power while the President's authority had not yet formally ended after the insurrection".

The opposition says it needs only a simple majority in the 300-member parliament to impeach Han, as this is the threshold for a cabinet member. The ruling People Power Party, however, argues that a two-thirds majority is required since Han is currently serving as acting president. Kwon Seong-dong, leader of the ruling People Power Party, said the Democratic Party's "coercive politics have reached their peak" adding that they are "constantly interfering with the legitimate exercise of the acting president's authority." "This behavior is no different from that of gangsters who threaten retaliation if money is not deposited," said Kwon. — AFP

Bangladesh student protesters enter TV station; journalists fired

DHAKA: A gang of Bangladesh student protesters entered the offices of the investor of a television station accusing it of "propaganda", protesters said Tuesday, with at least five journalists subsequently fired. The students had taken part in the August revolution that toppled prime minister Sheikh Hasina, whose tenure was marked as one of the worst periods for media freedom.

Hasnat Abdullah, convener of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement, led around 15 to 20 students on December 17 to the offices of City Group, who invest in Somoy Television. "Somoy Television was spreading propaganda, twisting my comments, and accommodating the views of a fallen political party," Hasnat told AFP.

"We are staunch supporters of press freedom, but the press must remain unbiased," Hasnat said, adding that he saw no issue in making demands—but rejecting reports the students had handed over a list of those they wanted fired. The managing director of the business conglomerate that funds the television station did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The incident has intensified fear among journalists in the wake of the revolution. One journalist, Omar Faroque, who had been a senior editor of the television station, said he was among the five who received a termination letter without reason. "The television authorities requested a few of us to step down for the greater good of the station," Faroque told AFP. "We demanded an explanation for the decision, but the authorities refused to provide any." Interim leader Muhammad Yunus has repeatedly insisted he wants media freedom. Yunus' press secretary Shafiqul Alam sought to distance the government, saying that if someone "takes any action, the responsibility lies with them". Press watchdogs say many journalists—seen by critics as having supported Hasina when she was in power—face police investigations in apparent retaliation for their past work. — AFP

News in Brief

Swiss flight makes emergency landing, crew member in ICU

ZURICH: A Swiss International Air Lines flight bound for Zurich from Bucharest made an emergency landing in Austria because of engine problems and smoke in the cabin and cockpit that left one crew member in intensive care, the carrier said. The Airbus A220-300 aircraft involved in Monday's incident was carrying 74 passengers and five crew when it landed in the Austrian city of Graz. Two members of the cabin crew are still undergoing medical treatment, one of whom is in intensive care, Swiss said. —Reuters

Russia sentences US man to 15 years in prison for 'espionage'

MOSCOW: A Russian court on Tuesday sentenced a US man to 15 years in a penal colony for "espionage". Russian news agencies reported. Russia has detained and sentenced a number of US citizens and dual-nationals in recent years, some of whom have been freed in prisoner exchanges. Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich was convicted of espionage in July and released in August. — AFP

Russia says cargo ship sinks in Mediterranean after blast

MOSCOW: Two crew members are missing after a Russian cargo ship sank in international waters in the Mediterranean after an explosion on board, Russia's foreign ministry said on Telegram on Tuesday. The Ursa Major sank "after an explosion in the engine room," the ministry's crisis unit said. The ministry said that out of the 16 Russian crew members, 14 had been rescued and taken to the Spanish port of Cartagena and two were missing. — AFP

China says Japan's foreign minister to visit Wednesday

BEIJING: Japan's foreign minister Takeshi Iwaya will visit China on Wednesday for talks with local counterpart Wang Yi, Beijing said. The visit will be Iwaya's first to China since becoming Tokyo's top diplomat earlier this year. "China is ready to work with Japan... to focus on common interests, strengthen dialogue and communication, deepen practical cooperation (and) properly manage differences," foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said. — AFP

Chad goes to polls in votes boycotted by opposition

N'DJAMENA, Chad: Chad goes to the polls Sunday in legislative and local elections which the government of President Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno presents as a key step towards a democratic transition but which opposition parties dismiss as a "masquerade". Voting is taking place against a backdrop of recurring attacks by jihadist group Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, the ending of a military accord with former colonial master France, and accusations of interference in the conflict ravaging neighboring Sudan. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2024

Investors swoop in to save German flying taxi startup

Lilium announces a 'major breakthrough' after support

FRANKFURT: A German flying taxi firm was Tuesday saved from collapse after investors swooped in to take it over, in a case that has fired debate about support for the country's startup scene. Lilium had already filed for bankruptcy in October, and was expected to fold entirely this week unless it could secure new sources of funding.

But the startup, which has been developing small electric-powered jets that can take off and land vertically, announced a "major breakthrough". Mobile Uplift Corporation, a company set up by a consortium of European and North American investors, had signed a deal to buy the assets of the crisis-hit German company, Lilium said. Lilium, which is headquartered in Munich, did not disclose the price of the deal or further details about the investors. The agreement is expected to be finalized at the start of January, which will "allow us to restart our business", Lilium CEO Klaus Roewe said.

Founded in 2015, Lilium had attracted substantial interest, with 100 firm orders for its jets to date and hundreds more pre-orders. Among future buyers was Saudi Arabia's flag carrier Saudia, which this year signed a deal to buy 50 of the firm's aircraft with options to purchase 50 more. The firm's flying taxis should be able to carry four to six passengers up to 175 kilometers (110 miles) at a speed of 250 kilometers an hour. But it has yet to conduct a manned test flight. The first trial is expected next year, followed by the first deliveries to customers in 2026.

Its investors, mostly from the United States and China, provided some \$1.5 billion (1.4 billion euros) in financing but Lilium burnt through huge amounts of money in development costs. It was forced to turn to the state for emergency funding but the German parliament's budget committee refused in October to approve a loan guarantee to the tune of 50 million euros. It then filed for bankruptcy, and launched a hunt for new investors.

Lilium employed more than 1,000 people, most of whom were made redundant ahead of this week's deadline to get new investors on board. But many will reportedly return now a rescue deal has been



Delegates look at The Lilium Jet, an electric vertical take-off eVTOL jet, on the company's stand on the opening day of the Farnborough International Airshow 2024, southwest of London, on July 22, 2024. — AFP

agreed. Another Germany flying taxi startup, Volocopter, has also been facing problems, including when it comes to financing.

The manufacturer was forced to scrap test flights in Paris during the Olympics as the certification for its aircraft engine did not come through in time. Lilium's predicament has fuelled a debate in Europe's biggest economy about whether enough is being done to support startups.

Critics have long lamented a dearth of funding to help support the growth of young, innovative companies, comparing the situation in Germany unfavorably with that in the United States and elsewhere. In October Lilium's boss Roewe said that other countries were actively backing his firm's rivals in a highly competitive field.

The country's Startup Association had meanwhile warned of "lasting reputational damage to Germa-

ny as a location" for the tech sector if Berlin failed to provide support for Lilium. Others however cautioned that backing the startup with public money was a gamble. The firm was not in trouble "because the state did not want to step in as an investor," said the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* daily in a commentary. "Lilium failed because the company has not been able to produce decent results even after years of investment and research." — AFP

Markets edge up in quiet Christmas Eve trading session

NEW YORK: Wall Street's main indexes rose on Tuesday in a truncated trading session before Christmas, with the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq up for the third consecutive day, helped by gains in a handful of megacap and growth stocks. Broadcom and Nvidia provided the biggest boost to the indexes, advancing 2.7 percent and 0.7 percent, respectively, while Consumer Discretionary and Technology led gains among S&P 500 sectors.

Global stocks mostly pushed higher on Tuesday in thin Christmas Eve trade as investors waited to see if a so-called Santa Claus rally would sweep the market. "Santa Claus comes tonight, but if stock market participants are lucky he will start sprinkling some gifts today, which marks the official start to the 'Santa Claus Rally' period," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

With few major catalysts, thin trading volumes expected in the final days of the year raised the prospect of choppy trading. Stock markets will at 1 pm ET on Tuesday and will be closed for Christmas on Wednesday. At 09:42 am the Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 32.38 points, or 0.08 percent, to 42,939.33, the S&P 500 gained 21.68 points, or 0.36 percent, to 5,995.75, and the Nasdaq Composite gained 116.55 points, or 0.59 percent, to 19,881.43.



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. — AFP

"Investors are breathing a sigh of relief that maybe the hawkish rate cut last week combined with the softer PCE reading indicate that inflation is not that big of a re-emerging threat," said Sam Stovall, chief investment strategist of CFRA Research.

"As a result, maybe this market will end up creeping higher between now and the end of the year."

After a stellar run to record highs following the November election, which sparked hopes of pro-business policies under US President-elect Donald Trump, Wall Street's rally hit a bump this month as investors grappled with the prospect of higher interest rates in 2025. The US Federal Reserve eased borrowing costs for the third time this year last Wednesday, but signaled only two more 25-basis-point reduc-

tions next year, down from its September projection of four cuts, as policymakers weigh the possibility of Trump's policies stoking inflation. Traders expect the Fed to leave rates in the range of 4 percent to 4.25 percent by the end of 2025, from between 3.75 percent and 4 percent about 10 days ago, according to CME's FedWatch tool.

US stock markets have traditionally fared well in the last five trading days of the year and the first two in the new year, with experts advancing a number of possible reasons as the festive holiday mood and purchasing ahead of the end of the tax year.

"It looks like Santa Claus's sleigh will be a little slow getting off the ground, but he would be the first to tell you that it isn't how he starts, it's how he finishes," added O'Hare. There was little news to push trading in the half-day trading session in New York.

Shares in American Airlines fell more than two percent as trading got away after a technical issue forced the world's largest carrier to ground all its US flights for an hour during the busy year-end travel period. The airline and the Federal Aviation Administration have yet to describe the nature of the technical issue. In Europe, Paris's CAC 40 closed higher in a pre-holiday short session while Frankfurt was closed all day.

London also closed in the green, despite a week clouded by lacklustre economic data that is "stoking concerns about the UK's slowing momentum heading into the new year," said Matt Britzman, senior equity analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown. Hong Kong and Shanghai stock markets closed up over one percent, as China announced fresh fiscal measures to boost its ailing economy. — Agencies

Weather woes to crush India's sugar production

MUMBAI: Sugarcane yields in India are declining due to last year's drought and this year's excessive rains, which could reduce the country's sugar production below consumption levels for the first time in eight years, farmers and industry officials said on Monday. Lower-than-expected output by the world's second-largest sugar producer could eliminate the possibility of India allowing exports in the current season ending in September 2025, supporting global sugar prices SBc1, LSUc1.

Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh account for more than 80 percent of the country's total sugar production, with lower cane yields in these states prompting trade houses to reduce their output estimates for the 2024/25 season. The production could fall to around 27 million metric tons from the last year's 32 million tons and below annual consumption of more than 29 million tons, said India head of a global trade house, who declined to be named.

"During the summer months, the cane crop faced prolonged stress due to the lack of water," B.B. Thombare, president of the West Indian Sugar Mills Association told Reuters. "When the monsoon season began, there was excessive rainfall and limited sunshine, which also adversely affected the crop's growth." The adverse weather curtailed cane yields by 10 to 15 tons per hectare, Thombare said.

The western state of Maharashtra and neighboring Karnataka, which together produce nearly half of India's sugar, received lower-than-average rainfall in 2023, bringing down reservoir levels. "Usually, we harvest 120 to 130 tons of cane from one hectare of land, but this year yields have fallen to 80 tons despite all our efforts," says Shrikant Ingle, who cultivated cane on five acres of land in Maharashtra's Solapur. Drought did not affect the crop in Uttar Pradesh, the country's leading sugar-producing state in the north.

However, plantations in the state were impacted by red rot disease, which reduced sugarcane yields, said a senior state government official. "To control the spread of the disease, we are advising farmers to adopt new cane varieties," the official said. The downward revision in the production estimate has eliminated the possibility of any exports in the current season, the head of the trade house said.

Sugar industry seeks 2 million tons of exports, while the government says it may allow limited exports, if any surplus remains after ethanol needs are met. — Reuters

US consumer confidence takes unexpected hit

WASHINGTON: US consumer confidence fell unexpectedly in December, according to survey data published Monday, as concerns were raised about the impact of tariffs on the economy before Donald Trump takes office. The president-elect pledged on the campaign trail to implement sweeping tariffs on goods entering the United States, which many economists predict would have an impact on the cost of everyday items.

Responding to the criticism, Trump has continued to insist that, "properly used," tariffs would be positive for the US economy. "Our country right now loses to everybody," he told reporters at his Florida residence earlier this month, adding: "Tariffs will make our country rich." The US consumer confidence index slipped to 104.7 in December, down from a revised 112.8 last month. The Conference Board announced in a statement. This was sharply below the market consensus of 113.5, according to Briefing.com.

"The recent rebound in consumer confidence was not sustained in December as the index dropped back to the middle of the range that has prevailed over the past two years," Conference Board chief economist Dana Peterson said in a statement. "While weaker consumer assessments of the present situation and



Consumers shop at an Outlet mall in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

expectations contributed to the decline, the expectations component saw the sharpest drop," she added.

Monday's release is the last before President Joe Biden hands over the White House keys in January to Donald Trump, whose campaign focused on immigration and the cost of living. But Trump's threats to impose widespread tariffs appear to have led at least some to grow less optimistic, according to The Conference Board, which noted that write-in responses to its survey found a rise in mentions of politics and the impact of tariffs. "Notably, a special question this month showed that 46 percent of US consumers ex-

pected tariffs to raise the cost of living," The Conference Board announced.

Meanwhile, 21 percent expected tariffs to create more US jobs, it added. "Politics are influencing consumer confidence this holiday season," Nationwide financial markets economist Oren Klachkin wrote in a note to clients. "This report marks a sour end to 2024, but we think it overstates any true deterioration in attitudes," he said. "We think confidence will send an encouraging signal in 2025 as tailwinds from a solid economy overpower price and policy concerns," Klachkin added. — AFP

Trump's TikTok love raises stakes in war over app's fate

Situation remains complex due to Trump's unpredictable nature

WASHINGTON: President-elect Donald Trump's repeated support for TikTok has sparked speculation about potential solutions to prevent the app's impending ban in the United States, though the path forward remains unclear. "We got to keep this sucker around for a little while," Trump told supporters on Sunday, just days after meeting with TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew in Florida. Trump, who credits the wildly popular platform with delivering him a large young user base, opposes banning TikTok partly because he believes it would primarily benefit Meta, the Mark Zuckerberg-led company behind Instagram and Facebook. The situation is complex, according to University of Richmond School of Law professor Carl Tobias, given the various potential solutions and Trump's unpredictable nature.

Congress overwhelmingly passed legislation, signed by President Joe Biden in April, that would block TikTok from US app stores and web hosting services unless Beijing-based ByteDance sells its stake by January 19. US officials and lawmakers grew wary of the potential for the Chinese government to influence ByteDance or access the data of TikTok's American users.

Even with Trump's decisive election victory and incoming Republican-led Congress, acquiescing to the president-elect's desire and preventing the ban faces significant hurdles. The law enjoyed rare bipartisan support in a divided Washington, making its outright repeal through a vote in Congress politically unlikely even with Trump's influence over Republicans. The Supreme Court may offer the clearest path forward.

TikTok has appealed to the nation's highest court, arguing the law violates First Amendment rights to free speech. The court, which is dominated by Trump-aligned conservatives, will hear the case on January 10, just nine days before the ban takes effect. This follows a lower appeals court's unanimous decision to uphold the law in December. Another possibility, according to Tobias, is that a Trump-led Department of Justice could determine ByteDance has addressed the law's national security concerns.

However, such a move would likely be seen as caving to China by Congress and others.

The final option is ByteDance selling to a non-Chinese buyer, though the company has consistently refused this possibility. With 170 million monthly active users, acquiring TikTok's US operations would require substantial resources. As president, Trump could extend the ban deadline by 90 days to facilitate a transaction. Few potential buyers have emerged, with major tech companies likely deterred by antitrust concerns.

Former Trump Treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin, who runs a private equity fund backed by Japan's



People gather for a press conference about their opposition to a TikTok ban on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC on March 22, 2023. --AFP

SoftBank Group and Abu Dhabi's Mubadala sovereign wealth fund, has expressed interest. During a recent event with Trump, SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son pledged to invest \$100 billion in the US economy, though specific investments weren't detailed. Other contenders include US real estate billionaire Frank McCourt, who aims to make social media safer through his Project Liberty organization. Elon Musk, given his proximity to Trump and ownership of X, could also

have a role to play, as he has expressed plans to transform the text-focused platform into something more like TikTok.

A senior Republican lawmaker recently suggested Trump might orchestrate a "deal of the century" satisfying both US concerns and ByteDance's interests.

The chairman of the US House committee on China, John Moolenaar, told Fox News Digital that once ByteDance accepts it must comply with US law, the situa-

tion could progress rapidly. Any agreement would need Beijing's approval, with US-China relations expected to remain tense during Trump's upcoming term. This isn't the first attempt to resolve TikTok's US status. In 2020, Trump also threatened a ban unless ByteDance sold its US operations. While Oracle and Walmart reached a preliminary agreement with ByteDance for ownership stakes, legal challenges and the transition to the Biden administration prevented the deal's completion. --AFP

Japan aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions 60%

TOKYO: Japan's environment and industry ministries on Tuesday finalized a plan to cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 60 percent from 2013 levels by 2035, up from its 2030 goal of a 46 percent cut.

The move follows the Biden administration's new US target under the Paris climate agreement to slash GHG emissions by 61 percent-66 percent below 2005 levels by 2035, a goal officials called achievable by states even if President-elect Donald Trump reverses federal policies. In November, Japanese ministries unveiled a draft plan aiming

for a 60 percent GHG reduction by fiscal 2035 and 73 percent by 2040, based on a linear trajectory between Japan's current target of a 46 percent reduction by 2030 and achieving net zero by 2050. The proposed target sparked calls for deeper cuts from environmentalists and politicians, who argue it is insufficient for the world's fifth-biggest carbon emitter, which remains heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Climate activists say the target falls short of the reduction recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The IPCC states that global emissions must drop by 60 percent from 2019 levels by 2035, equivalent to a 66 percent cut from 2013 levels for Japan. Despite strong criticism, a joint meeting of expert panels from the two ministries approved the draft climate target, which emphasizes the importance of balancing economic

growth, energy security and decarbonization efforts. Several panel members argued the target was too low for a developed country and insufficient to meet global expectations, but the goal was ultimately left unchanged.

As a part of the international process to combat global warming, Japan plans to submit the revised target, known as a Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), to the United Nations in February, following a public consultation. The NDC is designed to align with Japan's revised basic energy plan and its "Green Transformation (GX) 2040 vision," a national strategy integrating decarbonization and industrial policy, both currently under consideration.

Under the Paris agreement, nations must deliver new and stronger climate action plans to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change by February. The NDCs must align with the global goal of limiting temperature rises to 1.5C. -- Reuters

Gulf Bank issues online safety guidelines

KUWAIT: As part of its continued support for the Central Bank of Kuwait's "Diraya" campaign, Gulf Bank has cautioned against blindly trusting internet search engines. The Bank urges individuals to exercise vigilance when searching online and to confirm that the website they are accessing is the official platform of the intended organization before making payments or sharing personal and banking details.

Gulf Bank emphasized the dangers of depending solely on search engine results, which can sometimes direct users to fraudulent websites. The Bank further highlighted that scammers are becoming more advanced, expertly replicating the design and branding of reputable institutions to mislead users. These fraudulent websites expose users to significant risks, including online scams and the theft of sensitive banking details.

To help protect users, Gulf Bank provided the following recommendations:

1. Make sure the URL matches the official website and includes "HTTPS" along with a padlock icon for added security.
2. Verify search results by comparing them with the official website to ensure authenticity.
3. Avoid clicking on links unless certain of their legitimacy.
4. Avoid linking your email to one-time password (OTP) codes.
5. Activate two-factor authentication to enhance the security of your devices and prevent unauthorized access.
6. Pay government fees through the "Sahel" app or the official website of the relevant authority.
7. Verify the credibility of platforms before making payments on shopping or service websites.
8. Do not respond to requests for civil ID verification from unknown sources.
9. Refrain from responding to SMS or emails that request payments or additional information for deliveries or civil IDs.

The "Diraya" campaign, launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait in partnership with the Kuwait Banking Association, seeks to educate bank customers about essential banking services and empower them with the knowledge to carry out secure transactions. The campaign also promotes financial inclusion, cybersecurity, and awareness of customer rights and responsibilities, while emphasizing the advantages of digital financial transactions and providing guidance on how to minimize related risks.



NEW YORK: Starbucks employees, union members and supporters strike outside of a Starbucks store which is closed down due to the strike on December 23, 2024 in New York City. -- AFP

Starbucks strike to expand to over 300 US stores: Union

NEW YORK: A strike at Starbucks will expand to over 300 US stores with more than 5,000 workers expected to walk off the job before the five-day work stoppage ends later on Christmas Eve, the workers' union said. Starbucks Workers United, representing employees at 525 stores nationwide, said more than 60 US stores across 12 major cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Boston and Seattle, were shut on Monday.

Talks between Starbucks and the union had hit an impasse with unresolved issues over wages, staffing and schedules, leading to the strike that began on Friday. With a union contract, improved benefits, wages, and working conditions could be in writing and can't be reduced without bargain-

ing, according to the Workers United website. The Christmas Eve strike on Tuesday was projected to be the largest ever at the coffee chain, the union added. "These strikes are an initial show of strength, and we're just getting started," an Oregon barista said in a union statement.

When asked for a response, a Starbucks spokesperson referred to a company statement it released on Monday. It said that 97 percent to 99 percent of Starbucks stores will continue to operate and serve customers, adding that it expects a "very limited impact" to overall operations. Starbucks has over 10,000 company-operated stores across the US.

"We are ready to continue negotiations when the union comes back to the bargaining table," the company said. The Seattle-headquartered firm had previously claimed that the union delegates prematurely ended the bargaining session.

Earlier this month, the workers' group rejected an offer of no immediate wage raises and a guarantee of a 1.5 percent pay increase in future years. The union also said that Starbucks has yet to present its workers with "a serious economic proposal." -- Reuters

Musk's AI startup raises further \$6bn

PARIS: Billionaire tech mogul Elon Musk's startup xAI said it had raised \$6 billion from investors in its latest funding round, as it battles stiff competition in the artificial intelligence market. The firm, whose flagship product is the Grok chatbot, garnered support from US venture capitalists, chipmakers NVIDIA and AMD, and investment funds from Saudi Arabia and Qatar among others.

Musk has repeatedly warned that AI poses a risk to human civilization, but he is pushing hard for a bigger slice of investment in the sector and xAI already raised \$6 billion in May. The company is now one of the world's most valuable startups with an estimated \$50 billion valuation, though still dwarfed by chief competitor OpenAI's estimated \$157 billion.

Despite the sky-high estimates, critics have pointed out that AI firms are burning through cash and still have no clear path to profitability. Announcing the funding on Monday, xAI said it would use the cash injection to "ship groundbreaking products that will be used by billions of people".

It would also "accelerate the research and development of future technologies enabling the company's mission to understand the true nature of the universe". Musk, who also acts as boss of SpaceX and Tesla and is a chief backer of US president-elect Donald Trump, wrote on his X account that "a lot of compute is needed" to power AI products. He launched the company in July 2023 shortly after he signed an open letter calling for a pause in the development of powerful AI models.

Musk is currently taking legal action against ChatGPT-maker OpenAI, which he co-founded as a non-profit in 2015 before leaving in 2018, alleging that its conversion to a for-profit company breaks legally binding commitments. --AFP

Business

China says to raise deficit, boost spending next year

Beijing looks to prop up its struggling economy

BEIJING: China will raise its deficit in order to boost spending next year, its finance minister said Tuesday according to state media, as Beijing looks to prop up its struggling economy. The world's second-largest economy has for years battled sluggish domestic consumption, a persistent crisis in the property sector and soaring government debt.

Beijing unveiled a slew of aggressive measures this year aimed at bolstering growth—cutting interest rates, cancelling restrictions on homebuying and easing the debt burden on local governments.

Economists have urged more direct fiscal stimulus to shore up domestic consumption and restore China's economy to full health. Finance Minister Lan Fo'an said at a conference in Beijing on Tuesday: China would "increase the fiscal deficit ratio to boost spending intensity", according to state broadcaster CCTV.

Beijing would also focus more on improving livelihoods and promoting sluggish consumption, Lan said, and transfer payments to indebted local governments would be increased.

Beijing has long been reluctant to boost government spending to pull itself out of its economic malaise, fearful of piling on debt. However, Beijing's leadership committed this month to a "moderately loose" monetary policy and a "more proactive" fiscal policy next year.

The terminology represented a shift away from the government's previous commitment to a more cautious approach. China is pushing for an official national growth target this year of around five percent, a goal President Xi Jinping has expressed confidence in achieving but which many economists believe it will narrowly miss.

The International Monetary Fund expects China's economy to grow by 4.8 percent this year and 4.5 percent next year. Gary Ng, Senior Economist for Asia Pacific at Natixis, told AFP the magnitude of new spending may be "lower than it looks on the surface". "The current policy is also more about managing growth at a reasonably comfortable range for top policymakers rather than boosting growth," Ng said. — AFP



A woman works at a textile factory in Siyang County of Suqian municipality in east China's Jiangsu province on December 24, 2024. — AFP

Philip Morris marks a decade of IQOS

DUBAI: Philip Morris International Inc (PMI) marks the 10th anniversary of the introduction of its leading smoke-free product, IQOS. The launch of this smoke-free innovation was a breakthrough moment toward achieving the company's commitment to a future without cigarettes.

In Japan—the first market where IQOS was launched in 2014—newly released public health data by the National Health and Nutritional Survey (NHNS) an annual nationwide health examination survey conducted since 1948 by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, shows a 46 percent decrease in cigarette-smoking prevalence since 2014, dropping from 19.6 percent of all adults to 10.6 percent in 2022.

This decline correlates with the introduction of heated tobacco products and their subsequent widespread adoption by millions of adults who smoke in Japan. The country continues to have the highest number of heated-tobacco-product users, and tobacco prevalence has not increased since they were introduced. Not only has the total tobacco use prevalence continued to decline, but the introduction of heated tobacco products in Japan appears to have helped many adult smokers transition away from cigarettes to less harmful alternatives, leading to a reduction in the number of adults smoking cigarettes. A decade after it was launched in Japan, IQOS now generates over \$10 billion of PMI's annual net revenues, the product is available in over 70 markets worldwide, and 30.8 million adults use it.

PMI CEO Jacek Olezak said: "With the debut of IQOS, we launched PMI's vision of a smoke-free company, creating an opportunity to solve the problem of smoking. Every day, IQOS demonstrates its potential for this, as evidenced by the approximately 22 million adults around the world who have fully switched to it and stopped smoking. IQOS is the world's leading smoke-free product, and we are committed to continuing to lead the way to a future where better alternatives have completely replaced cigarettes, while moving forward to become a predominantly smoke-free company by 2030. Today, PMI employs over 80,000 people, and I would like to mark this anniversary by thanking them and their predecessors—all who made this transformation possible."

With PMI transforming into an industry-leading science and technology company, smoke-free products account for 38 percent of the company's net revenues in Q3 2024, up from practically 0 percent in 2014.



Jacek Olezak

China, Japan to discuss seafood ban Wednesday

BEIJING: China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi will hold talks with his Japanese counterpart Takeshi Iwaya in Beijing on Wednesday, the Chinese foreign ministry said, when both men are expected to address China's ban on Japanese seafood imports. Iwaya's one-day visit to the Chinese capital, on China's invitation, is his first since assuming his role in October. Beijing imposed the ban last August after Tokyo began releasing treated radioactive water from the wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant despite Chinese opposition.

When asked about the ban at a regular news briefing on Tuesday, foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning urged Japan to fulfill its commitments under an agreement reached in September. The deal commits Japan to setting up a long-term international monitoring arrangement and allowing stakeholders such as China to conduct independent sampling and monitoring.

"After effectively participating in long-term international monitoring ... China will begin to adjust relevant measures on the basis of scientific evidence, and gradually restore imports of Japanese aquatic products that meet standards and regulations," Mao said, without giving a timeline. China continues to oppose the water discharge, she added. — Reuters

El Salvador Congress votes to end ban on metal mining

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador: El Salvador's Congress on Monday approved a bill promoted by President Nayib Bukele to roll back a ban on the mining of gold and other metals, dismayed environmentalists.

The small Central American nation became the world's first country to outlaw metal mining in 2017, warning of the harmful effects of the chemicals used, like cyanide and mercury. The move by Bukele's predecessor, former left-wing rebel Salvador Sanchez Ceren, reflected a growing rejection of mining by rural communities in the region.

But last month, Bukele, who is popular at home for his crackdown on street gangs, signaled that he wanted to change course. The bill to bring back metal mining was approved by 57 deputies out of a total of 60, said Ernesto Castro, head of the legislature—which is dominated by the ruling party—as environmental campaigners protested nearby.

Critics fear that mining will pollute the Lempa River, which runs through a potential mining zone proposed by Bukele and supplies water to 70 percent of the inhabitants of the capital and surrounding areas. "This wretched mining will punish the people, it will contaminate our waters and rivers and that's an attack on life," activist Vidalina Morales told reporters.

Bukele said last month that El Salvador, a country of 6.6 million people, had "potentially" the largest gold deposits per square kilometer in the world.

"God placed a gigantic treasure underneath our feet," he wrote on social media, arguing that the mining ban was "absurd." "If we make responsible use of our natural resources, we can change the economy

China's CATL launches EV chassis, flagging safety as selling point

SHANGHAI: China's CATL, the world's largest electric vehicle battery maker, on Tuesday launched a new EV chassis that it says can withstand a 120-kph (75-mph) frontal impact without catching fire or exploding, as it touts safety as a key selling point. The chassis has a battery capable of running for about 1,000 km (621.37 miles) on a single charge and reduces the time required for mass production of a vehicle to 12-18 months from the traditional 36 months or longer, CATL said.

The company aims to sell the new EV platform—called "panshi" in Chinese, which translates to "bedrock"—to premium car makers seeking to accelerate development and reduce costs.

"Due to the extremely high crash speed and intensity, there has been no previous instance of any new energy vehicle daring to challenge a 120km/h frontal pole impact test," said Ni Jun, CATL chief manufacturing officer. The speed for a frontal impact safety test in the commonly used China New Car Assessment Program is 56km/h.

Chinese EV brand Avatr, which is co-owned by CATL, state-owned Changan Auto and technology giant Huawei, will be the first to develop EV models based on CATL's Bedrock chassis, Chen Zhao, president of Avatr said at the press conference. He did not specify when such a model would be launched.

Such EV platforms are also known in the industry as "skateboard chassis", or flexible platforms that combine electric motors, batteries, controls and suspensions. Other players in this area include Chinese EV maker Xpeng and Shanghai-based engineering firm Launch Design.

Toyota to build Lexus EV plant in China: Report

TOKYO: Toyota plans to build an electric vehicle factory in Shanghai for its luxury Lexus brand, media reports said on Tuesday, at a time when many foreign automakers are struggling in China. The world's top-selling automaker aims to bring the factory online around 2027 and will operate



Riot police guard an entrance to the Legislative Assembly during a protest against the repeal of the law banning mining in San Salvador on December 23, 2024. — AFP

of El Salvador overnight," he said.

The new law stipulates that the state will be the only entity authorized to search for, extract and process mined metals. However, the government may do so through companies in which it is a shareholder. The bill prohibits the use of mercury in mining operations, which may not be carried out in protected natural areas or places with important water sources.

A survey by Central American University published on Monday revealed that 59 percent of respondents do not consider El Salvador "an appropriate country for metal mining."

Since El Salvador dollarized its remittances-reliant economy in 2001, it has registered average annual growth of 2.1 percent. Twenty-seven percent of Salvadorans live in poverty, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and 70 percent of the workforce operates in the informal sector.

Elsewhere in the region, Costa Rica and Honduras have banned open-pit mining, and Panama declared a moratorium on new mining concessions last year after mass protests over plans for a huge copper mine. — AFP



Employees of Chinese electric truck startup Windrose working on an electric truck assembly line at a factory in Suzhou, in eastern China's Jiangsu province. — AFP

The chassis is crucial to CATL Chairman Robin Zeng's ambitions to push the Chinese battery giant towards further growth. Besides this, CATL is also looking into micro power grids and is building a battery swapping service. CATL has a global market share of roughly 37 percent in EV batteries, according to battery market tracker SNE Research. Zeng disclosed the panshi project to Reuters in November, saying it could slash the cost of developing a new EV from billions of dollars to just \$10 million and could make a niche EV firm profitable by selling just 10,000 cars a year.

It without a local partner. Japan's Nikkei business daily said, citing sources. That would make it the first Japanese vehicle factory of its kind in China, according to the Nikkei.

Toyota declined to confirm the plan when contacted by AFP. Public broadcaster NHK said Toyota hoped that building the new plant would help it catch up in the Chinese market.

China overtook Japan as the biggest vehicle exporter last year, helped by its dominance in EVs, a sector where Japanese firms have lost ground by focusing on hybrid vehicles. Honda and Nissan, Japan's number two and three automakers after Toyota, agreed on Monday to launch talks on a merger

This in turn could open the industry to new EV players in economies without established automakers, and Zeng said at the time that CATL had shown the panshi technology to Porsche for a potential luxury EV and to investors in the United Arab Emirates eager to start a local EV brand.

The company has been working on developing EV platforms with battery integrated to the chassis directly since 2020 and has formed partnerships with automakers including Vinfast, BAIC and Neta to develop models based on the platform over the past two years. — Reuters

to help them strengthen their position on EVs and self-driving tech. Citing "dramatic changes in the environment surrounding both companies and the automotive industry", Honda and Nissan said they plan to list a holding company in August 2026.

Lackluster consumer spending and tough competition in several markets is making life hard for many automakers. But Toyota's strategy to offer a range of vehicles, including hybrids, has paid off in markets such as the United States. The planned Shanghai factory would mainly produce Lexus models, the Nikkei said, adding that Toyota mostly sells Japanese-made Lexus vehicles in China. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2024



Volunteers hang lights on The National COVID Memorial Wall.



Volunteers hang lights on The National COVID Memorial Wall.



The National Covid Memorial Wall, dedicated to those who lost their lives to COVID-19.

LONDON WALL ILLUMINATES COVID'S ENDURING PAIN AT CHRISTMAS

UK families of some 240,000 people who died from COVID-19 have hung festive lights on a London wall, a symbol of love, anger and pain ahead of another Christmas overshadowed by loss. As the fifth anniversary of the global pandemic approaches, emotions still run raw across the UK amid lingering accusations that the then government responded too slowly to the crisis. Some 240,000 hearts have been painted by hand on the wall, nestled on the banks of the Thames, opposite the British parliament. Each heart on the 500-metre-long (540-yard) wall represents one of the UK victims of the disease, which shattered and disrupted lives around the globe after being first detected in China in December 2019.

"We put up lights every Christmas, just as a way to reflect and remember those people who are not with us," said Kirsten Hackman, 58, whose mother died from COVID in May 2020. "For many of us, there is that empty place at the table this Christmas," she added. The wall is a collective "therapy session," say volunteers. Since 2019 more than seven million people have been

reported to have died from Covid worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. But the true toll is believed to be much higher.

Thousands of messages written on the hearts on the London wall reveal the depth of the emotional toll and scars left by the pandemic on UK lives. "Mamy, love you forever," reads one, while another says: "Phil, always in my heart". The remembrance wall was originally meant to be temporary, and was constructed without permission in March 2021 in protest at then prime minister Boris Johnson's handling of the pandemic. He faced accusations of being too slow to recognize COVID's threat and then taking too long to lock down the country to try to prevent the spread of the highly infectious disease.

The wall is an "outpouring of love, anger, rage", Lorelei King, whose husband died of COVID in March 2020, told AFP. The 71-year-old is part of the "Friends of the Wall" group, a dozen volunteers who come every Friday to clean the monument, repaint the rain-washed hearts and rewrite the messages. "It's quite meditative", she said. The



Volunteer Lorelei King paints a heart on The National COVID Memorial Wall, dedicated to those who lost their lives to COVID-19, on the bank of the River Thames in London on December 20, 2024, as volunteers hang lights on the wall ahead of the fifth anniversary of the pandemic. — AFP photos

group continues to draw new hearts as COVID claims new lives.

Wall 'comforts me'

But on the Friday before Christmas, the volunteers met for another, more joyful mission: to hang lights along the wall. They illuminated them on Monday, and the decorations will remain in place until the beginning of January. Near-

ly five years after the start of the pandemic, the pain remains the same, said King, adding she was one of many who had not been able to grieve properly.

"We weren't able to have a real funeral," due to lockdown rules, she explained, referring to the severe restrictions put in place on visiting loved ones in their dying hours, and then from holding large gatherings to mourn their

loss. Instead, she focuses her energy on the wall. "It comforts me. And I don't want the people we care about to be forgotten," said King. "We are all in the same boat", added Michelle Rumball, 53, whose mother died of COVID in April 2020. She was there on the first day that some hearts were painted, following a social media call by activist group Led By Donkeys.

Over the next 10 days, hundreds of people who had lost loved ones showed up to add their tribute, despite risking arrest for damaging a listed wall. "I was very angry at that time. It was a demonstration," recalled Rumball. The group is in discussions with the authorities to make the wall, whose upkeep depends on donations, "permanent" and officially recognized, meaning it could be better protected. And a few days before Christmas, they had a "very positive" meeting, King said. According to the WHO, more than 232,000 people have died with COVID in the United Kingdom. By comparison, there have been around 168,000 deaths in France. —AFP



Items are seen from the collection of Bob Borzello, 88, owner of 43 Camden Passage, in London.



Passers-by examine Christmas items displayed in the window of 43 Camden Passage, owned by Bob Borzello, in London.



Items are seen from the collection of Bob Borzello, 88, owner of 43 Camden Passage, in London.



Pedestrians pass Christmas items displayed in the window of 43 Camden Passage, owned by Bob Borzello, in London.

London toy 'shop' window where nothing is for sale

With its twinkling Christmas fairy lights and nostalgic array of vintage toys, the window of one London "shop" never fails to enchant passers-by. A Punch and Judy puppet, old board games, model trains and planes, papier mache masks adorn the window of Number 43, Camden Passage in the north London neighborhood of Islington. Would-be shoppers intrigued by the quirky collection immediately start searching for the entrance. But Number 43 is not a shop and nothing here is for sale -- to the huge disappointment of the excited children who press their noses up against the glass.

The adjacent blue door with its festive wreath remains firmly closed and no one answers the bell. Sandwiched between a Chipotle Mexican grill and a jewelry store, neighboring shopkeepers say people are forever asking where the entrance is. In fact, the property is the former home of Bob Borzello, 88, and the window display is the result of a lifetime obsession with collecting, or "accumulating", as he prefers to call it. "Everyone comes and says, 'Oh look at that, I wonder when they're open'," his daughter-in-law Belle Benson, 51, who recently took over the displays with her daughter, told AFP. "People just like it, especially little children," added Borzello.

The property was once home to a poster shop where Borzello and his former wife sold pin-ups of iconic figures like Che Guevara. Originally from Chicago, the former businessman and tabloid newspaper editor came to London in the 1960s to study at the London School of Economics. After a short spell back in Chicago he and his now ex-wife returned to settle in London in 1967 and ran the poster shop and a print business from the property.



Items are seen from the collection of Bob Borzello, 88, owner of 43 Camden Passage, in London. —AFP photos

Accumulator

All along, however, Borzello was "accumulating" his vast collection of items picked up in antique shops and junk sales. "The fun of it is looking around and finding it... a lot of it is just things I find interesting," he said. A decade ago Borzello began displaying the items, and the window in the property he still owns is now something of an Islington institution. The toy collection began with airplane models which are soon to be the subject of another themed display. As well as toys, Borzello has accumulated lots of souvenir items from the late Queen Elizabeth II's coronation.

Other collections include clocks, badges, wedding cake toppers, shop mannequins, his children's old school reports, even his old Covid tests, which he has lined up next to his phone. The fireplace in Borzello's nearby flat is surrounded by all things green, from glass vases and ornaments to ladies' shoes, hats and necklaces. He says he thinks he

picked up the "collecting gene" from his Italian-American mother and that his children are also collectors in different ways.

"My daughter, she's a 'mudlark' and she's got her whole house filled with things that she's got from the (River) Thames," he said, referring to people who search for treasures on the shores of rivers. His "minimalist" son, meanwhile, has "gone the other way", although he "picks up everybody else's dying plants and nurses them back to life", making him a collector of a different kind, he said.

Despite his lifelong dislike of throwing anything away, Borzello laughed when Belle revealed she recently found him "slaving over the shredder". He admitted he was shredding his old love letters so his grandchildren can't read them after his death, although he has insisted on keeping the shreds. "I just have a hard time getting rid of things," he said. —AFP

Lifestyle



Ronaldo Teixeira, owner of Bar do Lacador, shows a photo of him with singer Bruno Mars at the bar in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. — AFP photos



View of the facade of Bar do Lacador in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Brazil bar gets 24K Magic moment with Bruno Mars visit

Lacador, a small bar in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, has got its uptown funk on following a surprise visit by US pop hitmaker Bruno Mars. "Bruno was here!" reads a proud sign in front of the modest establishment, which has turned Mars's November drop-in into a lucrative tourist draw. Certainly, for the bar's owner, Ronaldo Teixeira, the unexpected appearance of the multi-Grammy-award winner on November 5 was something he will never forget. "It was a Tuesday morning and we were at the door, just talking with friends, when a dark car pulled up and three big guys got out," Teixeira, 62, told AFP.

"They asked if I had a drink... and that's when Bruno then walked into my place," he said. "The only thing Bruno said when he sat down, in rough Portuguese, was 'Call over the boys.'" The owner didn't hesitate. "I shouted to everyone, 'Come here guys! He's calling people in for a picture.'" Then people arrived, we sat in the entrance and he started dancing in that way he has, so cool... It was sensational."

Mars later highlighted his bar visit on social media, quickly lending fame to Lacador (which is pronounced "lass-a-door" and means "lassoer" -- someone who throws a lasso), and to its



A napkin dispenser with the phrase "Welcome to Bar do Lacador. Bruno was here!" is pictured at the bar in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

owner. "It's as if I'm a pop star... this place has become a tourist spot, with new people always coming in, including from other cities, people of all ages who are fans of Bruno," said Teixeira.

Untouched

Even though Mars's entourage was thirsty, the 39-year-old singer himself did not open the can he was served -- and which now has pride of place in the bar, as a memento of the momentous occasion. On top of the booming trade, the bar has also had a makeover, with



Antonio Carlos, neighbor of Ronaldo Teixeira, owner of Bar do Lacador, shows a photo of him with singer Bruno Mars on his phone at the bar in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

the company behind the can's label capitalizing on the Mars aura by paying for a renovation. The once nondescript bar now boasts a new refrigerator, tables and chairs, and a poster -- all of them printed with the likeness of Mars. There is also a large framed photo of Teixeira with the singer on the wall. The American artist already has a history with Brazil, having performed there on tour four times -- the last in November, when he made his Belo Horizonte stop, in a venue just five kilometers (three miles) from the bar.



Ronaldo Teixeira, owner of Bar do Lacador, watches on his phone the video made with Bruno Mars at the bar in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

In some of his shows, he spoke a little Portuguese, and on his last tour Mars was presented with an honorary Brazilian taxpayer's identity card in his name. A Belo Horizonte bricklayer who lives next door to Lacador, Adilson Machado, said he was among those who met the star. "When they said that 'Bruninho' ('little Bruno' as Mars is affectionately called in Brazil) was here, I shook his hand and he greeted everyone. He is a very humble person," he said. Raphaela Resende, a social projects analyst living in the

city, said: "It's great that an international celebrity has chosen a street that is not so well-known or central to have a drink." Teixeira himself has adopted his body language to match the local legend growing up around his bar. "Now, whenever I celebrate, it will be with 'Bruninho's' signature move, pointing to the sky -- to thank God for bringing him to my doorstep." —AFP

Mali singer Traore child custody case postponed

A Belgian court Monday postponed the trial of Malian singer Rokia Traore to January 8 over an outstanding two-year prison sentence handed down in a child-custody dispute. The 50-year-old singer and guitarist was sentenced in absentia by a Brussels court last year on charges of parental abduction, in a long-running fight with the Belgian father of her daughter -- now aged nine. Traore was arrested in Italy in June and a Rome court later approved her extradition to Belgium, where she arrived in November. She has appealed her conviction and will be retried, this time in her presence.



Malian singer Rokia Traore performs in Henry Purcell's opera "Dido and Aeneas (Didon et Enee)" directed by Vincent Huguet and conducted by Vaclav Luks during the International Festival of Lyric Art in the French southeastern city of Aix-en-Provence. — AFP

Arriving handcuffed at the courthouse in Brussels Monday, the singer said she "never refused to let the father" have contact with his daughter, who lives in Mali, but was "afraid to bring her to Belgium and have her detained here". This case "has snowballed, it has destroyed my career", she said. The singer's new lawyer, Dimitri de Beco, asked for the trial to be postponed to "give him time" to dive into the details of the case.

The lawyer insisted the child only knew life in Mali. "She goes to school in Mali. It's her country and she grew up there. She's never been to Belgium," he said. The dispute between Traore and the child's father, Belgian playwright Jan Goossens, dates back to 2019. Goossens says he has not seen his daughter in more than five years. Goossens' lawyer Sven Mary said his client "wants to see his daughter, like a father. He is not asking for sole custody, but to have the right to see her during the holidays" in Belgium. —AFP



Actors Ryan Reynolds (left) and Blake Lively pose with their daughters as Ryan Reynolds is honored with star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on December 15, 2016 in Hollywood, California.

Support grows for Blake Lively over smear campaign claim

A chorus of support is growing behind actress Blake Lively after she filed a complaint alleging sexual harassment and a smear campaign against "It Ends With Us" co-star Justin Baldoni. Actress Amber Heard on Monday became the latest celebrity to speak out on behalf of the "Gossip Girl" alum over what she says was a coordinated social media effort to tarnish her name. Over the weekend, Lively filed a complaint claiming that Baldoni and a lead producer had behaved unacceptably during the filming of box office hit "It Ends With Us."

The allegations included that Baldoni—who also directed the film—had spoken inappropriately about his sex life, and had sought to alter the film to include sex scenes that were not in the script and had not been agreed to. They also detailed how lead producer Jamey Heath had watched Lively while she was topless, despite having been asked to turn away. But the complaint goes into great detail—including with texts and emails—on a PR campaign to wreck her reputation and to divert attention from any public comments she might make about the men's alleged misbehavior.

This was "a carefully crafted, coordinated, and resourced retaliatory scheme to silence her, and others from speaking out about the hostile environment that Mr Baldoni and Mr Heath created," the complaint says. It



US actress Blake Lively attends the LACMA Art+Film Gala at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in Los Angeles, California. —AFP photos

includes allegations that the two men hired a crisis PR team that amplified or planted negative stories about Lively on social media platforms. "You know we can bury anyone," Melissa Nathan, a member of the team, is alleged to have said, according to messages contained in the complaint.

Heard's ex-husband Johnny Depp hired the same PR team during the high-profile defamation trial between the couple in 2022, in which a jury unanimously found that Heard defamed Depp over allegations he abused her. "Social media is the absolute personification of the classic saying 'A lie travels halfway around the world before truth can get its boots on,'" Heard said in a statement carried by NBC News. "I saw

this firsthand and up close. It's as horrifying as it is destructive."

Heard's support came on the heels of a joint statement by America Ferrera, Amber Tamblyn and Alexis Bledel, who starred with Lively in "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants." "As Blake's friends and sisters for over 20 years, we stand with her in solidarity as she fights back against the reported campaign waged to destroy her reputation," they wrote on Instagram.

"Throughout the filming of 'It Ends with Us', we saw her summon the courage to ask for a safe workplace for herself and colleagues on set, and we are appalled to read the evidence of a premeditated and vindictive effort that ensued to discredit her voice." A lawyer for Wayfarer, the studio behind the film, said in a statement released to the New York Times that neither the studio, its executives, nor its PR team did anything to retaliate against Lively. "These claims are completely false, outrageous and intentionally salacious with an intent to publicly hurt and rehash a narrative in the media," lawyer Bryan Freedman wrote. The complaint was lodged with the California Civil Rights Department, and is a precursor to a lawsuit. Major Hollywood talent agency WME—which represents Lively—has reportedly dropped Baldoni as a client. —AFP

Picturesque Japan hot spring town limits day trippers

A popular for its photogenic snowy scenes began limiting entry to day-trippers on Monday in a trial to tackle overtourism during winter. Ginzan Onsen, a remote town in northern Yamagata region, draws around 330,000 visitors each year. Many share photos online of its old-fashioned buildings blanketed in snow and illuminated by lamplight that create a nostalgic atmosphere. However, authorities in Ginzan Onsen, as in more famous destinations such as Kyoto and Mount Fuji, have become fed up with a rise in road problems, quarrels and other nuisances.

From Monday, only people staying at local hotels will be allowed to enter the town after 8 pm, while those wishing to visit between 5 pm and 8 pm will need a reservation. Japan has seen a record influx of foreign tourists this year as the weak yen swells a post-pandemic travel boom.

"Traffic jams have sometimes been caused by cars getting stuck in the snow, because travelers were driving with normal tyres" instead of with snow tyres, said Takayuki Saito, head of commerce and tourism for the municipality of Obanzawa, where the town is located. "We've also heard of cases of emergency vehicles not being able to reach" Ginzan Onsen due to congestion, Saito told AFP. Driving there "can be dangerous with poor visibility in snowstorms" in winter, he said.

Until the end of February, day-trippers will be asked to park at a tourism center two kilometers (1.2 miles) away and pay for a shuttle bus. The official website for Ginzan Onsen said the trial had been launched after years of debate, adding that authorities were hoping to maintain a good relationship with visitors. When heavy traffic recently stopped an ambulance, "an emergency service team made it to the scene by running, but it was truly a life-and-death situation," the site said. —AFP



Carriages are pictured in an exhibition hall at the Imperial Carriage Castle Museum (Wagenburg) of the Schoenbrunn Palace in Vienna.



Victoria, Emperor Franz Joseph's most favorite carriage, is seen on display at the Imperial Carriage Museum.



The hearse of Empress Sisi is pictured in the exhibition hall of the Imperial Carriage Castle Museum (Wagenburg) at the Schoenbrunn Palace.

Pimp my carriage: How to ride in style like Austria's famed emperor Franz Joseph



Museum's conservator Matthias Mazini gently blows a piece of gold leaf into the air while restoring a carriage, in the studio of the Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM) in Vienna.



Museum's conservator Matthias Mazini applies a piece of gold leaf while restoring a carriage, in the studio of the Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM) in Vienna.

A long-lost carriage once used almost daily by Austria's longest-serving monarch Franz Joseph for his commute from the Schoenbrunn palace to his office in central Vienna has gone on display after an epic renovation. With tourists flocking to Vienna for Christmas, the carefully restored vehicle can be seen at the Imperial Carriage Museum, which houses one of the world's most important collections.

"People usually saw him in exactly this type of vehicle, and the emperor in his beloved everyday carriage became a popular subject of postcards and paintings," Mario Doeberl, historian and museum curator, told AFP. People would line the streets, hoping to throw petitions and protest letters into his carriage, knowing it was the only way to get the emperor's ear, Doeberl said. But his well-known commute also made him a potential assassination target and police also patrolled to make sure nobody came close.

The head of the Habsburg dynasty had access to about 600 vehicles including sleighs and sedan chairs. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918, only 100 of the most valuable vehicles went into the Imperial carriage museum which opened four years later. The royal carriage collection in Paris — once the most important center of production — was mostly destroyed in the French revolution. The emperor's everyday carriage was thought to have been lost until it resurfaced at a stud farm in the 1990s and was painstakingly restored after a 20-year-long fight for funding.

Restoring masterpieces
Museum conservator Matthias Manzini was one of a handful of experts



Museum's conservator Matthias Mazini looks on in the studio of the Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM) in Vienna.—AFP photos

who brought the carriage back to life. The run-down, rusty vehicle, which had been repainted, was barely recognizable when it first entered the collection. The carriage has gone on show again more than a century after one of the world's longest-serving leaders last sat in it. "A carriage is a moving work of art, and many different craftsmen are involved, including blacksmiths, sculptors, carpenters and architects," Manzini told AFP. "These vehicles are no longer in use, but back then they were the most elaborate, most expensive ones -- similar to a Rolls Royce nowadays," said the 37-year-old conservator.

His task is not only to preserve the carriages, but also to find out how they were built and embellished in the first place. Armed with a gilding brush made from the tail of a squirrel and gold leaf, Manzini is restoring the wheels of an imperial gala coach once used for coronations and weddings.



A carriage of Empress Elisabeth of Austria (known as Sisi), originally the Milan coronation carriage of Napoleon 1, is seen on display at the Imperial Carriage Museum.

Last rides

The museum's most valuable carriage -- the gilded Imperial state coach -- was once hauled across the Alps to Milan and taken to Budapest for the 1867 coronation of Empress Elisabeth. But it nearly became a victim of conflict. Just a few months before the end of World War II, in February 1945, US planes bombed the Schoenbrunn palace, burying the carriages under debris. The most daunting carriage is the collection's jet-black hearse, which caused a stir when it last rolled through the streets of Vienna in 1989.

Built in 1876, the neo-baroque hearse was used for five funerals, including Empress Elisabeth, Emperor Franz Joseph and Austria's last empress Zita. "It was controversial to use this museum piece again -- nobody could guarantee that a strap wouldn't rip, which would have been highly unpleasant for reasons of piety, but also dangerous for the hearse itself," Doeberl told AFP. Fabian Daubner, 24, who was visiting Vienna for a few days, said he was awestruck by some of the carriages' huge wheels which are almost "as big as" a human being.—AFP



The Hungarian coronation carriage of Empress Sisi is pictured in the exhibition hall of the Imperial Carriage Castle Museum (Wagenburg) at the Schoenbrunn Palace.



Mario Doeberl, Curator of the Imperial Carriage Castle Museum, poses for a picture in the exhibition hall of the Imperial Carriage Castle Museum (Wagenburg).



Victoria, Emperor Franz Joseph's most favorite carriage, is seen on display at the Imperial Carriage Museum.

Reptile star of 'Crocodile Dundee' dies at 90

An Australian saltwater crocodile who starred in the hit film "Crocodile Dundee" has died aged 90, the reptile's zoo confirmed Tuesday. Burt, the five meter (16.4 foot) reptile died "peacefully", according to a statement from the Darwin aquarium, where he lived in Crocosaurus Cove. "Burt's life story is one of strength, resilience, and a personality as bold as the Top End (Northern Territory) itself." The "confirmed bachelor" was captured in a Northern Territory river in the 1980s, before he became "one of the most recognized crocodiles in the world", the aquarium's statement said.

"Burt was truly one of a kind. He

wasn't just a crocodile; he was a force of nature and a reminder of the power and majesty of these incredible creatures." In "Crocodile Dundee", Burt was used in a scene where American reporter Sue Charlton, played by Linda Kozlowski, is attacked by a crocodile while refilling her water bottle, only to be rescued by Paul Hogan's Mick Dundee. The scene used footage of Burt "launching out of the water", Penny Priest, chief executive of Crocosaurus Cove, told national broadcaster ABC.

"Obviously, he wasn't in the whole scene, but that was where he made his debut." The aquarium, where Burt lived

since 2008, thanked everyone who visited him and urged the public to remember the importance of conserving wildlife. Post "Crocodile Dundee" fame, Burt stayed in the spotlight thanks to his alleged psychic abilities, predicting elections and the outcome of major sporting events—with mixed success. Government figures suggest more than 100,000 "salties"—many of which can grow over six meters long and weigh more than 1,000 kilograms (2,200 pounds) -- hunt along the coasts, rivers and wetlands of the continent's far north.—AFP



File photo shows Paul Hogan carrying a deceased crocodile in a bar in a scene from the film "Crocodile Dundee" in 1986.—AFP

India to consider second spinner for Boxing Day Test

Teen Konstas to open for Australia in Boxing Day India Test

MELBOURNE: India captain Rohit Sharma was coy Tuesday on how his team will line up for the Boxing Day Test against Australia, with the option of a second spinner on the table.

Temperatures are forecast to reach 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) on Thursday, and the Melbourne Cricket Ground curator said during the week he expected the pitch to offer plenty for the fast bowlers. But Rohit left the door open to a second spinner.

"Whatever we have to do to make the best possible XI in these conditions, we will do that—whether that is playing an extra spinner or not," he said.

With off-spinning allrounder Ravichandran Ashwin announcing his immediate retirement from international cricket after the third Test in Brisbane, Ravindra Jadeja is expected to keep his place.

Washington Sundar is the other spin option. India has been carried this series by pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, who has tormented Australia almost single-handedly, with the other quicks not offering as much menace.

Speedster Akash Deep replaced the underperforming Harshit Rana in Brisbane and is set to play

again along with Mohammed Siraj and Nitish Kumar Reddy should the second spin option not be taken.

Despite their lacklustre performance, Rohit defended the pace attack.

"When you talk about our bowling unit, I have enough faith in all our bowlers to get the job done," he said. "Anyone can have tough games, tough series. But it doesn't mean they are not good enough to perform at this level. It happened that in these two or three games; they've not been able to get those big numbers, but that's okay, it happens. I have enough confidence and faith in them." Rohit himself is under pressure.

After missing the first Test in Perth for the birth of his second child, he came in at six in Adelaide and Brisbane instead of opening to allow Yashvir Jaiswal and KL Rahul to remain at the top of the order.

There has been mounting speculation that he could again start as opener in Melbourne, but brushed off questions about the likelihood. "Let's not worry about that. I think who bats where is something that we need to figure out within ourselves," he said.

"It's not a thing I should be discussing at every press conference, where I'll be batting. Whatever it

takes for our team to look good or gives us the best chance to succeed, we'll try and do that." The two sides head into the match tied at 1-1 in the five-match series after India won by 295 runs in Perth before being crushed by 10 wickets at Adelaide. The hosts were on top at the third Test in Brisbane, but persistent rain ruined the game and it ended in a draw.

Meanwhile, Sam Konstas will open the batting for Australia in the fourth Test against India, coach Andrew McDonald said Tuesday, while voicing confidence leading batsman Travis Head will be fit to play.

Konstas was called up after selectors dumped Nathan McSweeney after just three Tests, with the 19-year-old tasked with fending off Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah alongside an underperforming Usman Khawaja.

"He'll play Boxing Day," McDonald told reporters, referring to the teenager as "composed, relaxed".

"We have said from the get-go, leading into this summer, that we wouldn't shy away and age was no barrier. What he's shown is an array of shots and an ability to put pressure back on his opponents and he gets his opportunity. Really excited for him—Boxing Day, the biggest stage." Konstas will become

Australia's youngest Test debutant since current skipper Pat Cummins took the field against South Africa at Johannesburg in 2011.

It could be a baptism of fire, with an expected 90,000 fans at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and temperatures forecast to reach 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) on Thursday.

Konstas thrust himself into the frame after becoming the youngest player since Ricky Ponting to score two centuries in the same Sheffield Shield match.

He also slammed a century playing for the Prime Minister's XI against India. The five-match series is tied at 1-1 after India won by 295 runs in Perth before being crushed by 10 wickets at Adelaide. The rain-affected third Test in Brisbane was drawn.

Head is the highest run scorer in the series, plundering aggressive centuries at both Adelaide and Brisbane. But he picked up a minor thigh strain at the Gabba.

McDonald said he expected him to play but Head still had "some things to work through". "I'm pretty confident he'll play," he added. "He has been able to do his running. I think he will be fully functional come game time." — AFP

Date for India Pakistan Champions match announced

DUBAI: Bitter rivals Pakistan and India will square off in the Champions Trophy in Dubai on February 23 as the International Cricket Council (ICC) announced the schedule on Tuesday. The tournament runs from February 19 to March 9 and will be split between host country Pakistan and neutral venue Dubai.

India refused to travel to Pakistan due to security fears and political tension. "The eight-team tournament will feature 15 matches, and will be played across Pakistan and in Dubai," announced the ICC. The competing teams are divided into two Groups with defending champions Pakistan, India, New Zealand and Bangladesh in Group A while Group B comprises South Africa, Australia, Afghanistan and England.

The final announcement came after a month long stand-off with the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) intially adamant it host all the matches. But after the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) refused to change its stance the PCB finally agreed, though they reached a compromise as Pakistan will play at a neutral venue in any event hosted by India until 2027.

Pakistan, who won the title in 2017, will open the event with a match against New Zealand in Karachi on February 19 while India play Bangladesh in Dubai the following day. The first semi-final will be held in Dubai on March 4 while Lahore will stage the second the next day.

But there are two venues announced for the final, subject to India's qualification. "Lahore will also host the final on 9 March, unless India qualify, in which case it will be played in Dubai," said the ICC.

Schedule:

- 19 February, Pakistan v New Zealand, Karachi, Pakistan
- 20 February, Bangladesh v India, Dubai
- 21 February, Afghanistan v South Africa, Karachi
- 22 February, Australia v England, Lahore
- 23 February, Pakistan v India, Dubai
- 24 February, Bangladesh v New Zealand, Rawalpindi
- 25 February, Australia v South Africa, Rawalpindi
- 26 February, Afghanistan v England, Lahore
- 27 February, Pakistan v Bangladesh, Rawalpindi
- 28 February, Afghanistan v Australia, Lahore
- 1 March, South Africa v England, Karachi
- 2 March, New Zealand v India, Dubai
- 4 March, Semi-final 1, Dubai
- 5 March, Semi-final 2, Lahore
- 9 March, Final, Lahore (unless India qualify, when it will be played in Dubai)
- 10 March, Reserve day. — AFP

Tennis power couple de Minaur, Boulter get engaged

SYDNEY: Tennis glamour couple Alex de Minaur and Katie Boulter have announced their engagement ahead of the start of the 2025 season this week. The Australian world number nine and Britain's top women's player have been dating for several years with their news sparking congratulations from across the tennis world.

"We've been keeping a small secret," the pair jointly said on Instagram late Monday, with Boulter showing off her ring. Among the well-wishers were women stars Paula Badosa and Madison Keys while de Minaur's fellow Australian Thanasi Kokkinakis quipped: "It's about damn time."

De Minaur, 25 and Boulter, 28, both enjoyed breakthrough seasons in 2024. The Australian broke into the top 10 for the first time while Boulter reached a career-high 23. They both start their 2025 campaigns at the mixed-teams United Cup in Sydney this week. — AFP

Stokes to miss three months with torn hamstring

LONDON: England Test captain Ben Stokes faces at least three months out after tearing his left hamstring during the tour of New Zealand, team management announced on Monday.

The 33-year-old all-rounder had already been ruled out of next year's Champions Trophy one-day international tournament in Pakistan and the preceding white-ball tour of India.

Further assessments have since revealed the full extent of the injury, with Stokes set to undergo surgery in January, said an England and Wales Cricket Board statement. Stokes suffered the injury while bowling during the third Test against New Zealand in Hamilton last week.

Stokes did not bat in the second innings of that match as England slumped to a 423-run defeat—a result that meant his side still won a three-match series 2-1.

"Something else to overcome...go on then!!!!!! I've got so much more left in this tank and so much more blood, sweat and tears to go through for my team and this shirt," Stokes wrote on social media.

"There's a reason I have a Phoenix permanently inked on my body."

Stokes previously missed this year's home series against Sri Lanka and the first Test in Pakistan after tearing the hamstring on the same left leg in August.

England's next Test is at home to Zimbabwe in May. They will then host a five-match Test series against India starting in June before their pinnacle 2025/26 Ashes tour of Australia. — AFP



Ben Stokes

Sabres rout Islanders to halt 13-game skid

NEW YORK: Beck Malenstyn scored just 2:07 into the game Monday night for the visiting Buffalo Sabres, who never trailed as they snapped a 13-game losing streak by routing the New York Islanders 7-1 in Elmont, NY. Jiri Kulich posted his first career two-goal game while Rasmus Dahlin collected a career-high four assists for the Sabres, who set a season high for goals while winning for the first time since Nov. 23 -- five days before Thanksgiving. The Sabres, who were outscored 54-28 during their 13-game skid (0-10-3), scored the first six goals Monday as they posted their most lopsided win since a 7-0 blanking of the Los Angeles Kings on Feb. 13 last season. The four assists by Dahlin snapped his previous single-game best of three, set three times previously. Goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 27 saves in the win.

Blue Jackets 5, Canadiens 4

Dmitri Voronkov lit the lamp twice and Kirill Marchenko scored the game winner with just over two minutes remaining to help host Columbus outlast Montreal. Marchenko finished with a goal and two assists while Sean Monahan and Zach Werenski tallied three assists apiece. Patrik Laine's return to Columbus as a member of the Canadiens was cut short after he left the game following the end of the first period with an upper-body injury.

Lightning 4, Panthers 0

Nikita Kucherov netted the game-winner before being ejected and Tampa Bay split its home-and-home set against Florida by blanking the Stanley Cup champions in Sunrise, Fla. Lightning backup goaltender Jonas Johansson stopped 36 shots for his first shutout since October 2023. Kucherov scored early but was assessed a game misconduct late in the first period after a kneeing incident on Matthew Tkachuk, who had to be helped to the dressing room but later returned.

Canucks 4, Sharks 3

Elias Pettersson scored twice and Quinn Hughes added two assists as Vancouver edged visiting San Jose. Brock Boeser and Kiefer Sherwood also scored for the Canucks, who snapped a three-game skid (0-1-2) and won for the second time in six outings (2-2-2). Thatcher Demko made 26 saves to improve to 12-0-0 against the Sharks in his career. William Eklund, Cody Ceci and Luke Kunin tallied for San Jose, which has lost five straight (0-4-1). Rookie Macklin Celebrini, a Vancouver native, picked up two assists in the loss. Yaroslav Askarov stopped 20 shots while opposing the Canucks for the first time.

Golden Knights 3, Ducks 1

Tomas Hertl scored the go-ahead goal midway through the third period and also had an assist as Vegas completed a four-game regular-season series sweep of Anaheim in Las Vegas. The victory was the 119th for coach Bruce Cassidy with the Golden Knights, passing Gerard Gallant for the most in franchise history. Cassidy is 119-59-20 with the club. Gallant went 118-75-20. Tanner Pearson had a short-handed goal and Keegan Kolesar added a goal and an assist for Vegas, which won its fourth straight game and prevailed for the eighth time in nine games. Adin Hill made 31 saves for his 50th career win with Pacific Division-leading Vegas, which improved to 14-3-0 at home this season. Mason McTavish scored a goal and Lukas Dostal, who entered the game with 2:28 to go in the first period after starting goaltender John Gibson was injured, finished with 19 saves for Anaheim.

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"Something else to overcome...go on then!!!!!! I've got so much more left in this tank and so much more blood, sweat and tears to go through for my team and this shirt," Stokes wrote on social media.

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England's next Test is at home to Zimbabwe in May. They will then host a five-match Test series against India starting in June before their pinnacle 2025/26 Ashes tour of Australia. — AFP



COLUMBUS: Denton Mateychuk #5 of the Columbus Blue Jackets skates with the puck as Alex Newhook #15 of the Montreal Canadiens defends during the first period of a game at Nationwide Arena on December 23, 2024 in Columbus, Ohio. — AFP

Gibson stopped all 11 shots he faced before Vegas center Tanner Laczynski, spinning around to race back up ice, inadvertently caught the goalie in the right eye with his stick. Laczynski earned an interference penalty.

Wild 4, Blackhawks 3

Brock Faber scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period and Minnesota held on for a win over Chicago in Saint Paul, Minn. Faber put the Wild on top 3-2 with 17:17 remaining in the third period. Kirill Kaprizov, Jared Spurgeon and Marcus Foligno each added one goal for Minnesota, which snapped a four-game losing streak. The Wild improved to 13-0-1 in their past 14 games against the Blackhawks. Connor Bedard, Nick Foligno and Jason Dickinson each scored for Chicago. The Blackhawks lost their second straight game after winning the previous three in a row.

Stars 3, Utah Hockey Club 2

Casey DeSmith made 24 saves in his first start since Dec. 2, helping Dallas end a two-game skid with a win against Utah in Salt Lake City. DeSmith's previous start also came at Utah, where he made 36 saves in a 2-1 win. Jake Oettinger started the next eight games, with DeSmith making one 18-minute relief appearance against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday. Colin Blackwell, Roope Hintz and Jamie Benn scored for Dallas. Kevin Stenlund and Barrett Hayton scored and Karel Vejmelka made 26 saves for Utah, which had its eight-game point streak (6-0-2) snapped.

Penguins 7, Flyers 3

Sidney Crosby had a goal and three assists to match the Pittsburgh career record held by Hall of Famer Mario Lemieux as the host Penguins beat Philadelphia. Crosby and Lemieux each have 1,033 assists, tied for 12th in NHL history. Michael Bunting scored twice, Rickard Rakell had a goal and two assists. Bryan Rust added a goal and an assist and Philip Tomasino and Blake Lizotte also scored for Pittsburgh. Evgeni Malkin and Erik Karlsson had two assists apiece, and Tristan Jarry made 24 saves for the victory. Egor Zamula, Noah Cates and Sean Couturier scored for Philadelphia. Scott Laughton had two assists. Samuel Ersson stopped nine shots and surrendered five goals before being replaced by Aleksei Kolosov, who made six saves on seven shots.

Devils 5, Rangers 0

Jack Hughes scored twice and collected an assist as New Jersey scored three power-play goals and rolled to a victory over sliding New York in Newark, NJ. Hughes scored twice on goaltender Jonathan Quick three weeks after scoring twice on Igor Shesterkin in the Devils' 5-1 rout of New York on Dec. 2. Timo Meier also scored a power-play goal while Stefan Noesen and Dawson Mercer scored in a span of 4:35 in the third for New Jersey. Quick allowed five goals on 29 shots. The Rangers are 4-13-0 in their past 17 games.

Bruins 4, Capitals 1

Elias Lindholm and Charlie Coyle scored third-period goals within a span of 2:18 as Boston surged past visiting Washington. Brad Marchand's two goals and an assist led the Bruins, who will carry their first five-game point streak of the season (4-0-1) into the holiday break. The Boston captain now has points in 10 consecutive games for the third time in his career. Jakub Vrana scored his third goal in as many games for Washington, which took only its fourth loss in a 14-game span (10-3-1). The Bruins played about half of the game without star winger David Pastrnak, who was hurt on a neutral-ice hit in the second period and was not on the team's bench to start the third.

Blues 4, Red Wings 0

Dylan Holloway notched his first career hat trick and St. Louis Blues ended a three-game losing streak with a win at Detroit. Jordan Binnington made 19 saves for his second shutout this season and the 17th of his career. Alexandre Texier also scored for the Blues, who had scored just one goal in each of their previous three games. Cam Talbot made 17 saves for the Red Wings, who have lost three straight games.

Jets 5, Maple Leafs 2

Mark Scheifele had three goals and an assist as visiting Winnipeg defeated Toronto. Kyle Connor added two goals and two assists. Gabriel Vilardi piled up three assists and Josh Morrissey had two assists for the Jets, who have won two games in a row. Connor Hellebuyck stopped 23 shots. John Tavares scored twice for Toronto, notching his 200th goal as a Maple Leaf in the process. Including his time with the New York Islanders, Tavares has 473 career goals and is the fifth player in NHL history with 200 or more goals for two franchises. — Reuters

Sports

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander leads Thunder to 8th straight win

Malik Beasley, Cade Cunningham help Pistons beat Lakers

WASHINGTON: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander overcame a slow start to score 41 points as the Oklahoma City Thunder powered to a 123-105 home win over the Washington Wizards on Monday. The Thunder extended their regular-season winning streak to eight, their longest winning streak since January 2018. Oklahoma City hasn't had a longer streak since the 2013-14 season. Though the Monday game featured the Thunder, with the top record in the Western Conference, against the team with the worst record in the NBA, it was far from a cake walk. Gilgeous-Alexander finished 14 of 25 from the field and made all 10 of his free throws. Jalen Williams added 17 points for Oklahoma City, scoring 11 in the first quarter. Isaiah Hartenstein (16 points, 11 rebounds) and rookie Ajay Mitchell (16 points, 12 rebounds, both career highs) each had a double-double. It was Mitchell's first career double-double and the 10th in 13 games this season for Hartenstein. Jordan Poole led Washington with 31 points and seven assists. Carlton Carrington scored 14 points, Jonas Valanciunas logged 12 points and 16 rebounds, Malcolm Brogdon also had 12 and Kyshawn George scored 11.



ATLANTA: Trae Young #11 of the Atlanta Hawks drives to the basket during the game against the Minnesota Timberwolves on December 23, 2024 at State Farm Arena in Atlanta, Georgia. — AFP

Hawks 117, Timberwolves 104

Reserve Garrison Mathews scored a season-high 25 points and tied a career high with seven 3-pointers to help Atlanta defeat visiting Minnesota. Mathews went 7-for-8 from the field—all 3-point attempts—and 4-for-5 from the free-throw line as Atlanta ended a three-game losing streak. Trae Young was back in action for Atlanta after missing one game due to a bruised heel. He scored a team-high 29 points, knocking down four 3-pointers, and also dished out seven assists. DeAndre Hunter added 19 points, and Jalen Johnson supplied 17 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists. Minnesota's top scorer was Naz Reid (23 points). Julius Randle finished with 19 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists. The Timberwolves have lost three games in a row.

Rockets 114, Hornets 101

Fred VanVleet scored 20 points, Jabari Smith Jr. and Amen Thompson added double-doubles and

Houston cruised past host Charlotte. VanVleet tallied 18 points on 7-for-9 shooting in the first half, and his shot-clock buzzer-beater lifted Houston to a 31-point halftime lead. The Rockets led by as many as 34 points en route to winning both sides of a back-to-back and the opening two games of a three-game road trip. Miles Bridges posted 24 points and eight rebounds and LaMelo Ball added 23 points and eight assists for Charlotte. Ball finished 5 for 11 from behind the arc.

Magic 108, Celtics 104

Tristan da Silva scored a team-high 18 points and Orlando overcame a 15-point halftime deficit to beat visiting Boston. The Celtics were within one point until da Silva capped the scoring by making a 3-point-er with 9.9 seconds to play. The Magic received 17 points from Trevelin Queen and 16 from Jalen Suggs

in the victory. Jaylen Brown had 35 points and nine rebounds for the Celtics, who were 8-for-33 from 3-point range. Kristaps Porzingis and Derrick White each finished with 17 points.

76ers 111, Spurs 106

Tyrese Maxey racked up 32 points that included eight in a rousing run over the final two and a half minutes as short-handed Philadelphia held off visiting San Antonio in a gritty clash. The 76ers won for the third time in four games despite losing former league MVP Joel Embiid to an ejection late in the first half. Philadelphia led by three points at halftime and by nine heading into the final quarter. Maxey also took 10 rebounds in the win. Paul George hit for 19 points, Guerschon Yabusele had 17, Caleb Martin had 12 and Kelly Oubre Jr. tallied 10 for the 76ers. Victor Wem-

banyama led six Spurs in double-figure scoring with 26 points and added nine rebounds and eight blocked shots. Stephon Castle had 17 points, Jeremy Sochan, Julian Champagnie and Devin Vassell hit for 15 apiece and Paul scored 12 for San Antonio.

Clippers 114, Grizzlies 110

Norman Powell scored 29 points, including four in the final minute, and Ivica Zubac had 20 points and 19 rebounds to lead Los Angeles to a victory at Memphis, snapping the Grizzlies' eight-game home winning streak. Powell's 15-footer with 25.4 seconds left broke a 110-all tie. He added two game-clinching free throws with 5.7 seconds to go. James Harden added 21 points, nine assists and eight rebounds for Los Angeles, which won for the third time in four games. Jaren Jackson Jr. led the Grizzlies with 24 points. Ja Morant added 23 and Desmond Bane finished with 21 points, nine rebounds and seven assists. Rookie big man Zach Edey grabbed a career-high 14 rebounds as Memphis fell for just the second time in eight games overall.

Nuggets 117, Suns 90

Nikola Jokic scored 32 points, Michael Porter Jr. added 24 points on 10-for-12 shooting, and host Denver beat Phoenix. Aaron Gordon contributed 12 points and Russell Westbrook scored 11 for the Nuggets, who have won five of their past six games. Denver's Jalen Pickett posted career highs in points (11) and assists (eight). Kevin Durant and Bradley Beal scored 23 points each for Phoenix, which has dropped three in a row.

Mavericks 132, Trail Blazers 108

Luka Donicic paired a game-high 27 points with seven assists and seven rebounds, leading Dallas to a rout of visiting Portland. Daniel Gafford added 23 points off the bench on 7-for-7 shooting while Kyrie Irving scored 20 points for Dallas, which won its second straight game. Reserve Deni Avdija led the Trail Blazers with 19 points, nine rebounds and seven assists in 16 points and nine boards. Portland fell for the eighth time in its past nine games. — Reuters

Amorim questions 'choices' of Rashford's entourage

LONDON: Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim has questioned the "choices" of those close to forward Marcus Rashford, whose time at Old Trafford could be coming to an end. The 27-year-old England international sat out a third straight game on Sunday as United slumped to a 3-0 home loss to Bournemouth.

Rashford was also omitted from the squad for the derby win at Manchester City earlier this month and Thursday's League Cup quarter-final defeat by Tottenham. Two days before the Spurs loss, Rashford said in an interview that he was "ready for a new challenge and the next steps" of a career that

began in the United academy.

"It is a hard situation but I understand that this kind of player have a lot of people around them, and making some choices that sometimes is not the first idea from the player," Amorim told Sky Sports on Monday.

"They chose to do that interview because it's not just Marcus. I understand that so for me as a coach I'm just focused on the performance, the way he trains. "The rest, I think, is better for me and the club to deal with that when the times comes."

Amorim also expressed his support for Rashford, who is under contract until 2028, and is keen for the player to stay at United. The Portuguese said he can "separate" his relationship with Rashford from the decisions of the people advising him.

"At the moment I'm just focused on improving Marcus," added Amorim. "We need a lot in this moment. (from a) talented guy like Marcus, and I forget for now the interview. I just see what I see on the pitch."



Ruben Amorim

United's defeat by Bournemouth left them 13th in the Premier League, their lowest position in the top flight at Christmas since 1986. Amorim's side return to action at Wolves on Boxing Day before hosting Newcastle next Monday. — AFP

FIFA adapts transfer rules after Diarra case

PARIS: FIFA announced Monday it had adopted an "interim regulatory framework" regarding player transfers after a ruling earlier this year by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in a case brought by Lassana Diarra. The decision comes just over a week before the transfer market reopens in January and follows "close consultation with key stakeholders", world football's governing body said in statement.

The changes relate to article 17 of FIFA's regulations governing the status and transfer of players. "The framework... addresses the rules about compensation for breach of contract, joint and several liability, inducement for breach of contract, International Transfer Certificates and proceedings before the Football Tribunal," FIFA said.

The objective is to provide "clarity and stability ahead of upcoming registration periods and upholding globally uniform rules", it added. The European Union's top court, the ECJ, in October said that certain FIFA rules regarding transfers were contrary to the bloc's laws on freedom of movement, as it found in favor of former France midfielder Diarra.

The Diarra case goes back 10 years. In August 2014, Lokomotiv Moscow terminated Diarra's contract citing contractual breaches by the player. The Russian club also sought 20 million euros (\$22m) compensation from Diarra, now aged 39.

Diarra, who also played for Arsenal, Chelsea, Paris Saint-Germain and Real Madrid during his career, refused and requested that Lokomotiv pay him compensation. He was eventually ordered to pay his former club 10 million euros by FIFA, a fine that was upheld by the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Diarra also received a backdated 15-month suspension.

Any club wishing to sign Diarra risked being made liable to pay the fine, according to FIFA rules which the court ruled "contrary to EU law", determining they hindered free movement and competition between clubs.

FIFA said the interim regulations would apply immediately and that they would have no effect on ongoing talks over possible long-term changes to the system overseeing player registration and transfers. — AFP

Supermaxi yachts eye record in Sydney-Hobart race

SYDNEY: Forecast favorable winds could see the prestigious Sydney-Hobart race record challenged by the supermaxi yachts when the often-brutal bluewater classic sets sail on Thursday. LawConnect won from Comanche last year by just 51 seconds in a thrilling finale after a treacherous 628 nautical mile slog with the two 100-footers again set to battle for line honors.

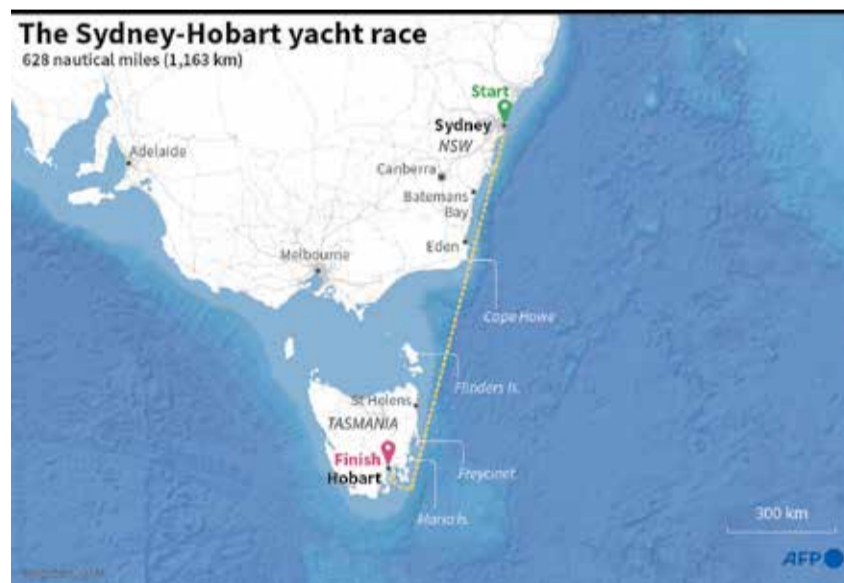
Two other supermaxis are entered—Wild Thing and Maritimo—among a fleet of 105. The big boats are predicted to get off to a flying start from Sydney Harbour on Boxing Day before they head down Australia's east coast then tackle the notorious Bass Strait towards the Tasmanian state capital Hobart.

Comanche navigator Juan Villa is confident of a fast race if the long-range forecast of north-easterly winds holds. "In our mind is whether the conditions will lead to possibly break a record," said the Spaniard, who added that depending on what the weather does "we

feel that our boat is quite, quite strong".

Weather is a critical factor in the race, which was first held in 1945, with winds often shifting rapidly in direction and intensity. In 1998, when a deep depression exploded over the fleet in the Bass Strait, six men died, five boats sank and 55 sailors were rescued. "There's a lot of sections through the race and a lot of weather phenomena that can affect the strategies," said Villa.

"It's a really exciting race. It's really complicated, but that's why it makes it very interesting for navigators." Four-time champion Comanche is the current race record holder after it surged over the finish line in one day, 9 hours, 15 minutes and 24 seconds to set a new mark in 2017. Alive, last year's overall winner of the Tattersall Cup, which takes into account boat size and other factors, is back to defend its title. Other previous overall winners in the fleet include Centennial 7 (formally Celestial), Love and War and Unicorn, which won as Assassin.



Love and War, a three-time winner, is being skippered for the first time by Simon Kurts, son of owner Phillip Kurts. "We're absolutely capable of winning the race. The tougher the race is, the better we'll go," said Simon Kurts.

There are six international competitors including French yacht Cocody, Poulpito from New Caledonia and the

Hong Kong-based Antipodes. The Filipino-crewed Centennial 7, Caro from New Zealand and American challenger Bacchanal are also entered. Maritimo Katwinchar, built in 1904, will become the oldest boat in the ocean race's 79-year history when it sets sail, co-skippered by 45-time Sydney-Hobart veteran Michael Spies. — AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

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

Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

Hospitals

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

Change of Name

I, SK Jane Alam S/o SK Jamaluddin, residing at Vill- Lakshya, P.O- Kumarara, P.S. Mahishadal, Dist-Purba Medinipur, Pin-721632, mistakenly in my passport no- Z3827008 my name is Shaikh Jane Alam S/o Shaikh Jamaluddin. On 6/11/24 by Haldia First Class Judicial Magistrate Shaikh Jane Alam S/o Shaikh Jamaluddin and SK Jane Alam S/o SK Jamaluddin is same and identical person.
#6615, 24/12/2024

I, Agnelo Saluzinho D'Costa holder of Passport No. P0775908 do hereby change my name to Agnelo Saluzinho D'Costa. I will henceforth be known in the name of Angelo Saluzinho Da Costa and, I also undertaken to carry out this name change in all my documents.
#6614, 23/12/2024

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is 1889988

Minister hails regional cooperation

Host of Gulf Cup 27 to be announced on Thursday



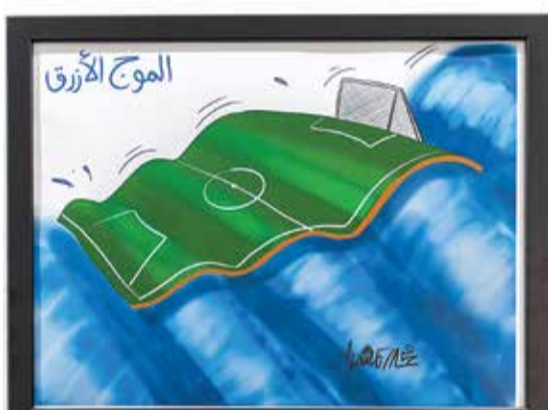
KUWAIT: Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi with other officials.



KFA Chairman Sheikh Ahmad Al-Yusuf Al-Sabah and former Kuwaiti player Saad Al-Houti with other officials at a caricature exhibition at Al-Arabi Club.



Caricatures on display at the exhibition.



KUWAIT: Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, who is also Chairman of the Supreme Organizing Committee for Khaleeji Zain 26, highlighted the importance of the "Diwan Al-Khaleeji Forum" as a platform for communication, collaboration and exchange of ideas and expertise among Gulf youth. He stated that such efforts contribute to enhancing Gulf cooperation.

Speaking on Monday at the forum's closing ceremony, which lasted four days, Al-Mutairi expressed gratitude for the patronage of HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the support of HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, as well as the follow-up of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. "The participation of over 120 speakers who shared their unique experiences through discussions, workshops and presentations proves that dialogue and idea exchange can lay the foundation for a better future for our youth and nations," he said.

Al-Mutairi further emphasized the pride in hosting Gulf nationals who participated in Kuwait's successful organization of Khaleeji Zain 26, which underscores the strong bonds among Gulf nations. He praised the efforts of Kuwaiti youth, particularly those from the "Harvard Diwan", who played a pivotal role in

the forum's success, and thanked all entities that contributed to the success of this significant event.

The minister also toured the forum's workshops, lectures, art exhibition and events hosted by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters and the Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah. He attended a sports performance by members of the Warba Club for Persons with Disabilities.

Sheikh Al-Yousef commends Gulf Cup efforts

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Yousef, Chairman of the Kuwait Football Association and Vice Chairman of the Supreme Organizing Committee, lauded the tremendous efforts of all those involved in organizing Khaleeji Zain 26, currently taking place in Kuwait.

"The tournament has garnered attention due to the committee's efforts to overcome challenges and create an ideal sporting and social atmosphere for participating delegations and visiting fans," Sheikh Ahmad said. He described the tournament's timing as ideal and noted that participating teams are fielding their best lineups to compete for the prestigious title. Regarding Kuwait's national team (Al-Azraq), Sheikh Ahmad revealed their unsuccessful attempt to replace defender Hassan Hamdan, who was ruled out due to injury. Tournament rules prohibit substitutions after the first match.



Local journalists at the media center.

Looking ahead, Sheikh Ahmad said the focus post-tournament will be on developing young players to ensure the team's sustained success. He expressed admiration for the significant fan turnout and the camaraderie among fans in various venues, which reflects the Gulf Cup's role in fostering unity.

The Gulf Football Federation will hold its General Assembly meeting at 12:00 pm on Thursday. The agenda includes discussions on enhancing collaboration among Gulf federations to develop

football in the region. The meeting will also announce the host country for the next Gulf Cup, "Gulf Cup 27", showcasing a commitment to regional cooperation and advancing Gulf sports. In other news, the second round of Group B matches will feature Yemen vs. Saudi Arabia at 5:30 pm at Jaber Mubarak Stadium and Iraq vs. Bahrain at 8:30 pm at Jaber Al-Ahmad Stadium.

Coaches speak up
Yemen coach Nouredine Ould Ali ac-

knowledged the difficulty of facing Saudi Arabia, referring to the match as critical for the Saudis after their loss to Bahrain. "Saudi Arabia has strong players, especially in attack," he noted, mentioning Salem Al-Dawsari and Musab Al-Juwair. "We'll give it our all to stand firm against them," he added.

Saudi coach Herve Renard admitted his team hasn't been at its best in recent months but remains optimistic about qualifying for the semifinals. "We need to reflect and work harder," Renard said, urging fans to remain hopeful. Iraq coach Jesus Casas described the upcoming match against Bahrain as highly competitive. Despite limited preparation time, Casas expressed confidence in achieving a positive result. Bahrain coach Dragan Talayich expressed readiness to face Iraq, emphasizing respect for their opponents and focusing on delivering a strong performance.

Art and culture

Fans attending Khaleeji Zain 26 shifted their focus on Monday from the stadiums to Souq Al-Mubarakiya, creating a festive and joyful atmosphere that highlighted Gulf unity. Meanwhile, an exhibition featuring over 80 caricatures by 40 Gulf artists opened at Al-Arabi Club. The event, organized by the Kuwaiti Caricature Society, celebrates Gulf football heritage and unity.

Oman secure crucial win over Qatar

KUWAIT: Oman achieved a vital 2-1 victory over Qatar on Tuesday in their second match of Khaleeji Zain 26. With this win, Oman climbed to the top of Group A with four points, while Qatar remains at the bottom with a single point, awaiting the result of the Kuwait-UAE match at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium later.

Qatar struck early, with Almoez Ali scoring in the second minute. Following the goal, both teams adopted a defensive approach, limiting chances until Oman began to exploit the flanks around the 15th minute. Oman created a clear opportunity from the right side, but Omar Al-Maliki's delayed shot allowed the Qatari defense to block it. The breakthrough for Oman came when forward Issam Al-Subhi earned a penalty after being tackled during a left-flank cross. Al-Subhi converted the spot kick in the 20th minute, leveling the score.

Qatar responded by implementing an advanced defensive strategy from the 25th minute, but Oman consistently broke through with quick counterattacks, especially down the right wing. Oman maintained their

direct play style, focusing on fast transitions and a zonal defense when losing possession in their attacking third. Head coach Rasheed Jaber relied on Jameel Al-Yahmadi to initiate play from the back.

As the first half progressed, Qatar dominated possession but struggled to penetrate Oman's defense. Their attempts to score from long-range shots, including one by Jassim Jaber in the 36th minute, lacked precision. Oman came close to taking the lead in the 38th minute when Abdulrahman Al-Mashifari's effort struck the crossbar after a right-side cross from Amjad Al-Harhi. In the 44th minute, Oman faced a setback as midfielder Arshad Al-Alawi left the field due to injury.

The second half began with Oman matching Qatar's early aggression. Al-Subhi struck again in the 52nd minute, scoring his third goal of the tournament and becoming the top scorer. Oman continued to rely on their quick counterattacks, while Qatar maintained passive possession without converting chances. Al-Subhi's injury in the 84th minute dampened Oman's offensive momentum, forcing them into a defensive stance. Qatar's best chance to equalize came in the 86th minute when Abdulrahman Mustafa's shot hit the crossbar from inside the penalty area.

During the six minutes of stoppage time, Oman showcased excellent ball control with short, frequent passes, securing their victory and demonstrating a fast-paced and entertaining performance throughout the match.



KUWAIT: Oman and Qatar players vie for the ball.