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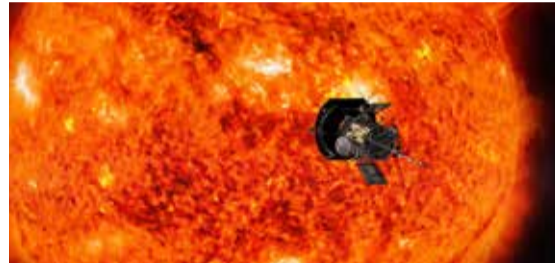
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## They will retain their passports, but will we retain their loyalty?

By Dr M Ziad Al-Alyan  
Deputy Editor-in-Chief

KUWAIT: I had the pleasure of attending a meeting hosted by First Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah on Wednesday, along with my fellow editors-in-chief of Kuwaiti newspapers. The minister was straightforward and bold from the beginning, making it clear that he would not sugarcoat any of his comments during the meeting to address revocations of Kuwaiti citizenships. He emphasized the primary purpose of the changes being implemented was to rectify past mistakes.

"The government is aware that the situation is a difficult one," he said, adding that he had been given clear instructions from His Highness the Amir of Kuwait to make these changes to ensure the prosperity and safety of the Kuwaiti family. The meeting was also attended by several ministers, including the ministers of commerce, justice and information.

Sheikh Fahad's opening remarks were followed by a brief statement from Minister of Justice Nasser Al-Sumait, who explained that Kuwait is undergoing an unprecedented transformation for the long-term benefit of its citizens. He reaffirmed that wives whose citizenships have been revoked under article 8 of the



KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense and Interior Minister Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah meets editors-in-chief of local newspapers on Dec 25, 2024. — KUNA

law will still retain all the benefits they previously enjoyed as Kuwaiti citizens. This applies to all whose citizenships have been revoked, except those who acquired it through fraud, committed crimes against the state, made pejorative references to the Almighty or HH the Amir of Kuwait or committed acts of high treason.

The magnitude of the issue was made evident during the meeting, as live examples of fraudulent cases were presented.

The harsh reality of the vast number of such cases quickly became apparent. The ministers emphasized that Kuwait will never tolerate injustice against anyone but equally cannot allow injustice to be done to Kuwait.

The salient points raised included the stop date for reviewing citizenships, which is backdated to 1987, and the announcement that suspended bank accounts will be unfrozen this Sunday.

Wives whose citizenships have been revoked will continue to carry blue Kuwaiti passports and will be allowed to travel as before. They will also retain similar civil IDs. Additionally, those receiving medical treatment or pursuing education abroad will have their sponsorships continue uninterrupted.

I voiced my concern to Sheikh Fahad regarding the wives whose citizenships have been revoked despite not committing fraud or crimes. These women had chosen Kuwaiti nationality over their original citizenships, only to face revocation years later. His response was firm: "We are implementing the law," while again highlighting that these women will retain all the benefits they once had as Kuwaiti wives.

Minister of Commerce and Industry Khalifa Al-Ajeel said wives of Kuwaitis who lost their citizenships will be treated like Kuwaitis in commercial licenses. Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sharida Al-Maousherji said many cases of dual citizenship, banned under Kuwaiti law, were discovered through biometrics.

Sheikh Fahad also said some foreigners who were granted Kuwaiti citizenship under the great services clause did not fulfill all necessary conditions and the commission is currently studying the cas-

es of some 2,100 persons who fall under this category. The government has already revoked the citizenship of several people who were naturalized because of their services to the country.

Sheikh Fahad said a law will be issued in the next two months to resolve the situation of thousands of stateless people or bedoons. He said the law will encourage "illegal residents", the term the government uses to identify bedoons, to obtain the citizenship of other countries and will also talk to those countries. The minister also announced that the Kuwaiti constitution will be amended but added that there is no timeframe for this process. He provided no further details. The constitution, which was issued in 1962, has never been amended.

I am categorically certain that the majority of these decisions are in the country's best interest in the long run. The Kuwaiti identity must be protected at all costs. The naturalization of hundreds of thousands of ineligible individuals has been a significant burden on the country. However, I cannot ignore the fact that a minority of good citizens may have suffered a grave injustice. As this extremely fluid situation continues to develop, one lingering concern remains: While their passports will stay blue, will their loyalties remain the same?

### Syria authorities torch 1 million Captagon pills



DAMASCUS: A man throws a bag onto a pile of burning illicit drugs seized from a security branch on Dec 25, 2024. — AFP

DAMASCUS: Syria's new authorities torched a large stockpile of drugs on Wednesday, two security officials told AFP, including one million pills of captagon, whose industrial-scale production flourished under ousted president Bashar Al-Assad. Captagon is a banned amphetamine-like stimulant that became Syria's largest export during the country's more than 13-year civil war, effectively turning it into a narco-state under Assad.

"We found a large quantity of captagon, around one million pills," said a balaclava-wearing member of the security forces, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Osama, and whose khaki uniform bore a "public security" patch. An AFP journalist saw forces pour fuel over and set fire to a cache of cannabis, the pain

Continued on Page 6

### Pope condemns 'extremely grave' situation in Gaza

ROME: Pope Francis called Wednesday for "arms to be silenced" around the world in his Christmas address, appealing for peace in the Middle East, Ukraine and Sudan as he denounced the "extremely grave" humanitarian situation in Gaza. He used his traditional message to the world's 1.4 billion Catholics to call for talks for a just peace in Ukraine as the country was pummeled by 170 Russian missiles and drones in a Christmas morning barrage Kyiv branded as "inhuman".

His voice breathless, the 88-year-old pontiff also appealed for a ceasefire in Gaza and for the freeing of captives. "I think of the Christian communities in (the Zionist entity) and Palestine, particularly in Gaza, where the humanitarian situation is extremely grave," he told thousands of the faithful gathered in front of St Peter's Basilica in Rome for the "Urbi et Orbi" ("to the city and the world") address. "May there be a ceasefire, may the hostages be released and aid be given to the people worn out by hunger and by war."

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KUWAIT: Christians attend Christmas Eve mass at the Catholic Co-Cathedral of the Holy Family in Kuwait City on Dec 24, 2024. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 3)

### 38 killed as Azeri jet crashes in Kazakhstan

ASTANA: An Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet crashed on Wednesday in western Kazakhstan, killing 38 of the 67 people on board, officials said. The Embraer 190 aircraft that was supposed to fly northwest from the Azerbaijani capital Baku to the city of Grozny in Chechnya in southern Russia instead flew across the Caspian Sea and went down near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan.

The plane's course on Flight Radar showed it flying away from its normal

route and then circling over the area where it eventually crashed near Aktau, which is an oil and gas hub on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. "The situation is not very good, 38 dead," Russia's Interfax news agency quoted Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister Kanat Bozumbayev as saying.

Azerbaijan Airlines reported that 67 people were on board – 62 passengers and five crewmembers. The Kazakh emergency situations ministry reported earlier in the day that "28 survivors including two children have been hospitalized." The Kazakh transport ministry said the plane was carrying 37 nationals from Azerbaijan, six from Kazakhstan, three from Kyrgyzstan and 16 from Russia.

Continued on Page 6



AKTAU, Kazakhstan: Emergency specialists work at the crash site of an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet on Dec 25, 2024. — AFP



## Local

# Cabinet approves 15% tax on multinationals

## Cabinet orders fast-tracking completion of sewage treatment plants

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Cabinet has approved a draft decree-law imposing a 15 percent tax on multinational companies operating in more than one country, in line with global tax standards. The new law aims to combat tax evasion and prevent the leakage of tax revenues to other jurisdictions. It is set to come into effect on January 1, 2025. The decision was made during the Cabinet's weekly meeting held on Tuesday, December 24, 2024, at Bayan Palace, chaired by HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

As part of ongoing efforts to improve infrastructure and reduce waiting times for housing, Cabinet has tasked the Ministry of Public Works to coordinate with the Public Authority for Housing Welfare and other relevant entities to expedite the completion of contracts for permanent sewage treatment plants. These plants will be built in residential cities, as well as in areas and neighborhoods currently under development or planned for future construction. This initiative aims to ensure the timely delivery of these critical infrastructure projects.

The Cabinet also reviewed a presentation by the Minister of State for Communications, Omar Al-Omar, on the progress of the framework agreement between the State of Kuwait and Google Cloud. The agreement covers various initiatives aimed at improving digital infrastructure. Sheikh Abdullah Sabah Al-Sabah, head of the supervisory committee, and committee member Mohammad Al-Rashed provided



**KUWAIT:** Cabinet ministers convene for their weekly meeting in Bayan Palace on Tuesday, December 25, 2024. — KUNA

updates on the projects underway, noting some challenges in their implementation. The Cabinet directed the relevant ministers and government entities to cooperate with the committee to resolve any obstacles and requested quarterly progress reports.

In terms of diplomatic initiatives, the Cabinet discussed recent agreements with India, including a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defense cooperation, an executive sports program for 2025-2028, and a cultural exchange program for 2025-2029. Additionally, the Cabinet reviewed a

framework agreement to establish the International Solar Alliance, which aims to promote global solar energy cooperation.

The Cabinet also discussed the outcomes of First Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah's recent visits. In Riyadh, he held talks with Saudi Arabia's Minister of Interior, Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud, focusing on bilateral security issues. In Basra, Iraq, he inaugurated the Kuwait Surgical Hospital, a gift from Kuwait to the people of Iraq, underscoring the continued strong ties between the two countries.

## Kuwaiti officials discuss enhancing women's role in Defense Ministry

**KUWAIT:** Deputy Chief of Staff of the Kuwait Army, Major General Pilot Sabah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, met with the Assistant Foreign Minister for Human Rights, Ambassador Sheikhah Jawaher Ibrahim Duaij Al-Sabah, at his office on Wednesday. The meeting focused on key bilateral issues, particularly the role of women in the Ministry of Defense, both in military and civilian capacities.

In a statement issued by the General Staff of the Kuwait Army, it was mentioned that the two sides discussed ways to enhance the participation of women by creating a supportive and motivating environment. They also explored strategies to ensure women have equal access to various career opportunities that will contribute to strengthening the efficiency of the armed forces. — KUNA



**Ambassador Sheikhah Jawaher Ibrahim Duaij Al-Sabah meets with Deputy Chief of Staff of the Kuwait Army, Major General Pilot Sabah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.**



**KUWAIT:** Ambassador Sheikhah Jawaher poses for a photo with women defense ministry personnel. — KUNA photos

## Kuwait sends 9th planeload of aid to Lebanon

**BEIRUT:** The ninth plane of the Kuwaiti aid airbridge arrived in Lebanon on Wednesday carrying 40 tons of food aid as part of the Kuwaiti humanitarian airlift to assist Lebanon, in light of the hardships faced by the Lebanese people due to Zionist occupation assaults.

In a statement to KUNA, the First Secretary at the Kuwaiti Embassy in Beirut Abdullah Al-Diyin, who was present to receive the plane, said: "In implementation of the directives of the political leadership in Kuwait and as part of the (Kuwait is by Your Side) campaign, and continuing the Kuwaiti humanitarian



**KUWAIT:** HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and senior Kuwaiti officials meet with Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Zhang Jianwei at Bayan Palace. — KUNA

## Kuwait's PM and Chinese envoy discuss development projects

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah received Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Zhang Jianwei at Bayan Palace on Wednesday.

During the meeting, they reviewed the progress of several key development projects outlined in the memoranda of understanding between the

governments of Kuwait and China. These projects cover a range of sectors, including cooperation on the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port project, collaboration in the electricity and renewable energy sectors, and the establishment of a low-carbon green system for waste recycling. The discussion also touched on joint efforts in housing development, environmental infrastructure—particularly sewage treatment plants—and cooperation in the development of free and economic zones.

Kuwait has fast-tracked its projects with China after a period of stagnation. Last week, the Cabinet approved a draft decree related to the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Kuwait

and China, marking a significant step toward advancing their cooperation and accelerating the completion of key projects.

The meeting was attended by Abdulaziz Dakhil Al-Dakhil, Head of the Prime Minister's Diwan; Dr Noura Al-Mashaan, Minister of Public Works; Dr Mahmoud Bushehri, Minister of Electricity, Water, and Renewable Energy; Abdullatif Al-Meshari, Minister of State for Municipal Affairs and Minister of State for Housing Affairs; Noura Al-Fassam, Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Investment and Samih Jawhar Hayat, Assistant Foreign Minister for Asian Affairs. — KUNA

## Saudi Arabia, Kuwait to establish first joint business council

**RIYADH:** The Federation for Saudi Chambers announced the start of procedures to establish the first Saudi-Kuwaiti Joint Business Council, marking an important step in advancing economic cooperation between the two countries. According to the Saudi Press Agency, this announcement came during a meeting between the Chairman of the Saudi Chambers Federation Hassan Al-Huwaizi and the Ambassador of Kuwait to Saudi Arabia Sheikh Sabah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

The agency added that the two sides discussed the investment environment and opportunities between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as the organization of an investment forum in Riyadh, along with enabling Kuwaiti investors to participate in the 2025 Hafr Al-Batin Investment Forum.

The Chairman of the Saudi Chambers Federation stated that the outcomes of the meeting with the Kuwaiti Ambassador represent a new phase of economic cooperation between the two countries, highlighting the promising partnership opportunities



**RIYADH:** Chairman of the Saudi Chambers Federation Hassan Al-Huwaizi and Kuwaiti Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Sheikh Sabah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meet in the presence of high ranking officials. — KUNA

between the business sectors of both nations.

Kuwaiti Ambassador to Saudi Arabia expressed his hope for achieving comprehensive economic integration between the two countries, pointing to the investment environment in the Kingdom and the remarkable development it has witnessed, which has made it an at-

tractive destination for investors from around the world.

Trade exchange between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait reached approximately \$2.67 billion in 2023, with approximately \$2.24 billion in Saudi exports and approximately \$430 million in Kuwaiti imports. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** A Kuwait Air Force relief plane carrying 40 tons of food supplies prepares to depart to Beirut.



**BEIRUT:** Officials pose for a photo in front of the Kuwait Air Force plane after its arrival in Beirut. — KUNA photos

Local

# Home away from home: Christian expats celebrate Christmas in Kuwait

Expats find community while living in predominantly Muslim country



KUWAIT: A view of the Christmas morning mass at the church altar, adorned with festive decorations, as clergy lead the congregation in prayer in front of a mural depicting the nativity scene.



Worshippers attend the Christmas morning mass. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



People pose by a giant Christmas tree at the Catholic Co-Cathedral of the Holy Family in Kuwait City on December 25, 2024.



Worshippers pray in silence during the Christmas Eve mass.



Indian Pastor Gasper Parish leads Christmas mass at the Catholic church in Kuwait City on Christmas Day.

By Passant Hisham

**KUWAIT:** While celebrating Christmas may look different for expatriates in Kuwait compared to their home countries, the essence remains unchanged. On a much-anticipated December morning, the streets near the Catholic church came alive with groups from diverse backgrounds, all making their way to a shared place of worship—a space where traditions are renewed, and cherished memories find new meaning.

Father Gasper Parish, an Indian priest at the church, stood at the entrance warmly greeting attendees. “Although we are far from our homelands, we don’t feel as though we’re missing home. (The church’s) environment was created to make people feel comfortable and at peace with the Lord. Ultimately, God is one,” he said.

He expressed his gratitude to the people of Kuwait for their hospitality, emphasizing how their acceptance enables expatriates to “strengthen their faith” through this church, which has stood as an “icon” of unity and devotion for 63 years.

Among the worshippers was Homa Salim, elegantly dressed in a vibrant red Pakistani sari. She walked holding hands with her husband, Arslan Yousaf, after their prayer. “I do miss my family back home,” she admitted, “but the freedom to practice my religion here reminds me of the freedom I had in Pakistan.”

She added: “In Kuwait, we can celebrate our cul-



KUWAIT: Congregants attend the Christmas Eve mass at the Catholic Co-Cathedral of the Holy Family on December 24, 2024.

ture and traditions openly.” Homa also highlighted the spiritual fulfillment and community connection she felt during the festivities. “It’s similar to the unity Muslims experience during occasions such as Eid Al-Fitr, where families and friends come together after prayer to share blessings,” she explained.

Christmas for Cathuranga, a Filipino domestic worker, stirred a mix of joy and longing. With tears in her eyes, she shared: “I cry when I pray

because it’s deeply spiritual. I only get to come to church once a year, on Christmas.” She explained that her employer rarely grants her a day off, citing the expense of traveling from Jahra. Despite living in a predominantly Muslim country, Cathuranga felt a sense of unity with the local community. “When I’m at my employer’s house, I hear my madame reciting from the Quran — ‘Bismillah Bismillah.’ It reminds me that we all worship one God.”

Inside the church that morning, the sound of carols sung in diverse accents echoed through the hall, accompanied by the vibrant display of traditional attire and the exchange of heartfelt greetings—a harmonious blend of cultures coming together to create something uniquely beautiful. The church hosted multiple masses throughout the day, conducted in over 15 different languages, reflecting the rich diversity of its community.



Church members dressed in traditional ceremonial attire join the congregation in solemn prayer.

## Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital performs 149 kidney transplants

**KUWAIT:** The kidney transplant program at Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital reached a new milestone with 149 successful kidney transplants performed in 2024, surpassing the previous record of 140 transplants in 2023.

Dr Saja Surour, Head of the Organ Transplantation Department at Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital, told Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) that this achievement reflects the hospital’s ongoing efforts to provide comprehensive healthcare services. She attributed the success to the collaboration between medical teams and various hospital departments, and highlighted the goal to continue increasing kidney transplants for patients with kidney failure in the upcoming year.

Dr Surour also acknowledged the support of the Ministry of Health for its role in advancing the program. She also recognized the contribution of medical teams and national initiatives in the program’s progress. Dr Colin Forman, Consultant Transplant Surgeon at Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital, explained that the opening of the Organ Transplantation Department in March 2024 marked a significant development for the hospital’s transplant program. The availability of a range of medical specialties has helped increase the program’s efficiency, enabling the team to manage more complex cases.

Dr Forman also noted that the expansion of hospital resources has contributed to a nearly twofold increase in the number of kidney transplants compared to previous years. This development is part of broader efforts to enhance organ transplant services in Kuwait.



KUWAIT: The Organ Transplantation Department team at Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital pose for a photo in the operation room. — KUNA photos



Dr Colin Forman, Consultant Transplant Surgeon at Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital.

The Organ Transplantation Department at Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital was inaugurated in March 2024, along with the launch of the National Kidney Ex-



The organ transplant team perform a surgery.

change Program. This initiative aims to expand the donor pool and improve transplant success rates, benefiting patients awaiting kidney transplants. — KUNA

## Kuwait committed to humanitarian efforts, social welfare initiatives

**MANAMA:** Kuwait’s Minister of Social Affairs, Family, and Childhood Affairs, Dr Amthal Al-Huwailah, highlighted Kuwait’s ongoing humanitarian efforts to support Arab and Islamic countries during the 44th session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs in Bahrain. She reaffirmed Kuwait’s commitment to providing humanitarian aid to Palestine and Lebanon, rejecting Zionist occupation-related crimes, and contributing to the Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem Fund. Al-Huwailah emphasized Kuwait’s dedication to implementing the social dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. Regarding social assistance in Kuwait, Al-Huwailah noted that Article 11 of the Kuwaiti Constitution guarantees support for citizens facing old age, illness, or incapacity. She detailed the Public Assistance Law No 12 of 2011, which benefits a wide range of individuals, including the elderly, widows, and those facing financial hardship. In 2023, over 49,915 families and 56,834 individuals received social assistance.

The minister also highlighted Kuwait’s commitment to supporting persons with disabilities, noting that Kuwait was among the first to implement legislation promoting their rights. This includes Law No 49 of 1996 and Law No 8 of 2010. Al-Huwailah mentioned the “Kuwait Vision 2035 for Persons with Disabilities” project, developed with the UNDP, to ensure social security and integration. Kuwait has introduced various initiatives, such as the Prevention Project and the Early Disability Detection Program, aimed at raising awareness and supporting persons with disabilities. She also mentioned financial benefits for caregivers and ongoing efforts to provide employment opportunities through coordination with the Civil Service Commission and other agencies. Additionally, Al-Huwailah discussed initiatives for children and the elderly, including a program for rehabilitating juvenile delinquents and mobile services for the elderly. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Parts of the Ratqa heavy oil project in northern Kuwait are seen in these file photos.— KUNA photos



## KISR successfully tests solar-powered desalination unit

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) has announced the successful completion of an innovative research project focused on advancing solar-powered seawater desalination technologies. In a recent press release, KISR explained that the project aims to develop and test a prototype unit based on solar-powered membrane distillation with an air gap for seawater desalination. The testing unit has been installed and fully equipped at KISR's Water Research Center.

This cutting-edge system offers significant social and economic benefits, including the enhancement of local expertise, improved water security, and reduced environmental impacts. The technology is particularly well-suited for remote areas and can be easily scaled to meet increasing water demands. Researchers recommend conducting pilot-scale trials of the technology in conjunction with renewable energy sources and waste heat recovery to reduce energy consumption during operation.

The institute emphasized that the research has successfully demonstrated the technology's effectiveness in desalinating seawater. The system also reduces common challenges such as membrane fouling, scaling, and corrosion, which contribute to extending the lifespan of membranes and reducing the need for chemical additives compared to traditional reverse osmosis systems.

KISR highlighted that the project met its goals by establishing a comprehensive knowledge base on the performance of the experimental unit under real-world conditions in Kuwait, using seawater from the Arabian Gulf. The experimental results indicated that the membrane distillation system is capable of producing up to 23.42 liters of freshwater per day.

Additionally, based on the experimental data, a conceptual design for large-scale production has been developed. This design leverages mathematical modeling and simulation programs to assess the technical and economic feasibility of scaling the technology for various operational capacities.

The institute also pointed out the versatility of this innovative technology, which can be applied across different scales, from small and medium-sized units to mobile and stationary desalination plants. It can be used for both seawater and groundwater applications and has the potential for large-scale commercial implementation.

One of the major developmental advantages of this project is the localization of scientific knowledge, which will help diversify freshwater production methods, ensuring long-term water security and sustainability. The technology addresses the challenges of natural resource scarcity and reduces economic burdens related to water production.

KISR added that its Water Research Center looks forward to the practical deployment of these technologies, which aim to lower the cost of freshwater production and minimize harmful environmental emissions typically associated with traditional desalination plants.

The research project was funded by the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, and efforts are underway to publish several scientific papers in leading international conferences, workshops, and high-impact journals, with the goal of contributing to global knowledge and earning recognition in Scopus Q1 databases.— KUNA

# KOC hits 'remarkable' milestone, producing 90,000 bpd of heavy oil

## Ratqa field projects, collaboration with Shell credited for achievement

KUWAIT: Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) has reached a historic milestone, with its heavy oil production surpassing 90,000 barrels per day (bpd) for the first time in the company's history. This achievement comes as part of the North and West Kuwait Directorate's ongoing efforts to expand production capabilities.

Eisa Al-Maraghi, Deputy CEO for North and West Kuwait, highlighted the significance of the achievement, calling it a "remarkable milestone" given the challenges associated with heavy oil production. He emphasized that the company had successfully overcome numerous hurdles, including the complexities of developing heavy oil fields, limited steam injection resources, and shortages in drilling rigs and maintenance capacity.

Al-Maraghi credited the success to the collaborative efforts of KOC teams, which accelerated the completion of key projects in the Ratqa field, a major heavy oil field in northern Kuwait. These efforts were further supported by KOC's recent organizational transformation, which enhanced the flexibility and adaptability of the company's operational structure, allowing teams to complete critical projects in record time.

A key factor in achieving this production level was the strong partnership with Shell International. Al-Maraghi praised the cooperative work between KOC and Shell, particularly through a developed technical services agreement that introduced best practices and innovative solutions to optimize steam usage. These initiatives played a critical role in addressing the challenges posed by steam shortages and enabled KOC to exceed its production goals.

Several strategies were implemented to improve efficiency, including the development of an automated tool to optimize steam allocation, the use of reverse osmosis water for enhanced efficiency, and comprehensive assessments to improve recovery rates. KOC



KUWAIT: Kuwait Oil Company staff in the company's North and West Kuwait Directorate walk on site.

also focused on enhancing well performance through continuous monitoring and real-time adjustments, all of which contributed to the success of the project.

This achievement is particularly meaningful for KOC as the company celebrates its 90th anniversary this year. Al-Maraghi expressed pride in the dedication and efforts of all employees who contributed to the success, underscoring that this milestone was a "gift" to the company on its anniversary.

Looking ahead, KOC has set ambitious targets for further growth. Al-Maraghi confirmed that the company is working towards increasing its heavy oil pro-

duction to 100,000 barrels per day by the second quarter of 2025. Heavy oil was first discovered in 1979 in the south Ratqa field, with production briefly initiated in the early '80s before being halted by the Iraqi invasion in 1990. Operations resumed in 2006. The first phase of the project aims to produce 60,000 barrels per day (bpd), with plans to produce low-sulfur fuel for Kuwait's new Al-Zour refinery. By May 2020, the project had reached 38,000 bpd and was expected to hit 60,000 bpd by September 2020, according to officials that year. The project also includes infrastructure for storage and gas production.— KUNA

## LuLu Hypermarket earns certification for payment data security

KUWAIT: LuLu Hypermarket, a prominent leader in the regional retail industry, has earned international acclaim for its exceptional data security measures across its global network of outlets. Crossbow Labs, a leading cybersecurity compliance and certification authority, awarded LuLu Hypermarket the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS v4.0.1) Certification of Compliance. The certification was presented during a ceremony held at LuLu Hypermarket's regional office in Kuwait in December.

Top management representatives from both LuLu Hypermarket and Crossbow Labs attended the ceremony. LuLu Hypermarket officials expressed their delight in receiving the latest PCI DSS v4.0.1 certification. They highlighted it as a testament to their stringent security measures to safeguard customers' payment transactions and personal data across all Kuwait outlets. Administered by the PCI Security Standards Council (PCI SSC), an independent body formed by major payment brands such as American Express, Mastercard, Visa, Discover, and JCB, PCI



KUWAIT: LuLu Hypermarket staff receive the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS v4.0.1) Certification of Compliance.

DSS establishes global benchmarks for securely handling credit card information. The certification sets a framework for preventing, detecting, and responding to security incidents, ensuring a safe business environment for retailers and consumers.

Given LuLu Hypermarket's expansive operations and the increasing challenges posed by evolving cybersecurity threats, implementing a secure data protection system aligned with international standards, has been paramount. The PCI DSS certification vali-

dates these efforts and reinforces the hypermarket's resilience against potential data breaches, safeguarding its financial stability and reputation.

This certification offers customers extra confidence in the security of their transaction details with LuLu Hypermarket. By implementing top-tier security protocols, the hypermarket reinforces trust and demonstrates its dedication to safeguarding payment card information and providing a secure shopping experience.



KUWAIT: A participant in Kuwait's second Disability Marathon receives a medal.— KUNA photos

## Disability marathon promotes health, social inclusion

KUWAIT: The second Disability Marathon was held on Wednesday organized in collaboration with the Public Authority for Disability Affairs and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, with the aim of promoting better health and enhancing the sports skills of participants.

The marathon sought to highlight the athleticism of people with disabilities, fostering inclusion and

helping them overcome isolation. It also encouraged participants to engage in physical activities as a means of preventing health issues associated with a sedentary lifestyle. Notably, the event brought together individuals with Down syndrome, autism, intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, and other conditions. It was attended by parents, experts, and professionals working in the field of disability services, creating an atmosphere of competition and encouragement that inspired participants to face challenges and overcome obstacles.

A total of 215 participants from 14 organizations and special needs schools across the country took part in the marathon. These included the Kuwait Center for Autism and the Kuwait Down Syndrome Society.— KUNA



Participants, wearing medals, pose for a photo after completing the marathon.



A group of participants, their guardians and supervisors pose for a photo. The event brought together over 200 athletes from various disability groups.



Participants race during the second Disability Marathon, showcasing their determination and athletic spirit.



Suriname ex-dictator and fugitive Desi Bouterse dies at 79

## Pakistani bombardment in Afghanistan kills 46 people



GAZA: Father Gabriel Romanelli, Parish Priest of the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Family, prays during Christmas Eve mass at the church in the Zaytoun neighborhood of Gaza City on Dec 24, 2024. (Right) Women pose for a selfie after the mass. — AFP photos

# Gaza Christians gather amid carnage

## Devotees for end of 'death and destruction' at Christmas mass

GAZA: Hundreds of Christians in war-ravaged Gaza City gathered at a church on Tuesday, praying for an end to the war that has devastated much of the Palestinian territory. Gone were the sparkling lights, the festive decorations, and the towering Christmas tree that had graced Gaza City for decades. The Square of the Unknown Soldier, once alive with the spirit of the season, now lay in ruins, reduced to rubble by relentless Zionist air strikes.

Amid the rubble, the faithful sought solace even as fighting continued to rage across the coastal strip on Tuesday. "This Christmas carries the stench of death and destruction," said George Al-Sayegh, who for weeks has sought refuge in the 12th century Greek

Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius. "There is no joy, no festive spirit. We don't even know who will survive until the next holiday."

A part of the church itself was destroyed in a Zionist air strike in October last year, in which 18 Palestinian Christians were killed, according to the territory's health ministry. About 1,100 Christians live in Gaza, a community that has also faced the brunt of the war since Oct 7 last year, when fighting between the Zionist entity and Hamas broke out.

The Zionist entity's recent air strikes, including one that killed several children according to the territory's civil defense agency, have come under severe criticism from Pope Francis. "With pain I think of

Gaza, of so much cruelty, of the children being machine-gunned, of the bombings of schools and hospitals. What cruelty," the pope said after his weekly Angelus prayer on Sunday. Zionist Foreign Minister Gideon Saar had slammed the pontiff's comment, saying they showed "double standards".

### 'Pray for peace'

But the pain and sorrow are visible in Gaza, and for Gaza City resident Kamal Jamil Caesar Anton, the festive season of Christmas is marred by profound grief. Last December, his wife Nahida and daughter Samar were killed by Zionist sniper fire within the compound of the Holy Family Church, he said. "We

pray for peace, for the war to end so that the people can live safely," Anton said. His sentiments were echoed by resident Ramez Al-Souri who also suffered a bitter tragedy during the air strike that hit the Church of Saint Porphyrius. His three children were among those killed in that attack. "We are still suffering. We didn't celebrate last year because of the destruction," Souri said. "This year we hoped for an end to the war, but every day we lose loved ones."

Local Christian community leader George Anton hoped the warring sides would end the fighting soon. "We call on all parties to end the war and to seek a true path to peace," he said. "We hope both peoples can live in harmony and security." — AFP



DOUMA: Syrian AFP photographer Sameer Al-Doumy walks in his old neighborhood and visits his house in this city near Damascus on Dec 22, 2024. — AFP photos

## Like a dream: AFP photographer's return to Syria

DOUMA, Syria: AFP photographer Sameer Al-Doumy never dreamed he would be able to return to the hometown in Syria that he escaped through a tunnel seven years ago after it was besieged by Bashar Al-Assad's forces. Douma, once a rebel stronghold near Damascus, suffered terribly for its defiance of the former regime, and was the victim of a particularly horrific chemical weapons attack in 2018.

"It is like a dream for me today to find myself back here," he said. "The revolution was a dream, getting out of a besieged town and of Syria was a dream, as it is now being able to go back. We didn't dare to imagine that Assad could fall because his presence was so anchored in us," said the 26-year-old.

"My biggest dream was to return to Syria at a moment like this after 13 years of war, just as it was my biggest dream in 2017 to leave for a new life," said the award-winning photographer who has spent the last few years covering the migrant crisis for AFP's Lille bureau in northern France. "I left when I was 19," said Sameer, all of whose immediate family are in exile, apart from his sister.

"This is my home, all my memories are here, my childhood, my adolescence. I spent my life in Douma in this house my family had to flee and where my cousin now lives. "The house hasn't changed, although

the top floor was destroyed in the bombardments. "The sitting room is still the same, my father's beloved library hasn't changed. He would settle down there every morning to read the books that he had collected over the years — it was more important to him than his children."

"I went looking for my childhood stuff that my mother kept for me but I could not find it. I don't know if it exists anymore. I haven't found any comfort here, perhaps because I haven't found anyone from my family or people I was close to. Some have left the country and others were killed or have disappeared. People have been through so much over the last 13 years, from the peaceful protests of the revolution, to the war and the siege and then being forced into exile.

"My memories are here but they are associated with the war which started when I was 13. What I lived through was hard, and what got me through was my family and friends, and they are no longer here. The town has changed. I remember the bombed buildings, the rubble. Today life has gone back to a kind of normal as the town waits for people to return."

Douma was besieged by Assad's forces from the end of 2012, with Washington blaming his forces for a chemical attack in the region that left more than 1,400 people dead the following year. Sameer's career as a photojournalist began when he and his brothers began taking photos of what was happening around them. "After the schools closed I started to go out filming the protests with my brothers here in front of the main mosque, where the first demonstration in Douma was held after Friday prayers, and where the first funerals of the victims were also held.

"I set up my camera on the first floor of a building

which overlooks the mosque and then changed my clothes afterwards so I would not be recognized and arrested. Filming the protests was banned. When the security forces attacked, I would take the SIM card out of my phone and the memory card out of my camera and put them in my mouth." That way he could swallow them if he was caught. In May 2017, Sameer fled through a tunnel dug by the rebels and eventually found himself in the northern rebel enclave of Idlib with former fighters and their families.

"I took the name Sameer Al-Doumy (Sameer from Douma) to affirm that I belonged somewhere," even though he was exiled, he said. "I stopped using my first name, Motassem, to protect my family living in Damascus. "In France I have a happy and stable life. I have a family, friends and a job. But I am not rooted to any particular place. When I went back to Syria, I felt I had a country."

"When you are abroad, you get used to the word 'refugee' and you get on with your life and make a big effort to integrate in a new society. But your country remains the place that accepts you as you are. You don't have to prove anything. When I left Syria, I never thought one day I would be able to return. When the news broke, I couldn't believe it. It was impossible Assad could fall. Lots of people are still in shock and are afraid. It is hard to get your head around how a regime that filled people with so much fear could collapse. "When I returned to the Al-Midan district of Damascus (which had long resisted the regime), I could not stop myself crying. I am sad not to be with my loved ones. But I know they will return, even if it takes a while. My dream now is that one day we will all come together again in Syria." — AFP

## Erdogan warns YPG will be buried if they don't lay down arms

ANKARA: Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said on Wednesday that Kurdish militants in Syria will either lay down their weapons or "be buried", amid hostilities between Turkey-backed Syrian fighters and the militants since the fall of Bashar Al-Assad this month. Following Assad's departure, Ankara has repeatedly insisted that the Kurdish YPG militia must disband, asserting that the group has no place in Syr-

ia's future. The change in Syria's leadership has left the country's main Kurdish factions on the back foot.

"The separatist murderers will either bid farewell to their weapons, or they will be buried in Syrian lands along with their weapons," Erdogan told lawmakers from his ruling AK Party in parliament. "We will eradicate the terrorist organization that is trying to weave a wall of blood between us and our Kurdish siblings," he added.

Turkey views the Kurdish YPG militia - the main component of the US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) - as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militia, which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. The PKK is designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States and the European Union. An-

kara has repeatedly called on its NATO ally Washington and others to stop supporting the YPG.

Earlier, Turkey's defense ministry said the armed forces had killed 21 YPG-PKK militants in northern Syria and Iraq. In a Reuters interview last week, SDF commander Mazloum Abdi acknowledged the presence of PKK fighters in Syria for the first time, saying they had helped battle Islamic State and would return home if a total ceasefire was agreed with Turkey, a core demand from Ankara. He denied any organizational ties with the PKK.

Erdogan also said Turkey would soon open its consulate in Aleppo, and added Ankara expected an increase in traffic at its borders in the summer of next year, as some of the millions of Syrian migrants it hosts begin returning. — Reuters

## Russia cargo ship blast was 'terror attack'

MOSCOW: A "terrorist act" sank the cargo ship that went down in international waters in the Mediterranean this week, the Russian state-owned company that owns the vessel said Wednesday. The Oboronlogistika company said it "thinks a targeted terrorist attack was committed on December 23, 2024, against the Ursa Major," it said in a statement cited by Russian news agencies, without indicating who may have been behind the act or why.

The ship sank in international waters off Spain in the early hours of Tuesday after having sent a distress call for help on Monday. "Three consecutive explosions" took place on the ship before it began taking on water, added the company, which belongs to the Russian defense ministry. Oboronlogistika did not say what evidence it had allowing it to conclude a terrorist attack sank the Ursa Major.

Russian foreign ministry's crisis unit said on Telegram on Tuesday that the ship sank "after an explosion in the engine room". It added that out of the 16 Russian crewmembers on board, 14 had been rescued and taken to the Spanish port of Cartagena and two were missing. 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 sank overnight. The Ursa Major is listed on MarineTraffic.com as a 124.7-m-long general cargo ship

It 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. The Ursa Major was sailing from the Russian city of Saint Petersburg to Vladivostok in Russia's Far East. Last week Oboronlogistika issued a press release with photos of the ship in port, saying it was to transport a particularly large and heavy load: cranes each weighing 380 tons and hatch covers for icebreakers each weighing 45 tons to Vladivostok.

The United States in 2022 imposed sanctions on Oboronlogistika and ships including the Ursa Major for providing "transportation services... for the delivery of cargo to Russian-occupied Crimea". This means any US organization dealing with the company or its ships would risk sanctions. Ukraine's GUR military intelligence said the Ursa Major was also used to supply Russian troops in Syria where Moscow has a naval base at Tartus. — AFP

## International

## Ukraine slams Russia Christmas attack

## Woman killed as drone comes down on Russian shopping mall



(Left) A rescuer of the Ukrainian State Emergency Service works to put out a fire in a private house after a drone strike in Kharkiv on Dec 25, 2024. (Right) In this grab taken from a footage released by the Russian Emergencies Ministry on Dec 25, 2024, smoke rises from the four-storey Alania Mall that caught fire in Vladikavkaz. - AFP photos

## Suriname ex-dictator and fugitive Desi Bouterse dies at 79

**PARAMARIBO:** Desi Bouterse, the former dictator of Suriname who was a fugitive from justice for the murder of political opponents four decades ago, has died at 79, the government said Wednesday. Still popular with working class citizens of the South American nation, Bouterse — who died Tuesday — rose to power after a 1980 coup as a young sergeant major in the army. He stepped down in 1987 under international pressure in the wake of political violence he was accused of orchestrating.



Desi Bouterse in 1987

He returned to power in 1990 after a second coup, this time without bloodshed. Bouterse left a year later, then was elected president of the former Dutch colony in 2010 and ruled for a decade. "In anticipation of more detailed and definitive information from official channels, we would like to offer our condolences to the wife, children and other surviving relatives for this loss," President Chan Santokhi said in a statement.

Rumors began to spread around midnight about the former strongman's sudden death after a short illness at his hideout. His body was transferred by unknown people to his residence in the capital Paramaribo, where his family and National Democratic Party (NDP) supporters gathered in the early hours of Christmas Day to bid farewell. Doctor Rabindernath Khoenkhoen, speaking to reporters, confirmed the time of death at 6:50 am Tuesday. He did not provide further details.

The NDP expressed sorrow over "the unexpected passing of our spiritual father" Bouterse, who was the party's honorary chairman. "We are grateful to him for his vision, courage and tireless efforts and love for our country," party chairwoman Jennifer Simons said on her Facebook page. Bouterse's conviction for the execution of 15 people in 1982, including lawyers, journalists, businessmen and military personnel, was upheld in December 2023. But he refused to turn himself in to start serving a 20-year prison sentence.

Last year, Bouterse urged his supporters not to cause "chaos", vowing that "we will hold out until the 2025 elections". Santokhi said necessary arrangements including formal matters and communication with Bouterse's family were underway. "In the spirit of the holidays and the end of the year, the president calls on everyone to remain dignified and to maintain calm, to maintain peace and order and to pray in the spirit of these special days," he said. — AFP

**KYIV:** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Wednesday denounced an "inhuman" attack from Russia, which launched over 170 missiles and drones on his war-torn country's power grid on Christmas Day, killing an energy worker. The country woke up at 5:30 am (0330 GMT) to an air raid alarm, shortly followed by air force reports that Russia had launched Kalibr cruise missiles from the Black Sea.

"Putin deliberately chose Christmas to attack. What could be more inhumane? More than 70 missiles, including ballistic missiles, and more than a hundred attack drones. The target is our energy system," Zelensky said. This was the 13th large-scale strike on Ukraine's energy system this year, the latest in Russia's campaign targeting the power grid during winter.

Russia meanwhile said five people had died in Ukrainian strikes and a falling drone in the border region of Kursk and in North Ossetia in the Caucasus. A woman was killed in a fire when the drone fell on a shopping mall in Russia's North Ossetia region early Wednesday, local authorities said. The blaze at the four-storey Alania Mall in Vladikavkaz, the main city in the Caucasus region, was caused by the debris of a drone hit by an air defense system, Russia's defense ministry said. Another drone came down Wednesday in the town of Malgobek in the neighboring Russian republic of Ingushetia without causing damage or injuries, regional leader Makhmud-Ali Kalimatov said.

Ukraine said its air force downed 58 out of 79 Russian-launched missiles. It did not, however, down the two Korean KN-23 ballistic missiles launched by Russia. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer condemned the

strikes. "I pay tribute to the resilience of the Ukrainian people, and the leadership of President Zelensky, in the face of further drone and missile attacks from Putin's bloody and brutal war machine with no respite even at Christmas," Starmer said. Kyiv also said a Russian missile went through Moldovan and Romanian airspace, but Romania said it detected no such violation while Moldova said it launched investigations.

## 'Nothing sacred'

"Unfortunately, there are some hits. As of now, there are blackouts in several regions," Zelensky said. Ukraine's DTEK energy company said the attack severely damaged equipment of thermal power plants. "Denying light and warmth to millions of peace-loving people as they celebrate Christmas is a depraved and evil act that must be answered," DTEK CEO Maxim Timchenko said, urging allies to send more air defense.

The employee of a Ukrainian thermal power plant was killed in the central Dnipropetrovsk region, over which 42 missiles were shot down, governor Sergiy Lyssak said. Lyssak also said rescue operations had been completed on the site of a strike on Kryvyi Rig, which killed one person and wounded 17 others the day before. Engineers have restored power to consumers in the Ivano-Frankivsk region.

"Christmas morning has once again shown that nothing is sacred for the aggressor country," Svillana Onyshchuk, the head of the Ivano-Frankivsk region, said earlier. Ukraine is officially celebrating Christmas on Dec 25 for the second time. The government last year changed the date from Jan 7, when most Ortho-

dox believers celebrate, as a snub to Russia. The Christmas Day attack also targeted Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, located near the Russian border. The missiles had targeted the city's boiler houses, thermal power plants and electricity facilities, mayor Igor Terexhov said, temporarily cutting power to 500,000 people. One unexploded missile was found in a private yard in Kharkiv, Synegubov said. Kharkiv's governor Oleg Synegubov also said authorities had evacuated 46 people from the area of Borivske and Kupiansk.

Moscow's forces are aiming to recapture the town of Kupiansk, which was occupied in the first year of the war. Ukraine recaptured it in Sept 2022 as part of a lightning offensive that saw its forces regain large swathes of the Kharkiv region. Outnumbered Ukrainian troops are on the back foot across the front line in the Kharkiv and Donetsk region further south, ceding ground to better-equipped Russian troops.

Russia said it seized the small village of Vidrodzhennia, a few kilometers south of the vital rail and mining hub of Pokrovsk. Both sides are scrambling to gain an upper hand ahead of the inauguration of US president-elect Donald Trump, who boasted he would quickly end the war, raising fears that Washington may force Kyiv into a deal on Moscow's terms.

Ukraine has been urging allies to send more aid to fend off aerial strikes and push back troops on the ground. "I am grateful to everyone who is working for the country, who is on combat duty, who is protecting our sky," Zelensky said. "Russian evil will not break Ukraine and will not ruin Christmas," Zelensky said. — AFP

## 'Invisible' tragedy: Cubans who vanish in the Caribbean

**CARDENAS, Cuba:** In the early hours of Jan 3, 2023, 32 people climbed onto a makeshift raft off southern Cuba and set out across the Caribbean for Florida, 170 km away. They were never heard from again. Among them was an eight-year-old girl who was traveling with her mother, six members of a family from the central Cuban city of Camaguey and a couple from the south-central city of Cienfuegos who left their children behind for safety.

The boat's occupants also included Yoel Romero, a 43-year-old bricklayer and father of three, Jonathan Jesus Alvarez, a 30-year-old truck driver, also with three children, and Daniel Alejandro Chacon, a 27-year-old maintenance worker. Chacon's mother Idalmis put some toast in her son's backpack for the crossing to Florida, but he never got to eat it. The bag washed up four days later on a rocky beach at a luxury golf club in the Florida Keys.

The Caribbean has become a watery grave for Cubans fleeing a severe economic crisis on the communist island and headed for Florida. At least 368 Cubans have died or disappeared on the Caribbean migration route since 2020, when the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began gathering statistics on what it calls

"invisible shipwrecks". The US Coast Guard repatriated a similar number — 367 — who tried to enter the country illegally in the fiscal year ending Sept 30, 2024.

But residents of the cash-strapped island, reeling from the worst economic crisis since the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba's main ally and financial backer, in the 1990s, remained undeterred. AFP spoke to 21 relatives of the 32 Cubans who went missing at sea on January 3, 2023. All were desperate for news of their relatives' fate.

"Nobody has given us an answer," Alvarez's mother, Osma Garcia, said in an interview in her adobe house in a low-income neighborhood of Cardenas, a city in west-central Cuba from which many of the missing travelers hail. "We need to know whatever the answer is... because the uncertainty is unbearable," Romero's mother Amparo Rivera said.

## Two backpacks

Cuba is experiencing the biggest emigration wave since the revolution that brought the late Fidel Castro to power in 1959. The island has lost around one million inhabitants since 2012, census figures show. Many try the well-traveled route across the sea to the United States, where President Joe Biden in 2023 began allowing legal entry for citizens of Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela — four countries with grim human rights records.

More than 700,000 Cubans entered the United States — legally or illegally — between Jan 2022 and Aug 2024. But for many of those who do not meet the conditions for entry, including having a US sponsor, illegal entry by sea is the fallback plan. The raft bearing Alvarez,



CARDENAS, Cuba: Cubans show pictures of their relatives who disappeared in Jan 2023 on a handmade migrant boat somewhere between Cuba and South Florida on Nov 30, 2024. — AFP

Chacon, Romero, and their fellow travelers left from Playa Larga beach on Cuba's southern coast. The only clues as to their fate were the backpacks of Chacon and another migrant found within a kilometer and a half of each other on the Florida coast. "From then on, my life changed (...)" it was all about the search," Romero's mother Rivera said.

Unlike in the Mediterranean, where NGOs track migrant boats and organize rescue missions, the plight of people crossing the Caribbean goes largely undocumented. At least 1,100 migrants from Central and South America have disappeared "without a trace" on the Caribbean migrant route since 2020, said Edwin Viales, regional monitor for the IOM Missing Migrants Project. — AFP

## Pope condemns 'extremely grave'...

Continued from Page 1

Francis also extended his call for peace to Sudan, which has been ravaged by 20 months of brutal civil war and where millions are under the threat of famine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky railed at Russia's attempt to take out his country's battered power grid, with one energy worker killed in the 13th major attack on the system this year. "Putin deliberately chose Christmas to attack," he said. "What could be more inhumane? More than 70 missiles, including ballistic missiles, and more than 100 attack drones."

Ukraine has been marking Christmas on Dec 25 for the past two years rather than on Jan 7, when most Orthodox believers celebrate, as a snub to Moscow. However, Russia said five people were killed in Ukrainian strikes on its territory overnight, including one by a downed drone in North Ossetia in the Caucasus. The feast day was also marred by tragedy when an Azerbaijan Airlines jet carrying 67 people from Baku to the Chechen capital Grozny crashed in western Kazakhstan, officials said. Twenty-nine survivors have been reported but 38 others are feared dead.

Christmas celebrations were also muted in the Zionist-occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem. Since the war in Gaza began, the Palestinian town has done away with its giant Christmas tree and the elaborate decorations that normally draw throngs of tourists. The Latin patriarch, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, told a small crowd there on Tuesday that he had just returned from Gaza, where he "saw everything destroyed, poverty, disaster".

About 1,100 Christians live in Gaza, with hundreds gathering at a church there to pray for an end to the war, as Hamas and the Zionist entity traded accusations over delays in finalizing a ceasefire and hostage release agreement. "This Christmas carries the stench of death and destruction," said George Al-Sayegh, who has had to take refuge for weeks in the 12th-century Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza City.

In the UK, head of state King Charles III used his annual Christmas message to thank medics that have helped him and his daughter-in-law Princess Catherine in their fight against cancer this year. He also called for "peace on earth" and an end to conflicts around the world. In Buenos Aires, a Christmas solidarity dinner for the homeless fed around three thousand people at a time when more than half of Argentina's population is affected by poverty. And in Paris, worshippers gathered at the Notre Dame cathedral for the first Christmas mass since its reopening following a devastating fire in 2019. — AFP

## Syria authorities torch 1 million...

Continued from Page 1

killer tramadol, and around 50 bags of pink and yellow captagon pills in a security compound formerly belonging to Assad's forces in the capital's Kafr Sousa district. Captagon has flooded the black market across the region in recent years, with oil-rich Saudi Arabia a major destination. "The security forces of the new government discovered a drug warehouse as they were inspecting the security quarter," said another member of the security forces, who identified himself as Hamza.

## 38 killed as Azeri jet crashes...

Continued from Page 1

"A plane doing the Baku-Grozny route crashed near the city of Aktau. It belongs to Azerbaijan Airlines," the Kazakh transport ministry said on Telegram. Azerbaijan Airlines, the country's flag carrier, said the plane "made an emergency landing" around three kilometers from Aktau. Kazakhstan said it had opened an investigation.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev declared Thursday a day of national mourning and cancelled a planned visit to Russia for an informal summit of leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a grouping of former Soviet nations. "We cannot disclose any investigation results at this time," the office of Azerbaijan's prosecutor general said in a statement. "All possible scenarios are being examined, and the necessary expert analyses are underway," it added. It said an investigative team led by the deputy prosecutor general of Azerbaijan has been dispatched to Kazakhstan and is working at the crash site. The

Authorities destroyed the stocks of alcohol, cannabis, captagon and hashish in order to "protect Syrian society" and "cut off smuggling routes used by Assad family businesses", he added. Syria's new Islamist rulers have yet to spell out their policy on alcohol, which has long been widely available in the country.

Since an Islamist-led rebel alliance toppled Assad on Dec 8 after a lightning offensive, Syria's new authorities have said massive quantities of captagon have been found in former government sites around the country, including security branches. AFP journalists in Syria have seen fighters from Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) set fire to what they said were stashes of captagon found at facilities once operated by Assad's forces.

Security force member Hamza confirmed Wednes-

Kazakh emergency situations ministry said its staff put out a fire which broke out when the plane crashed. It said 150 emergency workers were at the scene. The health ministry said a special flight was being sent from the Kazakh capital Astana with specialist doctors to treat the injured. Aliyev's office said the president "ordered the prompt initiation of urgent measures to investigate the causes of the disaster". "I extend my condolences to the families of those who lost their lives in the crash... and wish a speedy recovery to the injured," Aliyev said in a social media post.

Russian President Vladimir Putin held a phone conversation with Aliyev and also "expressed his condolences in connection with the crash", his spokesman Dmitry Peskov told a news conference. A Russian emergency situations ministry had been sent to Aktau with medical personnel and other equipment. Putin said later as he opened the CIS leaders' meeting in Saint Petersburg. Azerbaijan's first lady Mehriban Aliyeva, who is also the country's first vice president, said she was "deeply saddened by the news of the tragic loss of lives in the plane crash near Aktau". "I extend my heartfelt condolences to the families and loved ones of the victims. Wishing them strength and patience! I also wish a speedy recovery to the injured," she said on Instagram. — AFP

day that "this is not the first initiative of its kind — the security services, in a number of locations, have found other warehouses... and drug manufacturing sites and destroyed them in the appropriate manner". Maher Al-Assad, a military commander and the brother of Bashar Al-Assad, is widely accused of being the power behind the lucrative captagon trade.

Experts believe Syria's former leader used the threat of drug-fueled unrest to put pressure on Arab governments. A Saudi delegation met Syria's new leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa in Damascus on Sunday, a source close to the government told AFP, to discuss the "Syria situation and captagon". Jordan in recent years has also cracked down on the smuggling of weapons and drugs including captagon along its 375-km border with Syria. — AFP

## International

## Pakistan strikes kill 46 in Afghanistan

## Taliban condemn bombardment, vow to retaliate against their neighbor

KABUL: Pakistan air strikes in an eastern border region of Afghanistan killed 46 civilians, the Taliban government said Wednesday, whilst a Pakistan security official said the bombardment had targeted "terrorist hideouts". The strikes were the latest spike in hostilities on the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with tensions escalating since the Taliban seized power in 2021.

Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP that late on Tuesday Pakistan bombarded four areas in the Barmal district of eastern Paktika province. "The total number of dead is 46, most of whom were children and women," he said, adding that six more people were wounded, mostly children. Neither Pakistan's foreign ministry nor its military have responded to a request for comment.

But a senior Pakistan security official said the strikes were on "terrorist hideouts" using jets and drones and that they killed at least 20 militants from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the country's homegrown Taliban group. "Arguments from Afghan officials claiming civilians are being harmed are baseless and misleading," he added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A Taliban defense ministry statement late Tuesday condemned the strikes, calling them "barbaric" and a "clear aggression". "The Islamic Emirate will not leave this cowardly act unanswered, but rather considers the defense of its territory and sovereignty to be its inalienable right," the statement said, using the Taliban authorities' name for the government.

Skirmishes on the frontier followed deadly air strikes in March by Pakistan's military in the border regions of Afghanistan, which Taliban authorities said killed eight civilians. A Barmal resident, Maleel,

told AFP Tuesday's strikes killed 18 members of one family. "The bombardment hit two or three houses, in one house, 18 people were killed, the whole family lost their lives," he said. He said a strike killed three people in another house and wounded several others, who were taken to hospital.

## 'Strikes will continue'

Taliban officials said the dead were local residents and people who had fled over the Pakistan border from the Waziristan region. North Waziristan, which borders Paktika, has historically been a hive of militancy and was the target of a long-running Pakistani military offensive and US drone strikes during the post-9/11 occupation of Afghanistan that saw many people flee over the border. The TTP in a statement on the strike claimed Pakistan "deliberately targeted refugee residences".

The strike comes after the TTP — who share a common ideology with their Afghan counterparts — last week claimed a raid on an army outpost near the border with Afghanistan, which Pakistan said killed 16 soldiers. The Pakistani security official said the recent attack "was a significant trigger" for Tuesday's strikes, "but not the only one". "The interim Taliban regime has been repeatedly urged to take action against the TTP, but their response has been lukewarm," he said. "Such strikes will continue as necessary."

Pakistan has been battling a resurgence of militant violence in its western border regions since the Taliban's 2021 return to power in Afghanistan. Islamabad has accused Kabul's Taliban authorities of harboring militant fighters, allowing them to strike on Pakistani soil with impunity. Kabul has denied the allegations



SHARAN, Afghanistan: Afghan victims injured in a Pakistani air strike receive medical treatment at a hospital in the capital of Paktika province on Dec 25, 2024. — AFP

and pledged to evict foreign militant groups from Afghan soil.

But a UN Security Council report in July estimated up to 6,500 TTP fighters are based there — and said "the Taliban do not conceive of TTP as a terrorist group". The spike in attacks has soured

Islamabad-Kabul relations. Security was cited as one reason for Pakistan's campaign last year to evict hundreds of thousands of undocumented Afghan migrants. Earlier Tuesday, high-level Taliban officials were meeting with Pakistan's special envoy for Afghanistan who was on a visit to Kabul. — AFP

## Japan raises 'serious concerns' over China military buildup

BEIJING: Japanese foreign minister Takeshi Iwaya raised "serious concerns" on Wednesday over China's military buildup as he met counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing, Tokyo said. On his first visit to China since becoming Japan's top diplomat earlier this year, Iwaya told Wang that Tokyo was "closely monitoring the Taiwan situation and recent military developments", according to his foreign ministry.

Meeting with Wang at Beijing's opulent Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, he also "expressed serious concerns over the East China Sea situation, including around the Senkaku Islands (and) China's increasing military activity", Tokyo said. Iwaya in addition called for the "swift release" of Japanese nationals detained by Chinese authorities. "Opaqueness surrounding the anti-espionage law is causing Japanese people to think twice about visiting China," he warned.

But the two ministers also agreed to work towards a visit to Japan by Wang "at the earliest possible timing next year". China's foreign ministry said in a statement that the meeting would take place "at an appropriate time", without mentioning discussions of Beijing's military maneuvering or detained Japanese nationals.

Iwaya earlier met Chinese Premier Li Qiang and agreed to work for a "constructive and stable" relationship, Japanese news agency Kyodo said. China and Japan are key trading partners, but increased friction over disputed territories and military spending has frayed ties in recent years. Beijing's more assertive presence around disputed territories in the region, meanwhile, has sparked Tokyo's ire, leading it to boost security ties with key ally the United States and other countries. — AFP



Takeshi Iwaya

## Blogs to Bluesky: Social media shifts after 2004 tsunami

JAKARTA: The world's deadliest tsunami hit nations around the Indian Ocean two decades ago before social media platforms flourished, but they have since transformed how we understand and respond to disasters — from finding the missing to swift crowdfunding. When a 9.1-magnitude quake caused a tsunami that smashed into coastal areas on Dec 26, 2004, killing more than 220,000 people, broadcasters, newspapers and wire agencies were the main media bringing news of the calamity to the world.

Yet in some places, the sheer scale took days to emerge. Survivor Mark Oberle was holidaying in Thailand's Phuket when the giant waves hit Patong beach, and penned a blog post to fend off questions from family, friends and strangers in the days after the disaster. "The first hints of the extent were from European visitors who got text messages from friends back home," said Oberle, adding people initially thought the quake was local and small, when its epicenter was actually near western Indonesia, hundreds of miles away.

"I wrote the blog because there were so many friends and family who wanted to know more. Plus I was getting many queries from strangers. People were desperate for good news tales," said the US-based physician, who helped the injured. The blog included images of cars ploughed into hotels, water-filled roads and locals fleeing on scooters because rumors produced "a stampede from the beach to higher ground".

Bloggers were named 'People of the Year' by ABC News in 2004 because of the intimacy of first-hand accounts like those published in the days following the tsunami. But today billions can follow major events in real-time on social media, enabling citizen journalism and assistance from afar, despite the real risk of rumor and misinformation.

During Spain's worst floods for decades in October, people voluntarily managed social media accounts to assist relatives trying to locate their missing loved ones. After Turkey's devastating earthquake last year, a 20-year-old student was rescued thanks to a post of his location while buried under the rubble.

## Fast picture

Two decades ago, the online social media landscape was vastly different. Facebook was launched early in 2004 but was not yet widely used when the tsunami hit. One of YouTube's founders reportedly said an inspiration for the platform's founding in early 2005 was an inability to find



BANDA ACEH: A boat that was preserved after being swept onto a roof by the 2004 tsunami is seen at a tsunami memorial site on Dec 24, 2024 ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. — AFP

footage of the tsunami in its aftermath. Some tsunami images were posted on photo site Flickr. But X, Instagram and Bluesky now allow for instant sharing.

Experts are clear that more information saves lives — hours lapsed between the tremor's epicenter near Indonesia and the giant waves that crashed into Sri Lanka, India and Thailand's coastal areas. Daniel Aldrich, a professor at Northeastern University, conducted interviews in India's Tamil Nadu where many said they had no idea what a tsunami was and had no warnings in 2004. "In India alone nearly 6,000 people were taken by surprise and drowned in that event," he said.

Mobile apps and online accounts now quickly publicize information about hospitals, evacuation routes or shelters. "Social media would have provided an immediate way to help locate other survivors and get information," said Jeffrey Blevins, head of journalism at the University of Cincinnati. Oberle also noted that "knowing what help was locally available... would have provided a clearer perspective of what to expect in the days to come".

## Citizen science

Beyond emergency rescue, social media clips can also be a boon to understanding a disaster's cause. When giant waves crashed into Indonesia's Aceh province, footage remained largely confined to handheld camcorders capturing the carnage. Fast forward

to 2018, when a quake-tsunami hit Indonesia's Palu city, killing more than 4,000 people, enough videos were taken on smartphones that scientists researching seismic activity were later able to use the clips to reconstruct its path and time between waves. The piece of citizen science in 2020 used amateur videos to conclude it happened so fast because of underwater landslides close to shore.

But it's not all good news. Scholars warn that disinformation and rumors have also hindered disaster responses. When Hurricane Helene struck North Carolina in September, relief efforts were disrupted as tensions between locals and emergency workers rose over unfounded rumors including a higher hidden death toll and diverted aid.

Workers faced reported threats from local armed militias. "This information was so malicious that FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) had to withdraw its teams from the area," said Aldrich. "Social media has absolutely altered the field of disaster response for the good and the bad." Yet perhaps the biggest change — the free flow of information to the vulnerable — has been beneficial. Laura Kong of the Honolulu-based International Tsunami Information Center recently recalls how "2004 was such a tragedy". "Because... we might have known there was an event, but we didn't have a way to tell anyone." — AFP

## Impeached Yoon defies summons over martial law

GWACHEON, South Korea: South Korea's suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol did not respond on Wednesday to a second summons by anti-corruption authorities who, along with prosecutors, are investigating his short-lived martial law decree issued early this month. Yoon had not appeared for questioning as of 10 am (0100 GMT) on Christmas Day as requested by the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials, after ignoring their first summons last week.

An agency official said it would continue waiting for Yoon on Wednesday, adding it would need to review the case further before seeking an arrest warrant, Yonhap news agency reported. Yoon also did not respond on Dec 15 to a separate summons by prosecutors who are investigating the martial law declaration, Yonhap said.

Yoon's repeated defiance of the summons and failures to appear for questioning have sparked criticism and calls from the opposition for his arrest, citing concerns over potential destruction of evidence. In a televised address on Dec 7, four days after the martial law declaration, Yoon said he would not evade legal and political responsibility for his actions.

Yoon was impeached by parliament on Dec 14 over his brief imposition of martial law and must now face a Constitutional Court trial on whether to remove him from office or restore his presidential powers. If upheld by the court, which is required to deliver its ruling within six months of the impeachment, a by-election must be held within 60 days of the court's decision. — Agencies

## Catholics hold muted Xmas mass in Aceh

BANDA ACEH: With flickering candles and the sound of organs, hundreds of Catholics held a muted Christmas Eve mass in Indonesia's Aceh province, the only one under ultraconservative Islamic law in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation. Christmas decorations are not allowed on the streets of Aceh — the only Indonesian province to implement strict sharia law that includes punishments like flogging — where 98 percent are Muslim and just 6,000 Catholics live.

The Sacred Heart Catholic Church, built almost 100 years ago by Dutch colonial rulers and the only one in the provincial capital Banda Aceh, was allowed to hold a ceremony Tuesday evening for a crowd of 500 faithful. "I don't find any difficulty in terms of relationship with believers of other religions. So far, the religious tolerance here is excellent," the church's pastor, Father Agustinus Padang, told AFP.

Aceh has been widely criticized by rights groups for punishments of moral offences under the strict law, such as public canings for alleged adultery. But the province's special autonomy excludes non-Muslims from those, and

Catholicism is one of the nominally secular country's six official religions. The church, located in the heart of the city and a stone's throw away from the grand mosque, is bare of any Christmas ornaments on its exterior.

A tight security presence of more than a dozen police and soldiers was also visible because of several attacks against Christians in Indonesia in recent years. But inside the colonial-style church, worshippers celebrated with a tall Christmas tree, fairy lights, and a choir singing the Indonesian version of "Holy Night". The sound of the Islamic call to prayer echoed around the church while preparations were underway for the Christmas celebration.

## 'Always feel safe'

Catholics in the city prefer a muted celebration that focuses on self-reflection, so Christmas paraphernalia was only put up 24 hours before the big day, according to church administrator Baron Ferryson Pandiangan. "Catholics in Banda Aceh assimilate well with other religions, despite the rules that Aceh must be managed with Islamic sharia law. It doesn't bother us at all," Pandiangan said.

Despite improvements in religious harmony, being a minority in the overwhelmingly Muslim region is not without challenges. There are only 19 Catholic churches in Aceh, while Protestants have more than 180 churches. Catholics mix with believ-



BANDA ACEH: Christians take selfies after the Christmas Eve Mass at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Banda Aceh on December 24, 2024, ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 2004 tsunami disaster. — AFP

ers of other religions in Banda Aceh, partly bonded by the shared trauma of the devastating 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which killed around 60,000 people in the city alone.

Their Sacred Heart church was affected by the giant waves, becoming flooded with thick mud while the initial earthquake destroyed parts of its walls. Every year on Dec 26, the churchgoers congregate to mark the tragic event and pray for the victims. While the Christmas celebration is less festive than in other parts of the world, worshippers still welcome the joy in the church that

has become their little oasis.

"I always feel safe and comfortable to worship here because the security is tight," worshipper Lisbetty Purba told AFP. The 35-year-old housewife said when she moved to Banda Aceh four years ago from neighboring North Sumatra province, where many Christians live, she was worried about the rules she had to follow, but soon realized her worries were unfounded. "I really love living here, I met good neighbors who are kind to me," she said. "The key is communication and willingness to share." — AFP

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2024

# Chinese tricksters take cue from Squid Game to prey on indebted

## Players of 'self-discipline' lured with big prizes



BANGKOK: A 12 meter-tall statue of Young-hee, the iconic doll from Netflix's South Korean TV series "Squid Game", is seen on a barge in front of Wat Arun temple on the Chao Prayer River ahead of the launch of Season 2, in Bangkok on December 19, 2024. — AFP

BEIJING: In China's take on Squid Game, fraudsters are preying on the financially distressed in a slumping economy with promises of prize money, debt restructuring and other schemes that are not always what is promised.

Unlike the dystopian South Korean TV series, which returns to the small screen for a second season on Thursday, Chinese players taking on "self-discipline" challenges do not risk their lives if they lose.

But courts have found some participants in isolation challenges - who pay hundreds of dollars to stay in a room for days, following prescribed rules in the hopes of winning as much as 1 million yuan (\$140,000) - are being scammed. And regulators are warning people about dodgy debt relief claims.

Isolation challenges, often advertised on Douyin, as TikTok is known in China, have risen in popularity this year as the world's second-biggest economy slows. It grew at the weakest pace in more than a year in the three months to September, spurring policymakers to pledge fresh measures to boost household incomes among other steps.

The long lists of rules in the challenges include toilet breaks not exceeding 15 minutes and bans on touching the alarm clock more than twice a day. Many players cry foul when they do not survive their first day for infractions caught on surveillance cameras, which they dispute.

In October, a court in the eastern province of Shandong ordered an organizer to refund 5,400 yuan (\$740) in sign-up fees to a player surnamed

Sun, ruling the contract was unfair and "violated public order and good morals".

Sun was trying to win 250,000 yuan by surviving a 30-day isolation challenge with rules forbidding smoking, use of electronic devices, consumption of alcohol and contact with anyone outside the room.

On the third day of the challenge, organizers said Sun had covered his face with a pillow, breaking a prohibition on players obscuring their faces. The Cyberspace Administration of China, which regulates the country's internet, and ByteDance, owner of Douyin, did not respond to Reuters requests for comment. The National Financial Regulatory Administration (NFRA) warned the public on Tuesday not to fall for "debt intermediaries" claiming to help people restructure their borrowings or improve

their credit profiles.

Touting their services through phone, texts, flyers and ads on social media, such intermediaries claim they can help secure new loans or provide temporary funds, but the regulator warned the services come with a high fee. Intermediaries charge as much as 12 percent of the loan value in "service fees", the state-backed National Business Daily said.

Another scheme involves charging large fees to ostensibly help debtors repair their credit records, according to the NFRA, which cautioned that borrowers' personal information might also be leaked or sold. China's household loans totaled 82.47 trillion yuan (\$11.3 trillion) in November, according to central bank data. — Reuters

## Chinese workers saved from 'slave-like conditions' in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO: More than 160 Chinese workers have been saved from "slave-like conditions" in Brazil, where they had been building an electric car factory for Chinese giant BYD, officials said Tuesday. BYD's Brazilian subsidiary said in a statement late Monday it has "broken with immediate effect" its contract with the company responsible for the work on the site, Jinjiang Construction Brazil Ltd.

The site is located in Camacari, in the northeast state of Bahia and, when completed, will be BYD's biggest electric car plant outside Asia, with a production capacity of 150,000 vehicles per year. Work on part of the site was suspended by order of Bahia's public ministry for works (MPT).

Since November that state ministry and other authorities have been conducting inspections which the MPT said identified "163 workers who appeared to be in slave-like conditions with the Jinjiang company providing services for BYD." An MPT spokesperson told AFP that all those workers identified were Chinese nationals.

In a statement, the MPT said it had found "an alarming situation of precariousness" where employees were being kept in "degrading working conditions." "In one of the accommodations, workers slept on beds without mattresses and had no wardrobes for their personal effects, which were mixed together with food supplies," it said.

The MPT also found there was just one bathroom per 31 workers, "which forced them to get up at 4:00 am to line up to be able to get ready before leaving to start work at 5:30 am." Once on the site, "the workers were exposed to intense solar radiation, presenting visible signs of skin damage."

The MPT said it suspected "forced labor" had been occurring, with the workers' passports confiscated and their employer "retaining 60 percent of their salary, and them receiving the other 40 percent in Chinese money."

Authorities have organized an online hearing Thursday so that BYD and Jinjiang "can present the necessary provisions guaranteeing minimal accommodation conditions" and the rectification of the violations detected. BYD's Brazilian subsidiary said in its statement that "it does not tolerate violations of Brazilian law and human dignity," adding that it had immediately transferred the 163 workers to stay in hotels in the region. — AFP

## China approves value-added tax law, taking effect in 2026

BEIJING: China approved a value-added tax law on Wednesday to take effect on January 1, 2026, the official Xinhua said, bringing into one document previous regulations that have included exempting items from the tax. VAT, the largest tax category in China, accounted for around 38 percent of national tax revenue in 2023, official data show.

The report did not detail provisions of the law. The latest draft included exemptions for some agricultural products, imported instruments and equipment for scientific research and teaching, some imported goods for the disabled and services provided by welfare institutions such as nursery, kindergarten and nursing institution for the elderly.

To aid specific sector or business, the government could include new items into the scope of tax deductibles. "With the introduction of the VAT Law, 14 tax categories out of 18 in China have their own laws, covering the majority of tax revenue and marking significant progress of implementing the principle of statutory taxation," Xinhua said.

The law was passed at the end of a session of China's top legislature, the National People's Congress

## Nippon Steel's US Steel takeover plan has support in steelmaking areas

TOKYO: Japan's Nippon Steel is seeing support for its proposal to acquire US Steel in the regions of the United States where steel mills are located, Nippon Steel's President Tadashi Imai told reporters on Wednesday. On Monday, a US foreign investment committee referred the decision whether to approve or block the \$15 billion deal to US President Joe Biden, who has 15 days to decide. Biden and his incoming successor, Donald Trump, have both expressed opposition to the purchase.

On Wednesday, Imai reiterated that Nippon Steel has made a number of commitments to address national security concerns of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, adding he believed there was "progress in understanding".

"In the communities of the various regions where the steel mills are located, there is a considerable amount of support for this acquisition," Imai said. "I hope that President Biden will understand...the value of this acquisition to the US economy."

Both companies have previously said they had planned to close the deal, which has also faced opposition from a powerful the United Steelworkers labor union (USW), before the end of 2024. On Wednesday, Nippon Steel shared a letter to Biden dated December 23 and signed by two dozen US municipality officials



BEIJING: People walk at a shopping center in Beijing on December 25, 2024. — AFP

Standing Committee, which began on Saturday. Last month, China unveiled tax incentives on home and land transactions to support the crisis-hit property market. Residents are exempt from VAT when they sell their homes at least two years after purchase.

In September 2023, the finance ministry said it would extend a VAT refund policy aimed at encouraging domestic and foreign research institutions to purchase Chinese-made equipment until the end of 2027. China in 2019 cut the VAT rate for manufacturers to 13 percent from 16 percent, and to 9 percent from 10 percent for the transportation and

construction sectors.

With the slowing world's second-largest economy, VAT revenue in the first 11 months this year dropped 4.7 percent from the same period last year to 6.1 trillion yuan (\$840 billion), as businesses suffered weak domestic demand. For November, VAT revenue rose 1.36 percent. "The rebound in VAT reflects improving economic vitality, as sales and business activity recover. It may also indicate a recovery in industrial profits, further supporting economic momentum," Tommy Xie, head of Asia macro research at OCBC, said in a note on Monday. — Reuters



TOKYO: This general view shows steel moving along rollers at the hot rolling mill (rough rolling) during a media tour by Japanese company Nippon Steel at their East Nippon Works Kashima Area facility in Kashima, Ibaraki prefecture, north of Tokyo on December 6, 2024. — AFP

in areas where US Steel mills are located, asking the US president to approve the takeover deal.

"We respectfully urge you to listen to the voices of the steelworkers and everyone else whose economic security is tied to US Steel - they are speaking loudly in unison that this deal must be approved," the letter said. USW said in a separate statement that it met Nippon Steel officials twice last week. It repeated its view that the Japanese steelmaker had no interest in the long-term security of US Steel plants or blast furnace operations and urged Biden to keep the company domestically owned and operated. — Reuters

## Taiwan blocks Uber, Foodpanda merger over monopoly concerns

TAIPEI: Taiwan has rejected ride-hailing giant Uber's plan to buy Delivery Hero's Foodpanda on the island, stating on Wednesday that the deal would significantly harm market competition. The US ride-hailing giant was aiming to acquire Foodpanda Taiwan by the first half of 2025 for US\$950 million, merging the top two players in Taiwan's food delivery market. "If Uber acquires Foodpanda, it will be completely unrestrained by competition," Taiwan's Fair Trade Commission (FTC) vice chairman Chen Chi-ming told a press conference.

"The disadvantages to market competition from this merger far outweigh its economic benefits," Chen said, adding that the merged companies' market share would exceed 90 percent. "No corrective measures could sufficiently ensure competition would be maintained," he said. Uber had described the deal, announced in May, as one of Taiwan's largest international deals outside the semiconductor industry.

Chen said the FTC conducted an economic analysis to assess the merger's impact on competition, and received over 600 responses from food delivery platforms and relevant agencies. Taiwan's delivery trade union welcomed the FTC's decision, with spokesperson Su Po-hao saying it secures "greater benefits for the future of the food delivery industry". — AFP



# Thousands attend Christmas charity dinner in Buenos Aires

## More than half of Argentina's population affected by poverty



A man looks on as he takes part in a Christmas solidarity dinner called 'No Families Without Christmas' in front of the National Congress in Buenos Aires on December 24, 2024.



A man dressed as Santa Claus looks on as he takes part in a Christmas solidarity dinner called 'No Families Without Christmas' in front of the National Congress in Buenos Aires on December 24, 2024.

**Buenos Aires:** Some 3,000 homeless people sat down for a festive Christmas charity dinner on Tuesday in the center of Buenos Aires, at a time when more than half of Argentina's population is affected by poverty, one year into ultra-liberal Javier Milei's term in office. "I came because I feel alone and it's sad," said Walter Villagra, a 54-year-old homeless man who survives by collecting cans after he lost his job as an electrician four years ago. Titled "No Family Without Christmas," the event in front of the National Congress was held for the eighth consecutive year, and Tuesday's turnout exceeded organizers' expectations.

"To say that it is a special year because there is more and more poverty is sad, but it is true," Mariana Gonzalez, spokesperson for the Movement of Excluded Workers, one of the organizers behind the event, told AFP. "There are more and more people sleeping on the street and more people coming to the soup kitchens because they do not have a plate of food, it is a very difficult year."

Long tables covered with tablecloths were laid out on the street in front of Congress and the atmosphere was joyful with floating balloons, music and clowns walking on stilts. Guests ranging from single adults to elderly couples and families with children greeted the arrival of each of the trucks carrying food with shouts and applause.

Before dinner, about a hundred people were able to take a shower and get a haircut or a shave in tents



**Buenos Aires:** Aerial view showing volunteers and homeless people taking part in a Christmas solidarity dinner called 'No Families Without Christmas' in front of the National Congress in Buenos Aires on December 24, 2024. — AFP photos

set up around the square. According to the INDEC government statistics agency, in the first half of the year poverty jumped 11 points and reached 52.9 percent, 18.1 percent of whom are homeless.

Meanwhile, child poverty reached 66 percent, affecting seven million children under 14 years of age.

"This dinner shows that there is plenty of solidarity, but it is not enough," said Gonzalez. Sitting at one of the tables, Juan Carlos Benitez, a 59-year-old homeless man, said he was grateful for the opportunity to have a plate of food and also "laugh a bit and talk to someone" this Christmas. — AFP

## Congo frees most of Chinese men held for illegal mining

**Kinshasa:** Democratic Republic of Congo has freed 14 of the 17 Chinese men arrested on suspicion of running an illegal gold mine in the country, authorities said late on Tuesday. The men, who are travelling back to China, were detained last week along with others from Congo and neighboring Burundi after failing to produce the required documents during a crackdown on unlicensed extraction of the minerals in the central African nation.

Jean-Jacques Purusi Sadiki, the governor of South Kivu, the province where the men were arrested, told reporters he was shocked to hear news of their release. The Chinese miners owed \$10 million in unpaid taxes and fines to the government, he added.

Around 60 Chinese nationals were at the site and officials detained the 17 who appeared to be in charge. The Chinese embassy in Kinshasa has not responded to requests for comment. Burundi's embassy said it was still waiting for details from its representative in Bukavu.

Bernard Muhindo, South Kivu's finance minister and acting mines minister, said the intention was to improve the system. "The idea is not to go on a manhunt, but rather to clean up the mining sector so that reliable partners can work properly and legally," he told reporters.

The central African country says it has been struggling to stop unlicensed companies and in some cases armed groups from exploiting its rich reserves of cobalt, copper, gold and other minerals. Competition over mining operations has fueled fighting in the region that borders Rwanda. — Reuters

## NBK signs exclusive partnership with Alshaya Group

**Kuwait:** National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is dedicated to offering exceptional benefits and exclusive offers to meet the diverse needs of its customers. By aligning its services with their expectations of various lifestyles, NBK continues to add value to their exceptional banking experience.

Reaffirming its commitment to innovation and exceptional customer service, NBK announced signing an exclusive partnership agreement with Alshaya Group, one of the leading international retail franchise operators. This collaboration marks the beginning of a pioneering service set to be introduced in Kuwait at the start of 2025, aimed at enhancing NBK's customers' banking experience with innovative offerings.

The bank emphasized that this partnership is set to offer exceptional benefits to its customers both in Kuwait and internationally, strengthening NBK's leadership in the banking sector. Through this collaboration, NBK continues to innovate, offering exclusive and distinctive advantages that set it apart in delivering top-tier services to its clientele.

The signing ceremony of the agreement was attended by Isam Al-Sager, Vice Chairman and Group CEO of NBK, and Mohammed Alshaya, Executive Chairman of Alshaya Group, at Burj Alshaya, while it was signed by Mohammed Al-Othman, Chief Executive Officer of Consumer and Digital Banking Group at NBK, and John Hadden, CEO of Alshaya Group.

Commenting on the event, Mohammed Al-Othman said, "This exclusive partnership agreement with Alshaya Group aligns with our ongoing efforts to strengthen our relationships with prominent companies across diverse sectors. It enables us to offer exclusive advantages and exceptional benefits that enhance the banking experience for our customers." "Service excellence and a commitment to deliv-



**NBK and Alshaya Group officials pose for a group picture on the sidelines of signing the partnership agreement.**

ering an exceptional customer experience are embedded in NBK's culture. Through strategic partnerships, NBK seeks to provide its customers with benefits that not only meet their needs, but also exceed their expectations. Drawing on decades of experience, NBK is adept at understanding customer preferences and evaluating their objectives to offer tailored products and services that suit a variety of lifestyles," he added.

Meanwhile, John Hadden, CEO at Alshaya Group said, "We are proud of this exclusive agreement with NBK for our customers in Kuwait, bringing together a leading financial and banking institution of NBK's stature with Alshaya Group."

"We are confident that this agreement will offer a fantastic range of services to Alshaya and NBK customers with superior benefits and exclusive offers that enhance their overall experience with our brands," he added.

NBK consistently strives to provide value-added offers and exclusive benefits to its customer base, strengthening its leadership position in the bank-



**KUWAIT:** NBK and Alshaya Group officials sign the partnership agreement.

ing sector locally and regionally. Meanwhile, Alshaya Group operates a wide range of brands across the Middle East, North Africa, Türkiye and Europe, bringing the world's best-known brands to its customers with thousands of stores, restaurants, coffee shops, and leisure destinations and over 125 e-commerce and digital sites for its brands.

## Japan investor launches fund with 'stock geek'

**Tokyo:** On the face of it, the duo hardly seem fit to inspire confidence as the brains behind Japan's newest stock fund: one, a former comedian and the other, every bit the stereotypical "otaku" geek.

But their maiden fund, announced on Wednesday, may be the Christmas gift that followers of the one-time entertainer, Toshiya Imura, have been waiting for since he revealed his plans for it about two years ago.

The 40-year-old father of three had gained fame and an enthusiastic fan base by turning his obsession with stock research into 6.5 billion yen (\$41.4 million) in assets as an individual investor.

His reputation was such that any time his name appeared in a regulatory filing as a major shareholder, that company's stock would surge, as followers sought out "Imura stocks" to piggy-back on his value-investment bets.

But Imura had bigger dreams: to become a professional investor to get more Japanese to profit from the stock market - a goal that aligns with the government's efforts to shepherd the roughly \$6.5 trillion of households' cash into financial investments. He doggedly began his courtship of Keizo Takeiri, a quirky, former Goldman Sachs analyst, to be his partner-in-crime.

Imura said he was instantly struck by Takeiri's photographic memory, talent for analysis and sheer geekdom when they first met in 2020. "His knowledge was next-level," Imura told Reuters in an interview this month alongside Takeiri and an official from the fund's operator, Fundnote. Takeiri had also previously caught the eye of Akira Katayama, a famous online gamer-turned-billionaire whose invitation to work at his hedge fund was



**Tokyo:** People take pictures in front of a Christmas tree in Tokyo's Hibiya area on December 24, 2024. — AFP

further proof of his analytical chops.

Known to his ex-Goldman colleagues as "that stock otaku", Takeiri, 38, said his years at the elite Tokyo University were spent skipping classes, playing mahjong and researching stocks. Grooming was low on his priority list. "He sometimes shows up with holes in his clothes and bizarrely long fingernails," Imura teased. "Maybe he doesn't care or notice? He's a real high-spec weirdo."

That sentiment is mutual. Takeiri said Imura would send him 200 Slack messages on a typical day but then go missing for days on end when diving deep into a company's balance sheet. "The force with which he throws himself into finding out what he wants to know is out of this world." The pair's new fund goes on sale on January 10 and will have an initial investment cap of 10 billion yen. — Reuters

## Weyay Bank signs partnership with Alshaya Group

**Kuwait:** Weyay Bank, Kuwait's first digital bank, has officially entered a strategic partnership with Alshaya Group, one of the leading international retail franchise operators, offering an unparalleled choice of well-known brands to customers. This partnership marks a significant milestone in both entities' efforts in the financial and retail landscapes in Kuwait and beyond.

This collaboration aims to drive innovation, expand access to financial products, and deliver exceptional value for customers.

### Key highlights of the partnership:

- Digital banking with retail integration: the partnership will focus on creating a seamless customer experience by combining Weyay Bank's cutting-edge digital banking capabilities and Alshaya Group's expansive retail portfolio to create an enhanced customer experience that integrates digital banking services with retail offerings.
- New digital payment solutions: a key component of the partnership is the development of advanced payment solutions, which will enable customers to easily make transactions in-store and online.
- Financial inclusion initiatives: Both entities share a commitment to enhancing financial inclusion, with joint initiatives aimed at empowering customers, especially the youth, with digital tools for better money management, savings, and personalized financial products.

Amal Al-Duwaisan, Head of Weyay Bank, said, "This partnership with Alshaya Group represents a new chapter in our journey to transform Kuwait's banking ecosystem. Together, we are creating a seamless fusion of retail and digital banking, bring-



**KUWAIT:** Weyay Bank and Alshaya Group sign the partnership agreement.

ing more convenience and value to customers. We are excited to work alongside Alshaya Group to deliver innovative solutions that will reshape the way people shop and bank inside and outside Kuwait."

Francois Orhan, Vice President of Loyalty, Payments and Data at Alshaya Group, also commented, "Our partnership with Weyay Bank marks a major step forward in the retail and banking industries. By combining our extensive retail network with Weyay's digital banking expertise, we can provide our customers with a unified, rewarding experience that meets their evolving needs. We look forward to working together to bring exciting new services to the market."

Weyay Bank is Kuwait's first digital bank, dedicated to providing innovative banking solutions designed for the digital age. Through its user-friendly app interface, Weyay offers a wide range of financial services and features, with an emphasis on simplicity, speed, and security.

Alshaya Group operates a wide range of brands across the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey and Europe, bringing the world's best-known brands to its customers with thousands of stores, restaurants, coffee shops, and leisure destinations and over 125 e-commerce and digital sites for its brands.

# Sweeping Vietnam internet law comes into force

## Facebook, TikTok required to verify user identities, hand over data to authorities

**HANOI:** New Vietnamese internet rules requiring Facebook and TikTok to verify user identities and hand over data to authorities came into force on Wednesday, in what critics say is the latest attack on freedom of expression.

Under "Decree 147", all tech giants operating in Vietnam must verify users' accounts via their phone numbers or Vietnamese identification numbers and store that information alongside their full name and date of birth. They must provide that data to authorities on request and remove any content the government regards as "illegal" within 24 hours.

The new rules came into force on Wednesday, state media VNEexpress said. All social media sites had been given 90 days to provide data on "the total number of regular visits from Vietnam" and the number of regular users per month to authorities, the website said.

"Decree 147 will be used to publicly suppress those with different viewpoints," said activist Dang Thi Hue, who writes about politics and social issues on her Facebook account, which has 28,000 followers. The decree was "the latest sign of infringement of basic freedoms... with a vague line between what is legal and what is not," said former political prisoner Le Anh Hung. "No one wants to go to jail, so of course some activists will be more cautious and afraid of this decree."

Vietnam's hardline administration generally moves swiftly to stamp out dissent and arrest critics, especially those who find an audience on social media. In October, blogger Duong Van Thai -- who had almost 120,000 followers on YouTube, where he regularly

recorded livestreams critical of the government -- was jailed for 12 years on charges of publishing anti-state information.

Decree 147 builds on a 2018 cybersecurity law that was sharply criticized by the United States, European Union and internet freedom advocates who said it mimics China's repressive censorship of the internet.

### 'Just keep playing'

The decree also says that only verified accounts can livestream, impacting the exploding number of people earning a living through social commerce on sites such as TikTok. Aside from the ramifications for social media firms, the new laws also include curbs on gaming for under-18s, designed to prevent addiction.

Game publishers are expected to enforce a time limit of an hour per game session and not more than 180 minutes a day for all games. Just over half of Vietnam's 100 million population regularly plays such games, says data research firm Newzoo.

A large proportion of the population is also on social media, with the Ministry of Information and Communications estimating the country has around 65 million Facebook users, 60 million on YouTube and 20 million on TikTok.

The force of the decree was yet to be felt at a small online gaming cafe in capital Hanoi, where around a dozen young people were glued to their desktop screens. "I don't know anything about a time limit for the games," said one 15-year-old boy who said he had skipped class to come and play. "I just keep playing, and as you see, it still works. I never have to show an ID or student card to enter a



**HO CHI MINH:** Men use their smartphone as they sit on their motorbike in Ho Chi Minh City on December 23, 2024. — AFP

gameshop or for my game account online. I don't know how (the decree) will work, let's see."

The owner of the cafe, who charges around 30 cents for an hour of gaming, was similarly nonchalant. "I have no idea what this decree is about. I don't know if it will work or not. My business is still going normally. They pay and we let them use the desktop for their gaming. It's simple." — AFP

## Russian gas and LNG exports to Europe up 18-20% in 2024

**MOSCOW:** Total exports of Russian gas to European countries have so far been 18-20 percent higher this year than in 2023, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Wednesday. In January to November, supplies of pipeline gas and liquefied natural gas (LNG) exceeded 50 billion cubic meters, Novak said.

"Despite all the statements and sanctions pressure because gas is a highly ecological product, it is in demand. And Russian gas is the most cost-efficient, both in terms of logistics and the price," he said on state TV station Rossiya-24. The increase was from a very low base in 2023, when Russian pipeline gas supplies to Europe plummeted by 55.6 percent to 28.3 bcm as Moscow's relations with the West sharply deteriorated due to the Ukraine conflict.

Supplies are expected to recover to around 32 bcm this year, according to Reuters calculations based on state-controlled gas giant Gazprom's daily exports and statistics from European gas pipeline operators. Russian pipeline gas exports to Europe face serious challenges.

A five-year gas transit deal between Moscow and Kyiv that has seen Russian exports flow via Ukraine despite the war, expires at the end of the year and Ukraine has said it won't renew the arrangement.

Around half of Russian gas to Europe flows via the Ukrainian route. The rest is supplied through the TurkStream pipeline on the bed of the Black Sea. Novak reiterated Russia was ready to supply gas to Europe via several routes and that Ukraine and Europe should agree between themselves on the Russian gas transit.

"To date, the issue has not been resolved, although Europeans and European countries are interested in this (Ukrainian gas route). But this depends primarily on the agreement between the European Union and Kyiv on the possibility of such supplies," Novak said.

Supplies of Russia's seaborne super cool LNG have been on the rise, however, with Europe taking around half of such exports. The EU has no imminent plans to stop buying Russian



**SAINT PETERSBURG:** Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak attends the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in Saint Petersburg on June 6, 2024. — AFP

LNG, but has said it will try to wean itself off Russian gas by 2027 thanks to rising imports from Norway, the United States and Qatar. Novak said that Russia's LNG exports in 2024 are seen at around 33 million tons, on par with 32.9 million tons supplied last year. — Reuters



**BRUSSELS:** This illustration photograph shows the Bitcoin cryptocurrency logo displayed on a smartphone beside a screen showing a trading chart in Brussels on December 17, 2024. — AFP

## Russia using bitcoin in foreign trade, says finance minister

**MOSCOW:** Russian companies have begun using bitcoin and other digital currencies in international payments following legislative changes that allowed such use in order to counter Western sanctions, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said on Wednesday.

Sanctions have complicated Russia's trade with its major partners such as China or Turkey, as local banks are extremely cautious with Russia-related transactions to avoid scrutiny from Western regulators.

This year, Russia permitted the use of cryptocurrencies in foreign trade and has taken steps to make it legal to mine cryptocurrencies, including bitcoin. Russia is one of the global leaders in bitcoin mining.

"As part of the experimental regime, it is possible to use bitcoins, which we had mined here in Russia (in foreign trade transactions)," Siluanov told Russia 24 television channel.

"Such transactions are already occurring. We believe they should be expanded and developed further. I am confident this will happen next year," he said, adding that international payments in digital currencies represent the future.

Earlier this month, President Vladimir Putin said that the current US administration was undermining the role of the US dollar as the reserve currency by using it for political purposes, forcing many countries to turn to alternative assets.

He singled out bitcoin as an example of such assets, saying that no-one in the world could regulate bitcoin. Putin's remarks indicated that the Russian leader backs the extensive use of cryptocurrencies. — Reuters

## US banks sue Fed over 'opaque' stress tests

**NEW YORK:** A business coalition led by large US banks filed suit Tuesday against the Federal Reserve, criticizing the central bank's annual stress test implementation as "opaque" and detrimental to economic growth.

"For years, we have highlighted serious concerns about the stress testing framework and the need for reform," said the Bank Policy Institute, which represents US banking giants, large regional lenders and international banks operating in the United States.

BPI is leading a coalition that includes the US Chamber of Commerce, the American Bankers Association and the Ohio Bankers League who are challenging the Fed's implementation of stress tests following reforms enacted in the wake of 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Large banks have often argued that post-2008 capital requirements are excessive and harmful to businesses who need loans.

"The current opaque regime, combined with the lack of clear standards for the global market shock and the operational risk charge, continues to produce capital charges that are inaccurate, volatile and excessive, resulting in reduced lending and economic growth," BPI said.

The Fed did not immediately respond to a request for comment. On Monday, the Fed announced that it planned to soon seek public comments on "significant changes to improve the transparency" of the stress tests and reduce



**NEW YORK:** A person uses an ATM at a Bank of America in New York City on November 19, 2024. — AFP

volatility on required capital buffers.

A Fed statement noted that since the inception of the tests more than 15 years ago, large banks have more than doubled their capital levels, an increase of more than \$1 trillion.

"The Board will continue its exploratory analysis, which assesses additional risks to the banking system in ways that are separate from the stress

test," the Fed said on Monday. "The analysis would be used to inform bank supervision and financial stability assessments."

BPI welcomed the Fed's statement Monday "as a first step towards transparency and accountability," but the group believes "it is necessary to file this suit to preserve our legal rights," said BPI President Greg Baer. — AFP

## IMF, Egypt reach deal unlocking \$1.2 billion

**WASHINGTON:** The International Monetary Fund said Tuesday that it has reached a deal with Egyptian authorities allowing the country access to about \$1.2 billion. The funding access is subject to executive board approval.

"The Egyptian authorities have continued to implement key policies to preserve macroeconomic stability, despite ongoing regional tensions that are causing a sharp decline in Suez Canal receipts," said Ivanna Vladkova Hollar, who led the IMF mission involved in discussions with Egyptian authorities. She added in a statement that "continued implementation of fiscal consolidation efforts will be necessary to preserve debt sustainability, and reduce large interest costs and gross domestic financing requirements."

The deal comes as both sides reached staff-level agreement on the fourth review under the Extended



**CAIRO:** An employee of a restaurant prepares orders for clients in the Sixth of October suburb of Cairo in the Giza governorate on December 8, 2024. — AFP

Fund Facility arrangement, the fund said. Vladkova Hollar also noted that authorities "plans to streamline and simplify the tax system were commendable, but that "further reforms will be needed to enhance domestic revenue mobilization efforts." — AFP

## Finland-Estonia power cable hit in latest Baltic incident

**HELSINKI:** An undersea power cable linking Finland and Estonia broke down Wednesday, Finland's prime minister said, the latest in a series of incidents involving telecom cables and energy pipelines in the Baltic Sea. Arto Paikin, the head of operations of the Finnish electricity grid, told public broadcaster Yle that "the possibility of sabotage cannot be ruled out".

Finland's Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said the power outage "does not affect electricity supplies for Finns". "The authorities remain vigilant even during Christmas and are investigating the situation," he added on X.

Operator Fingrid said current on the EstLink 2 cable sending electricity to Estonia was cut at 12:26 pm local time (10:26 GMT). Last month two telecoms cables in the Baltic linking neighboring Sweden and Denmark were also cut.

Suspicious rapidly fell on the Chinese ship Yi Peng 3, which according to ship tracking sites had sailed over the cables around the time they were cut. Sweden said Monday that China had denied a request for prosecutors to conduct an investigation on the vessel and that it had left the area.

European officials said they suspect several of the incidents are sabotage linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the Kremlin dismissing this as "absurd" and "laughable". Early on November 17, the Arclion cable running from the Swedish island of Gotland to Lithuania was damaged.

The next day, the C-Lion 1 submarine cable connecting Helsinki and the German port of Rostock was cut south of Sweden's Oland island. Tensions have mounted around the Baltic since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In September 2022, a series of underwater blasts ruptured the Nord Stream pipelines that carried Russian gas to Europe, the cause of which has yet to be determined. In October 2023, an undersea gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia was shut down after it was damaged by the anchor of a Chinese cargo ship. — AFP

# Lifestyle

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2024



A cyclist dressed as Santa Claus rides along a road, on Christmas in New Delhi.



A surfer dressed as Santa Claus participates in the 16th annual "Surfing Santas" event on Christmas Eve in Cocoa Beach, Florida.—AFP photos



Participants in Santa costumes jump into the water during the 115th edition of the Copa Nadal (Christmas Cup) swimming race in Barcelona's Port Vell.



A man dressed in Santa Claus outfit sits outside a house as he waits for passersby to distribute chocolates ahead of Christmas in Chennai.



A Pomeranian dog of a Royal well-wisher is pictured as people wait to watch members of the Royal family attend their traditional Christmas Day service at St Mary Magdalene Church in Sandringham, Norfolk, eastern England.



## Christmas celebrations around the world



Ukrainians wearing traditional clothes take part in a Christmas Eve procession in Lviv.

Across the globe, Christmas celebrations bring people together in a dazzling display of cultural traditions, vibrant decorations, and heartfelt gatherings. From candlelit services and festive feasts to colorful parades

and gift-giving, the season inspires a universal spirit of joy, generosity, and togetherness, reminding us of the shared warmth and hope that transcends borders.



Christmas figurines made out of radish are pictured during the 'Noche de Rabanos' exhibition as part of Christmas celebrations in Oaxaca, Mexico.



A boy walks past a house with an inflatable Santa Claus decoration in Havana.

## NASA probe makes closest ever pass by the Sun

NASA's pioneering Parker Solar Probe made history Tuesday, flying closer to the Sun than any other spacecraft, with its heat shield exposed to scorching temperatures topping 1,700 degrees Fahrenheit (930 degrees Celsius). Launched in August 2018, the spaceship is on a seven-year mission to deepen scientific understanding of our star and help forecast space-weather events that can affect life on Earth.

Tuesday's historic flyby should have occurred at precisely 6:53am (1153 GMT), although mission scientists will have to wait until Friday for confirmation as they lose contact with the craft for several days due to its proximity to the

Sun. "Right now, Parker Solar Probe is flying closer to a star than anything has ever been before," at 3.8 million miles (6.1 million kilometers) away, NASA official Nicky Fox said in a video on social media Tuesday morning. "It is just a total 'yay, we did it,' moment."

If the distance between Earth and the Sun is the equivalent to the length of an American football field, the spacecraft should have been about four yards (meters) from the end zone at the moment of closest approach -- known as perihelion. "This is one example of NASA's bold missions, doing something that no one else has ever done before to answer long-standing questions about our universe," Parker Solar Probe program scientist Arik Posner said in a statement on Monday.

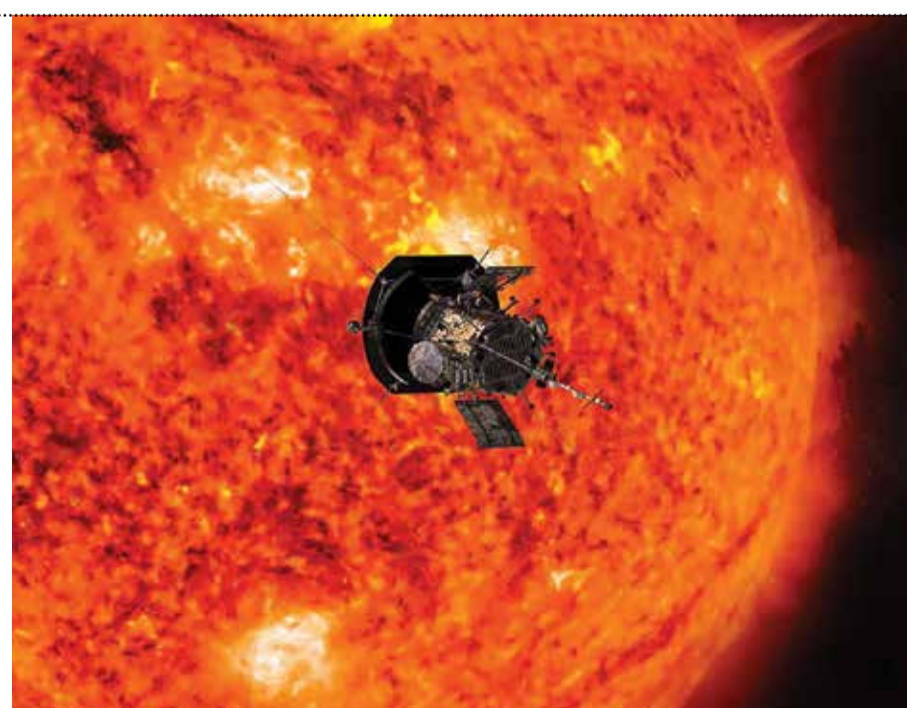
"We can't wait to receive that first status update from the spacecraft and start receiving the science data in the coming weeks." So effective is the heat shield that the probe's internal instruments remain near room temperature -- around 85F (29C) -- as it explores the Sun's outer atmosphere, called the corona.

Parker will also be moving at a blistering pace of around 430,000 mph (690,000 kph), fast enough to fly from the US capital Washington to Japan's Tokyo in under a minute.

"Parker will truly be returning data from uncharted territory," said Nick Pinkine, mission operations manager at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) in Laurel, Maryland.

"We're excited to hear back from the spacecraft when it swings back around the Sun." By venturing into these extreme conditions, Parker has been helping scientists tackle some of the Sun's biggest mysteries: how solar wind originates, why the corona is hotter than the surface below, and how coronal mass ejections -- massive clouds of plasma that hurl through space -- are formed.

The Christmas Eve flyby is the first of three record-setting close passes, with the next two -- on March 22 and June 19, 2025 -- both expected to bring the probe back to a similarly close distance from the Sun.—AFP



This handout illustration obtained July 6, 2018, in courtesy of NASA/Johns Hopkins APL shows an artist's conception of NASA's Parker Solar Probe, the spacecraft that will fly through the Sun's corona to trace how energy and heat move through the star's atmo-



## Saving the mysterious African manatee at Cameroon hotspot

General view of the vegetation on Lake Ossa, in Dizangue.

**E**ver since his first hard-won sightings of African manatees, award-winning marine biologist Aristide Takoukam Kamla has been devoted to protecting the little known and at risk aquatic mammals. African manatees are found in fresh water along the coast of western Africa, such as in Cameroon's vast Lake Ossa where the researcher first saw them more than 10 years ago. But they are shy creatures -- spotting them requires setting out before dawn when the lake is glassy and tranquil, all the better for following the trails of bubbles and, maybe just maybe, catching

was moved to tears after seeing five African manatees, including a female with her calf, while out on the lake with Takoukam Kamla. "Its huge! There are certain places in Africa where it's impossible to see them," said Farinelli, who is in her 30s and studies the marine mammals in Nigeria. Much still eludes researchers about the *Trichechus senegalensis* -- how many are in Cameroon; how long do they live; when and where do they migrate. African manatees are found between Mauritania and Angola but "it's a very little studied species, around which many mysteries still remain", Takoukam Kamla said.

its mesh", he complained, getting into a heated discussion with a fisherman in his dug-out canoe. "We're indigenous, we live off this and we have never had to suffer prohibitions at home," the old man grumbled bitterly. "If you want to impose bans on us, you will have to pay us every month."

Thierry Aviti said. Three years on, the menacing plant has all but disappeared. "At one point, we couldn't cope anymore" but promises were kept, Dizangue fisherman Thierry Bossambo said, marked by the memories of long nights with no fish. The bridges built with the fishermen is something Takoukam Kamla is keen to maintain to avoid "parachute science", a



Fishermen bring their pirogues to the shores of Lake Ossa to sell their fish, in Dizangue.

two big nostrils taking a quick breath.

"I was expecting to see them like on YouTube: in clear water, jumping like dolphins... a completely surreal idea" stemming from publications on manatees in Florida, the 39-year-old Cameroonian recalled, smiling. Their African cousins, however, are very different and the then University of Dschang apprentice researcher had to row for a long time before being rewarded.

Thanks to local fishermen, Takoukam Kamla has now learnt how to spot African manatees more easily within the darkened depths of the 4,500-hectare (11,000-acre) Lake Ossa, part of a sprawling wildlife reserve in southwestern Cameroon. They are his "favorite animal", the subject of his doctorate at the University of Florida -- and the reason he won this year's prestigious Whitley Award that recognizes groundbreaking biodiversity work by grassroots conservationists.

### Endangered habitat, poaching

American scientist Sarah Farinelli

Sometimes known as sea cows, the large marine herbivore is listed as "vulnerable" on the red list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. But the Cameroonian scientist thinks that is "an under-estimation of the real status of this species, which is subject to poaching" and whose habitat is "constantly in danger". Takoukam Kamla set up the African Marine Mammal Conservation Organisation which has five laboratories including in the lakeside fishing village of Dizangue.

On Lake Ossa, the animal's sole predators are human -- only a few years ago, manatees were still being served up in the village restaurant. Manatee hunting is now outlawed and the dish has vanished from menus. A blue statue of a manatee has even been erected in their honor. But threats remain.

Takoukam Kamla, standing on the shores of the lake, points to a palm oil refinery whose waste is dumped into the water. Another threat is the positioning of a net across the lake to maximize catches as it could "trap a small manatee in



General view of the Edea Canyon, in Edea.



General view of fishes in a bucket, in Dizangue.



Thierry Aviti, head of freshwater habitats and researcher at the University of Douala, looks for weevils in a clump of salvinia on Lake Ossa, in Dizangue.

### Biological combat

Relations between the scientists and the local communities whose fishing traditions have been passed down the generations are tricky. But an environmental threat that struck three years ago brought their two worlds together. Half of the lake's surface became covered by the invasive giant salvinia -- *Salvinia molesta* -- a free-floating plant that has made the lake uninhabitable for both fish and manatees. To combat it, scientists used a microscopic insect that feeds exclusively on salvinia and called on the fishermen to help.

"They used to take the salvinia infested with weevils and put a bit everywhere in the lake," AMMCO researcher

term referring to scientists dropping into local communities from their academic ivory towers to undertake field work. And to counter possible poaching, he wants to develop the area's eco-tourism. It's a "priority", agreed Gilbert Oum Ndjocka, curator of the nearby Douala-Edea National Park, who said "all stakeholders are allies for conservation". --AFP



A statue of a manatee stands at a roundabout in the town of Dizangue.--AFP photos



A man fishes on his pirogue on a canal leading to Lake Ossa in Dizangue.



Thierry Aviti (left), head of freshwater habitats and Aristide Takoukam Kamla (center), marine biologist, researcher and specializing in the African manatee, takes a sample of salvinia on Lake Ossa, in Dizangue.



Guests dressed like participants of Squid Games attend the opening ceremony of the Los Angeles premiere and fan event for Netflix's "Squid Game: Season 2" at Los Angeles City College.— AFP photos



Squid Games Guards are seen at the opening ceremony of the Los Angeles premiere and fan event for Netflix's "Squid Game: Season 2" at Los Angeles City College.



South Korean director Hwang Dong-hyuk (center) speaks onstage during Netflix's "Squid Game: Season 2" LA premiere and fan event at Los Angeles City College.

## The real-life violence that inspired South Korea's 'Squid Game'

A factory turned into a battlefield, riot police armed with tasers and an activist who spent 100 days atop a chimney -- the unrest that inspired Netflix's most successful show ever has all the hallmarks of a TV drama. This month sees the release of the second season of "Squid Game", a dystopian vision of South Korea where desperate people compete in deadly versions of traditional children's games for a massive cash prize. But while the show itself is a work of fiction, Hwang Dong-hyuk, its director and writer, has said the experiences of the main character Gi-hun, a laid-off worker, were inspired by the violent Ssangyong strikes in 2009.



Lee Chang-kun, a worker at South Korea's KG Mobility -- formerly operated as Ssangyong Motor -- who took part in a 100-day sit-in strike perched on a company tower in 2009, speaking during an interview with AFP at a labor union office in Pyeongtaek.

"I wanted to show that any ordinary middle-class person in the world we live in today can fall to the bottom of the economic ladder overnight," he has said. In May 2009, Ssangyong, a struggling car giant taken over by a consortium of banks and private investors, announced it was laying off more than 2,600 people, or nearly 40 percent of its workforce. That was the beginning of an occupation of the factory and a

77-day strike that ended in clashes between strikers armed with slingshots and steel pipes and riot police wielding rubber bullets and tasers. Many union members were severely beaten and some were jailed.

### 'Many lost their lives'

The conflict did not end there. Five years later, union leader Lee Chang-kun held a sit-in for 100 days on top of one of the factory's chimneys to protest a sentence in favor of Ssangyong against the strikers. He was supplied with food from a basket attached to a rope by supporters and endured hallucinations of a tent rope transformed into a writhing snake. Some who experienced the unrest struggled to discuss "Squid Game" because of the trauma they endured, Lee told AFP.

The repercussions of the strike, compounded by protracted legal battles, caused significant financial and mental strain for workers and their families, resulting in around 30 deaths by suicide and stress-related issues, Lee said. "Many have lost their lives. People had to suffer for too long," he said. He vividly remembers the police helicopters circling overhead, creating intense winds that ripped away workers' raincoats. Lee said he felt he could not give up.

"We were seen as incompetent breadwinners and outdated labor activ-

ists who had lost their minds," he said. "Police kept beating us even after we fell unconscious -- this happened at our workplace, and it was broadcast for so many to see." Lee said he had been moved by scenes in the first season of "Squid Game" where Gi-hun struggles not to betray his fellow competitors.

But he wished the show had spurred real-life change for workers in a country marked by economic inequality, tense industrial relations and deeply polarized politics. "Despite being widely discussed and consumed, it is disappointing that we have not channeled these conversations into more beneficial outcomes," he said.

### 'Shadow of state violence'

The success of "Squid Game" in 2021 left him feeling "empty and frustrated". "At the time, it felt like the story of the Ssangyong workers had been reduced to a commodity in the series," Lee told AFP. "Squid Game", the streaming platform's most-watched series of all time, is seen as embodying the country's rise to a global cultural powerhouse, part of the "Korean wave"

alongside the Oscar-winning "Parasite" and K-pop stars such as BTS. But its second season comes as the Asian democracy finds itself embroiled in some of its worst political turmoil in decades, triggered by conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol's failed bid to impose martial law this month.

Yoon has since been impeached and suspended from duties pending a ruling by the Constitutional Court. That declaration of martial law risked sending the Korean wave "into the abyss", around 3,000 people in the film industry, including "Parasite" director Bong Joon-ho, said in a letter following Yoon's shocking decision. Vladimir Tikhonov, a Korean studies professor at the University of Oslo, told AFP that some of South Korea's most successful cultural products highlight state and capitalist violence. "It is a noteworthy and interesting phenomenon -- we still live in the shadow of state violence, and this state violence is a recurrent theme in highly successful cultural products."—AFP



High school students line up to watch a film in an itinerant CinemaTdour truck cinema, in the city of Djemmal in Tunisia's Monastir Governorate.



Workers from a local cable factory prepare to watch a film inside an itinerant CinemaTdour truck cinema, in the city of Djemmal in Tunisia's Monastir Governorate.

## Wallace and Gromit return with comic warning about AI dystopia

Beloved British animated couple Wallace and Gromit are returning to screens in their first feature-length film in 20 years for a typically mad-cap adventure that spotlights the dangers of technology in the wrong hands. "Vengeance Most Fowl" will air on the BBC on Christmas Day for the first time before being made available on the Netflix platform from January 3 worldwide.

Inventor and director Nick Park has returned to the technology theme that he explored in his 1993 Oscar-winning hit "The Wrong Trousers", but updated to take into account the advent of artificial intelligence (AI). The tale centers on tea and cheese-loving Wallace's latest invention: an "intelligent" robotic gnome called Norbot, which helps around the house and garden, threatening to replace the ever-loyal Gromit, who takes pride in the daily tasks of life.

"Wallace is completely deluded and obsessed, whereas Gromit represents the human touch," Park told AFP in a pre-release interview. "He likes doing his gardening. It's not about just seeing an end result, it's the act of doing that is enjoyable. I love the fact that we have technology. We have to just sometimes ask: is it always enhancing our lives and our relationships, or is it somehow diminishing them in some way?"

### 'Real humans'

Park has shown loyalty to the idea of "doing" throughout his four-decade career and still insists on real-world modelling to create Wallace and Gro-

mit instead of resorting to computerized imagery. At his Aardman Animations studio -- makers of other hits including "Chicken Run" and "Shaun the Sheep" -- films are shot frame-by-frame, with clay models slowly moved and altered in a technique known as "stop motion" that dates back to the dawn of cinema. At their fastest rate, the 200-person production team for "Vengeance Most Fowl" produced two minutes of film per week.

"Everything's made by real human beings and that hopefully shines off the screen," Park said. The limitations actually spur creativity, he insists, and are a core part of the franchise's appeal. "With CGI (computer-generated imagery) I guess you are tempted to just use it to the full. You've got everything at your disposal," he said. "Whereas I think if you don't have that, you tend to be more creative with what little you've got."

The film sees the return of the villainous penguin Feathers McGraw from "The Wrong Trousers", which won an Oscar for best short animated film. Feathers McGraw is blank-faced throughout, but his on-screen menace is always obvious -- often to comical effect -- while a full range of emotions are expressed, as ever, through the legendary eyebrows of Gromit. "Very small nuanced movements can say a lot," Park said.

One small change to listen out for in the new film is Wallace's new voice after the death of English actor Peter Sallis, who had played him since his debut in 1989. Sallis has been replaced by Ben Whitehead, an English voice artist and actor who collaborated with Park on the last full-length Wallace and Gromit film, "The Curse of the Were-Rabbit", released in 2005.—AFP



English filmmakers, animators and co-creators of Wallace & Gromit Nick Park (left) and Merlin Crossingham pose during a photo session in Paris.— AFP

## Mobile cinema brings Tunisians big screen experience

Like many of his fellow Tunisians, 23-year-old Amine Elhani has never been to the cinema, but now, thanks to a mobile theatre touring the country, he can finally enjoy the big screen. The bright red truck of CinemaTdour, or "moving cinema", has transformed parking lots and factory grounds in underserved towns and neighborhoods across the North African country into pop-up theatres. In the central town of Djemmal, dozens of workers unloaded the expandable truck,

and nonprofit Focus Gabes, with funding from private donors.

"We wanted a way to reach as many viewers as possible, in a short time and on a limited budget, while offering them an authentic cinematic experience," project director Ghofrane Heraghi told AFP. Mobile cinemas have long existed in other countries, but Heraghi said CinemaTdour was "unique" for turning a truck into a full-fledged theatre. Without government funding, CinemaTdour relies heavily on partnerships with private

For many workers, earning up to 1,000 dinars a month, the cost of tickets and the journey to a main city with a movie theatre can be prohibitive. "Having this cinema right outside their workplace also gives workers a sense of pride and belonging," said Ben Amor.

### 'Social impact'

After Djemmal, CinemaTdour set up in Hay Hlel, an impoverished neighborhood of the capital Tunis. Many children gathered around the pop-up theatre, eager for their turn. Yomna Warhani, 11, was beaming with excitement, anticipating her first ever movie screening. "I can't wait to see what it's like inside and what films they'll show," she said. Nejiba El Hadji, a 47-year-old mother of four, said: "It's not just the kids who are thrilled, believe me." To her, the mobile cinema was a rare source of joy in an otherwise bleak environment. "We have nothing here, no cultural centers and no entertainment, just the streets," said Hadji.

"People say our kids are lost, but no one does anything about it." CinemaTdour's two-week stay in Hay Hlel was funded by the World Health Organization, with screenings themed on mental health, smoking and drug abuse, and violence against women. The shows were tailored for younger audiences as well as for viewers with hearing or visual impairments. Heraghi, the project head, said that "what drives us is the social impact of culture."

"We want to break stereotypes, shift mindsets, and promote values like social cohesion and community spirit." In just a few months, CinemaTdour has reached more than 15,000 people, including 7,500 in the southern oasis town of Nefta where a month of free screenings was sponsored by a date exporter.—AFP



Workers from a local cable factory line up to watch a film in an itinerant CinemaTdour truck cinema, in the city of Djemmal in Tunisia's Monastir Governorate.— AFP photos

easily setting up a fully equipped outdoor movie theatre with 100 seats. "The screen is huge, and the sound effects are amazing," said Elhani, who had so far only watched films on his phone or computer.

He had "never had the chance to go to a movie theatre", he told AFP. "It's a fantastic experience, especially because I'm watching with friends." Movie theatres are scarce in Tunisia, numbering at just 15 and largely concentrated in major urban hubs. Recognizing this gap, CinemaTdour was launched in May by private cultural network Agora

companies to cover costs like film rights, maintenance and staffing. The truck itself was purchased on credit for about one million Tunisian dinars (\$315,000), Heraghi said, with annual operating expenses of around 500,000 dinars.

For 10 days in Djemmal, residents could watch films for free thanks to a partnership with German car parts manufacturer Draxlmaier, which has a factory in the town. Jihene Ben Amor, Draxlmaier's communications manager in Tunisia, said the company wanted to "contribute to the development" of remote and underserved regions where it operates.

## Sports

# Djokovic eyes more Slam glory as Swiatek returns under doping cloud

## Friday's United Cup kicks off 2025 season

**SYDNEY:** Novak Djokovic is confident he can still win Grand Slams, starting at the Australian Open, with the Serbian kickstarting his bid for an unprecedented 11th title and record 25th major crown in Brisbane this week.

Top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka, who is gunning for a third Melbourne Park trophy, joins him at the Queensland Tennis Centre from December 29-January 5 in a stellar women's field. The 2025 season gets under way on Friday with the mixed-teams United Cup in Perth and Sydney, headlined by world number two Iga Swiatek in her first tournament since revelations that she served a one-month doping suspension.

It is the first season since 37-year-old Djokovic began playing that none of the other so-called "Big Four" will be on the other side of the net following the retirements this year of Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray. Roger Federer called it quits in 2022.

As they faded, Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz stepped up to become the new Grand Slam kings, with both men opting against a warm-up tournament leading into the first major of the year which begins on January 12. As doubts grew over Djokovic's motivation and ability to take down the new guard after a disappointing 2024, he stunned the tennis world by

hiring Murray to coach him.

### Kyrgios returns

The British three-time major winner is set to miss Brisbane but hook up with his old rival at the Australian Open. "I still will try to go strong because I feel like my body is serving me well. I still have motivation to win Grand Slams, make more history," said Djokovic, who needs one more Slam crown to surpass Margaret Court's 24. "That's one of the biggest reasons why I asked Andy to work with me, because I still have big plans, so as long as that's the case, I will keep going."

By his standards, 2024 wasn't kind, failing to win a Slam, claiming just one title -- Olympic gold in Paris -- and ending his season in October. A resurgent Grigor Dimitrov, Holger Rune, and Frances Tiafoe are also playing in Brisbane, as is Australian Nick Kyrgios, who returns after injuries restricted him to just one ATP Tour singles match in two years. He and Djokovic are set to play doubles together.

Challenging Sabalenka on Pat Rafter Arena will be America's top talents Jessica Pegula and Emma Navarro, ranked seven and eight respectively, along with former world number two Ons Jabeur and veteran Victoria Azarenka.

Sabalenka, who beat China's



**DOHA:** Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic sits for a beard trimming at Lusail International Circuit in Lusail, north of Doha, during the first practice session of the Qatari Formula One Grand Prix on November 29, 2024. — AFP

high-flying Zheng Qinwen in the Melbourne final this year, had a sensational 2024 which culminated in being named WTA Player of Year this month. The 26-year-old reached seven finals and won four titles, successfully defending

the Australian Open, lifting her first US Open and winning WTA 1000 events in Cincinnati and Wuhan.

She also recaptured the number one ranking from five-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek, whose reputation

was rocked in November when it was revealed she tested positive for a banned heart medication in August. The International Tennis Integrity Agency accepted that the violation was not intentional, and the Polish star escaped with a one-month sanction.

### Sinner awaits verdict

Swiatek called it "the worst experience of my life", but vowed: "I know I will be stronger than ever." Her case is similar to that of Australian Open winner Sinner, who is still waiting for the outcome of a World Anti-Doping Agency appeal against his initial exoneration for twice testing positive for traces of the steroid clostebol in March.

The agency told AFP a ruling was not expected before the new year, but it could conceivably be handed down before or during the Australian Open. Joining Swiatek at the United Cup is world number two Coco Gauff and fourth-ranked Jasmine Paolini.

Two-time Australian Open winner Naomi Osaka begins her season at the Auckland Classic, hoping for a better year than 2024 when she failed to win a title. Former US Open champions Emma Raducanu, a place above Osaka in the rankings at 57, and Bianca Andreescu are also starters in New Zealand. — AFP

## French primed to end King George horserace drought

**LONDON:** It has been a long time since a France-based trainer won British horseracing's King George VI Chase but there are three cross-Channel raiders with live hopes for Thursday's fascinating renewal at Kempton Park. A classy field of 11 is set to post -- though there is a doubt about Corbetts Cross, one of the quartet of Irish challengers -- for the race that is probably second to only the Cheltenham Gold Cup in importance in the British jump racing calendar.

The hosts have high hopes too in 2022 winner Bravemansgame -- bidding to provide trainer Paul Nicholls with a record-extending 14th victory -- Grey Dawning and L'Homme Presse. However, this year's edition offers the best hope of a French winner since First Gold gave trainer Francois Doumen his fifth success in the race back in 2000.

Il Est Francais is the pick of the trio as he returns to the course in Sunbury, west of London, where he produced one of the performances of last season -- winning the Kauto Star Novices Chase by 11 lengths. The concern for Noel George and Swedish co-trainer Amanda Zetterholm, who are based in Avilly-Saint-Leonard, northern France, is the star's tendency to burst blood vessels in races.

The latest mishap came at the Auteuil course in Paris in November, but George says the horse is now in prime shape. "It's not the first time he's done it and every time it's happened, it's been at Auteuil," said George. "We're just hoping he can put in the performance he did last year at Kempton, he seems in the same form. If it goes the way it went last year, with no health problems, then I think he'll be very difficult to beat."

George is also enthusiastic about General En Chef, who ran an eye-catching fourth in a competitive chase at Newbury, southern England, in late November. "I think he's going to run a massive race," said George. "I've never had him as good as he is."

### 'Climbing the ladder'

There appears to be similar confidence behind the third of the French runners Juntos Ganamos. "I think he's a very good horse with a lot of class, I'm hoping I'm not wrong," said trainer David Cottin.

The Irish challenge is headed by Spillane's Tower, who won a Grade One race last season, with trainer Jimmy Mangan saying he is the best horse he has trained. Mangan has just 12 horses but he has a habit of punching above his weight as he showed when Monty's Pass won the 2003 Grand National.

"It's incredible, really," Mangan, 69, told the *Thoroughbred Daily News*. "Everywhere I go, people are asking, 'how's the horse?' They wouldn't ask how are you going yourself! Spillane's Tower comes first."

Mangan is yet to train a winner this season, but landing the King George would be quite a way to end the drought. "Arra, we only like to win the big ones," he said chuckling. "We're living in heaven with a horse like Spillane's Tower around the place and we're getting great enjoyment out of it all."

Grey Dawning was probably England's leading novice chaser last term, so the King George will gauge whether he is able to make the jump into the senior ranks. "We are climbing the ladder and don't think we are as high as we can go yet," said his trainer Dan Skelton. "I don't know how high he can go, but I still feel we are climbing the ladder." — AFP

## Australia's in-form Head confirmed fit for Boxing Day Test

**MELBOURNE:** Batsman Travis Head was declared fit for the Boxing Day Test against India on Wednesday in a big boost for Australia while Scott Boland was confirmed as the injured Josh Hazlewood's replacement.

Aggressive number five Head is the highest run scorer in the five-match series, plundering centuries at both Adelaide and Brisbane. He picked up a minor thigh strain at the Gabba and there were lingering concerns about his fitness, but skipper Pat Cummins said the left-hander was fine.

"Trav is good to go, so he will play. He just ticked off some final things today and yesterday," said Cummins. "No stress, no worries about injury for Trav, so he will go into the game fully fit. I don't think you'll see too much management of him through the game. Maybe around fielding if he's a bit uncomfortable, but he's fully fit," he added.

Head has slammed 409 runs at an average of 81.80 across the first three Tests, dominating India as other Australian batters have struggled from the threat posed by pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah.

"It feels like the last 12 months he's been in this unbelievable vein of form and he just keeps going," Cummins said of Head. "He's hitting the ball really cleanly and you can see the pressure he shifts back onto the opposition, literally from the first ball he walks out there. I'm loving that he is in our team. Long may it continue."

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. Cummins confirmed two changes to the team with seamer Boland, as expected, in for the injured Hazlewood.

Teenage opener Sam Konstas had already been locked in to make his debut, replacing Nathan McSweeney. The 19-year-old Konstas will become Australia's youngest Test debutant since Cummins took the field against South Africa at Johannesburg in 2011.

"I just remember being really excited and it's similar for Sammy this week," said Cummins, looking back to his debut. "There's a level of naivety that you



**MELBOURNE:** Australian batsman Travis Head reacts during a training session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne on December 25, 2024. — AFP

just want to go out and play, like you do when you were a kid in the back yard, you just want to take the game on and have fun and not overthink it. That's the message to Sam." — AFP



**CAPE TOWN:** South Africa's Temba Bavuma runs between the wicket during the second one day international (ODI) cricket match between South Africa and Pakistan at Newlands Cricket Ground in Cape Town on December 19, 2024. — AFP

## South Africa opt for all-pace attack against Pakistan

**CENTURION:** South African captain Temba Bavuma on Tuesday announced an all-pace attack for the first Test against Pakistan starting at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Thursday. The two-match series is crucial for South Africa, who will qualify for next year's World Test Championship final if they win one of the matches.

"We back our seamers at Centurion," Bavuma said at his pre-match press conference. Fast bowler Corbin Bosch will make his debut for a team missing several leading pace bowlers because of injury. He plays for the Titans provincial team whose home ground is at Centurion.

Bosch, 30, is the son of the late Tertius Bosch, who played in South Africa's first post-isolation Test, against the West Indies in Barbados in 1992. "He will be playing at the venue where he has made a name for himself in the provincial set-up," said Bavuma. "He adds that element of extra pace. He's a big, strong guy who hits the deck hard and he offers a role with the bat as well."

Bosch bowled at more than 140kmph (87mph) when he made his one-day international debut

against Pakistan in Johannesburg on Sunday and hit 40 not out as a lower-order batsman. Bavuma said his players were aware of the significance of being on the verge of reaching the world championship final. "We know what's at stake. There's confidence and belief because of the good cricket we have played over the last while. Nothing has happened by accident."

South Africa's progress in the Test championship final has come despite Cricket South Africa's deliberate downgrading of Test cricket to accommodate a high-profile Twenty20 franchise series. South Africa's schedule of 12 Tests -- all in two-match series -- is the joint lowest with Bangladesh in the championship cycle. England have played 22 matches, while Australia and India will have played 19 each when they complete their fixtures.

The system of average points has propelled South Africa to the top of the table despite virtually forfeiting a series in New Zealand when coach Shukri Conrad was prevented from selecting any players contracted to the SA20 league.

South Africa did not play against Australia or England and their only series against one of the "big three" Test nations was a tied one against India. Pakistan have only won two out of 15 Tests in South Africa but will go into the series on the back of a convincing 3-0 one-day series win. Seven of the Pakistan squad and eight of the South African Test team players were involved in the one-day games. — AFP

## Skippers brace for gale-force winds in Sydney-Hobart

**SYDNEY:** Skippers of the supermaxi yachts in the Sydney-Hobart bluewater classic are bracing for a fast start on Thursday and a wild first night at sea with gale-force winds forecast. A fleet of 105 will set sail from Sydney Harbour in one of the world's great ocean races before they head down Australia's east coast, then tackle the notorious Bass Strait towards the Tasmanian state capital Hobart.

In the final race briefing, meteorologist Gabrielle Woodhouse said the boats can expect fine weather and brisk north-easterly winds to get them underway before gusts strengthen as they fly down the coast. "We'll see those winds strengthening and potentially getting gale-force speeds, particularly along the southern parts of the New South Wales coast on Thursday," she said.

Woodhouse added that a strong south-westerly change would move across the Bass Strait on Friday morning, potentially bringing showers, lightning, thunder and swells of up to four meters (13 feet). Wind speeds could reach 40 knots (74 kilometers per hour). 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.

LawConnect edged Comanche last year by just 51 seconds after a treacherous 628 nautical mile journey with the two 100-footers again set to battle for line honors. Two other supermaxis are entered -- Wild Thing and Maritimo.

LawConnect skipper Christian Beck said he relished the forecast conditions. "I think from our point of view, the harder it is, the better it is," he said. "We've had a crew that's been together for six years. We hope our crew is our main strength. The harder it is, the more that comes to our advantage. So, we're pretty happy with the forecast overall."

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. Comanche co-skipper James Mayo said that strategy would be key, adding "it's definitely good conditions, better than waking up on Boxing Day knowing that you're facing a southerly."

"It's about keeping the boat in one piece, you know there's going to be some good rides. It's about getting there safely and working through those transitions as we enter Bass Strait and getting through those as best as possible."

Alive, last year's overall winner of the Tattersall Cup, which takes into account boat size and other factors, will again be contention to defend its title. Other previous overall winners in the fleet include Centennial 7 (formally Celestial) and Love and War. — AFP

Sports

# Liverpool host Foxes, Arsenal prepare for life without Saka

## Crisis-hit Manchester clubs seek redemption

LONDON: Christmas Premier League chart-toppers Liverpool are overwhelming favorites to see off struggling Leicester on Boxing Day Thursday. Meanwhile both crisis-hit Manchester clubs will seek a festive fillip, with faltering champions City at home to Everton and United away to Wolves.

Second-placed Chelsea host Fulham while in-form Arsenal will fancy their chances against relegation-threatened Ipswich on Friday, even without the injured Bukayo Saka. Ange Postecoglou's Tottenham, licking their wounds after a brutal 6-3 hammering by Liverpool, face a tough assignment at high-flying Nottingham Forest. AFP Sport picks out some of the major talking points in the run-up to one of the busiest points of the English football season.

### Liverpool top of the tree

Liverpool are top the table on Christmas Day for the first time since the 2020/21 season and will want to make it count. Just once in the past seven top-flight campaigns in which they have sat at the summit on December 25, have they gone on to win the title.

Arne Slot's side returned to winning ways in style on Sunday, overwhelming Spurs following two frustrating draws. They are four points clear of Chelsea with a game in hand. It would be a huge surprise if they slipped up against Leicester at

home, especially with Mohamed Salah enjoying a purple patch. The Egypt international is the first player to reach double figures for both goals (15) and assists (11) before Christmas in the history of the Premier League.

Leicester won their first match under new manager Ruud van Nistelrooy earlier this month but have collected just a single point in their past three matches, conceding nine goals. The leaky Foxes have not won at Anfield since 2000 and are just two points clear of the drop zone after returning to the top flight this season.

### Saka blow forces Arsenal rethink

A buoyant Mikel Arteta said the Premier League title race was "on" after Arsenal swept Crystal Palace aside 5-1 on Saturday. But one dark cloud was Saka limping off at Selhurst Park, with the England winger set for a lengthy spell on the sidelines with a hamstring injury.

It is a blow for Arteta, depriving him of his most potent attacking weapon -- Saka has scored nine goals and provided 13 assists in all competitions this season -- just as Arsenal are finding their form again.

"It's going to be a really good exercise for all of us to think about ways to overcome another challenge, because we've already had a lot in the

season," said Arsenal boss Arteta, whose team are third in the Premier League table. Arteta has a number of attacking options, with Gabriel Martinelli a candidate to fill the void, but Saka, 23, offers something unique.

### Forest chase European dream

Nottingham Forest fans are dreaming of a return to the Champions League -- more than 40 years after they last played in Europe's premier club competition. Nuno Espirito Santo's side have won seven of their past 10 Premier League games to climb to fourth in the table ahead of their match against Tottenham on Thursday.

Forest have not won a major trophy since 1990 but they have a proud tradition in continental competition -- with the Midlands club twice crowned European champions under former manager Brian Clough, in 1979 and 1980. While Forest are not prolific scorers, they are impressive at the back -- only Liverpool and Arsenal have conceded fewer goals in the English top flight this season.

Former Spurs boss Nuno is braced for the unknown against his former club, who have built a reputation as great entertainers. "You never know what's going to happen in the game," he said. "What we can see is good players, a lot of goals, also conceding goals." -- AFP



LONDON: Liverpool's Egyptian striker #11 Mohamed Salah celebrates after scoring his fourth goal during the English Premier League football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London, on December 22, 2024. — AFP

## Man Utd boss Amorim vows to stay on course despite Rashford row

LONDON: Ruben Amorim has insisted he knows what he's doing as the Manchester United manager looks to revive the fallen English giants amid a row over the future of Marcus Rashford. Amorim has had a rollercoaster ride since succeeding the sacked Erik ten Hag at Old Trafford.

United enjoyed a late comeback win over local rivals Manchester City only to then slump to a 3-0 loss at home to Bournemouth last weekend following a midweek 4-3 League Cup quarter-final defeat by Tottenham.

Rashford was omitted from all three of those games, with the 27-year-old, a product of the United youth system, now looking increasingly likely to leave Old Trafford. The struggling England international fueled speculation about his own future by saying he was "ready for a new challenge" in a midweek interview.

But Amorim, speaking ahead of the Boxing Day match away to Wolves, said nothing had changed from his point of view. "Normal situation," he said. "When I feel that it's the right moment I will change something. Until then I will continue to think what is the best for the team. I speak with him (Rashford) every day. Not about the interview, about the performance." Amorim added Rashford "wants to play, he is trying" but "it's my decision, only my decision". "I spoke with a lot of players -- individually, during training -- so I'm trying to do things... I am doing things my way," the Portuguese boss said. "And it's the only way I know. If I don't do that I will lose myself and I will not lose myself. I know what I'm doing."

Amorim questioned the "choices" of people surrounding Rashford after omitting him from the Bournemouth match, when Gary Neville said the forward leaving felt like an "inevitable ending". The former



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Portuguese head coach Ruben Amorim watches the players from the touchline during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Manchester United at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on December 15, 2024. — AFP

United captain also called it a "distraction for the manager" -- something Amorim denied Tuesday.

"No, I don't think so," he said. "Not for me, not for the other players because everybody is there every day during training, so they understand and that is the key point. For the media and for the other people, I cannot control that. But I'm really focused and they know, I'm so clear in my message, everybody in Carrington know what I'm talking about and what I want from Marcus and everybody else. So, it's not a distraction for us. Maybe it's for the media but that is not my concern."

### 'Responsibility'

Amorim, asked what more he would like to see from Rashford, replied: "Like any other player, the best that they can be. If you have big talents, big performance, big responsibility, big engagement, like push forward everybody in this moment. And some guys have a big responsibility here because they are here for a long time."

United are a lowly 13th in the table ahead of Thursday's match against a team managed by Amorim's compatriot Vitor Pereira, who is taking charge of his first match at Molineux fresh from leading Wolves to a 3-0 win at Leicester. — AFP

## Chelsea's Maresca expects Man City to be in title hunt

LONDON: Enzo Maresca believes Manchester City will bounce back into Premier League title contention, while insisting it is "just reality" that Chelsea are not genuine challengers for the crown.

Chelsea go into Thursday's west London derby at home to Fulham second in the table and just four points adrift of leaders Liverpool, having played one game more than the Merseysiders. By contrast City, for all they have won an unprecedented four straight Premier League titles before this season, are now 12 points off the summit following a woeful run of nine defeats in 12 matches in all competitions.

But Maresca, who worked alongside City boss Pep Guardiola at the Etihad, said: "Manchester City at the end will be there. They are in a moment that has never happened before. Every time they play a game, they have an injury, and they don't have enough players in this moment. And the ones they

have are not 100 percent because they have just come back from injury, so it is a very bad situation. We are ahead of our expectations, in terms of the way we are playing, and the points we have, but the main focus is how we can improve the players and how we can improve the team."

Maresca, who has repeatedly dismissed any title talk concerning Chelsea, added: "It is not about the (title) pressure for the players or for the club or for me, it is just the reality. I would like to have that kind of pressure and hopefully soon we can, but the reason why I said we are not there yet, is because the reality is that we are not."

Maresca, asked if it was now Liverpool's title to lose, replied: "No, the reality says we are second at the halfway point, so the table does reflect the teams. "But Liverpool have done a fantastic job since the first day, and the squad has lived that kind of moment, winning a trophy, which is important."

"Last year, when Liverpool faced Chelsea in the Carabao (League) Cup final I saw the amount of finals that Liverpool players had played in, and the number of finals Chelsea players had played in, and there was a huge difference. So it shows the experience you need, but we are happy to be where we are." --AFP



LIVERPOOL: Chelsea's Italian head coach Enzo Maresca (L) speaks with Chelsea's Spanish goalkeeper #01 Robert Sanchez at the end of the English Premier League football match between Everton and Chelsea at Goodison Park in Liverpool, north west England on December 22, 2024. — AFP

### News in Brief

#### Spain's Valencia hire Corberan as new boss

MADRID: La Liga's relegation-threatened Valencia have appointed Carlos Corberan as their new manager after prizing him from English second-tier side West Bromwich Albion, the clubs announced on Wednesday. The fallen Spanish giants exercised a buyout clause in Corberan's contract to bring him to Mestalla on a deal lasting to 2027, days after sacking coach Ruben Baraja. Corberan, a former Valencia youth goalkeeper, guided West Brom to the Championship playoffs last season. He spent just over two years at the club, which expressed its "gratitude and best wishes". Corberan, 41, has also coached Huddersfield Town and Greek giants Olympiacos as well as assisting Marcelo Bielsa at Leeds United. He faces a daunting challenge to save Valencia from the drop. — AFP

#### Brazil's Oscar returns to Sao Paulo

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazilian international midfielder Oscar, who played for Chelsea, is returning to Sao Paulo, where he started his career, the club announced on Tuesday. "Welcome, Oscar, what a great addition," read text at the end of a video posted on the club's social media accounts. Oscar -- whose full name is Oscar dos Santos Emboaba Junior, and who is aged 33 -- became a free agent after spending eight seasons in China with Shanghai Port, where he arrived in 2017 after leaving Chelsea. The attacking midfielder started his career at Sao Paulo and made his first-team debut in 2008. Two years later, he transferred to another Brazilian club, Internacional de Porto Alegre, in a controversial move that sparked a long legal dispute. — AFP

#### Orlando Pirates equal record in eight-goal rout

JOHANNESBURG: Orlando Pirates equaled the record winning margin for a South African Premiership game when they hammered Marumo Gallants 8-1 in Soweto on Tuesday. The Buccaneers scored seven unanswered second-half goals to match SuperSport United, who beat Zulu Royals by the same score in the 2003-2004 season. Victory kept second-placed Pirates three points behind defending champions Mamelodi Sundowns, who snatched a 1-0 win over AmaZulu in Durban despite having goalkeeper Ronwen Williams sent off. Sundowns, seeking an eighth straight league title, have 27 points from 10 matches and Pirates 24 from nine in what is developing into a two-club championship race. — 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 Jamal Duddin is same and identical person.  
#6615, 24/12/2024

## Kuwait in title hunt after last-gasp win

### Kuwait tops Group A following 2-1 victory over UAE



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Mohammad Daham #7 (left) celebrates his goal against the UAE during the Khaleeji Zain 26 championship at the Jaber International Stadium on Tuesday.

KUWAIT: Mohammad Daham scored for Kuwait at the 16th minute and Moath Al-Enezi netted the winner at the 89th minute to give Kuwait their first victory of the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup 'Khaleeji Zain 26' against the UAE on Tuesday. The win puts Kuwait in cruise control as it seeks to claim the tournament's title, standing on top of Group A with four points ahead of Oman.

Kuwait's game winner came after a stumble from UAE defender Khalifa Al-Hamadi, who tried to return the ball to the keeper, but it ended up with Kuwait's Al-Enezi in front of the goal as he feinted the keeper and fired the ball into the back of the net. The UAE team surprised the hosts with a pressing attack from the first minute, which caused some confusion among the Kuwaiti team, and resulted in an early goal by Caio Canedo in the sixth minute. But the Kuwaiti team quickly regained its balance with a goal in the 16th minute through Mohammad Daham.

The UAE team was able to achieve the advantage in terms of possession for most of the first half, which placed great responsibility on the Blue defenses and goalkeeper Khaled Al-Rashidi, Caio Canedo, Har-

ib Abdullah, and Yahya Al-Ghassani posed a great danger. On the other hand, the Kuwaiti team relied on the zone defense and counterattacks that posed some danger, especially since the UAE defense was not in the best condition.

Kuwait coach Juan Pizzi relied on Youssef Nasser in the front, assisted by Mohammad Daham, Youssef Majid, Ahmed Al-Dhafiri, and Ali Khalaf on the sides and in the middle, while Sultan Al-Enezi was limited to defensive roles.

In the second half, Kuwait coach Pizzi changed his plan by introducing Sami Al-Sanea substituting Nasser Al-Enezi, hoping to counter the expected UAE attacks. On the other hand, the UAE team increased its pressure, and Caio, followed by Harib Abdullah, and Yahya Al Ghassani almost scored against Kuwait, but the goalkeeper and the defense line shone.

The UAE Whites continued their search for the lead, while the Kuwaiti players retreated defensively, which forced the Blues' coach Pizzi to revitalize the ranks by introducing Reda Hani and Moath Al-Enezi, who stirred the stagnant waters in the Kuwaiti ranks.



Kuwait's players celebrate their team's victory against the UAE following the match at the Jaber International Stadium on Tuesday.

Al-Enezi was able to score the winning goal in the last minutes of the match, taking advantage of a mistake by Al-Hamadi, knowing that the UAE team suffered from a numerical shortage after Kwame was shown a red card in the 87th minute.

#### Best results

Pizzi expressed his pride in his players after the 2-1 win over the UAE in the second round of Group A of Gulf 26. Pizzi said in the post-match press conference: "I don't promise results, but I promise to work and present the best picture."

Pizzi praised the great support the team received from the fans, expressing his hope that it will continue until the end. Regarding the inclusion of rookie Nasser Khader, Pizzi explained that he aims to give a chance to some special elements. "Nasser, Daham, Al-Enezi, Youssef Majid, and others are the future of Kuwaiti football," he explained.

Pizzi was met with applause from the Kuwaiti media during the press conference after the win over the UAE. Yahya Al Ghassani, player of the UAE national team, congratulated the Kuwaiti team

on winning, saying in televised statements after the match: "The UAE team performed well for most of the match, scoring an early goal, and we should have scored more, especially in the first half."

He added: "The Kuwaiti team took advantage of two mistakes and scored their two goals, and I think they did not offer anything in the game except the two goals, and we missed many chances to score."

He continued: "We must now consider our match with Kuwait as a thing of the past and start thinking and focusing on our match next Friday, against Oman, with the desire to win," he continued. "We are very confident in ourselves, that we can qualify for the semi-finals of the tournament."

The Kuwaiti team raised its point-total after this victory to 4 points and shared the top spot with the Omani team, who beat Qatar 2-1 earlier in the day. Kuwait and Oman require a draw in the third and final round next Friday to qualify for the semifinals. Kuwait will meet Qatar, and the UAE will play against Oman on Friday. The Emirati and Qatari teams will have no choice but to win in the last round, in the hope of qualifying after their point-total froze at one point each.

## Sport creates joy, and football delivers it beautifully

KUWAIT: A wave of joy swept through the sporting community as the "Blue" defeated the UAE 2-1 in the second round of Group A in the Khaleeji Zain 26 championship, raising the Blue's tally to four points and putting them at the top of the standings. Oman moved to second place after a 2-1 victory over Qatar in the same group.

The joy wasn't merely due to the Blue overcoming the tournament favorite in the preliminary round, nor because it marked their first win after ten international matches. The real reason for celebration was the high spirit displayed by the Blue heroes, renewing their bond with loyal fans and proving that "those with history always return". Following the win, the Kuwait Football Association's Board of Directors announced a \$4,000 bonus for each player. Additionally, Federation Chairman Sheikh Ahmed Al-Yousef granted an extra \$1,000 bonus per player, while the Kuwait Shopping Festival "Ya Hala" contributed 500 Kuwaiti dinars for each national team player.

#### Bashar: Victory over UAE start of a comeback

Acting Director General of the Public Authority for Sport Bashar Abdullah congratulated the Kuwaiti team on their valuable victory, praising the players' high spirits and fighting performance. He described the win as a turning point, saying: "This victory against the strong Emirati team should be the starting point for the Blue to return to its rightful place among Gulf nations." Abdullah lauded the team's ability to overturn a deficit and achieve a 2-1 win, boosting their chances of qualifying for the semifinals. He expressed hope that the joy would continue in the upcoming match against Qatar on Friday. Drawing from history, he highlighted Kuwait's previous Gulf Cup wins, achieved even when they weren't favorites, underscoring the unpredictability of the tournament.

He also emphasized the Gulf Cup's role in building bonds among officials, players, and fans, adding: "As a former participant in five Gulf Cups, I've built lifelong friendships with players, administrators, and media professionals across the Gulf. These tournaments go beyond football, promoting a spirit of unity among Gulf nations." Abdullah concluded by noting that the champion of the Gulf Cup often emerges during the tournament, expressing hope that Kuwait would claim the title.

#### Al-Masrouri: Kuwait always returns to creativity and excellence

Oman Football Association Vice President Mohsen



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Moath Al-Enezi #19 celebrates with teammates and fans following Kuwait's victory against the UAE during the Khaleeji Zain 26 championship at Jaber International Stadium on Tuesday.

Al-Masrouri predicted that the third round of Khaleeji Zain 26 would bring even greater excitement. Reflecting on the second round, which saw Oman beat Qatar 2-1 and Kuwait triumph over the UAE, he noted that teams often start cautiously but elevate their performance as the tournament progresses.

Al-Masrouri highlighted that the four teams in Group A still have a chance to qualify, making the final round decisive. He praised Kuwait and Oman for their strong performances, noting that both teams' four-point standings give them an advantage but do not guarantee qualification. He stressed that small details could determine outcomes, pointing to Oman's consistent semifinal appearances under the two-group system and their runner-up finish in the last edition.

Al-Masrouri acknowledged the challenges posed by the tournament's compressed schedule but deemed them normal for such competitions. He praised the organization of the event, the opening ceremony, and the warm hospitality of the Kuwaiti people, saying, "Kuwait always impresses with its excellence and success on all occasions."

#### Pizzi: Proud of the spirit and performance

Kuwaiti national team coach Juan Antonio Pizzi expressed his pride in the players' fighting spirit and balanced performance during their win over the UAE. "I am very proud of the players' effort throughout the match," he said during the post-match press conference.

Pizzi commended the young talents on the team,

describing them as the future of Kuwaiti football and stressing the importance of supporting their development. He thanked fans for their unwavering support and promised to continue working hard to prepare for the crucial match against Qatar, with hopes of advancing to the semifinals.

#### Garcia: Unlucky against Oman

Qatar's head coach, Luis Garcia, attributed his team's 2-1 loss to Oman to missed opportunities. He acknowledged his team's strong start, which saw them score first, but praised Oman for their comeback. Despite several chances in the second half, Qatar failed to equalize. Garcia commended striker Akram Afif for overcoming personal challenges to participate in the match and contribute to the team. "Losing is part of football," he said, emphasizing the importance of preparing for the upcoming match against Kuwait to keep their semifinal hopes alive.

#### Jaber: A moral victory over the Asian champions

Oman coach Rasheed Jaber hailed his team's 2-1 win over Qatar, noting the significance of defeating the two-time Asian champions. He credited the victory to the players' discipline and determination, which strengthened Oman's chances of advancing to the semifinals. Jaber praised striker Issam Al-Subhi for returning to form, calling him a valuable addition to the team. He reiterated the importance of addressing each match based on its unique circumstances and expressed hope for continued success in the tournament.

## Saudi Arabia beat Yemen 3-2 in Gulf Cup thriller

KUWAIT: Abdullah Al-Hamdan scored in additional time to give Saudi Arabia a thrilling 3-2 victory over Yemen and keep their hopes alive at the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup on Wednesday. Yemen had opened the game by scoring twice, but the Saudi national team turned the tables and won a thrilling 3-2 victory at Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium, in the second round of Group B competitions in the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup, currently held in Kuwait.

The Yemeni team scored two goals through Haroon Al-Zubaidi and Abdul Majid Sabara in the 8th and 27th minutes respectively, but the Saudi Green turned the tables through the trilogy of Mohammed Kanoo (30), Musab Al-Juwair (57 penalty) and Abdullah Al-Hamdan (90+3). With this result, the Saudi team raised its point-total to 3 points in third place of Group B, while Yemen bid farewell to the tournament after losing in the first round to Iraq (1-0).

The Yemeni team surprised its Saudi counterpart at the beginning of the match, by rushing towards the attack with great confidence, and was able to surprise the green defense with an early goal in the eighth minute, when Haroon Al-Zubaidi took advantage of a cross from the left side and put it in Al-Owais' net. The Saudi national team tried to get back into the game quickly and increased the numerical density in the offensive line. Ali Al-Balaih almost equalized the score in the 10th minute, but his header went past the post.

As the Green attack failed to penetrate the Yemeni defense, Salem Al-Dosari relied on individual effort, and hit a powerful shot from outside the box that just missed the crossbar. An unfortunate error by Ali Al-Balaih, who misplaced a header, allowed Sabara to score Yemen's second goal in the 27th minute. Kanoo brought Saudi Arabia back into the game when he reduced the deficit in the 30th minute with a header, capitalizing on a neat cross by teammate Musab Al-Juwair. A few minutes later, Salem Al-Dosari almost equalized with a powerful header, but his header hit the crossbar. Before the end of the first half, Mohammed Kanoo fired a shot from outside the box that also hit the crossbar.

In the second half, the Yemeni team retreated towards the defense, which allowed the Saudi team to control the game, and threaten the Yemeni team's goal on more than one occasion. In the 57th minute, Musab Al-Juwair broke through on the right side and sent a cross that collided with the hand of the Yemeni defender, and the referee awarded a penalty kick after the return to the video technology, which Al-Juwair successfully translated into the net to equalize for the Green.