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Zionists set fire to Gaza hospital

Medics detained, patients ordered to evacuate • Kuwait condemns burning of hospital



The bodies of people killed in a Zionist strike on Al-Meghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip are placed at the Aqsa Martyrs hospital in Deir El-Balah on December 28, 2024. (Right) A woman mourns loved ones killed in the strike on the refugee camp. — AFP

CAIRO/JERUSALEM: Zionist forces detained dozens of medical staff from a north Gaza hospital after they stormed the facility and set it on fire on Friday, the enclave's health ministry said. The Zionist military raided the Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahiya on Friday, ordering dozens of patients and hundreds of others to evacuate and detaining medical staff including the facility's director, Hussam Abu Safiya.

The Health Ministry said it was not clear what was happening to Abu Safiya, adding it was concerned about his well-being after some of the staff freed by the army late on Friday reported that he was beaten up by soldiers.

Kuwait condemned the heinous crime the Zionist occupation forces committed by burning down Kamal Adwan hospital in north Gaza, which resulted in the evacuation of patients and medical staff, in a grave breach of international humanitarian law and all international conventions and norms.

Continued on Page 6

NEWS IN BRIEF

Kuwait inks maintenance deals

KUWAIT: Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy Dr Mahmoud Bushehri on Saturday signed two contracts for maintaining and modernizing power and water distillation plants at a total value of approximately KD 238 million. The new contracts are part of ongoing efforts to strengthen and sustain the country's power system, the Ministry of Electricity said in a press release, adding that necessary approvals have been obtained from state regulatory bodies. The first contract is intended to provide high-precision and efficient engineering services to power generation-related gas and steam turbine units, while the second contract aims at developing and modernizing steam boilers for electricity generation and water distillation and their auxiliary systems at the Doha West Power Plant, the ministry added. — KUNA

Saudi gives \$500m to Yemen

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia will give war-riven Yemen's internationally recognized government \$500 million to pay salaries and other expenses, a Saudi official said Friday. The sum is part of the \$1.2 billion approved last year to prop up Yemen's government, which was forced out of the capital Sanaa by Houthi rebels in 2014. The money was allocated "to address the Yemeni government's budget deficit", the official told AFP. Saudi Arabia also made payments of \$250 million in February and in August last year. "The funds aim to support salaries, operational expenses, enhance food security and assist economic reforms, reflecting (Saudi Arabia's) commitment to Yemen's security, stability and prosperity," the official said. — AFP

Egypt's Suez Canal extension

CAIRO: Egypt said on Saturday it had successfully tested a new 10 km channel near the southern end of the Suez Canal, even as its revenue from the waterway has plunged since Yemen's Houthis began attacking vessels in the Red Sea. The Suez Canal Authority said in a statement that during a trial run two ships passed through a new stretch of the canal's two-way section without incident. Following the 2021 grounding of the container ship Ever Given that blocked the vital waterway for six days, Egypt accelerated plans to extend the second channel in the southern reaches of the canal and widen the existing channel. — AFP

Philippine Embassy condemns heinous murder of child

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: The Philippine Embassy in Kuwait condemned the horrific crime committed by a Filipino domestic worker, who killed a baby by placing him in a washing machine at his family's home in Mubarak Al-Kabeer governorate.

The embassy issued a statement emphasizing that the incident does not reflect the character of the Filipino community. "This isolated incident does not

reflect the hard work, reliability, and positive contributions of Filipinos in Kuwait," the statement read.

The embassy also noted that it is cooperating with the Kuwaiti authorities in the investigation and is providing assistance to the detained Filipino domestic worker, in accordance with Kuwaiti law and the embassy's mandate.

The incident comes just three months after Kuwait received the first batch of Filipino domestic workers following nearly a year and half long ban over labor rights disputes. The ban itself had been a response to prior incidents, including the tragic murder of Juliebe Ranara in January 2023 and previous cases of abuse and mistreatment.

Mariam Macapudi, president of the Filipino Association of Secretaries of Employment Agencies in Kuwait (Fil-Aseak) and Founder of Bayaning Filipino Migrant Workers (BFMW) in Kuwait,

Kuwait strongly denounces Al-Aqsa Mosque storming

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Friday strongly denounced the storming of the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque by an extremist minister of the Zionist government. In a press release, the ministry echoed Kuwait's condemnation of such frequent practices that provoke the sentiments of Muslims around the world, break international legitimacy resolutions, and reflect continued Zionist entity occupation attempts to alter the existing historic and legal status of Jerusalem and its holy sites.

The ministry, therefore, called on the international community, particularly the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), to take on its due responsibilities to prevent and end the recurrence of such aggressions and to provide protection to the Palestinian people.

Zionist entity's national security minister Itamar Ben Gvir visited Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound on Thursday, triggering angry reactions from the Islamic

countries, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan accusing the far-right politician of a deliberate provocation.

Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Jassem Al-Budaiwi, strongly denounced the storming of the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque by the extremist minister. "The continuation of these illegal practices in the Palestinian territories is a flagrant provocation to Muslims around the world, and a blatant attack on the rights of the Palestinian people," said Al-Budaiwi in a statement.

The continuation of these attacks represents the Zionist occupation's deliberate disregard of all international laws and humanitarian conventions, and threatens security and stability in the region, he added.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation strongly condemned the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque. The OIC said in a statement that Ben Gvir desecration of the mosque is a provocation of all Muslims' sentiments, a flagrant breach of the international law and the mosque historic and legal status quo. The mosque is an exclusive worship place for Muslims and the occupation forces have no sovereignty over Jerusalem and the sanctities in the city, the OIC statement said, calling upon the international community to coerce the occupation into halting such recurring and dangerous breaches of the sacred locations and the freedom of worship. — Agencies

WHO chief narrowly escapes death in Yemen airport hit



This grab taken from footage released by Al-Masirah TV station shows CCTV images of the head of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Tedros Adhanom, being escorted to safety at Sanaa International Airport as it was hit by a Zionist strike. — AFP

GENEVA: The head of the World Health Organization said Saturday he only narrowly escaped death in fatal Zionist entity strikes on the airport in Yemen's Houthi-held capital.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told BBC radio his ears were still ringing following Thursday's attack as he prepared to board a flight in Sanaa, and stressed that the protection for civilian installations under international law must be respected. Zionist entity air strikes hit Sanaa's international airport and other targets in Yemen on Thursday. The UN health agency's chief described the scene as the first strike hit.

"We heard a heavy explosion nearby, and then I think repeated," Tedros said. "The sound was so, so loud... So deafening, actually. Still my ear rings. It's already more than 24 hours now."

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This photograph shows a USB-C plug reflected on the Apple logo in Brest, western France. — AFP

of Europeans and slash costs for consumers. By allowing consumers to purchase a new device without a new charger, it will also reduce the mountain of obsolete chargers, the bloc has argued.

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KUWAIT: Minister of Higher Education Dr. Nader Al-Jallal poses for a photo with NBK staff, including Emad Al-Ablani, during NBK's participation in the watehefti career fair.



NBK receives the Gold Award for "Excellence in Health and Wellbeing" from the US-based Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

NBK's HR Group empowers staff with innovative programs

HR strengthens employee support and engagement initiatives, fosters diversity

KUWAIT: The Human Resources Group at National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) remains integral to the bank's continued success, focusing on the development of human capital and the nurturing of professional talent. By fostering a work environment that inspires creativity and innovation, the department plays a critical role in advancing the bank's strategic goals. Additionally, it is committed to attracting and providing job opportunities for young Kuwaiti talent, ensuring a strong workforce that supports the group's ongoing growth and aspirations.



Emad Al-Ablani

Throughout the year, the Human Resources Group has tirelessly worked to foster creativity, innovation, and continuous development. Their unwavering support has been instrumental in helping employees build promising, sustainable careers, reinforcing the bank's commitment to talent development and long-term success. The year 2024 marked a defining moment for the Human Resources Department at NBK, underscoring its central role within the group. The department achieved significant milestones, which were celebrated with multiple prestigious awards, further solidifying NBK's leadership both regionally and globally.

Emad Al-Ablani, General Manager-Head of Human Resources Group at NBK, remarked: "Throughout 2024, we successfully achieved all of our interim objectives, which focused on enhancing the capabilities of our workforce across all levels. These initiatives promoted diversity and inclusion in the workplace, attracted and nurtured young national talent, and emphasized a healthy work-life balance by offering flexible working hours. Ultimately, our goal was to create a more prosperous and supportive work environment for all our employees."

"The HR team played a crucial role in the bank's successes this year, executing numerous initiatives with excellence that directly contributed to the achievement of our strategic goals and plans set at the outset of the year," Al-Ablani added. Al-Ablani highlighted that the HR team spearheaded numerous initiatives throughout 2024. Furthermore, the team focused on enhancing educational infrastructure and expanding career development programs in collaboration with prestigious universities and global experts.

More than just a workplace

Al-Ablani emphasized that NBK is committed to cultivating a distinctive work environment, centered around the motto "More than just a workplace." This approach not only enhances the overall well-being of employees but also prioritizes their mental and physical health, empowering them to perform at their best. Al-Ablani further highlighted that the bank's human resources strategy is built on four key pillars: Ensuring the right competencies are placed in the

right roles at the right time; preparing future leaders by fostering a culture of inspiration and empowerment; attracting top talent through effective recruitment, retention, and development practices; and creating a sustainable performance culture that supports diversity, inclusion, clear results management, and employee protection.

"NBK stands out as one of the few institutions in Kuwait that provides a unique and ideal work environment on par with global institutions. This is due to the exceptional professional development opportunities it offers, as well as its commitment to employee welfare. Notable initiatives include the adoption of flexible working hours and the introduction of paternity leave, allowing fathers to stay home and bond with their newborns," Al-Ablani added.

He emphasized that education and training initiatives form a core element of NBK's strategic plans. The bank has developed a robust framework prioritizing career development, mentorship, and a variety of professional growth opportunities. This comprehensive approach is designed to help employees shape their career trajectories and cultivate an environment where they can succeed and drive innovation.

Investing in human capital

NBK continued to support its young workforce in 2024 by offering top-tier training and development programs aligned with international standards. The goal was to cultivate a generation of highly skilled bankers across all fields, with a particular emphasis on digital disciplines. These fields have become increasingly essential as banking transactions evolve, driven by cutting-edge technologies and artificial intelligence.

In 2024, the Learning and Development Department intensified its focus on specialized training to refine employee skills. Through a combination of initiatives, workshops, and educational programs, the department aligned its efforts with the dynamic changes in the banking sector. NBK provided a total of 101,463 training hours across the group, with 86,374 hours dedicated to employees in NBK-Kuwait and 15,089 hours allocated to employees in international locations. This effort engaged 3,476 employees, including 2,913 at NBK-Kuwait and 563 at international locations. Notably, the employee satisfaction rate for all training courses and development programs reached an impressive 90 percent.

The first cohort of the NBK Tech Academy, the first initiative of its kind in Kuwait, successfully graduated 10 promising young Kuwaiti talents. Over a rigorous seven-month training period, these participants honed their skills in vital areas such as digital technology, data systems, cybersecurity, digital payments, and artificial intelligence. In addition to gaining technical expertise, the program also emphasized the development of personal skills, all aimed at equipping the graduates for impactful careers in the banking sector.

The bank has also launched two distinguished sales team programs, the "NBK Pioneers Program" and the "Prime Program," engaging 79 employees. Specifically tailored for sales channel employees and leaders, these initiatives target a select group of talented NBK staff with a proven track record of exceptional performance and leadership potential. The core focus of the programs lies in management and leadership specializations. In 2024, NBK Group achieved a remarkable improvement in engagement, with the overall response rate rising to 86 percent, and sustainable engagement reaching 84 percent. These figures exceed the global average for

the financial services sector by 7 percent.

As part of its commitment to advancing the capabilities of its workforce and fostering development based on the highest standards of excellence, the bank has entered an exclusive partnership with the renowned IE University, Spain. This collaboration focuses on several key areas, including talent development, driving institutional innovation, creating and implementing integrated solutions, and leveraging the university's expertise in both applied and academic research.

Women empowerment

In 2024, NBK launched the second edition of the NBK RISE program, aimed at empowering and supporting women. The program saw the participation of 25 trainees from various professional backgrounds, including those from NBK-Kuwait, international branches, NBK Wealth, and several renowned regional companies. These included Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, Ooredoo, Kuwait Banking Association, Abyat, Gulf Bank, Kuwait Financial Centre (Markaz), J's Bakery, and Intervest Capital Partners New York. This initiative further underscores NBK's commitment to fostering gender equality and empowering women in the workplace.

NBK RISE stands as a pioneering initiative, being the first program of its kind de-

signed specifically to support women leaders. Its core objective is to enhance the leadership roles of women, equipping them with the skills and qualifications needed for top executive positions. This program is fully aligned with the bank's broader strategy to elevate women's leadership both within the organization and beyond—extending its impact to the country, region, and globally.

For certain specialized roles. The Kuwaitization rate rose to 77.1 percent in alignment with the Central Bank of Kuwait's (CBK) requirements, reflecting the bank's strategic focus on attracting and nurturing local talent. This approach ensures the sustainability of the workforce and supports the bank's commitment to expanding the scope of national talent recruitment.

NBK also adopts a distinctive approach to ensuring equal opportunities, guaranteeing fairness for all its employees without exception. This commitment is reflected in the fact that women represent 44.6 percent of the total workforce, a remarkable achievement within both the banking sector and the regional labor market.

Sustainable practices

As part of its ongoing efforts to integrate sustainability practices across all its operations, NBK Group's HR department has introduced NBK HR Pedia, a digital assistant designed to provide employees with 24/7 access to HR support and information. This tool offers instant answers to HR-related inquiries, streamlining communication and enhancing efficiency. In addition, the bank has implemented an integrated archiving program that digitizes and secures employee documents in a sophisticated electronic system. This ini-

tiative highlights NBK's initiatives in promoting employee health, demonstrating an understanding of the link between well-being and productivity. The bank's commitment to this cause is reflected in its health and wellness programs, which foster an environment that not only prioritizes employee well-being but also contributes to enhanced organizational performance.

The bank was also honored with the title of Best Bank for Diversity and Inclusion in Kuwait by the global financial publication, Euro-money. This award highlighted the effectiveness of the NBK RISE program, reflecting the bank's unwavering commitment to empowering women and promoting their advancement into leadership roles within the organization.

NBK also received the Excellence in Sustainable Investment in MENA award at the MEED Banking Excellence Awards 2024 for the third consecutive year. This recognition celebrated the NBK Academy program, a legacy of success spanning over 16 years. The program is designed to enable new university graduates from Kuwaiti youth to enter the banking sector. Furthermore, the bank received two esteemed accolades from the Brandon Hall Group of Excellence: recognition in the "Best Advance in Compliance Training" category for the NBK Highfliers program and as the Best Bank for Diversity and Inclusion in



NBK Tech Academy successfully graduated 10 promising young Kuwaiti talents, who honed their skills in vital digital areas.

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Talent acquisition

The Talent Acquisition Department continued its efforts to build a dynamic workforce to support the bank's growth trajectory, successfully recruiting 373 new employees in 2024. This marked a notable increase in the bank's local hiring efforts, with new female employees accounting for 36.4 percent of the total workforce. Additionally, the department managed 98 internal recruitment announcements across various bank departments. The bank's commitment to nurturing talent positions NBK as the employer of choice for fresh Kuwaiti graduates, providing a pathway for future leadership roles within the organization.

The bank remained dedicated to maintaining a strong Kuwaitization strategy throughout 2024, actively participating in seven career fairs where recruiting national talent was prioritized. Additionally, the bank took steps to exclusively recruit Kuwaiti nationals

tiative not only ensures efficient information management and easy access when needed, but also plays a crucial role in reducing paper waste, aligning with the bank's broader environmental sustainability goals and efforts to lower its carbon footprint.

Furthermore, in 2024, the bank placed a strong emphasis on fostering a culture of continuous learning, leveraging automation and digital platforms to enhance performance quality. The Learning and Development team successfully rolled out the Prime Leadership Program, which focused on cultivating essential leadership competencies for branch and area managers. A total of 62 managers participated in this initiative, which covered key areas such as strategic thinking, market trend forecasting, informed decision-making for long-term growth, and developing high-performing teams. Additionally, the Professional Leader Program saw the participation of 106 leaders from various bank divisions.

Prestigious awards

Throughout 2024, the Human Resources Department's continuous efforts were rewarded with six prestigious awards, further strengthening NBK's global reputation for excellence. Notably, the bank received the Gold Award for "Excellence in Health and Wellbeing" from the US-based Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). This recog-

niation highlights NBK's initiatives in promoting employee health, demonstrating an understanding of the link between well-being and productivity. The bank's commitment to this cause is reflected in its health and wellness programs, which foster an environment that not only prioritizes employee well-being but also contributes to enhanced organizational performance.

Added value for employees

To enhance employee satisfaction and provide additional value, the HR Department has introduced new financial benefits tailored specifically to employees. These include exclusive fixed deposit interest rates and an extended interest-free loan program, enabling employees to apply for a second loan upon full repayment of the first. Additionally, working hours on Thursdays have been reduced by one hour, and employees are granted three days of welfare leave, reinforcing the Bank's commitment to promoting work-life balance and employee well-being.

The Strategic Business Support Partners Department has been instrumental in establishing the Digital Banking Group, a key driver of NBK's digital transformation journey. This group is dedicated to developing innovative digital products, applications, and systems while attracting top-tier digital talent to the bank. By enhancing the expertise of these professionals and enabling them to adapt to the rapidly evolving digital landscape, the department ensures alignment with NBK's strategic vision for digital innovation and transformation.

Moreover, the Human Resources Department has embraced Robotic Process Automation (RPA) technology to automate a variety of routine processes and procedures. By leveraging RPA as a digital workforce, the department has significantly enhanced operational efficiency, minimized human errors, and freed up employees to focus on complex, value-added tasks.

The Human Resources Department introduced a bi-annual performance self-review process to enhance alignment and mutual recognition of performance between managers and employees. This initiative fosters a culture of transparency within the bank, encouraging open communication and collaboration while ensuring performance expectations are clearly understood and consistently evaluated.



NBK RISE stands as a pioneering initiative, being the first program of its kind designed specifically to support women leaders.



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah attends the opening ceremony of Sabah Al-Salem University City and honors top graduates. — KUNA and Amiri Diwan photos

HH the Amir's 2024: Prestigious honors and bold political reforms

Year defined by key decrees shaping Kuwait's democratic process, nationality law



RIYADH: On behalf of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud decorates HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal with the King Abdulaziz Medal.



MUSCAT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal and Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tareq exchange medals at Al-Alam Palace on Feb 6, 2024.



DOHA: Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani presents the Sword of the Founder Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammad bin Thani to HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal on Feb 20, 2024.

KUWAIT: The year 2024 saw Kuwait actively engaging in diplomatic, political, and structural changes, with significant milestones achieved both internationally and domestically. The Amir of Kuwait, His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, was at the forefront of these developments, receiving numerous prestigious awards from global leaders and strengthening Kuwait's ties with key regional and international partners.

Strengthened international ties

Kuwait's international standing remained strong throughout 2024, as His Highness the Amir received multiple honors from world leaders in recognition of his leadership and the country's contributions to regional stability.

January 30: On behalf of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud awarded Sheikh Meshal the King Abdulaziz Medal, acknowledging Kuwait's role in fostering stability in the region.

February 6: Sultan Haitham bin Tariq of Oman awarded HH the Amir the Al Saeed Medal, one of Oman's highest honors, as a symbol of the close relations between the two nations. In return, Sheikh Meshal honored Sultan Haitham with the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Medal.

February 13: King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain presented the Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa Medal of the First Class to the Amir Sheikh Meshal. This prestigious honor was in recognition of His Highness's efforts in strengthening bilateral relations and reinforcing the his-

toric ties between the two countries.

February 20: Qatar's Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, presented the Sword of the Founder Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al-Thani to HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal, reflecting the longstanding friendship between the two countries.

March 5: Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, President of the UAE, awarded His Highness the Amir the Order of Zayed, the highest honor bestowed by the UAE on heads of state, kings, and leaders. On the same day, HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal decorated Sheikh Mohamed with the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Medal, signifying the strong relations between Kuwait and the UAE.

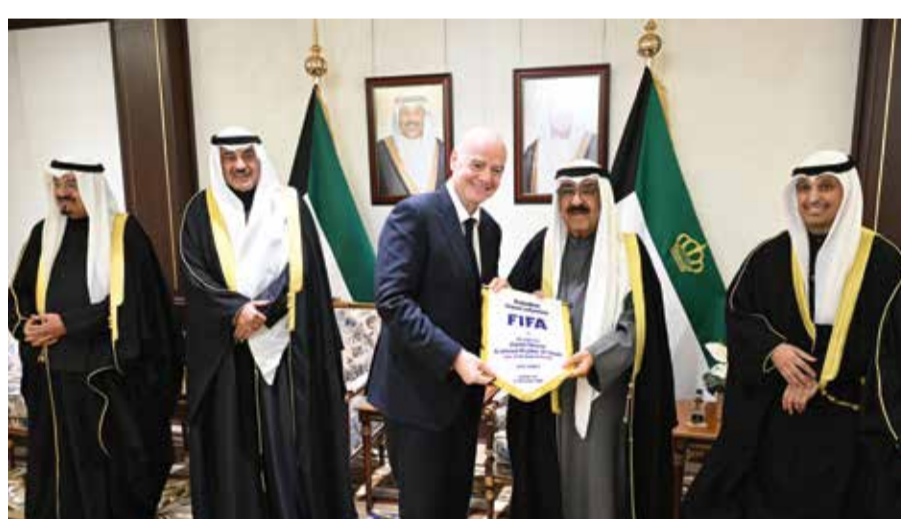
April 23: King Abdullah II of Jordan awarded the Hussein bin Ali Medal to HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal, highlighting the enduring bond between Kuwait and Jordan.

April 30: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi presented Sheikh Meshal with the Order of the Nile, Egypt's highest state honor, acknowledging Kuwait's historical role in supporting Egypt and regional peace.

May 7: During his visit to Turkey, HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal participated in the signing of six bilateral agreements with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who also awarded him the State Order.

Political reforms

The year 2024 also saw significant political and governance reforms aimed at strengthening Kuwait's democratic processes and addressing key domestic issues.



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal meets FIFA President Gianni Infantino as HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and Minister of Information Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi look on at Jaber International Stadium during the opening ceremony of Khaleeji Zain 26.

May 10: In a historic address, HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal announced the dissolution of the National Assembly and the suspension of certain articles of the constitution for up to four years. This was part of a broader effort to evaluate and enhance Kuwait's governance framework.

May 12: Amiri Decree No 73 was issued appointing Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah as Prime Minister, with a new Cabinet of 13 ministers.

May 27: HH the Amir issued a decree to form The Supreme Committee to Investigate Kuwaiti Citizenship, tasked with

addressing issues related to citizenship and residency.

June 1: In another key move, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah was appointed as Kuwait's new Crown Prince, with the formal swearing-in taking place on June 2.

November 28: Kuwait also saw the introduction of new measures under the Foreigners' Residency Law through Amiri Decree No 114. The new decree replaces the longstanding decree 17/1959, which had been in effect for six decades, to address legislative gaps

and modern challenges.

December 1: At the 45th Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal delivered an inaugural speech emphasizing regional cooperation in addressing global challenges.

Domestic milestones

Kuwait also made significant progress on the domestic front, including strides in education and sports.

March 6: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal attended the official opening of Abdullah Al-Salem University, an important addition to Kuwait's educational infrastructure.

May 13: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal attended and presided over the inauguration ceremony of Sabah Al-Salem University City.

December 21: His Highness the Amir was present at the opening ceremony of the Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26) at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium, reaffirming Kuwait's prominent role in the regional sports community.

The events of 2024 underscored Kuwait's active role on the global stage and its continued pursuit of political, economic, and social reforms. The awards and honors received by His Highness the Amir, combined with the ongoing domestic changes, demonstrated Kuwait's commitment to enhancing its diplomatic relationships while addressing the evolving needs of its citizens. As the year comes to an end, the ongoing initiatives in governance, regional diplomacy, and national development provide a foundation for Kuwait's continued growth and stability.



KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled takes the constitutional oath as Deputy Amir before HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal at a ceremony at Seif Palace on Jun 2, 2024.



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal attends the 45th Gulf Cooperation Council meeting on Dec 1, 2024.



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal attends the inauguration ceremony of Abdullah Al-Salem University (AASU) at the late Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah Theater in Shuwaikh on Mar 6, 2024.

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KUWAIT: KNET officials are seen during the company's general assembly meeting on Dec 28, 2024. — KUNA

KNET cash withdrawals fall amid shift toward digital payments

KNET sees 17% growth in electronic transactions across all platforms in 2024

KUWAIT: KNET, the Kuwaiti electronic banking services company, reported a 17 percent increase in electronic transactions for the 2024 financial year, driven by the growing adoption of various digital payment methods. The increase in transactions was seen across platforms, including point-of-sale systems (POS), online payment gateways, government e-payment services (Tasdeed), and ATMs. This growth contrasts with a 14 percent decline in cash withdrawals, reflecting the ongoing shift from traditional cash payments to digital transactions.

Speaking at the company's general

assembly meeting, KNET's Chairman, Mohammed Al-Othman, highlighted the company's continued success in driving growth and embracing the latest digital transformation technologies. He noted that the total transaction volume for the year rose by 6 percent, with POS devices increasing by 5 percent and a 20 percent rise in the number of POS transactions.

In terms of online payment systems, Al-Othman reported a 13 percent increase in transaction volume through online payment gateways, with a 7 percent rise in transaction values. This increase in online transactions signals a broader

trend towards digital solutions, as more consumers and businesses shift towards cashless payments.

However, the trend towards digital transactions has impacted cash withdrawals. There was a 14 percent drop in ATM cash withdrawals, and the value of withdrawals also decreased by 15 percent. This decline is attributed to a growing preference for electronic payments and digital transfers, which are becoming more convenient for consumers.

Al-Othman also discussed KNET's efforts to modernize its infrastructure, noting the renewal of its government

e-payment contract with the Ministry of Finance in August. This agreement has led to a 4 percent increase in the number of completed transactions on the government payment platform.

KNET's Chief Executive Officer, Esam Alkhashnam, further emphasized the company's ongoing commitment to expanding its market presence in Kuwait. Alkhashnam pointed out that the company's innovations, such as the introduction of the instant payment service "WAMD," and the ongoing development of the electronic payment gateway, were essential steps in supporting Kuwait's national

vision for digital transformation.

He also mentioned that KNET had replaced 90 percent of its outdated POS devices, which were operating on older 2G and 3G networks, with new devices that support more advanced communication technologies.

KNET, founded in 1992 with the support of local banks, has played a crucial role in linking the electronic payment systems of Kuwait's banks. The company's efforts align with Kuwait's broader goals of reducing reliance on cash in daily transactions and enhancing the country's financial inclusion. — KUNA



An emergency responder takes care of a patient at one of the health ministry's emergency clinics stationed at the Khaleeji Zain 26 stadiums.



Paramedics sort emergency supplies and equipment ahead of a Khaleeji Zain 26 match at an ambulance stationed outside the stadium.



KUWAIT: Acting Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior, Major General Ali Al-Adwani tours the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium accompanied by officials. — KUNA photos



Ministry of Interior officials check footage from surveillance cameras fixed across the Jaber Al-Ahmad Stadium.

MoI, MoH play vital role in success of Khaleeji Zain 26

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health has continued its crucial role in safeguarding public health and safety during the Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26), ensuring that emergency medical services are readily available throughout the tour-

nament, which is taking place from December 21 until January 3.

The ministry has deployed approximately 50 modern ambulances and 400 paramedics, stationed at key locations including Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium, Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Stadium, training facilities for the participating teams, accommodations for delegations, and other designated sites such as the Murooj complex. This extensive medical support underscores Kuwait's commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of all involved in the event.

In addition, the Ministry of Interior has also been actively involved in ensuring the safety of the event.

Acting Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior, Major General Ali Al-Adwani, emphasized the importance of coordination among various security agencies and ensuring the readiness of plans to address any emergencies. This statement came following a visit by Major General Al-Adwani to Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium.

According to the statement, Major General Al-Adwani affirmed the ministry's commitment to providing a safe and secure environment for the public, ensuring that the event proceeds smoothly and safely. He added that the visit focused on confirming the readiness of the plans in place to deal with any unexpected situations. — KUNA

Blue Wave Group rallies fans to support Kuwait's national team

KUWAIT: The youth initiative "Blue Wave Group" organized a vibrant march on Thursday night in Souq Al-Mubarakiya to show support for the Kuwaiti national football team ahead of their match against Qatar in the Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26).

The event, aimed at motivating the players, attracted fans of all ages. Participants waved Kuwaiti flags, held blue banners, and chanted familiar songs such as "Oh, ya Al-Azrag" and "Ana Kuwaiti ana" alongside other anthems that have become synonymous with the national team over the years. Souq Al-Mubarakiya has become a top destination for football fans attending Khaleeji Zain 26, the regional football tournament bringing together the eight Gulf nations. Taking place from December 21 to January 3 in Kuwait, the tournament has attracted supporters from Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, the UAE, and Qatar. The souq has been busy with fans from across the Gulf, who have brought their passion for football into the market. Many have been posting videos on social media, showing themselves supporting their teams, singing chants, and even playing impromptu games of football in the alleys of the market. — Agencies



KUWAIT: Football fans gather at Souq Al-Mubarakiya in a show of support for Kuwait's national football team during their participation in the Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26). — KUNA photos



Blue Wave Group members lead the march held in support of the Kuwait football national team.



Passionate supporters chant Kuwaiti national team anthems in Souq Al-Mubarakiya.



Fans of all ages join forces in Souq Al-Mubarakiya, waving flags in support of their favorite team during the Khaleeji Zain 26 tournament.



A passionate supporter holds Kuwait's flag high as he chants national anthems.



A young girl waves Kuwait's old red and white flag at the march.



Fans dressed in blue, the Kuwait national team's color, take part in the march at Souq Al-Mubarakiya to show their support ahead of the Gulf Cup match.



A fan takes a photo on his smartphone of man waving Kuwait's flag at the support march.



State funeral for former PM Manmohan Singh

Gaza child amputees get new limbs, can't shake war trauma

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S Korea prosecutors: Yoon authorised 'shooting' during martial law bid

Court to decide the fate of Yoon's replacement

SEOUL: South Korea's suspended president Yoon Suk Yeol authorized the military to fire their weapons if needed to enter parliament during his failed bid to impose martial law, according to a prosecutors' report seen by AFP on Saturday. The 10-page summary from former defense minister Kim Yong-hyun's prosecution indictment report, which was provided to the media, also says Yoon vowed on December 3 to declare martial law three times if necessary.

Yoon, who was stripped of his duties by the National Assembly this month, is under investigation for his short-lived attempt to scrap civilian rule, which plunged the country into political turmoil and led to his impeachment.

Yoon's lawyer Yoon Kab-keun dismissed the prosecutors' report, telling AFP it was "a one-sided account that neither corresponds to objective circumstances nor common sense". As lawmakers rushed to parliament on December 3 to vote down Yoon's martial law declaration, heavily armed troops stormed the building, scaling fences, smashing windows and landing by helicopter.

According to the prosecution indictment report, Yoon told the chief of the capital defense command, Lee Jin-woo, that military forces could shoot if necessary to enter the National Assembly. "Have you still not got in? What are you doing? Break down the door and drag them out, even if it means shooting," Yoon told Lee, according to the report.

Yoon also allegedly told the head of the Defense Counterintelligence Command, General Kwak Jong-keun, to "quickly get inside" the National Assembly since the quorum for the martial law declaration to be lifted had not been met.

"So quickly get inside the National Assembly and bring out the people inside the chamber, and break down the doors with an axe if necessary and drag everyone out," the report quotes Yoon as saying at the time. After lawmakers rushed inside parliament and voted 190-0 to nullify Yoon's declaration in the early hours of December 4, the report says Yoon told Lee, "Even if it's lifted, I can declare martial law a second or third time, so just keep going."

'Ugly truth'

The report also included screenshots of senior defense officials' messages from the day of the martial law declaration. It said there was evidence that Yoon had been discussing declaring martial law with



SEOUL: South Korea's Finance Minister and new acting president Choi Sang-mok (C) speaks as he presides over a meeting of the National Security Council at the Government Complex in Seoul on December 27, 2024, after Prime Minister Han Duck-soo's impeachment motion was passed by the National Assembly. — AFP

senior military officials as early as March. The declaration followed a budget tussle between Yoon's party and the opposition. Days later, Yoon in a speech apologized for the "anxiety and inconvenience" and promised there would not be a second declaration of martial law. Ex-defense minister Kim was arrested over his role in the failed martial law bid. Opposition Democratic Party lawmaker Kang Sun-woo said in a statement on Saturday that "the prosecution has laid bare the undeniable ugly truth about Yoon Suk Yeol, the treasonous ringleader", adding that he must be "arrested immediately". South Korea's Constitutional Court held its first

preliminary hearing on the validity of Yoon's impeachment on Friday. The court will also decide the fate of Yoon's replacement, Han Duck-soo, who was impeached Friday over his refusal to complete Yoon's impeachment process and bring him to justice. Tens of thousands of Yoon supporters and opponents held rival mass rallies in central Seoul on Saturday. "The martial law was legal, and president Yoon did it because of the insurrectionary opposition Democratic Party," said 31-year-old Danny Ko, holding the slogan "Legal martial law. Invalid impeachment!". "The Democratic Party will impeach (acting

president) Choi Sang-mok like Han, and the country will go mad." An anti-Yoon crowd was gathered nearby holding signs such as: "A new leader for the new year" and "Arrest Yoon Suk Yeol", with many singing along to K-pop songs and John Lennon's "Imagine". "I felt so relieved when Han was impeached, he was also part of the insurrection" Kwak Min-jeong, 25, told AFP. Holding a glow stick, Kwak said she would keep protesting until "democracy was achieved". "We are holding it to show our commitment, and unlike a candle, it will never go off," she said. — AFP

Slovakia ready to host Russia-Ukraine peace talks

BRATISLAVA: Slovakia on Friday confirmed its readiness to host peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, despite Kyiv's accusation that it is playing into the hands of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Russian leader on Thursday called it "acceptable" for the country to become a "platform" for dialogue over the conflict, which US President-elect Donald Trump has said he could end after he takes office in January.

That prospect has raised concerns in Kyiv that a settlement could be imposed on terms favourable to Moscow, as Ukraine struggles on the battlefield. "If someone wants to organize peace talks in Slovakia, we will be ready and hospitable," the country's Prime Minister Robert Fico posted late Friday on Facebook.

Earlier, Slovakia's Foreign Minister Juraj Blnar said on Facebook: "We offer Slovak soil for such negotiations." The moves come nearly three years after the start of the full-scale Russian assault on Ukraine. Putin announced Thursday that Slovakia had offered to be a "platform" for possible peace talks and that Russia was "not against it", praising Bratislava's "neutral position". But Putin reiterated his vow that his country would achieve "all the objectives in Ukraine".

Slovak-Russian ties

Blnar said any talks must take place "with the participation of all parties, and therefore also of Russia", unlike a previous summit in June in Switzerland. "We consider the statement of the Russian president as a positive signal to end this war, this bloodshed and this



MYKOLAIV: This handout picture shows the firefighters pushing out a fire in a residential building after drones attack in Mykolaiv region, amid Russian invasion in Ukraine. — AFP

destruction as soon as possible," the minister said. He said Slovakia had told Kyiv in October that it was available to host peace talks. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico is one of only a handful of European leaders who have remained close to the Kremlin. He met with Putin in Moscow on December 22, provoking an angry reaction from Kyiv. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Monday accused Fico of wanting to "help" Putin by continuing to import Russian gas. Despite being a NATO and European Union member, Slovakia has moved

closer to Russia since the return to power of the nationalist Fico in late 2023. Fico has stopped all military aid to Ukraine and accuses Kyiv of jeopardising his country's supply of Russian gas, which he wants to keep buying. Fico, in his Facebook post, said that "by stopping the gas transit, President Zelensky will cause billions of damage to the EU." "It seems that some big people in the EU don't mind. The main thing is that in the name of an unrealistic goal of weakening Russia, Slavs will continue to kill each other," he continued. — AFP

Footage shows NY inmate beaten by guards before death

NEW YORK: Law enforcement in the US state of New York on Friday released "devastating" footage of prison guards beating a Black inmate shortly before he died. The body-worn camera footage, recorded the night of December 9, shows Robert Brooks, 43, brutalized by multiple prison guards, with his face bloodied and neck held. Brooks, an inmate at a northern New York prison serving a 12-year sentence for assault, was pronounced dead later that night. Letitia James, the attorney general of New York, said the video was released to provide "transparency and accountability."

In a statement, Brooks' relatives said they found "watching the horrific and violent final moments of Robert's life was devastating for his loved ones." "We

will not rest until we have secured justice for Robert's memory," the statement added. The footage shows Brooks restrained on what appears to be a hospital bed with several guards holding him down and beating him. Brooks is later seen sitting up and gets dragged off the bed by his collar. A preliminary autopsy reported in local press said the cause of death was "asphyxia due to compression of the neck," though full autopsy results remain pending. The footage lacks audio, which James said was because the guards "did not activate" their body-worn cameras despite them being on, leading to the soundless recording. New York Governor Kathy Hochul condemned the incident in a statement. "We have no tolerance for individuals who cross the line, break the law and engage in unnecessary violence or targeted abuse," she said. Evidence of police brutality has been a galvanizing political force in the United States. Footage of the 2020 death of George Floyd, a Black American, under the knee of a police officer sparked widespread outrage and led to racial justice protests across the country. — AFP



MARCY: This screenshot taken from New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) body camera footage and released by the Office of the New York State Attorney General shows DOCCS officers with Robert Brooks at Marcy Correctional Facility in Oneida County, New York. — AFP

Mideast 'not a battleground for big powers'

BEIJING: The top diplomats of China and Iran agreed Saturday that the Middle East is "not a battleground for the big powers" and should not be an arena of geopolitical competition between countries outside the region.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi agreed that "the international community should respect the sovereignty, security, stability, unity and territorial integrity of Middle East countries," according to a readout from Beijing's foreign ministry.

Araghchi is on his first visit to China since being appointed foreign minister of Iran. The two major trading partners reiterated calls for a ceasefire in Gaza, the proper implementation of the ceasefire in Lebanon, and the "integrated promotion of counter-terrorism, reconciliation and humanitarian processes in Syria", according to the readout.

"The two sides agreed that the Middle East belongs to the people of the Middle East, and is not a battleground for the big powers, and should not be a victim of geopolitical competition and conflicts between countries from outside the region," the ministry said.

China and Iran were both supporters of ousted Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad. Syria's new leader, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, is an ardent opponent of Tehran. Araghchi and Wang also discussed Iran's nuclear program, which governments including Britain and the United States say could be on its way to building weapons.

Tensions have soared over Tehran's nuclear ambitions since then-president Donald Trump pulled the United States out of a landmark agreement that traded sanctions relief for limits on Iran's nuclear program.

China is a signatory to that agreement, and Wang told Araghchi Saturday that Beijing "firmly supports the Iranian side in safeguarding its legitimate rights and interests". China is Iran's largest trading partner and a top buyer of its sanctioned oil. — AFP

International

German president dissolves parliament, sets February 23 general election date

Steinmeier appeals for the campaign to be 'conducted with respect and decency'

BELIN: German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier dissolved parliament on Friday and confirmed the expected February date for an early general election after the collapse of Olaf Scholz's government last month. Scholz's coalition was brought down by internal fights about how to revive Europe's largest economy but a deadly car-ramming attack at a Christmas market last week has renewed the country's heated debates over security and immigration.

Confirming the February 23 date for the election, Steinmeier emphasized the need for "political stability" and appealed for the campaign to be "conducted with respect and decency". A Saudi doctor, Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, 50, was arrested at the scene of the attack on the Christmas market in the eastern city of Magdeburg which left five people dead and more than 200 injured.

Interior Minister Nancy Fraser said Abdulmohsen held "Islamophobic" views but his exact motive remains unclear. In the wake of the attack, Scholz appealed to Germans to "link arms" and to not allow "hatred to determine our coexistence".

The conservative CDU/CSU is leading in the polls on around 32 percent under its leader Friedrich Merz and even

before last week's attack it had been promising a harder line on immigration as well as a rightward shift on social and economic policy.

On Friday Merz wrote about the attack in his newsletter, pointing to the suspect's previous criminal record and asking: "Why don't we get rid of such people before they do something this awful?" If necessary, the law should be changed to make such deportations possible, he said.

In second place in the polls on 19 percent is the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which held what it called a "memorial" rally in Magdeburg on Monday. At the event, the AfD's regional leader Jan Wenzel Schmidt said Germany could "no longer take in madmen from all over the world" and demanded the country "close the borders".

Steinmeier also said on Friday that he wanted "the campaign to be conducted with fair and transparent means" and warned of the dangers of "foreign influence... which is particularly intense on X," the social media platform owned by billionaire Elon Musk. "Hatred and violence must have no place in this election campaign, nor denigration or intimidation... all this is poison for democracy," Steinmeier said.

Host of challenges

Scholz's Social Democrats are lagging badly in polls on just 15 percent. His unruly three-party coalition collapsed on November 6, the day Donald Trump won re-election to the White House. That led Scholz to call a confidence vote last week which he lost, paving the way for an early election.

He will remain in office as a caretaker chancellor until a new government is formed, which could take several months after the election. In his speech, Steinmeier reminded political parties and voters of the host of challenges the next government will face given the "economically unstable situation... the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine" as well as debates over immigration and climate change.

On security, both the CDU and SPD want to keep helping Ukraine in its war with Russia and spend two percent of GDP or more on Germany's defense. While the CDU program remains vague on what weapons to ship to Kyiv, the SPD opposes sending long-range missiles because "Germany and NATO must not themselves become parties to the war".

On the thorny issue of how to boost



BELIN: German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier delivers a speech on his decision to dissolve the parliament at Bellevue Palace in Berlin on December 27, 2024. -- AFP

Germany's ailing economy, both parties want to reinvigorate the "Made in Germany" brand, boost investment and upgrade crumbling infrastructure.

On climate and energy, the SPD has vowed to promote renewables, e-mobility and an ambitious green hydro-

gen initiative, while the CDU said it would reverse the planned phase-out of combustion engine vehicles. The conservatives have also pledged to study whether some of Germany's shuttered atomic power plants can be brought back on-line. — AFP



NEW DELHI: In this handout photograph taken on December 28, 2024, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi pays last respect to his late predecessor Manmohan Singh during the state funeral ceremony in New Delhi. — AFP

State funeral for former PM Manmohan Singh

NEW DELHI: India on Saturday accorded former premier Manmohan Singh, one of the architects of the country's economic liberalization in the early 1990s, a state funeral with full military honors, complete with a gun salute.

Singh, who held office from 2004 to 2014, died at the age of 92 on Thursday, after which seven days of state mourning were declared.

The honors were led by President Draupadi Murmu with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in attendance, along with the country's top civilian and military officials. Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck also attended the ceremony.

Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi, who called the former prime minister his mentor and guide, joined Singh's family as they prayed before his cremation.

Earlier, mourners gathered to pay their respects to Singh. His coffin, draped in garlands of flowers, was flanked by a guard of honor and carried to his Congress Party headquarters in New Delhi.

It was then taken through the capital to the cremation grounds, accompanied by guards of soldiers and accorded full state honors.

Modi called Singh one of India's "most distinguished leaders". US President Joe Biden called Singh a "true statesman", saying that he "charted pathbreaking progress that will continue to strengthen our nations—and the world—for generations to come".

Pakistan soldier killed in border clash with Afghanistan forces

PESHAWAR: A Pakistani paramilitary soldier was killed and seven others wounded in cross-border exchanges of fire with Afghanistan's forces, a security source said Saturday, while hundreds of Afghans protested against the deadly air strikes that sparked the clashes. Sporadic fighting, including with heavy weaponry, erupted overnight between border forces on the frontier between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan and Khost province in Afghanistan, officials from both countries said.

The exchanges of fire come after Afghanistan's Taliban authorities accused Pakistan of killing 46 people, mainly women and children, in air strikes near the border in the southeastern province of Paktika this week.

A Pakistan senior security source said they targeted "terrorist hideouts", though Islamabad has not

officially confirmed carrying out the bombardment. "One frontier corps (FC) soldier has been reported dead, and seven others have been injured," a senior security source at the border told AFP, adding clashes took place in at least two locations in Pakistan's border district of Kurram.

The Afghan defense ministry said on X that "several points" across the border with Pakistan "where the attacks in Afghanistan were organized... were targeted in retaliation". A provincial official in Khost told AFP the clashes forced residents to flee border areas, but that there were no reports of casualties among Afghan forces.

In Khost city, the provincial capital, hundreds of Afghans demonstrated against Pakistan on Saturday, calling for accountability for civilian deaths. Protester Najibullah Zaland said they demanded global economic pressure on Pakistan to prevent such incidents. "We gathered here today to raise our voices to the world," he told AFP. "A path to peace must be put in place, or else the youth will not stay silent." The demonstrators praised the Afghan forces, with one protester, Rashidullah Hamdard, saying "our fighters gave them a strong response, and we stand with our forces". — AFP

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France asks Indonesia to transfer national on death row

JAKARTA: France has sent Indonesia an official request for the transfer of a French death row inmate who has spent nearly 20 years in prison, an Indonesian minister told AFP on Saturday. Indonesia has in recent weeks released half a dozen high-profile detainees, including a Filipina mum on death row and the last five members of the so-called "Bali Nine" drug ring.

French diplomats have acknowledged that talks were underway for the transfer of Serge Atlaoui, a 61-year-old Frenchman arrested in 2005 at a drugs factory outside the capital Jakarta. The Indonesian government has now confirmed it received the official transfer request, which will be discussed in early January.

"We have received a formal letter requesting the transfer of Serge Atlaoui," senior law and human rights minister Yusril Ihza Mahendra told AFP. The French embassy in Jakarta declined AFP's request for comment.

'Considerable hope'

Father-of-four Atlaoui has maintained his innocence, claiming that he was installing machinery in what he thought was an acrylics plant. He was initially sentenced to life in prison, but the Supreme Court in 2007 increased the sentence to death on appeal.

Atlaoui was held on the island of Nusakambangan in Central Java, known as Indonesia's "Alcatraz", following the death sentence, but he was transferred to the city of Tangerang, west of Jakarta, in 2015 ahead of his appeal. That year, he was due to be executed alongside eight other drug offenders but won a temporary reprieve after Paris stepped up pressure, with Indonesian authorities agreeing to let an outstanding appeal run its course. — AFP



What is The Difference Between Smoke and Aerosol

It is widely known that cigarette smoking is harmful, yet there are over one billion smokers in the world today.

If you hear the word aerosol, you might think of a can of deodorant, but it's actually much more than that. Aerosol is the scientific, umbrella term for solid and liquid particles suspended in gas — such as a cloud. Smoke is actually a type of aerosol that is generated during combustion, the scientific name for "burning." And while smoke is an aerosol, not all aerosols are smoke.

Science and technology have allowed the production of alternative products that don't burn tobacco, therefore don't produce smoke—they are in fact, smoke-free. When scientifically substantiated and subject to appropriate quality and safety requirements, smoke-free products do not create smoke and therefore should not be a source of second-hand smoke or ash. The absence of smoke can significantly reduce the average levels of harmful chemicals in smoke-free products when compared to cigarettes. Whilst not risk-free and delivering nicotine, which is addictive, scientifically substantiated smoke-free products are better alternative to adult smokers who would otherwise continue smoking.

What is Smoke?

Smoke is the result of combustion or burning. When a cigarette is lit it burns tobacco at temperatures up to 900°C. That creates smoke

which contains approximately 6,000 chemicals, around 100 of which have been classified by public health authorities as harmful or potentially harmful. If the temperature is reduced to a level where tobacco or nicotine containing liquid is heated rather than burned, the smoke is removed.

What is Aerosol?

Aerosol is not associated with combustion. Smoke-free products, whilst not risk-free, have the potential to significantly reduce the average levels of harmful chemicals compared to cigarette smoke. Consumers typically use the term "vapor" to refer to the aerosol generated from heated tobacco products or other nicotine-containing products.

Quitting tobacco and nicotine altogether is the best choice for health. Existing tobacco control measures designed to discourage initiation and encourage cessation should continue.

However, despite these efforts, millions of people continue to smoke. Science-backed, smoke-free products can play a role in moving adults who would otherwise continue to smoke away from cigarettes. With the right regulatory encouragement and support from civil society, together we can deliver a smoke-free future more quickly than relying on traditional measures alone.

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024

Thousands rally to demand bigger hike in minimum wage in Turkey

Erdogan expects more interest rate cuts in 2025

ANKARA: Thousands of people protested in Turkey's capital Ankara on Saturday to demand a bigger hike in the minimum wage, chanting slogans calling on the government to resign and waving the opposition and national flags. The government announced this week that the net monthly minimum wage in 2025 will be 22,104 Turkish lira (\$630.28), a 30 percent increase from 2024. The government said the level was set to maintain fiscal discipline and continue the fight against inflation.

Turkish workers, who have faced a persistent cost-of-living crisis with an expected annual inflation of 45 percent this year, had called for an increase of around 70 percent in total: a 45 percent inflation adjustment and a 20 percent welfare increase. Turkey's main opposition CHP called Saturday's protest, saying the minimum wage increase showed President Tayyip Erdogan's government "lost touch with the realities of Turkey."

"They say that inflation would increase as much as the minimum wage is increased. This is a big lie. There was no minimum wage increase throughout the year, and we still have 50 percent inflation," CHP leader Ozgur Ozel told the rally. There were additional mid-year hikes to the minimum wage in 2023 and 2022, due to high inflation.

"While hundreds of thousands of people here are calling for your resignation, Mr. Erdogan, you cannot avoid elections. If there's no bread and butter, there should be elections," Ozel said.

Presidential and parliamentary elections in Tur-

key are scheduled for 2028. Erdogan, speaking at a meeting of his AK Party (AKP) in northwestern city of Bursa, said the minimum wage increase was determined by taking factors including inflation and employment into consideration.

Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek said the minimum wage increased in 2023 and 2024 more than the annual inflation. "Price stability is a prerequisite for the permanent increase in the purchasing power and welfare of our workers," Simsek said on X. The minimum wage hike will affect some nine million workers.

Meanwhile, Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan said on Saturday that there would be more interest rate cuts in 2025 after the central bank cut its key rate by 250 basis points to 47.5 percent this week.

The Turkish central bank trimmed the one-week repo rate after an 18-month tightening effort that reversed years of unorthodox economic policies and easy money championed by Erdogan, who has since changed tack to back the program. "Priority in our economy program is to lower the inflation... We will hopefully reduce inflation to the required level by using other tools at our disposal in addition to the monetary policy," Erdogan told members of his AK Party (AKP) in northwestern city of Bursa.

"We will definitely start lowering the interest rates. 2025 will be the landmark year for this," he said. "Interest rates will decrease so that inflation will decrease. We will take this step. This is now indispensable for us," Erdogan, who once described interest rates as his "biggest enemy," said last month



Turkish inflation jumped above 75 percent in May, official data showed Monday, but officials expect consumer prices to have finally peaked in a cost-of-living crisis. — File photo

that inflation would fall alongside the interest rate.

The central bank earlier announced that it had reduced the number of scheduled policy meetings next year to eight from 12 in 2024. According to

a Reuters poll's median, the central bank is expected to ease rates to about 28.5 percent by the end of 2025, with forecasts ranging between 25 percent and 33 percent. — Reuters

OpenAI outlines plans to becoming for-profit company

WASHINGTON: ChatGPT-maker OpenAI laid out plans Friday for a new corporate structure shifting away from control by a non-profit—an issue of contention for the artificial intelligence trailblazer.

OpenAI was founded as a non-profit in 2015 and has since switched to a "capped" for-profit enterprise allowing for a limited level of money making. But it has been seeking to become a for-profit public benefit corporation (PBC), which could attract more investment.

In a blog post, the company said it plans to restructure as a PBC, which "requires the company to balance shareholder interests, stakeholder interests, and a public benefit interest in its decision making." "It will enable us to raise the necessary capital with conventional terms like others in this space," OpenAI added. It said that it needs to raise more capital than



This combination of pictures shows Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI and Elon Musk listening to US President-elect Donald Trump. — AFP

imagined, citing the hundreds and billions of dollars that major firms are now putting into artificial intelligence development.

"Investors want to back us but, at this scale of capital, need conventional equity and less structural bespoke-ness," OpenAI said.

Currently, its structure does not allow the board to directly consider the interests of those who would finance its mission. The structure also "does not enable the non-profit to easily do more than control the for-profit," the company said. With the restructuring, the PBC will control OpenAI's operations and business. Its non-profit arm will build up a team to pursue charitable initiatives in areas like health care. OpenAI is under high scrutiny as an artificial intelligence powerhouse, reaching a staggering \$157 billion valuation in recent times.

The company, led by Sam Altman, has become one of the most successful startups in Silicon Valley history—propelled to headlines in 2022 when it released ChatGPT, its generative AI chatbot.

But its corporate set-up imploded in late 2023 when the board fired Altman out-of-the-blue. Staff rebelled and Altman was eventually reinstated, while those involved in his ouster left the company.

Alarmed by the situation, new investors have demanded that OpenAI become a more classic for-profit outfit within two years. Its restructuring efforts will likely face obstacles, with Elon Musk reportedly asking a US court to stop OpenAI from converting into a for-profit enterprise. — AFP

Tax cuts and debt reined in as Italy adopts 2025 budget

ROME: Italy's parliament on Saturday approved the 2025 budget, aiming to both appease EU demands to lower the eurozone nation's deficit and honor Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's pledge to cut taxes.

Over half of the package, worth some 30 billion euros (\$31 billion), is devoted to cuts to tax and social security contributions for low- and middle-income earners. Rome is having to perform a fine fiscal balancing act, after Brussels took Italy to task earlier this year over its debt worth nearly 3 trillion euros, the second highest as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) in the European Union.

Meloni's hard-right coalition has committed to reducing the public deficit to 3.3 percent of GDP in 2025, down from an expected 3.8 percent this year. But the budget comes amid slowing growth, with the ISTAT national statistics office estimating GDP this year to increase just 0.5 percent—half what it forecast in June. The measures approved include making permanent a merging of the lower two income tax brackets, so people earning 28,000 euros a year can pay 23 percent instead of 25 percent.

And the budget expands the number of people eligible for a reduction of social or tax charges.

Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy party is also trying to boost Italy's flagging birth rate, and the budget allocates a 1,000-euro bonus per newborn for families earning up to 40,000 euros a year.

Environmental associations have complained there is little for tackling man-made climate change, though Rome is scrapping a bonus for gas-fired boilers, under pressure from Brussels.

Instead, buyers of energy-efficient household appliances will be eligible for a bonus of up to 100 euros—rising to 200 euros for households earning under 25,000 euros. Companies that boost hiring and reinvest part of their profits will be able to benefit from a reduction in the corporate tax rate, which drops from 24 percent to 20 percent. This new measure is partly financed by Italy's banking sector, which has been asked to contribute a total of 3.4 billion euros for the 2025 and 2026 budgets.

They have agreed to postpone tax credits for these two years to provide liquidity to the Italian state, which should repay them later. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: A homeless man gestures while sitting on a luggage bag along a downtown Los Angeles street lined with tents housing the homeless on November 22, 2023. — AFP

US homelessness rose by record 18% in annual data

WASHINGTON: There was a record 18 percent rise in homelessness in the US in the last year, driven by factors like unaffordable housing, high inflation, systemic racism, natural disasters and rising immigration, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development said on Friday.

The problem of homelessness has been getting worse in the US, with commonplace sightings in many cities of destitute people living in the open, with tents pitched on city sidewalks. The federal and state governments have pushed with divergent strategies to deal with the crisis.

A total of 771,480 people - or about 23 of every 10,000 people in the US - experienced homelessness in an emergency shelter, safe haven, transitional housing program, or in unsheltered locations, according to data released on Friday. Overall, the

number of people experiencing homelessness increased by 18 percent between 2023 and 2024, the data showed. The previous such annual data released last year had shown a 12 percent rise in homelessness.

Between 2023 and 2024, children under the age of 18 were the age group that experienced the largest increase in homelessness, marking a 33 percent rise with 150,000 children experiencing the crisis, according to the data. Black people, who made up 12 percent of the total US population and 21 percent of the US population living in poverty, represented 32 percent of all people experiencing homelessness, the data showed. "Our worsening national affordable housing crisis, rising inflation, stagnating wages among middle- and lower-income households, and the persisting effects of systemic racism have stretched homelessness services systems to their limits," the Department of Housing and Urban Development said.

It also noted "additional public health crises, natural disasters that displaced people from their homes, rising numbers of people immigrating to the US, and the end to homelessness prevention programs put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic." — Reuters

US to hit new debt limit as soon as Jan 14: Yellen

WASHINGTON: The United States could come up against its debt ceiling as soon as in mid-January, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Friday, urging Congress to "act to protect the full faith and credit" of the country. Lawmakers have suspended the debt ceiling—a limit on government borrowing to pay for bills already incurred—until January 1 next year. This means that on January 2, a new limit will be set matching the amount of debt issued by the Treasury Department.

But the path forward could prove to be contentious if the United States hits this new limit, given that the lifting of the ceiling has been a thorny partisan issue in recent years. "Treasury currently expects to reach the new limit between January 14 and January 23, at which time it will be necessary for Treasury to start taking extraordinary measures," said Yellen in a letter addressed to Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson and other lawmakers. Such extraordinary measures allow the Treasury Department to continue financing the government's activities, preventing it from defaulting on its obligations.

The United States is not set to hit the debt limit once the suspension is over, as the country's outstanding debt is projected to decrease by around \$54 billion on January 2, Yellen noted. This is "mostly due to a scheduled redemption of nonmarketable securities held by a federal trust fund associated with Medicare payments," she added. Congress has raised the limit more than 100 times to allow the government to meet its spending commitments. But conservatives are generally against increasing the country's massive borrowing—currently standing at \$36.2 trillion—and multiple Republicans have never voted for a hike. If the debt ceiling is not raised or suspended before the Treasury's tools are exhausted, the government risks defaulting on payment obligations—with profound implications for the world's biggest economy. — AFP

China sanctions US firms over Taiwan military support

BEIJING: China on Friday slapped sanctions on seven US companies after Washington's approval last week of a \$571.3 million military aid package to Taiwan, which Beijing said infringed on its "sovereignty and territory". Last Friday, US President Joe Biden authorized the drawdown of up to \$571.3 million for defense assistance to the self-ruled island, which China regards as its own territory. Washington's actions "interfere in China's internal affairs, and undermine China's sovereignty and territorial integrity", the Chinese foreign ministry said as it announced the sanctions.

The statement also hit out at Washington's 2025 defense budget, which includes a security cooperation initiative with Taiwan, as well as calls for strengthened defense industrial cooperation with Taipei. Beijing will freeze the China assets of US defense companies Insitu, Hudson Technologies, Saronic Technologies, Aercomm and Oceaneering International, as well as Raytheon's Canada and Australia subsidiaries, the ministry said. The sanctions, which kick in on Friday, also prohibit the targeted companies from doing business with organizations and individuals inside China.

The United States does not officially recognize Taiwan diplomatically but it is the self-ruled island's strategic ally and largest supplier of weapons. China, which has said it will use force to bring Taiwan under its control if necessary, has intensified pressure on the island in recent years. It has staged three rounds of major military drills since Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te came to power in May. — AFP

Business

Chinese cars grab Mexican market share

Sales of traditionally dominant brands take a hit

MEXICO CITY: The growing popularity of Chinese sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks has shaken up Mexico's luxury car market, hitting sales of traditionally dominant brands such as Mercedes-Benz and BMW. According to industry experts, Mexicans are increasingly switching from traditionally dominant sedans to Chinese vehicles due to a combination of comfort, technology and price.

It is no small feat in a country home to factories of foreign brands such as Audi and BMW, and where until a few years ago imported Chinese cars were stigmatized, as in other parts of the world.

According to the Mexican Association of Automotive Distributors (AMDA), the high-end segment of the market registered a sales drop of 8.1 percent from January to November. Audi's sales slumped by 21.9 percent, while BMW, which includes the Mini brand, saw no growth in Latin America's second-largest economy, home to 129 million people.

Mercedes-Benz suffered a 9.8 percent decline, according to the state-run statistics institute INEGI.

In contrast, Motornation, which sells the BAIC, JMC and Changan brands in Mexico, saw an 8.8 percent increase in sales in the first 11 months of this year, while those of Jetour rose 131 percent, it said. Chinese firms now control 9.3 percent of the Mexican market, according to the AMDA.

They have brought stiff competition to the pickup truck segment, with many of the features of high-end models offered by premium brands, the association's president Guillermo Rosales told AFP. Traditionally, the premium segment included sedan-type vehicles with luxury engines and top-of-the-range features.

However, over the past decade consumer preferences have shifted toward utility vehicles such as pickup trucks, minivans and SUVs. Asian brands also

benefited from an exemption from import tariffs on electric vehicles that was in effect in Mexico from 2020 until October 1.

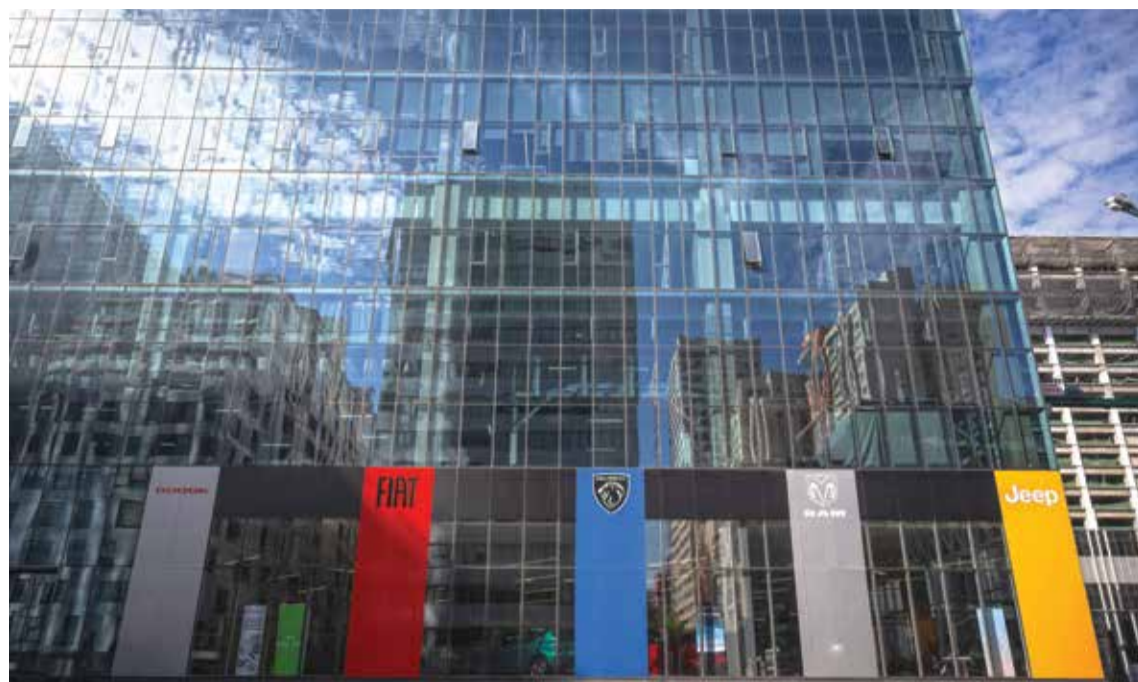
As in other Latin American countries, Mexicans are becoming more used to seeing Chinese brands on the streets that were unknown to them until about five years ago. Miguel Reyes, a 71-year-old retiree, said that choosing a Chinese car over others was "simple arithmetic."

"I needed a car that had the necessary technology, such as steering assist, to make driving safer," Reyes said. As well as the design and comfort, the "competitive" price was another factor, said Reyes, who paid around 550,000 pesos—roughly \$27,000. A similar model from a traditional brand would have cost him between \$40,000 and \$50,000, he said. According to Gerardo Gomez, an expert at the data and analytics company J D Power, there are around 30 Chinese brands in Mexico, with vehicles ranging from compact to luxury cars.

"They can offer you anything at any point in the range." BYD offers an electric pickup truck for more than a million pesos (\$50,000) but also a compact car for \$17,000. Zeekr, a premium electric brand, sells luxury models for around \$40,000.

Chinese cars' growing presence in Mexico, which is itself a major exporter of vehicles, comes at a time when China is a source of contention between the United States, Mexico and Canada, partners in a regional free trade agreement. During his campaign, US President-elect Donald Trump suggested that China was building car factories in Mexico to sell vehicles in the United States.

Canadian officials have accused Mexico of being a springboard for Chinese products in the region—a claim denied by Mexican authorities. Trump has also



View of the showrooms building of Dodge, Peugeot, Ram, Jeep and Fiat, in Mexico City, taken on December 5, 2024. — AFP

threatened to impose 25 percent tariffs on both Mexico and Canada unless they stop flows of migrants and drugs.

According to Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, only seven percent of the components of cars manufactured in the Latin American country are Chinese. "There's no evidence from anywhere that proves that Mexico is being used as a springboard" for Chi-

nese products, said Diego Marroquin, a trade policy specialist at the Wilson Center in the United States. "It's a political narrative that comes from the United States and now from Canada." Sheinbaum said last month that she would propose to the United States and Canada a Chinese import substitution plan, noting that in the case of Mexico alone, the trade deficit with the Asian giant amounted to \$80 billion. — AFP



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer attending a Parliamentary Liaison Committee hearing in London. — AFP

Starmer asks regulators to focus on growth

LONDON: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has asked the country's regulators, including the financial and competition watchdogs, to remove barriers to growth in an effort to revive a sluggish economy, Sky News reported on Saturday. Starmer wrote to more than ten regulators - including the Financial Conduct Authority, the Competition and Markets Authority and energy and water regulators Ofgem and Ofwat - on Tuesday, asking them to present pro-growth initiatives to Downing Street by mid-January, Sky said. It cited one recipient of the letter, which was also signed by finance minister Rachel Reeves, as saying it was unambiguous in its direction to prioritize economic growth and investment. Sky said the Financial Reporting Council, media regulator Ofcom, the Environment Agency and healthcare regulators also received the letter.

Downing Street did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment. Official figures last week showed Britain's economy failed to grow during the first three months of Starmer's new government, adding to signs of a slowdown. Business groups have also said the government's tax-raising Oct 30 budget would make it harder for companies to invest and recruit workers in the short term. Britain's economy failed to grow during the first three months of Prime Minister Keir Starmer's new government, official figures showed on Monday, adding to signs of a slowdown that has cast a shadow over his time in office so far.

The Office for National Statistics lowered its estimate for the change in gross domestic product output to 0.0 percent in the July-to-September period from a previous estimate of 0.1 percent growth. The ONS also cut its estimate for growth in the second quarter to 0.4 percent from a previous 0.5 percent.

Starmer and his finance minister Rachel Reeves took power in early July, warning of the poor state of the economy before announcing tax increases for businesses in a budget on Oct 30 that has alarmed many employers. Analysts, many of whom said the grim tone of the new government risked slowing the economy, said the numbers suggested zero growth over the entire second half of the year.

The Bank of England last week forecast that the economy would not grow in the fourth quarter. But it kept borrowing costs on hold because of the risks still posed by inflation. Paul Dales, chief UK economist at consultancy Capital Economics, said the GDP downgrade was caused in part by weaker demand for exports while consumer spending and business investment at home held up.

"Our hunch is that 2025 will be a better year for the economy than 2024," Dales said. Philip Shaw, chief economist at Investec, said the economy was only just on course to avoid a recession - defined as two consecutive quarters of economic contraction - but the data raised the likelihood of the BoE cutting interest rates in early 2025. A separate survey from Lloyds Bank showed confidence among businesses fell to its lowest level of 2024 in December. Data from the Confederation of British Industry - based on previously released surveys - showed companies expected activity to fall and prices to rise in early 2025. Alpesh Paleja, a CBI economist, said the figures "suggest that the economy is headed for the worst of all worlds - firms expect to reduce both output and hiring, and price growth expectations are getting firmer." The government's hike in social security contributions for employers was exacerbating weak demand, Paleja said. — Reuters

Political turmoil shakes South Korea's economy

SEOUL: After South Korea's president and his replacement were both deposed over a failed bid to impose martial law, deepening political turmoil is threatening the country's currency and shaking confidence in its economy. The won, which plunged Friday to its lowest level against the dollar since 2009, has been in near-constant decline since President Yoon Suk Yeol's attempt to scrap civilian rule in early December.

Business and consumer confidence in Asia's fourth-largest economy have also taken their biggest hit since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to figures released by the Bank of Korea.

Lawmakers impeached Yoon in mid-December on charges of insurrection, and on Friday they impeached his successor, acting president and prime minister Han Duck-soo, arguing that he refused demands to complete Yoon's removal from office and bring him to justice. That thrust Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok into the additional roles of acting president and prime minister. Choi has pledged to do all he can to end "this period of turmoil" and resolve the political crisis gripping the country. At the heart of the stalemate is the Constitutional Court, which will decide whether to uphold parliament's decision to impeach Yoon. It must do so by a two-thirds majority, however. And because three of the court's nine seats are currently vacant, a unanimous vote is required to confirm the suspended president's removal. Otherwise, Yoon will be automatically returned to office.

Lawmakers on Thursday nominated three judges to

fill the vacant seats, but acting president Han refused to approve them, precipitating his own impeachment. After an acrimonious day in which lawmakers from Yoon's party erupted in protest, the country's newest acting president sought to project calm. "Although we are facing unexpected challenges once again, we are confident that our robust and resilient economic system will ensure rapid stabilization," Choi said Friday. The 61-year-old career civil servant has inherited a 2025 budget—adopted by the opposition alone—which is 4.1 trillion won (\$2.8 billion) less than the government had hoped for.

"There are already signs the crisis is having an impact on the economy," Gareth Leather of Capital Economics wrote in a note to clients, citing the dip in consumer and business confidence. "The crisis is unfolding against a backdrop of a struggling economy," he added, with GDP growth expected to be just two percent this year, weighed down by a global slowdown in demand for semiconductors. "Longer term, political polarization and resulting uncertainty could hold back investment in Korea," Leather wrote, citing the example of Thailand, another ultra-polarized country whose economy has stagnated since a coup in 2014.

But other economists noted that the South Korean economy has so far weathered the chaos well. As early as December 4, the day after Yoon declared martial law following a budget tussle with the opposition, the central bank promised to inject sufficient liquidity to stabilize the markets, and the Kospi Index has lost less than four percent since the start of the crisis. "Like everyone, I was surprised when Yoon took those crazy measures," Park Sang-in, a professor of economics at Seoul National University, told AFP. "But there was a resilience of democracy." "We come from being an underdeveloped country to one of the world's most dynamic economies in very few years, and Yoon Suk Yeol is a side effect of the growth," he added. "Korean society was mature enough to counter his crazy actions." — AFP



Protesters take part in a rally calling for the ouster of South Korea's impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol in front of the Gwanghwamun Gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul on December 28, 2024. — AFP

Brazil views labor violations at BYD site as human 'trafficking'

RIO DE JANEIRO: Authorities in Brazil said Friday they were probing Chinese auto giant BYD and one of its contractors for suspected "trafficking" of Chinese workers who were building a factory in the South American country. Federal prosecutors in Brazil are weighing possible criminal action after labor inspectors found 163 Chinese workers "in slave-like conditions" at the construction site in the northeast state of Bahia, a government statement said. The workers, employed by BYD contractor Jinjiang Open Engineering, were viewed as "victims of international trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation," said the statement.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman in Beijing, Mao Ning, said: "We have noted the relevant reports... and are currently verifying the situation." She added that Beijing "attaches great importance to protecting laborers' legitimate rights and interests, and has always

required Chinese enterprises to operate in line with the law and regulations." On Thursday, BYD and Jinjiang were quizzed by Brazilian government ministries, which said "the companies committed to collaborate in protecting the rescued workers."

On Monday, Brazilian officials said they had found labor violations at the site, which is being built to be BYD's largest electric car plant outside of Asia. Bahia's regional ministry for works (MPT) ordered construction to be suspended at part of the site. Inspections carried out since November found "degrading working conditions," including beds in workers' accommodation lacking mattresses, and one bathroom per 31 workers, an MPT statement said. The workers, who spent long hours under the sun, had "visible signs of skin damage," the statement said. The MPT added that it suspected "forced labor," with workers' passports confiscated and their employer "retaining 60 percent of their salary."

After the allegations were made public, BYD's Brazilian subsidiary said it had broken its contract with the Jinjiang subsidiary responsible for work on the site. It added that it had sent the 163 workers to stay in hotels. BYD spokesperson Li Yunfei blasted the allegations of human trafficking in a post made to his personal Weibo social media account on Thursday. — AFP

News in Brief

Peru hikes minimum wage 10%

LIMA: Peruvian President Dina Boluarte on Friday announced that the minimum wage will rise 10% starting next year to just over \$300 per month, as the Andean nation shows signs of an economic recovery after slipping into a recession last year. Boluarte, in a televised speech, said that the minimum wage will rise to 1,130 soles (\$301.90) per month, from the previous 1,025 soles. It marks the first minimum wage increase since May 2022 under Boluarte's predecessor, Pedro Castillo, who was ousted at the end of 2022 for attempting to dissolve Congress. "Today the outlook is optimistic, our economy is growing at a projected rate of 3.2 percent and private investment is recovering significantly," Boluarte said. — AFP

China probing beef imports

BEIJING: China's commerce ministry on Friday launched an investigation into imported beef at the request of representatives from its struggling domestic industry, it said. The local price of beef in China has trended downwards in recent years, with analysts blaming oversupply and a lack of demand as the world's second largest economy has slowed. At the same time imports have surged, with China representing a hugely important market for countries like Brazil, Argentina and Australia. — AFP

China to cut import tariffs

SHANGHAI: China will reduce import tariffs on ethane and certain recycled copper and aluminum raw materials from next year, the government said on Saturday. The Ministry of Finance announced adjustments to various import tariff categories, effective Jan 1, aimed at increasing imports of high-quality products, expanding domestic demand and promoting high-level opening-up, it said in a statement. Provisional import tariffs below the most-favoured-nation rates will be applied to 935 items, the ministry said. Import tariffs will be reduced on ethane and certain recycled copper and aluminum raw materials to advance green and low-carbon development. Tariffs will rise on commodities including molasses and sugar-containing pre-mixed powders will increase but be reduced on items such as cyclic olefin polymers, ethylene-vinyl alcohol copolymers and automatic transmissions for special-purpose vehicles such as fire trucks and repair vehicles. — AFP

Turkey's energy ministry sends delegation to Syria

ISTANBUL: A delegation from Turkey's energy ministry headed to Syria on Saturday to help Syrians obtain access to essential services after the fall of strongman Bashar Al-Assad. "A team from our energy ministry is on the way to Damascus," Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar told a meeting of the ruling AKP party in the central Anatolian province of Nevsehir. "We will identify Syria's infrastructure, energy and electricity needs and will do our best to ensure (Syrians) benefit from these essential services," he said. Turkey is home to nearly three million refugees who fled Syria after the start of the civil war in 2011.

Assad's overthrow has raised hopes that many will go back. Turkish officials said nearly 31,000 Syrians had returned home since Assad's ousting on December 8. "We hosted our Syrian brothers and sisters. Turkey was on the right side of history," Bayraktar said. "There was a fire in our neighbor's house... Now, God willing, we will do our best as Turkey to rebuild our neighbor's house," he added. The minister said there was a lot to do in the war-torn country. "It is very important to get Syria back on its feet." — AFP

Business

Trump asks US Supreme Court to pause law threatening TikTok ban

'President-elect must be given an opportunity to pursue a political solution'

WASHINGTON: US President-elect Donald Trump filed a brief Friday urging the Supreme Court to pause a law that would ban TikTok the day before his January 20 inauguration if it is not sold by its Chinese owner ByteDance.

"In light of the novelty and difficulty of this case, the court should consider staying the statutory deadline to grant more breathing space to address these issues," Trump's legal team wrote, to give him "the opportunity to pursue a political resolution." Trump was fiercely opposed to TikTok during his 2017-21 first term, and tried in vain to ban the video app on national security grounds.

The Republican voiced concerns—echoed by political rivals—that the Chinese government might tap into US TikTok users' data or manipulate what they see on the platform.

US officials had also voiced alarm over the popularity of the video-sharing app with young people, alleging that its parent company is subservient to Beijing and that the app is used to spread propaganda, claims denied by the company and the Chinese government.

Trump called for a US company to buy TikTok, with the government sharing in the sale price, and his



This combination of pictures shows a man holding a smartphone displaying the logo of Tiktok and President-elect Donald Trump speaking to the media. — AFP

successor Joe Biden went one stage further—signing a law to ban the app for the same reasons.

Trump has now, however, reversed course. At a press conference last week, Trump said he has "a warm spot" for TikTok and that his administration would take a look at the app and the potential ban. Earlier this

month, the president-elect met with TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew at his Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida. Recently, Trump told Bloomberg he had changed his mind about the app: "Now (that) I'm thinking about it, I'm for TikTok, because you need competition."

"If you don't have TikTok, you have Facebook and Instagram—and that's, you know, that's Zuckerberg." Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg and part of his Meta tech empire, was among the social media networks that banned Trump after attacks by his supporters on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. The ban was driven by concerns that he would use the platform to promote more violence. Those bans on major social media platforms were later lifted.

In the brief filed on Friday, Trump's lawyer made it clear the president-elect did not take a position on the legal merits of the current case. "President Trump takes no position on the underlying merits of this dispute," John Sauer wrote in the amicus curiae—or "friend of the court"—brief.

"Instead, he respectfully requests that the court consider staying the act's deadline for divestment of January 19, 2025, while it considers the merits of this

case, thus permitting President Trump's incoming Administration the opportunity to pursue a political resolution of the questions at issue in the case." A coalition of free speech groups—including the American Civil Liberties Union—also filed a separate brief to the Supreme Court opposing enforcement of the law, citing censorship concerns.

"Such a ban is unprecedented in our country and, if it goes into effect, will cause a far-reaching disruption in Americans' ability to engage with the content and audiences of their choice online," the rights groups' filing read, in part.

The US apex court agreed last week to hear TikTok's appeal against Biden's move to force its owner to divest from it or face a ban. With oral arguments scheduled for January 10, the case would have to be heard at a breakneck speed. TikTok argues that the law, the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, violates its First Amendment free speech rights.

AFP, among more than a dozen other fact-checking organizations, is paid by TikTok in several countries to verify videos that potentially contain false information. — AFP

Wall St Week Ahead

Trump's first actions and job data to test market in January

NEW YORK: After closing the books on a banner year for US stocks, investors expect to ride seasonal momentum into mid-January when a slew of economic data and a transition of power in Washington could send markets moving. The S&P 500 rose roughly 25 percent in 2024 through Dec 27, while the technology-heavy Nasdaq Composite index, which surpassed 20,000 for the first time in December, is up over 31 percent. On Friday, however, stocks sold off amid some profit taking and questions about how markets could perform in January, according to analysts and traders.

"There are concerns that maybe the first part of (next) year can involve some repositioning and reallocation of funds and those that are trading today and next week are probably just trying to get a little bit ahead of that," said Robert Pavlik, senior portfolio manager at Dakota Wealth.

Stocks tend to do well in the last five trading days of December and into the first two days of January, a phenomenon dubbed the Santa Claus rally, which has driven S&P gains of an average of 1.3 percent since 1969, according to the Stock Trader's Almanac. Despite the Friday selloff, for the last five trading sessions, the S&P rose 1.77 percent, while the Nasdaq was up 1.8 percent.

Just how long upward momentum lasts will depend on several forces that could help drive markets in 2025. Monthly US employment data on Jan 10 should give investors a fresh view into the health and strength of the US economy. Job growth rebounded in November following hurricane- and strike-related setbacks earlier in the year.

The market's strength will be tested again shortly after, when US companies start reporting fourth-quarter earnings. Investors anticipate a 10.33 percent earnings per share growth in 2025, versus a 12.47 percent expected rise in 2024, according to LSEG data, although excitement over President-elect Donald Trump's policies is expected to boost the outlook for some sectors like banks, energy and crypto. "There's the hope that taxes and regulations will be lowered or reduced next year, that will help support corporate profits, which are what drive the market in the first place," said Michael Rosen, chief investment officer at Angeles Investments.

Trump's inauguration on Jan 20 could also throw the markets some curve balls. He is expected to release at least 25 executive orders in his first day on a range of issues from immigration to energy and crypto policy. Trump has also threatened tariffs on goods from China and levies on products from both Mexico and Canada, as well as to crack down on immigration, creating costs that companies could ultimately pass on to consumers.

Helen Given, associate director of trading at Monex USA, said a new administration always brings with it a large degree of uncertainty. There is also a good chance the impact of the Trump administration's expected trade policies is far from fully priced into global currency markets, she added.

"We're looking ahead to see which of those proposed policies actually are enacted, which might be further down the pipeline," Given said, adding she expected a big impact on the euro, Mexican peso, the Canadian dollar, and the Chinese yuan.

The conclusion of the Federal Reserve's first monetary policy meeting of the year in late January could also present a challenge to the US stocks rally. Stocks tumbled on Dec 18 when the Fed implemented its third interest-rate cut for the year and signaled fewer cuts in 2025 because of an uncertain inflation outlook, disappointing investors who had expected lower rates to boost corporate profits and valuations. Still, that could be good for alternative assets like cryptocurrencies. The incoming crypto-friendly Trump administration is adding to a number of catalysts that are boosting crypto investors' confidence, said Damon Polistina, head of research at investment platform Eaglebrook Advisors. Bitcoin surged above \$107,000 this month on hopes of friendlier Trump policies. — Reuters

Canadian ministers meet Trump's team on tariffs

OTTAWA: Senior members of Canada's cabinet held talks Friday with US President-elect Donald Trump's nominees to lead the departments of commerce and the interior, as Ottawa works to hold off the threat of punishing tariffs. Canada's newly-appointed Finance Minister Dominic Leblanc and Foreign Minister Melanie Joly met with Howard Lutnick, Trump's commerce secretary nominee, who will also lead the country's tariff and trade agenda.

Interior secretary nominee Doug Burgum was also at the meeting held at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. Leblanc's spokesman Jean-Sebastien Comeau, who confirmed the participants, described the talks as "positive and productive."

Trump has vowed to impose crippling 25-percent tariffs on all Canadian imports when he takes office next month. He has said they will remain in place until Canada addresses the flow of undocumented migrants and the drug fentanyl into the United States.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has promised retaliatory measures should Trump follow through on his pledge, raising fears of a trade war. Leblanc and Joly "outlined the measures in Canada's Border Plan and reiterated the shared commitment to strengthen border security as well as combat the harm caused by fentanyl to save Canadian and American lives," Comeau said in a statement.

Canada's Border Plan—estimated to cost CAN\$1 billion (\$694 million)—was crafted as part of Ottawa's response to Trump's concerns. Lutnick and Burgum "agreed to relay information to President Trump," the

German industry pessimistic over 2025 job prospects

FRANKFURT: Business leaders across the German economy say they are expecting a fall in employment levels in their sectors in 2025, according to a think tank study published Friday. The latest gloomy forecast for Europe's economic motor comes two months before an early general election in which Germany's economic malaise is sure to play a key role.

According to the IW institute, the number of employers' federations expecting a drop in employment levels in 2025 has risen to 25, out of the 49 surveyed in late November and early December, up from 23 in 2024 and 16 in 2023. They include key sectors for the German economy such as chemicals and automobiles, as well as machine production, construction and metalworking.

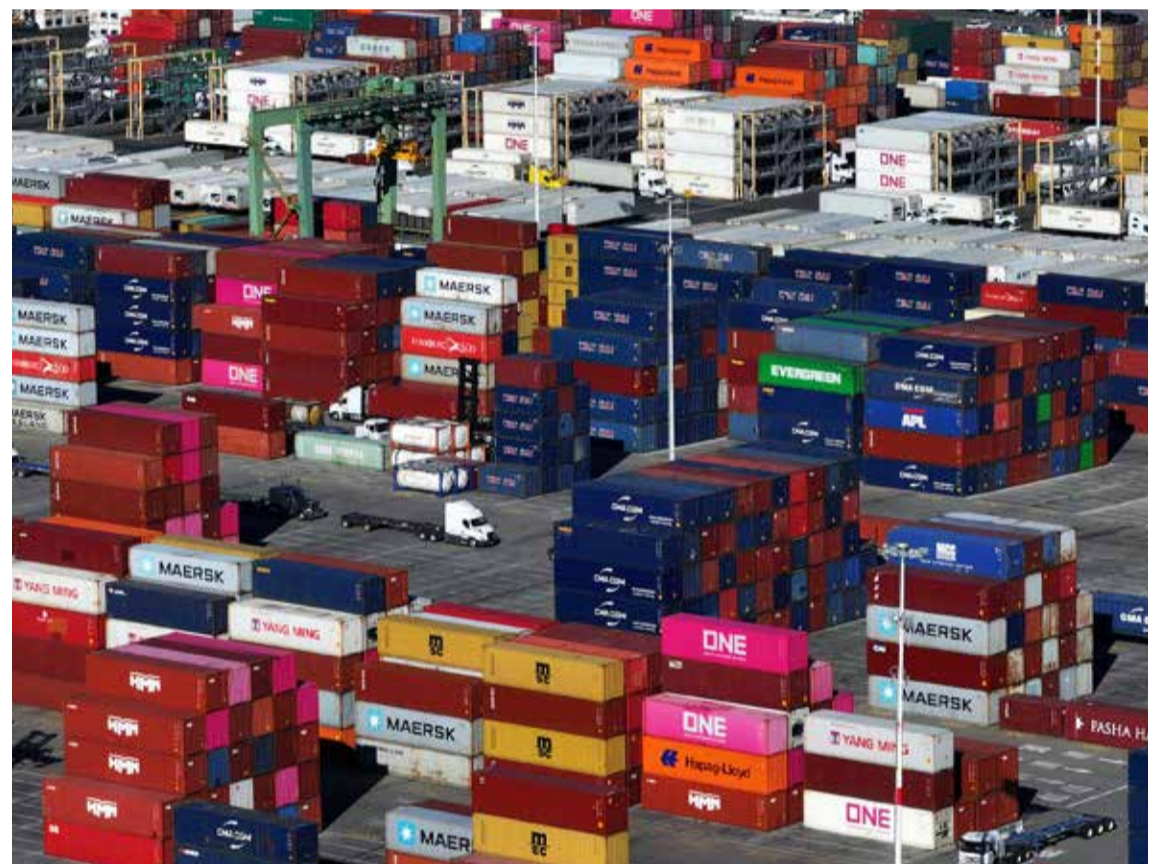
There are seven sectors which say they are expecting a rise in employment, including pharmaceuticals, aeronautics, energy and recycling. Many industries are being squeezed by high costs for energy, materials and labor and by the country's knotty bureaucracy, with firms in Germany's flagship car industry already announcing cost-cutting plans in recent months.

Steelmaker Georgsmarienhütte has been trying to soften the blow by reducing employees' hours but has warned that a wave of redundancies cannot be ruled out. "I say it clearly: if energy is this expensive and industry is getting ever weaker,

Montenegro to extradite crypto businessman to US

BELGRADE: Montenegro announced on Friday that it would extradite South Korean cryptocurrency entrepreneur Do Kwon to the United States, following a year and a half of dizzying court rulings and subsequent reversals over his removal. For months, Seoul and Washington have been seeking the South Korean's extradition for his suspected role in a fraud linked to the collapse of his company Terraform Labs, which wiped out about \$40 billion of investors' money and shook global crypto markets.

The crypto tycoon, whose real name is Kwon Do-



CALIFORNIA: In an aerial view, shipping containers are stacked on a dock at the Port of Oakland in Oakland, California. — AFP

statement said. Trudeau is facing his worst political crisis since sweeping into office in 2015.

Leblanc was named finance minister earlier this month after the surprise resignation of Chrystia Freeland. In a scathing resignation letter, Freeland

accused Trudeau of prioritizing handouts to voters instead of preparing Canada's finances for a possible trade war. More than 75 percent of Canadian exports go to the United States and nearly two million Canadian jobs depend on trade. — AFP



DUISBURG: An aerial view shows the blast furnace of German industrial conglomerate Thyssenkrupp Steel Europe AG in Duisburg, western Germany. — AFP

we just won't be able to do it any more in Germany," co-owner Anne-Marie Grossmann told the Handelsblatt daily on Friday.

"We are standing just before the abyss," she said. In previous years, IW's studies found businesses inclined to keep staff even in the face of an expected drop in production, citing a lack of

available labor. "This retention effect has weakened strongly in 2024," the IW says.

The federations surveyed by IW said they consider the current general economic outlook to be worse than it was a year ago. Germany's central bank has forecast GDP will expand just 0.2 percent in 2025, after a 0.2 percent contraction in 2024. — AFP

hyung, was arrested in March 2023 in Montenegro after trying to board a flight with fake Costa Rican travel documents. He had been on the run for months after fleeing South Korea and then Singapore before Terraform Lab's crash in 2022. The Montenegrin Constitutional Court, on Tuesday rejected an appeal by Kwon's lawyers against the decision of the Supreme Court, which in September determined that the conditions for extraditing Do Kwon to South Korea and the United States for criminal proceedings had been met.

After that, it was up to Justice Minister Bojan Bozovic to decide to which of the two countries Do Kwon would be extradited. "It was concluded that the majority of the criteria prescribed by law favor the extradition request from the competent authorities of the United States of America," the Ministry of Justice said in a statement on Friday.

"Consequently, the Minister of Justice issued a decision approving the extradition of Kwon Do Hyung to the United States, while simultaneously rejecting the

extradition request from the Republic of Korea," it added. Montenegro has already deported Kwon's business partner who was travelling with him—identified only by his initials JCH—to South Korea in early February.

Terraform Labs created a cryptocurrency called TerraUSD that was marketed as a "stablecoin", a token that is pegged to stable assets such as the US dollar to prevent drastic fluctuations. Do Kwon successfully marketed them as the next big thing in crypto, attracting billions in investments and global hype.

But despite billions in investments, TerraUSD and its sister token Luna went into a death spiral in May 2022. Experts said Kwon had set up a glorified Ponzi scheme, in which many investors lost their life savings. In January, Terraform Labs officially sought bankruptcy protection in the United States. Cryptocurrencies have come under increasing scrutiny from regulators after a string of controversies in recent years, including the high-profile collapse of the FTX exchange. — AFP

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024



A picture taken from Mount Qasioun shows the sun rising as a thick fog covers Damascus on December.--AFP photos



A couple watches the sunrise from a spot on Mount Qasioun overlooking Damascus.

WATCHING THE SUN RISE OVER A NEW DAMASCUS

After the fall of Bashar Al-Assad, Afaf Mohammed did what she could not for more than a decade: she climbed Mount Qasioun to admire a sleeping Damascus "from the sky" and watch the sun rise. Through the long years of Syria's civil war, which began in 2011 with a government crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, people were not allowed access to the mountain. But now they can return to look down again on their capital, with its high-rise hotels and poor suburbs exhausted by war.

When night falls, long queues of vehicles slowly make their way up a twisting road to a brightly lit corniche at the summit. Once there, they can relax, listen to music, eat and drink, and, inevitably, take selfies. On some evenings there have even been firework displays. Afaf Mohammed told AFP that "during the war we weren't allowed up to Mount Qasioun. There were few public places that were truly accessible." At her feet, the panorama of Syria's capital stretched far and wide. It was the second time in weeks that the dentist in her thirties had come to the mountaintop.

Ideal for snipers

Her first was just after a coalition of Islamist-led rebels entered the city, ousting Assad on December 8. On that occasion she came at dawn. "I can't describe how I felt after we had gone through 13 years of hardship," she said, wrapped close in an abaya to ward off the chilly breeze. Qasioun was off limits



People watch the view at a spot on Mount Qasioun overlooking Damascus.

to the people of Damascus because it was an ideal location for snipers -- the great view includes elegant presidential palaces and other government buildings. It was also from this mountain that artillery units for years pounded rebel-held areas at the gates of the capital.

Mohammed believes the revolution brought "a phenomenal freedom" that includes the right to visit previously forbidden places. "No one can stop us now or block our way. No one will harm us," she said. Patrols from the security forces of Syria's new rulers are in evidence, however. They look on as a boy plays a tabla drum and young people on

folding chairs puff from water pipes as others dance and sing, clapping their hands. Everything is good-natured, reflecting the atmosphere of freedom that now bathes Syria since the end of Assad rule. Gone are the stifling restrictions that once ruled the people's lives, and soldiers no longer through the city streets.

Hot drinks and snacks

Mohammad Yehia, in his forties, said he once brought his son Rabiuh up to Mount Qasioun when he was small. "But he doesn't remember having been here," he said. After Assad fell, his son



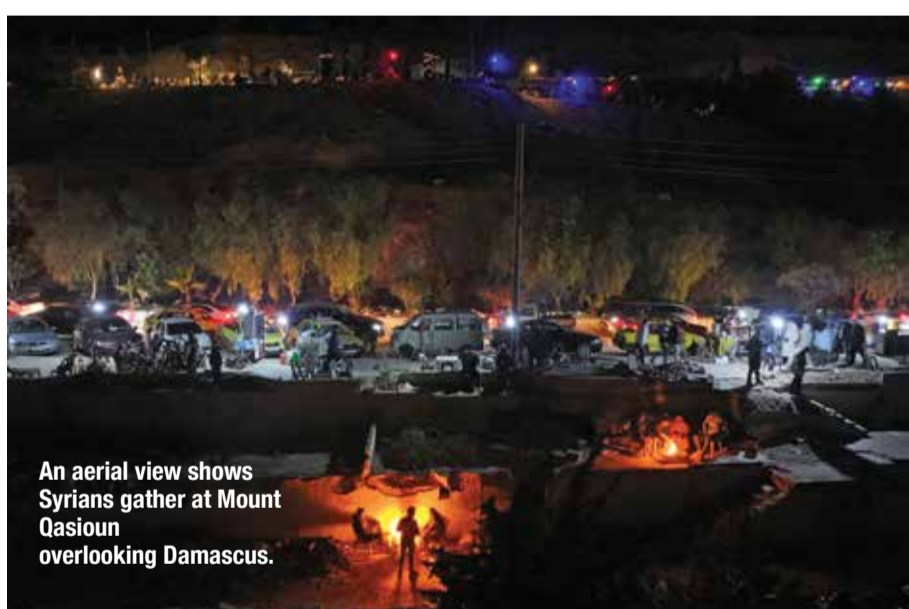
Men sit at a spot on Mount Qasioun overlooking Damascus.

"asked if we would be allowed to go up there, and I said, 'Of course'," Yehia added. So they came the next day. Yehia knows the place well -- he used to work here, serving hot drinks and snacks from the back of a van to on-lookers who came to admire the view. He prides himself on being one of the first to come back again, more than a decade later.

The closure of Mount Qasioun to the people of Damascus robbed him of his livelihood at a time when the country was in economic freefall under Western sanctions. The war placed a yoke of poverty on 90 percent of the popula-

tion. "We were at the suffocation point," Yehia told AFP. "Even if you worked all day you still couldn't make ends meet. "This is the only place where the people of Damascus can come and breathe a little. It's a spectacular view... it can make us forget the worries of the past."

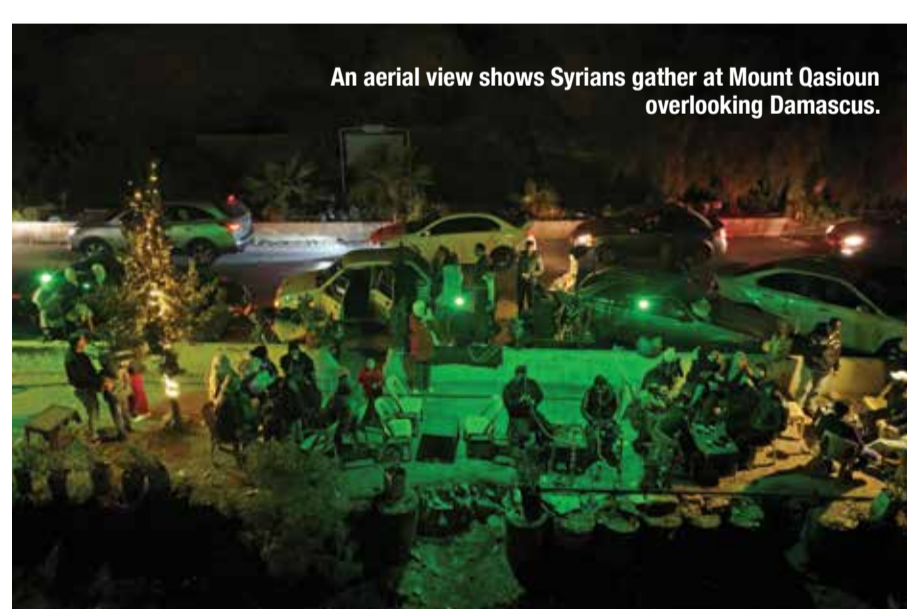
Malak Mohammed, who came up the mountain with her sister Afaf, said that on returning "for the first time since childhood" she felt "immense joy". "It's as if we were getting our whole country back," Malak said. Before, "we were deprived of everything".--AFP



An aerial view shows Syrians gather at Mount Qasioun overlooking Damascus.



A man sells tea at a spot on Mount Qasioun overlooking Damascus.



An aerial view shows Syrians gather at Mount Qasioun overlooking Damascus.

'Romeo and Juliet' star Olivia Hussey dies aged 73

Olivia Hussey, who starred as a teenage Juliet in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film "Romeo and Juliet," garnering her a Golden Globe, died Friday at age 73, her family announced. "Olivia was a remarkable person whose warmth, wisdom, and pure kindness touched the lives of all who knew her," her family said in a statement posted to her Instagram account. Buenos Aires-born Hussey was 15 when she and her co-lead Leonard Whiting starred in the Oscar-winning adaptation of William Shakespeare's tragedy. In 2023, the two actors filed a lawsuit against the studio alleging child abuse over a controversial nude scene featuring the pair, who were minors at the time. A judge dismissed the lawsuit later that year. In a 2018 interview with entertainment trade publication Variety, Hussey said Zeffirelli had shot the nude scene tastefully. "Everyone thinks they were so young they probably didn't realize what they were doing," Hussey said.

"But we were very aware. We both came from drama schools and when you work, you take your work very seriously." Whiting told Variety the pair had supported each other through the daunting experience. "Olivia was very, very nervous and frightened as well, but we really were very fond of each other and we helped each other get through the whole thing," he said in 2023.



Born to an Argentine opera singer and a British legal secretary, Hussey moved with her family from Buenos Aires to London when she was seven years old. She studied at the Italia Conti drama school and was already a working actor as a teenager when she was cast in Zeffirelli's film. --AFP

Pioneering Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa dies at 86

Renowned Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa, acclaimed for her searing portrayal of the Partition of India in her masterpiece "Ice Candy Man," has died in the US city of Houston at the age of 86. She passed away on December 25, her daughter Mohur Sidhwa told AFP. Born on August 11, 1938, in Karachi to a Parsi family, Sidhwa spent her formative years in Lahore, which was the backdrop for much of her writing.

She was the first Pakistani writer to gain global recognition for her works, which were written in English and paved the way for a wave of celebrated authors in that language in recent years, including the likes of Kamila Shamsie and Mohammed Hanif. Her most famous book, 1988's "Ice Candy Man" -- later published as "Cracking India" -- tells the story of a young Parsi

girl, afflicted by polio as Sidhwa herself was, as she witnesses the brutal communal strife that accompanied the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

The novel draws on Sidhwa's personal experiences. In interviews, she recounted harrowing memories, including seeing the body of a young man spill out of a gunny sack kicked over by her gardener as he escorted her to a private tutor. "Ice Candy Man," was later adapted into the critically acclaimed 1998 film "Earth," directed by Indian-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta and starring Bollywood icons Aamir Khan and Nandita Das.

It was also included on the BBC's list of 100 most inspiring novels in 2019. Her other works include 1978's "The Crow Eaters," a witty satire poking fun at the foibles of a Parsi family

in colonial India, and 1993's "An American Brat," a coming-to-America story following the journey of a Parsi girl fleeing Islamization in dictator Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan. Parsis -- followers of Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest religions -- fled Persia over a millennium ago, seeking refuge in the Indian subcontinent. Recent emigration, driven by instability in Pakistan, means there is only a tiny community left in the country.

Sidhwa herself later emigrated to the United States, teaching at institutions including Columbia University, Mount Holyoke College and the University of Houston. Her accolades included the Sitara-i-Imtiaz, a high-ranking Pakistani civilian award, and Italy's prestigious Mondello Prize for foreign authors, in 2007.--AFP



Hot air balloons rise in the sky during the International Hot-Air Balloon festival.



Hot air balloons rise in the sky during the International Hot-Air Balloon festival in Pokhara. — AFP

With Nepal's snowy Himalayan peaks as a backdrop, the sky above Pokhara transformed into a vibrant canvas of colors for the country's first hot-air balloon festival. Tourism is a major earner for Nepal, which saw over a million foreign visitors this year after a post-pandemic bounceback, and investments are being made in hotels and airports to cater to travelers. "We felt that we must bring a balloon festival like this to

Nepal," Sabin Maharjan, an organizer of the event, told AFP.

Hot-air balloons from more than 10 countries participated in the festival. "A ride here can be very exciting as you can see mountains, hills and lakes," Maharjan added. "All passengers tell us that they are very happy -- such a festival will boost our tourism."



Participants prepare their hot-air balloon.



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



Participants prepare their hot-air balloon during the International Hot-Air Balloon festival in Pokhara.



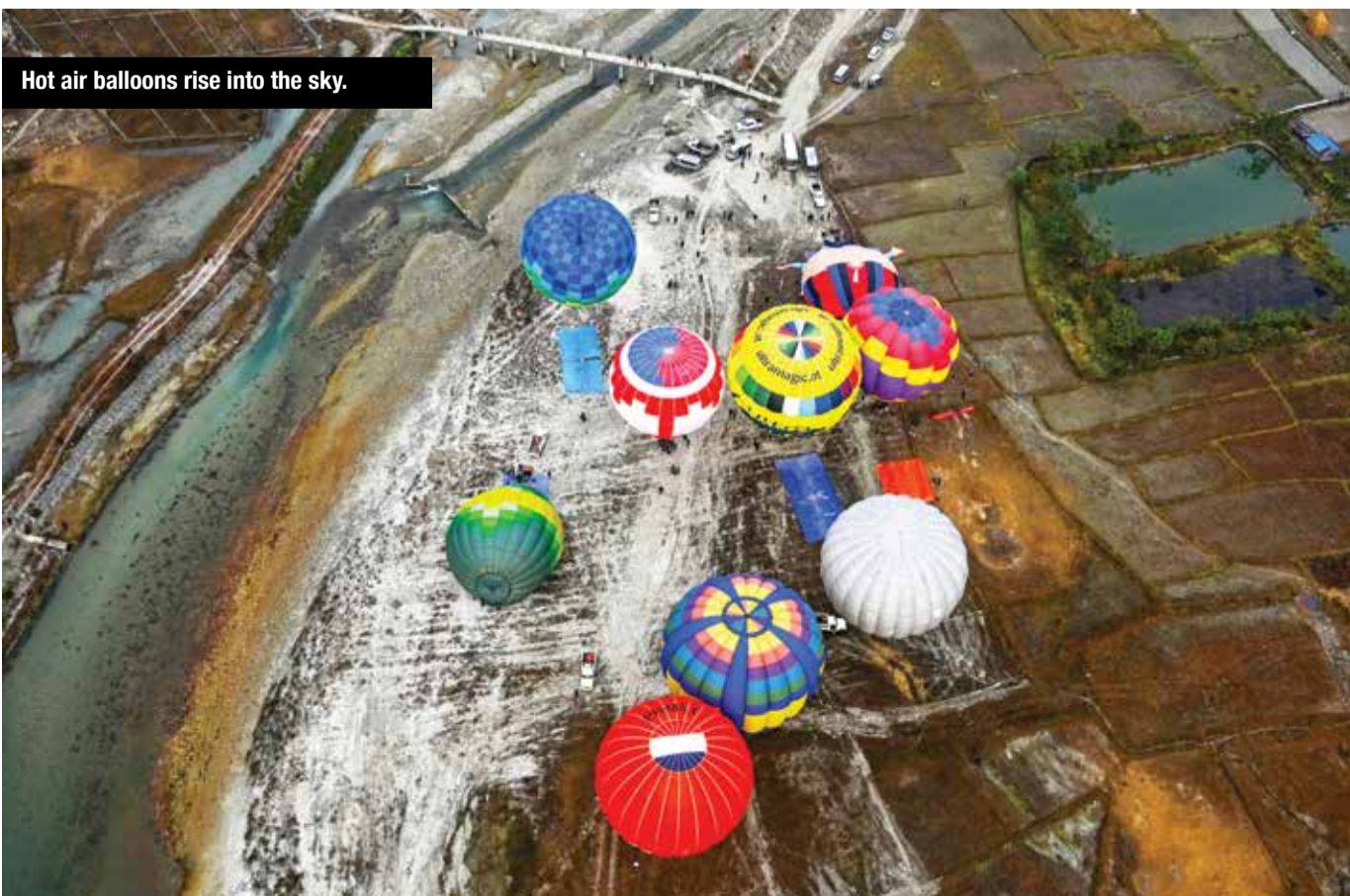
Participants prepare their hot-air balloon.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.



Participants inflate their hot-air balloon.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.



Participants prepare their hot-air balloon.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.



A participant prepares his hot-air balloon.



A participant prepares his hot-air balloon.



Participants prepare their hot-air balloon.

'Spectacular'
The balloons created a mesmerizing display against a stunning sight of the snow-capped Annapurna range. "It is spectacular," American balloon pilot Derek Hamcock, 67, said. "As soon as you go above the small range here you see all the Himalayas. Unbelievable, every time you see them it is unbelievable." Balloons shaped as a rat and a frog from were among those joining in the fun, slowly drifting with the breeze.
"You never know where you are going," said Diego Criado del Rey, 29,

a balloon pilot from Spain. "So it is pretty much you and the nature -- not fighting, but being together. You go where the nature tells you." Nepal's Civil Aviation Authority issued a notice for the skies over Pokhara for a duration of nine days to allow balloon flights. Although more than two centuries have passed since France's Montgolfier brothers made the first manned flight, ballooning can still capture the imagination. — AFP



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



A hot-air balloon rises into the sky.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.



A participant prepares his hot-air balloon.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.



Hot air balloons rise into the sky.

Sports

Reddy's defiant maiden ton claws India back into 4th Australia Test

'This hundred will be talked about and remembered for a very, very long time'

MELBOURNE: Nitish Kumar Reddy scored a defiant maiden century on Saturday as India fought back to reach 358-9 on a rain-hit third day of the fourth Test against Australia. Rising all-rounder Reddy was applauded off the Melbourne Cricket Ground on 105 not out after rain ended play for the day midway through the final session.

Having provided much-needed stability to another shaky Indian batting effort, the 21-year-old will resume on Sunday alongside Mohammed Siraj, on two, with the first-innings deficit reduced to 116 runs. Australia's push for a much bigger advantage after scoring 474 was stymied by Reddy and spin-bowling all-rounder Washington Sundar, who scored 50 as the pair put on 127 for the eighth wicket.

To the roar of a large contingent of Indian supporters among a record 83,073 third-day crowd at the MCG, Reddy lofted Scott Boland over mid-on to reach three figures just before play was halted. It was an innings memorable for resolute defence, mixed with classical strokeplay.

Reddy faced 176 balls, hitting 10 fours and one six, continuing the fine batting form at number eight in the order that has marked his debut series. In his first six Test innings, he has scored 284 runs—the most in the series by any Indian player—at an average of 71.

Sundar described Reddy's innings as "unbelievable" and said he always knew a century was well within his team-mate's ability. "Mentally he's very, very strong," Sundar said. "I've known him for quite a few years. The way he went about his business today was amazing. He gives a hundred percent, that's his approach to life."

"I'm sure this hundred will be talked about and

remembered for a very, very long time." Seamers Boland, who took 3-57, and Pat Cummins with 3-86 were the most productive Australian bowlers in conditions that offered little assistance despite overcast skies. Boland said Reddy was a "nice player" whose range of shots proved hard to contain.

"It looks like he's got pretty much every shot in the book," Boland said. "Obviously he's playing really nicely. Coming in down in the lower order, he's trying to put the pressure back on us."

Record crowd

Boland believed Australia were still well placed to push for victory, with the pitch still containing a "bit of nip" for the seamers. He said team-mate Mitchell Starc was bowling with a "niggle in his back or rib" but expected the paceman would continue to play a full part in the Test.

"He's someone who can still bowl at the same pace even when he is really sore, which is a great trait to have." The recalled Sundar's dogged knock off 162 balls ended when he was caught at first slip by Steve Smith from off-spinner Nathan Lyon.

It ended a partnership that traversed the entire second session after India had advanced from 164-5 overnight to 244-7 at lunch. Sundar survived the most freakish moment of the day when on 18. Attempting to flick a leg-sided delivery from Starc, the ball flew from the back of the bat into the slip cordon where a diving Smith spilled a one-handed opportunity.

India lost Rishabh Pant and Ravindra Jadeja in the opening session. Pant's innings of 28 ended when he over-balanced while attempting a ramp shot for six off Boland, top-edging the ball to third man where



MELBOURNE: India's Nitish Kumar Reddy (L) attempts a ramp shot past Australia's wicketkeeper Alex Carey (R) on the third day of the fourth cricket Test match between Australia and India at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). — AFP

Lyon held the catch. Jadeja was trapped lbw when on 17, playing back to a Lyon delivery that skidded on. The crowd of 83,073 was a record for the third day of a Boxing Day Test, according to Cricket Australia, and the largest day three crowd at the Melbourne Cricket Ground since 1937.

The record total attendance for a Boxing Day

Test is 271,865, which looks certain to be smashed on Sunday after 255,462 spectators came through the gates on the first three days. Rain threatened throughout the day and about 40 minutes of play was lost in a period either side of tea. The series is locked at 1-1 with the fifth and final Test to be played in Sydney next week. — AFP



SYDNEY: Australia's Alex de Minaur hits a return to Argentina's Tomas Martin Etcheverry during their men's singles match at the United Cup on Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney on December 28, 2024. — AFP

Australia crash to Argentina at United Cup

SYDNEY: Alex de Minaur swept past Tomas Martin Etcheverry to win his first match of the season Saturday but it was not enough to prevent Argentina upsetting hosts Australia at the United Cup, while Switzerland beat France.

The world number nine crushed his opponent 6-1, 6-4 to level the tie after teammate Olivia Gadecki crashed to Nadia Podoroska 6-2, 6-4 in the women's singles rubber at Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney. But the home side couldn't lift in the deciding mixed doubles with Etcheverry returning to partner Maria Carle and beating Matt Ebdon and Ellen Perez 6-2, 6-4.

Despite losing the tie, De Minaur was happy with his early-season form. "I've been putting some great work in the pre-season," he said. "I felt comfortable with the way I was playing before the tournament, so I just told myself to back myself and play the type of tennis I wanted to play."

Former Olympic gold medalist Belinda Bencic won her first tour-level match since the 2023 US Open to help Switzerland beat France. The 27-year-old, a one-time world number four who is now ranked 487, took down Chloe Paquet 6-3, 6-1, winning 10 of the last 11 games.

While she tentatively returned to the court at low-key events in November after having a baby in April, it was her first win at tour-level since her third-round victory at the 2023 US Open. Her teammate Dominic Stricker slumped 6-3, 7-5 to Ugo Humbert in their singles clash to send the tie to the mixed doubles. Bencic fronted up again alongside Stricker to down Edouard Roger-Vasselin and Elixane Lechemia 6-1, 7-6 (7/4) and earn Switzerland the win.

"I'm really excited to be back, of course," said Bencic, who won Olympic gold at the 2021 Tokyo Games and has eight career WTA titles to her name. "I had a little bit of nerves at the start and a little bit of rust, so I'm happy I kind of accepted that and tried to fight through it." And after, "I felt like it went smoother, I became a little bit more calm, and kind of was more able to focus on my tennis." In Perth, Canada bounced back after Felix Auger-Aliassime lost his singles rubber to prevail 2-1 over Croatia.

The win came thanks to a 6-3, 6-4 mixed doubles victory from Auger-Aliassime and Leylah Fernandez against Lucija Cirk Bagaric and Ivan Dodig. "It was all about trusting each other and not trying to go for too much," Auger-Aliassime said. "We stuck to the game plan and it worked out well."

After 2021 US Open finalist Fernandez easily dispatched Donna Vekic 6-4, 6-3 to start the tie, Auger-Aliassime got into trouble against Borna Coric, crashing 0-6, 6-4, 6-4. The 18-nation mixed-team United Cup is being played in Perth and Sydney.

Each team features three men and three women, with ties comprising one men's and one women's singles and an often decisive mixed-doubles clash. The tournament began on Friday with Spain crashing 2-1 to Elena Rybakina's Kazakhstan, while China swept past Brazil 3-0. — AFP

Duffy bowls NZ to T20 victory over Sri Lanka

MOUNT MAUNGANUI: A late bowling fight-back sparked by Jacob Duffy produced a remarkable eight-run victory for New Zealand against Sri Lanka at Mount Maunganui on Saturday. Sri Lanka, with openers Pathum Nissanka and Kusal Mendis in sparkling form, were cruising towards the 173-run target when they reached 95 without loss at the halfway stage.

But in the 14th over, with Sri Lanka 121-0, Duffy changed the game with three wickets in four balls, all caught behind by Mitchell Hay, beginning with the dismissal of Mendis for 46 off 36 deliveries. Nissanka went on to make 90 off 60, which included seven fours and three sixes for his highest Twenty20 score, while no other Sri Lankan reached double figures.

"We should have done better," was the succinct summary from Sri Lankan captain Charith Asalanka who was out for three and also dropped a catch. "Pathum and Kusal batted well, the rest including me should take responsibility for this loss."

New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner said Duffy changed the game with his 3-21 after the home side reached 172-8 in their 20 overs with the innings propped up by a century stand by Daryl Mitchell and Michael Bracewell.

The pair came together in the 10th over with New Zealand struggling at 65-5 and put on 105 before



MOUNT MAUNGANUI: New Zealand's Michael Bracewell bats during the first Twenty20 cricket match between New Zealand and Sri Lanka at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui on December 28, 2024. — AFP

both were dismissed in the final over. Mitchell was stumped for 62 off 42 deliveries while Bracewell was caught behind for 59 off 33.

"It was a massive partnership for us, the way they went about it, they soaked it up for a bit then put the pressure back on to put up a pretty good score," Santner said. Binura Fernando, who removed both New Zealand openers in his second over, finished with 2-22.

Tim Robinson was caught and bowled for 11

when he drove a short-pitched delivery straight back to the bowler. Three balls later Rachin Ravindra, on eight, nicked an outswinger and was caught behind. Mark Chapman, dropped on four, reached 15 before he was caught on the boundary by Kamindu Mendis off the bowling of Matheesha Pathirana. Glenn Phillips had made eight off nine deliveries when he was trapped in front and Mitchell Hay went first ball when he played and missed at a delivery drifting into the pads. — AFP



SYDNEY: This handout image taken and received from Rolex on December 26, 2024 shows the yacht Whisper (R) competing at the start of the annual Sydney to Hobart yacht race on Boxing Day on Sydney Harbour. — AFP

LawConnect wins punishing and deadly Sydney-Hobart race

SYDNEY: Australian supermaxi LawConnect took back-to-back line honors in the Sydney-Hobart ocean race early Saturday, leading a fleet shaken by the deaths of two sailors in wild weather conditions. LawConnect, the 100-foot defending champion skippered by Christian Beck, arrived first in Hobart after main rival Comanche dropped out with a damaged mainsail on the first night.

The crew navigated to victory along the final stretch of Tasmania's River Derwent in the dark, early hours of the morning after a day-and-a-half of drama since the fleet departed a sun-splashed Sydney Harbour on Boxing Day. LawConnect crossed with a winning time of one day, 13 hours, 35 minutes and 13 seconds, according to the official race tracker. Fans on the dock cheered her arrival but there were no signs of the usual celebrations aboard, a livestream by the race organizers showed.

Celestial, a 70-footer with hopes of winning the Tattersall Cup for the overall handicap race, was in second place, finishing a little over two-and-a-half

hours later. Wild Thing came in third. "It was challenging conditions, probably the roughest race I've done out of the 11 that I have done," said LawConnect sailing master Tony Mutter.

"But we came through okay. We didn't break too much stuff, and people are okay, we have got a few bumps and bruises," he told reporters in Hobart, explaining that his skipper was unable to appear because of a stomach bug. The crew faced 35-45 knot gales downwind out of Sydney, big waves and tricky currents, he said. "We are obviously hugely disappointed in the news that we heard during the race with the loss of a couple of fellow competitors and our heartfelt condolences go out to all the friends and family," Mutter said. "We are obviously not doing any celebrations on the boat and we will do that quietly later on."

Weather is a critical factor in the 628-nautical-mile race, first held in 1945. This year's initial fleet of 104 was pummeled by gale-force winds and big waves as it raced southwards along Australia's eastern coast before tackling the treacherous Bass Strait.

Two sailors were killed in separate incidents in rough weather on the first night, officials said. The boom on Flying Fish Arctos hit 55-year-old Roy Quaden on the head; and the main sheet on Bowline struck 65-year-old Nick Smith who then collided with a winch, said David Jacobs, vice commodore of the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia. Fellow crew members tried to revive both men but failed, officials said. — AFP

Kyrgios says tennis integrity 'awful' after doping scandals

BRISBANE: Nick Kyrgios lashed out Saturday at what he believes is the lenient treatment of world tennis number one Italian Jannik Sinner for a failed drug test and said integrity in the sport was "awful". Sinner twice tested positive for the banned steroid clostebol in March.

However, the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) accepted his argument that the steroid entered his system due to contamination from his physiotherapist and opted not to suspend him. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) subsequently appealed the decision at the Court of Arbitration for Sport, with a verdict pending.

Kyrgios has been scathing about the ITIA decision in the past and didn't hold back in a press conference ahead of his return to the game at the Brisbane International after an 18-month injury lay-off. "Tennis integrity right now, and everyone knows it, but no one wants to speak about it—it's awful," said the Australian.

"It's actually awful and it's not okay. I know that people don't like it when I just speak out about things, be honest about things. "For a kid that grew up playing tennis, I enjoyed the competition, I enjoyed playing. "I can get emotional, I can throw a racquet, but that's nothing compared to cheating and taking performance-enhancing drugs."

Asked whether he was accusing Sinner of cheating, Kyrgios told journalists to look at the facts. "He did fail two doping tests at separate times, as well," Kyrgios said. "It wasn't one after the other -- they were a different time frame, so I mean, if you think that that's the way that it got in his system, if that's how you think it's happened, then."

"But, I mean, if he didn't do anything wrong, then why did they take his prize money and points away? Obviously they found something wrong with it." With former women's world number one Iga Swiatek also having been suspended for a doping violation in 2024, Kyrgios said the sport's image was being tarnished. "I just think that it's been handled horrifically in our sport," he said. — AFP

Sports

Brown dominates as NBA champion Celtics snap skid

Sixers' Embiid fined \$75,000 for 'obscene gestures'

LOS ANGELES: Jaylen Brown delivered a 44-point gem as the NBA champion Boston Celtics snapped a two-game losing streak with a 142-105 blowout of the Indiana Pacers on Friday. Brown set the tone with 15 points in the first quarter, when the Celtics outscored the Pacers 39-22 to take control.

He finished with six of the Celtics' 23 three-pointers and came up with four steals, posting his highest scoring output since he scored 50 in a win over Orlando in January 2022. "He was big-time," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said of Brown, who energized the TD Garden crowd with an array of thunderous dunks. "He has the ability to impact a team and an arena with his energy and his physicality."

"When he gets into a certain zone he just gets locked in, and you kind of saw that on both ends of the floor." Jayson Tatum scored 22 points and pulled down 13 rebounds and Payton Pritchard added 18 points, eight rebounds and 10 assists off the bench for the Celtics, who shrugged off the absence of Kristaps Porzingis and Jrue Holiday to post their biggest points total of the season.

Tyrese Haliburton scored 19 points and Benedict Mathurin scored 18 for the Pacers, who were without injured Obi Toppin and Andrew Nembhard. The lopsided win over the team they vanquished in last season's Eastern Conference finals saw the Celtics avoid their first three-game skid of the season.

It also kept them in touch with Eastern Conference leaders Cleveland, who improved their league-best record to 27-4 with a 149-135 victory over the Denver Nuggets. Donovan Mitchell scored 33 points to lead six Cavaliers players in double figures as Cleveland won their sixth straight—and their 10th in 11 games. The Cavs drilled 23 three-pointers and led by as many as 21, withstanding a triple-double of 27 points, 14 rebounds and 13 assists from Denver's NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic.

Edwards seals T'Wolves win
It came down to the wire in Houston, where Minnesota's Anthony Edwards drilled a step-back three-pointer with 23.2 seconds remaining to lift the Timberwolves to a 113-112 victory over the Rockets. Fred VanVleet had a chance to win it for Houston, but missed a three-pointer with 1.8 seconds left.

Julius Randle scored 27 points and Edwards finished with 24 for the Timberwolves, who trailed by 16 points, 106-90, with 4:57 left to play. "Made it happen!" Edwards said. "Got some stops, we made some big shots—made a big shot at the end right there."

Alperen Sengun led the Rockets with 38 points and 12 rebounds. Amen Thompson added 20 points as all five Houston starters scored in double figures only to come up short at the end. The New York Knicks pushed their winning streak to six games with a convincing 108-85 victory over the Magic in Orlando.

Jalen Brunson scored 26 points and handed out nine assists and Josh Hart added 23 points and 13 rebounds for the Knicks, who made just four of their 15 three-point attempts but converted 24 of their 34 free-throw attempts.

The Magic, with top contributors Paolo Banchero, Franz Wagner and Moritz Wagner on the injured list, were led by 27 points from Jalen Suggs. San Antonio star Victor Wembanyama delivered 19 points and seven rebounds as the Spurs heated up in the second half to beat the Nets 96-87 in Brooklyn.

The Spurs connected on just 11 of their 40 shot attempts in the first half and were tied 41-41 at halftime. They broke it open in the third quarter, connecting on 13 of their 18 shots. Wembanyama made four of his five attempts in the period, including three three-pointers, as the Spurs seized a 74-62 lead going into the fourth quarter.

Meanwhile, Philadelphia 76ers center Joel Embiid was fined \$75,000 by the NBA on Friday for



BOSTON: Jarace Walker #5 of the Indiana Pacers defends Jayson Tatum #0 of the Boston Celtics during the second half at TD Garden on December 27, 2024 in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP

making "obscene gestures on the playing court" in the Sixers' 118-114 victory over the Boston Celtics on Christmas Day. The league said in a statement the incidents occurred in the first half of the 76ers' victory in Boston, in which Embiid scored 27 points with nine rebounds.

Embiid celebrated a layup in the first half with the "DX crotch chop" thrusting gesture he has adopted from professional wrestling and been fined for in the past. He had another gesture for Boston fans after a

three-pointer shortly before halftime.

The 2023 NBA Most Valuable Player has appeared in just nine games this season because of injuries—the latest a sinus fracture that has him playing in a protective mask—and a three-game suspension for a physical altercation with a journalist. Embiid had another injury scare before Wednesday's game, falling over the security rope at the perimeter of the court during warmups and grabbing his right ankle. — AFP

Arsenal beat Ipswich to go second in EPL

LONDON: Arsenal began life without Bukayo Saka by beating Ipswich 1-0 to move into second place in the Premier League and cut Liverpool's lead to six points on Friday. Kai Havertz scored the only goal as Arsenal failed to turn their dominance into a more convincing scoreline.

The lack of a clinical goalscorer may ultimately cost Mikel Arteta's men a first league title in more than 20 years, but they took advantage of Chelsea's shock 2-1 defeat against Fulham on Thursday to become Liverpool's closest challenger.

Saka is set to be sidelined for "many weeks" in the words of Gunners' boss Arteta with fears the England international could be out until March due to a hamstring injury suffered in last weekend's 5-1 victory at Crystal Palace. Arteta's solution was to start with Gabriel Martinelli in Saka's normal role wide right with Gabriel Jesus continuing up front after scoring five times in Arsenal's previous two outings.

The home side were dominant in possession but had few clear-cut chances to show for it until the final quarter. "Frustration when you win? No. Things to improve? Yes," said Arteta on the slender margin of victory. "Credit to them as they're very well organized, but we restricted them to nothing," he added.

Arsenal were frustrated by Everton in a 0-0 draw in their last league game at the Emirates so there was relief when Havertz broke the deadlock on 23 minutes. The German prodded high into the net from Leandro Trossard's low cross for his 12th goal of the season.

Jesus did find the net once more with a cheeky finish between the legs of Arijanet Muric from an almost impossible angle, but was flagged offside. Arsenal's prowess from set-pieces has been well-documented and they should have added to their goals from corners this season.

Gabriel Magalhaes headed against the outside of the post from point-blank range when it



LONDON: Arsenal's Brazilian midfielder #11 Gabriel Martinelli battles for the ball with Ipswich Town's Irish defender #26 Dara O'Shea during the English Premier League football match between Arsenal and Ipswich Town at the Emirates Stadium in London on December 27, 2024. — AFP

seemed easier to score. As Ipswich's ambition grew as the second half wore on, so the chances at the other end began to flow.

Martin Odegaard had given the home crowd a scare by going down holding the left ankle that saw him sidelined by injury for two months earlier in the campaign. The Arsenal captain, though, was quickly back on his feet and weaving his way through the Ipswich defense with a mazy run and powerful strike that Muric tipped over.

From the resulting corner, Declan Rice's powerful shot was blocked by Dara O'Shea. Havertz then wasted a glorious chance for his second and Muric saved once more from Mikel

United's form. Thursday's 2-0 loss at Wolves was the Red Devils' third straight defeat in all competitions following a League Cup quarter-finals loss at Tottenham and an embarrassing 3-0 reverse at home to Bournemouth.

After the Wolves game, Amorim admitted he had "no idea" how long it will take for him to revive United, saying his focus was on "survival" after making the worst start by any Old Trafford boss in nearly 100 years. Amorim is the first United manager to lose five or more of his first 10 matches in charge since Walter Crickmer in January 1932, with the club languishing in 14th place in the table.

Those 10 matches, however, are more than Amorim's successor as Sporting Lisbon boss received,

Merino to ensure a nervy ending.

But Arsenal held out to leapfrog Nottingham Forest and Chelsea into second. Ipswich remain second from bottom, three points adrift of safety. Brighton missed the chance to move within one point of the top five as their poor run continued in a 0-0 draw at home to Brentford.

The Seagulls are now winless in their past six games but they two remain two points above their opponents. Brentford had the ball in the net early on through Yoane Wissa but the goal was ruled out for offside after a VAR check. Just Brentford's second point away from home all season is enough to edge the Bees ahead of Tottenham into 11th. — AFP

with the Portuguese powerhouses sacking Joao Pereira after just eight games in charge.

Defeat by Wolves left United closer to the relegation zone than the Champions League places heading into their final match of 2024 at home to in-form Newcastle on Monday. "The manager of Manchester United can never, no matter what, be comfortable, and I know the business that I'm in," said Amorim. "I know that if we don't win, regardless if they pay the buyout (for me) or not, I know that every manager is in danger and I like that because that is the job, so I understand the question." At Molineux, United captain Bruno Fernandes was sent off for a second yellow yard soon after half-time, with Wolves' Matheus Cunha scoring directly from a corner. — AFP

Amorim accepts job is on the line if Man Utd keep losing

WOLVERHAMPTON: Ruben Amorim accepts his reign as Manchester United manager could be short-lived if he cannot oversee an upturn in the fallen English giants' fortunes. The initial optimism that surrounded the 39-year-old Portuguese coach's arrival at Old Trafford in succession to the sacked Erik ten Hag has given way to renewed concern over

Scheffler sidelined by cooking injury

MIAMI: World number one Scottie Scheffler will miss the PGA Tour's season opening event in Hawaii after injuring his hand while making Christmas dinner, the player's manager said on Friday. The injury rules Scheffler out of The Sentry which starts on January 2 but he hopes he will be able to feature in The American Express in La Quinta, California on January 16.

"On Christmas Day while preparing dinner, Scottie sustained a puncture wound to the palm of his right hand from a broken glass," Scheffler's manager, Blake Smith, said in a statement on Friday. "Small glass fragments remained in the palm which required surgery. He has been told that he should be back to 100 percent in three to four weeks. Unfortunately, he will have to withdraw from The Sentry. His next scheduled tournament is The American Express," he added.

Scheffler has just enjoyed one of the most successful seasons in PGA Tour history winning seven tournaments on the tour—the first player to reach that tally since Tiger Woods in 2007. Last month he was voted the PGA Tour Player of the Year for the third consecutive year.

Scheffler won his second Masters green jacket, Paris Olympic gold, the PGA Tour's season-ending Tour Championship and FedEx Cup playoffs and The Players Championship this year. He ended last season with victory at the unofficial Hero World Challenge Invitational which gave him nine wins in all competitions in the year. — AFP



Ruben Amorim

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khalidiya	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 AJIM AKABAR MADRE, holder of Indian Passport No. P1092844 having permanent address 101c, Khatib Mohalla, At Post Saitavade, TAI/Dist Ratnagiri, State Maharashtra, India, Pin code: 415613, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will read as (Given name) Azim Akbar Ali and (Surname) Madre.
#6616—27/12/2024

Saudi beat Iraq to qualify for Khaleeji Zain 26 semifinals

Yemen end Gulf Cup campaign with a thrilling 2-1 victory over Bahrain



Saudi and Iraqi players are seen in action. — Photos by Yasser Al Zayyat

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The Saudi national team succeeded in crossing to the semifinals of the Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26) by a deserved victory over Iraq (3-1), in the third round of Group B, on Saturday evening.

The match witnessed the brilliance of all players, especially Abdullah Al-Hamdan, who came on as a substitute and scored two goals, while Salem Al-Dosari scored a goal and created another.

The public address announcer at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium announced that Salem Al-Dosari was awarded man of the match award, receiving the support of the fans who chanted his name.

Salem Al-Dosari took his tally to 23 goals in his 90th match for Saudi Arabia in all competitions. Al-Dosari has been heavily criticized recently for his poor form with the Saudi national team, especially in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers. It is worth noting that the Saudi national team qualified as the top of Group B with 6 points, equal with Bahrain, but they won on goal difference, to set a date with Kuwait, the host of the tournament, in the semifinals.

The Saudi national team achieved a deserved victory over its Iraqi counterpart with a score of 3-1, on Saturday evening, in the third round of the group stage of the 26th Gulf Championship.

The Saudi team ensured that it will accompany Bahrain to the semifinals, after raising its score to 6 points, after beating Yemen and Iraq and losing to Bahrain. The victory is the Saudi team's third victory over the Mesopotamian Lions in the Gulf tournaments, and the result is the largest for the Green Team over Iraq in the Gulf championship.

The first confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iraq was in the fourth edition in 1976 in Qatar, and Iraq won 7-1. In the next edition in 1979, which was held in Baghdad, the Iraqi team won by two goals to one. In the 1982 edition held in Kuwait, the two teams drew 1-1, a tournament that witnessed the withdrawal of the Iraqi team. In 1984 in Iraq, the Lions defeated the Green 4-0. The eighth edition of the Gulf Cup, hosted by the Kingdom of Bahrain in 1986, witnessed the first victory of the Saudi team, when it beat its Iraqi counterpart with a score of 2-1.

The Iraqi team came back and won another victory over the Saudi team, in the next edition, in 1988, which was held in the capital, Riyadh, a score of 2-0.

After a long hiatus from confrontations in the Gulf Championship, the 18th edition of the tournament, in the UAE in 2007, witnessed a renewed confrontation, and the Saudi team managed to win by a goal without reply.

In the 21st Gulf Cup in Bahrain in 2013, the Iraqi



The match between Yemen and Bahrain.

team renewed its supremacy when it beat the Green 2-0, and with the same result, the Saudi team lost to its Iraqi counterpart in the last edition of the Gulf 25 in Basra. Salem Al-Dosari, captain of the Saudi Arabian national team, succeeded in ending the scoring jinx that has plagued him for the green team

throughout the recent period.

Al-Dosari was able to score against Iraq, during their match yesterday, in the third round of the group stage of the Arabian Gulf Cup 2024. In the 57th minute, Al Dosari opened the scoring, after he scored from the spot, which he executed with great skill.

With that kick, Al-Dosari scored his first goal for Saudi Arabia since he scored against Tajikistan on March 21, 282 days later, in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers. Salem Al-Dosari raised his tally to 23 goals in his 90th match for the Saudi national team in all competitions. Meanwhile in the second and final match of the third round of the group stage Yemen ended their Gulf Cup campaign with a thrilling 2-1 victory over Bahrain on Saturday.

Yemen took the lead with a reverse goal scored by Nasser Mohammedouh Al-Ghawashi in the 41st minute, but Mohammed Al-Rumaihi equalized for Bahrain in the 62nd minute.

Bahrain played with 10 men from the 73rd minute after Sayed Mahdi Baqer was sent off.

Yemen took advantage of their opponent's numerical disadvantage and snatched the winning goal two minutes before the end, through Haroon Youssef Al-Zubaidi. Bahrain had already secured qualification to the final four before today's match, topping Group B with 6 points.

Kuwait in semis in Khaleeji Zain 26

KUWAIT: Kuwait advanced to the semifinals of the 26th Gulf Cup, after drawing with Qatar (1-1) on Friday evening, in the third "last" round of the group stage of the tournament.

Mohammed Daham scored the first goal for Kuwait in the 73rd minute, then Mohammed Muntari equalized for Qatar in stoppage time. The Blue raised its score to 5 points to take second place in Group A, and the Annabi's (Qatar) score is two points to remain in fourth place. The Omani team topped the Group A table with 5 points, compared to 2 points for the UAE team, which ranked third.

The Omani team topped the standings ahead of the Kuwaiti team on a fair play difference, while Qatar and the UAE bid farewell to the tournament.

In the semifinals, the Omani team will play the second of the second group, while the Kuwaiti team will play the first of the second group.

Al-Anabi imposed an offensive advantage, but the danger remained absent, except for a chance by Al-Moez Ali that was brilliantly saved by Al-Rashidi.

Qatar's Youssef Abdul Razzaq found the goal, but referee Mustafa Gharbal canceled the goal due to a foul in favor of the Rashidi goalkeeper.

Qatar increased their pressure in the second half and managed to reach Kuwait's penalty area on more than one occasion. Mohamed Daham hit the right post of goalkeeper Salah Zakaria, then Muntari found the back of the net, but Mustafa Gharbal pointed to the offside flag.

Mohamed Daham managed to score the first goal for the Kuwaiti national team from a set-piece that settled in Salah Zakaria's net in the 73rd minute.

Al-Anabi came close to equalizing on several occasions, especially after Almoez Ali's header hit the right post of Rashidi's goal. Al-Moez came back with a chance, but Al-Rashidi continued to shine, and before the end of the match, Muntari scored the equalizer to end the match (1-1).

Most optimists did not expect the Kuwaiti Blue to survive the "Qatar, UAE and Oman" pincers, after the draw placed them at the head of Group A of the 26th Khaleeji Gulf competitions, and the maximum hopes were to show a good level and not come out with heavy defeats. Fans and football insiders based their expectations on what the Kuwaiti national team presented in the past years, and also in the era of coach Juan Pizzi, who achieved only one victory against Afghanistan to qualify for the Asian Cup finals after an absence from the tournament since 2015.

The Blue's results against Oman, the UAE and Qatar have not been encouraging at all, as victory has been far from the Blue in the face of the Omani Reds for 26 years, and the situation was not better in the face of the Al-Anabi and the White.

As Kuwait entered the first match against Oman in the 26th Gulf, which ended (1/1), the players and Pizzi were criticized, especially since the Reds controlled the game, especially the second half, and wasted many chances to decide the outcome of the match.

In the UAE match, Pizzi surprised fans and critics by relying on rookie Nasser Khader to replace the absence of Hassan Hamdan, which cost the Blue an early goal that almost ended the Blue's march in the tournament, if not for the quick return of Mohammed Daham's equalizer. Pizzi also changed his lineup in the second half against the UAE, which enabled Kuwait to snatch the victory in the last minutes through the feisty Moaz Al-Dhafiri.

Despite the Blue's draw against Qatar, Kuwait appeared confident, imposing an attacking style in the



Tomooh Sports Club members celebrate Kuwait's victory.

second half, and had it not been for the Annabi post, Mohamed Daham would have scored a hat-trick.

Despite the lack of concentration in the final moments of the game, the end result was a happy ending. Kuwait secured a goalless draw to set up a date with Bahrain in the semi-finals of the tournament.

Overall, the Kuwaiti national team overcame many obstacles and achieved many gains beyond the ascent to the semifinals of Khaleeji Zain 26, especially at the level of self-confidence and certainty in the abilities of the players to be among the top of the yellow continent.

Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi congratulated the Kuwaiti football team, the technical and administrative staff, the Kuwaiti Federation

and the loyal fans on the deserved qualification of the team on Friday to the semifinal round of the Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26), which is hosted by the State of Kuwait and continues until January 3. "We are all confident in our champions and look forward to them always providing the best in the rest of us," said Al-Mutairi, who heads the Supreme Organizing Committee of the tournament in a statement to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) after the team drew with their brother Qatar with a goal each in the final of the group stage.

Meanwhile, Tomooh Sports Club for the Mentally Challenged athletes were present at the Kuwait-Qatar match in support of Kuwait National Football Team and celebrated the qualification to the next round of Khaleeji Zain 26 Championship.