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2 **Burgan Bank boosts social responsibility leadership**

5 **Trump sides with Musk in rightwing worker visa row**

8 **Business booming for 'sick leave detective' in Germany**

16 **Manchester City stop rot with victory at Leicester**

Gaza braves Zionist terror

Gazans face genocide, ethnic cleansing, forced displacement and deadly cold



GAZA: Twenty-day-old Palestinian newborn Ali Al-Batran, whose twin brother Jumaa died due to hypothermia, lies inside an infant incubator at the intensive care unit of Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip on Dec 29, 2024. — AFP

GAZA: Gaza's civil defense agency said an air strike hit a hospital Sunday, killing at least seven people, while the Zionist entity claimed it had targeted fighters at the no longer functioning facility. "Seven martyrs and several injured people, including critical cases, have been recovered following the (Zionist) strike on the upper floor of Al-Wafaa Hospital in central Gaza City," a civil defense agency statement said.

The health ministry in Gaza said the hospital was still in use. "The Al-Wafaa Hospital is partially operational, providing care to patients with physical disabilities," the ministry's director general, Munir Al-Barsh, told AFP. "The hospital had been rehabilitated and was getting ready to receive patients. Had it not been targeted by (Zionist) shelling today, it would have been ready to fully reopen in the next few days," he said.

Palestinian health officials said Zionist military strikes across the enclave killed at least 23 people on Sunday. The Zionist campaign in Gaza has killed more than 45,300 Palestinians, mostly civilians. The Zionist military said approximately "five projectiles" were fired from northern Gaza into Zionist territory on Sunday.

The strike on Al-Wafaa Hospital came a day after the military ended a raid on Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza, an assault the World Health Organization reported left the facility empty of patients and staff. The military also detained the hospital's chief, Hossam Abu Safiyeh, saying he was suspected of being

a Hamas fighter, along with more than 240 Palestinians.

Some patients were evacuated from Kamal Adwan to the Indonesian Hospital, which is not in service, and medics were prevented from joining them there, the health ministry said. Other patients and staff were taken to other medical facilities. On Sunday, health officials said a Zionist tank shell hit the upper floor of the Al-Ahly Arab Baptist Hospital in Gaza City near the x-ray division.

Zionist forces carrying out a weeks-long offensive in northern Gaza ordered any residents remaining in Beit Hanoun to leave the town on Sunday. The instruction to leave has caused a new wave of displacement although it was not immediately clear how many people were affected, the residents said. Palestinian and United Nations officials say no place is safe in Gaza and that evacuations worsen humanitarian conditions of the population.

Much of the area around the northern towns of Beit Hanoun, Jabalia and Beit Lahia has been cleared of people and razed, fueling speculation that the Zionist entity intends to keep the area as a closed buffer zone after the fighting in Gaza ends. The Palestinian Civil Emergency Service said it had lost communication with people still trapped in the town, and it was unable to send teams into the area because of the raid.

Continued on Page 6

NEWS IN BRIEF

Khaleeji Zain 26 final on Jan 4

KUWAIT: The organizers of Khaleeji Zain 26 announced postponing the final match of the tournament to Saturday, Jan 4, 2025 instead of Friday, Jan 3, 2025. The semifinals will take place on schedule on Tuesday, Dec 31, 2024. Saudi Arabia vs Oman takes place at Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium at 5:30 pm, while Kuwait vs Bahrain takes place at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium at 8:45 pm. (See Page 16)

Journalist shot dead in Jenin

RAMALLAH: A Palestinian woman was shot dead overnight at the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, with her family on Sunday accusing the Palestinian Authority's security forces of killing her. Shatha Al-Sabbagh, a journalism student in her early 20s, was killed by a bullet to the head, which her family said was fired by a security forces sniper while there was no fighting going on. Hamas also accused the PA forces of killing her. — AFP (See Page 5)

Shark kills tourist in Egypt

CAIRO: One tourist was killed and another was injured in a shark attack in Egypt's Marsa Alam resort, the environment ministry said in a statement on Sunday. The ministry said the attack occurred in deep water outside the designated swimming zone near the jetties in northern Marsa Alam, adding that swimming out from the jetties was prohibited and the jetties would be closed for two days from Monday. — Reuters

Shark kills pastor in Australia

SYDNEY: A shark has attacked and killed a 40-year-old pastor who was fishing with his family in the waters of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, officials said. The predator bit him on the neck on Saturday afternoon off Humpy Island on the country's east coast, emergency services said. Community leaders spoke of their distress at the loss of Luke Walford, a youth pastor at the Cathedral of Praise church in the central Queensland town of Rockhampton. — AFP (See Page 6)

Plane crash kills 179 in S Korea's worst air disaster

MUAN, South Korea: A Jeju Air plane carrying 181 people from Thailand to South Korea crashed on arrival Sunday, smashing into a barrier and bursting into flames, killing everyone aboard except for two flight attendants plucked from the wreckage. A bird strike was cited by authorities as the likely cause of the crash — the worst ever aviation disaster on South Korean soil — which flung passengers out of the plane and left it "almost completely destroyed", according to fire officials.

Video showed the Jeju Air Boeing 737-800 landing on its belly at Muan International Airport, skidding off the runway as smoke streamed out from the engines, before crashing into a wall and exploding in flames. "Of the 179 dead, 65 have been identified," the country's fire agency said, adding that DNA retrieval had begun.

Kuwait extended sympathy and solidarity with the friendly Republic of Korea over the crash. A statement by the ministry of foreign affairs expressed Kuwait's sincere condolences to South Korea

Continued on Page 6



MUAN, South Korea: Fire and smoke rise from the tail section of a Jeju Air Boeing aircraft after the plane crashed and burst into flames at Muan International Airport on Dec 29, 2024. — AFP (See Page 7)

Syria leader says elections could take up to 4 years

DAMASCUS: Holding elections in Syria could take up to four years, Syria's de facto leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa said in remarks to be broadcast on Sunday, the first time he has commented on a possible electoral timetable since Bashar Al-Assad was ousted this month. Drafting a new constitution could take up to three years, Sharaa said in written excerpts from the interview with the Saudi state-owned broadcaster Al Arabiya, due to be transmitted later on Sunday. He also said it would take about a year for Syrians to see drastic changes.

The comment from Sharaa, who leads the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group that ousted Assad on Dec 8, comes as the new government in Damascus has been seeking to reassure its neighbors that it has moved away from its roots in Islamist militancy. The group's lightning campaign ended a 13-year civil war but has left a host of questions about the future of a multi-ethnic country previously held together by decades of authoritarian Assad family rule, and where foreign



DAMASCUS: Syrians ride on a bus in the capital on Dec 29, 2024. — AFP

states including Turkey and Russia have strong and potentially competing interests.

Sharaa said HTS, formerly known as the Nusra Front, would be dissolved at a national dialogue conference. It has repeatedly vowed to protect minority groups, who fear the new rulers could seek to impose an Islamist government and has warned of attempts to incite sectarian strife. In the interview, Sharaa said Syria shared strategic interests with Russia, a close Assad ally during the long civil war which has military bases in the country, reiterating conciliatory signals his government has made previously.

Continued on Page 6

Azerbaijan says Russia shot at jet before crash

BAKU: Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev accused Russia on Sunday of firing at an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet before it crashed and of initially trying to cover up the cause of the fatal disaster, demanding that Moscow admit guilt. Aliyev made the accusation in an interview to state media at Baku airport four days after the AZAL plane crashed in Kazakhstan, killing 38 people of the 67 people on board.

Azerbaijani officials have suggested the aircraft was hit by a Russian air-defense system as it tried to land in Grozny, capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya. Aliyev's unusually forthright accusation of his country's traditional ally came a day after he spoke by phone to Russian President Vladimir Putin. A Kremlin statement on the phone call gave no indication that Putin had claimed responsibility for the crash.

Continued on Page 6



Local



KUWAIT: Sheikh Humoud Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Governor of Al-Ahmadi inaugurates an exhibition held to support the Kuwait Society for the Handicapped.



Burgan Bank officials receive an honorary shield for their participation in the fifth edition of the Gulf Cybersecurity Challenges Conference and Exhibition.



Dr Faisal Al-Hajeri from Kuwait Hospital poses for a photo with Burgan Bank representatives during a prostate cancer awareness workshop.

Burgan Bank reinforces leadership with support for Kuwaiti society

Bank offers diverse programs, innovative social responsibility initiatives in 2024



Sheikha Naima Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kholoud Rida Al-Feeli, and Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah pose for a group photo with the women's team at Salwa Al-Sabah Sport Club.



Kholoud Al-Feeli from Burgan Bank poses for a photo with Ali Al-Marri, Fatema Hayat and Khalil Naddoum from the Kuwait Olympic Committee.

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank upheld its leadership position throughout 2024 on the social responsibility front with its continued efforts to support Kuwaiti society across various fields. In addition to its pivotal role in the banking sector, Burgan remains committed to empowering youth, supporting women, enhancing education and health sectors, advancing the sports, arts, and cultural scenes, as well as supporting community and humanitarian initiatives across Kuwait.

In adherence to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles, Burgan Bank strives to achieve sustainable development through a wide range of innovative initiatives and programs in line with its slogan "Driven By You". "Driven By You" is not merely a slogan but a work philosophy that manifests in Burgan Bank's social responsibility achievements for 2024," said Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah, Senior Manager – Corporate and CSR Communications at Burgan Bank. "Throughout the year, the bank reinforced its role as a key partner in building a better future for its community and a major contributor to the development of the cultural and institutional infrastructure, thus charting new horizons for growth and development."

Al-Najadah added: "Burgan Bank's initiatives included a wide range of diverse activities and events, covering several areas such as youth support, education, women's empowerment, contributing to the development of the sports and health sectors, in addition to supporting community and humanitarian initiatives, financial awareness, and supporting national projects."

Sponsoring sports events

Throughout 2024, and under the umbrella of its efforts to contribute to Kuwait's strategy for sustainable development, Burgan Bank sponsored various sporting events and activities that served to encourage a healthy lifestyle in Kuwait. In addition, the bank signed a strategic partnership with the Kuwait Olympic Committee (KOC) to sponsor the cohort of champions who represented Kuwait at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. This agreement came as an extension of the long-standing cooperation between Burgan Bank and KOC.

Unlike traditional sponsorship of Olympians, this partnership adopted a unique vision that spanned two years of diligent preparations with Burgan Bank supporting the Kuwaiti champions in their mission to reach the Olympic Games in Paris. It was a joint journey that reflected Burgan's commitment to supporting national athletes throughout their careers. Other sponsorships included Salwa Al-Sabah Sport Club's women's handball and volleyball teams during the current season, as part of its ongoing efforts to support the sports sector in Kuwait and enhance national talents. In addition, Burgan Bank sponsored the Kuwait Equestrian Federation (KEF) Tour for the 2023/2024 season's endurance competition. This sponsorship, considered the most prominent in the local sports arena for the third year in a row, reflects the bank's commitment to promoting the sports culture in Kuwait as part of its comprehensive social responsibility program and its commitment to supporting the development and growth of society.

In addition, Burgan Bank extended its strategic sponsorship, for the second consecutive year, to the ninth edition of Flare Festival, Kuwait's largest fitness competition. Moreover, the bank sponsored Kuwaiti students' participation in a football match between the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, hosted by the Bristol Rovers Football Academy at Memorial Stadium.

Financial awareness

As part of its efforts to raise public awareness of financial literacy and safe banking practices, under the umbrella of its continued support of the national banking awareness campaign, Burgan Bank concluded its sponsorship and participation in the fifth edition of the Gulf Cybersecurity Challenges Conference and Exhibition.

In light of the significant increase in financial fraud and the Ministry of Interior's success in handling many fraud reports since the establishment and operation of the virtual room to combat fraud, Burgan Bank renewed its efforts to urge its customers to follow the best banking practices and the necessary measures to avoid falling victim to financial fraud. The bank also participated in the virtual room to combat fraud (Aman) – established by the Kuwait Banking Association (KBA) under the supervision of the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK), with representatives from all local banks in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecution – to tackle electronic financial fraud reports around the clock, seven days a week.

As part of its support for the "Let's Be Aware" (Diraya) campaign, Burgan Bank continued to raise financial literacy and banking awareness by regularly sharing practical advice and clear instructions on the safest use of banking products and services, especially during high-spending seasons, such as travel seasons and official holidays, when financial fraud escalates. Burgan Bank also delivered numerous workshops throughout the year on banking awareness and financial literacy at different schools and universities as well as events, whereby Burgan representatives discussed the latest fraud and scamming trends.

As part of its active contribution to the campaign during the summer vacation, Burgan Bank published



Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah

several awareness messages on its website and across its various social media accounts. With each contribution, Burgan redirects public awareness to the most prominent fraudulent operations and common electronic hacking attempts, further providing security guidelines for customers to protect their personal information, bank accounts, and valuable savings.

Community initiatives

In line with its dedicated social responsibility program and as part of its continuous support for its community, Burgan Bank, under the auspices and in the presence of Sheikh Humoud Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Governor of Al-Ahmadi, extended its support to the Kuwait Society for the Handicapped by donating essential equipment and supplies to the association's educational center in Al-Ahmadi. Burgan Bank also sponsored the annual "Art's Night" event organized by the American United School (AUS) in Kuwait for teachers, students, and their families, as part of its continuous efforts to support, empower, and develop Kuwaiti students. In addition, the bank sponsored AUS's annual National and Liberation Day celebrations held on the school's premises. This day-long carnival was attended by approximately 1,500 participants, including employees, students, and their families, reflecting the essence of Kuwaiti society.

Cooperation with the Kuwait Food and Relief Bank

In cooperation with the Kuwait Food and Relief Bank and as part of its comprehensive social responsibility program, Burgan Bank distributed Iftar meals in various areas of Kuwait. This initiative, which embodies the spirit of giving that characterizes the holy month of Ramadan, came under the umbrella of Burgan's committed corporate citizenship and solidarity and within the framework of its active role in society.

Health initiatives

As part of its comprehensive social responsibility program and its ongoing efforts to raise awareness on important topics related to public health, Burgan Bank participated in several impactful initiatives in 2024. The bank organized its annual blood donation campaign for its employees, as part of its activities to serve the community and support the health sector in Kuwait. The campaign was held at the bank's headquarters in cooperation with the Central Blood Bank and the Ministry of Health. Burgan Bank also extended its annual support to the Kuwait Association for the Care of Children in Hospital (KACCH) and Bayt Abdullah Children's Hospice (BACCH), for the 23rd consecutive year.

In conjunction with World Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Burgan Bank renewed its partnership with Kuwait Hospital by hosting an awareness workshop for its employees at its headquarters and sharing breast cancer awareness videos throughout October via social media. Within the extended scope of collaboration with Kuwait Hospital, Burgan also hosted a prostate cancer awareness workshop for its employees at the bank's headquarters, whereby consultant urologist, Dr Faisal Al-Hajeri, shared valuable information and walked participants through the different means of prevention.

At the bank's headquarters, whereby consultant urologist, Dr Faisal Al-Hajeri, shared valuable information and walked participants through the different means of prevention.

Arts and cultural initiatives

As part of its ongoing efforts to advance Kuwait's arts and entertainment sector, and in line with its comprehensive social responsibility program, Burgan Bank dedicated plenty of its resources in 2024 to elevating the domestic culture scene by sponsoring various culture and live entertainment events and activities.

In celebration of Kuwait's National and Liberation Day, Burgan Bank launched the new "Beladona Helwa" (Our Country is Beautiful) video clip, capturing Kuwaitis' deep-rooted love for their homeland. The bank also announced reviving the highly celebrated classic play "Al-Sindbad Al-Bahri" in a new guise, building on the play's original glory as a Kuwaiti cultural icon whose social value and national meanings have been engraved in the hearts of generations.

The bank also launched the Eid Al-Fitr "Wain Al Ayadi, Middo Al 'Ayadi" TVC, performed by the talented artist Bader Al-Shuaibi and a distinguished group of children to promote the culture of saving in line with the Diraya banking awareness campaign. The song was featured in the "Abracadabra 2" show, garnering wide acclaim from the audience and notable views on various social media channels.

Following the great success of its distinguished events, Burgan Bank continued its partnership with Free Jabriya Productions for the second consecutive year, sponsoring several shows, including "Graish", an immersive live performance that encapsulates the authentic Kuwaiti Ramadan experience, reenacting staple TV shows, songs, and situations that draw a timeline of the Ramadan traditions throughout the past decades.

Burgan Bank also sponsored "Macintosh" – a unique live music and performance extravaganza, which took place at the Arena Kuwait, with an audience of approximately 10,000 viewers. The show, directed by Jassim Al-Qames and Maryam Al-Khatrash, brought together a group of distinguished Kuwaiti artists, including Ayed, Bader Al-Shuaibi, Daffy, Rahaf, Hamad Al-Amari, and Khaled Al-Mulla, with the accompaniment of an orchestra of 50 talented musicians led by Kuwaiti maestro Ahmad Al-Oud.

Burgan Bank concluded its partnership with Free Jabriya by sponsoring "Feykom Tarab? Sukkar Zeyad", featuring the Kuwaiti favorite, Miami Band, which spanned five nights of memorabilia live entertainment and revived nostalgia. The show follows the success of the first edition "Feykom Tarab? A Night with Miami Band", bringing a bigger flare and live entertainment prowess to the stage and taking the audience on an unforgettable journey into the world of Miami Band. The concert, held at the Arena Kuwait, was attended by a multi-generational audience of more than 23,000 Miami Band fans.

As part of its unwavering commitment to its comprehensive social responsibility program and its commitment to providing the best banking experience for private banking customers, Burgan Bank sponsored the "Umm Kulthum with Marwa Nagy" concert in partnership with the National Creative Industries Group (NCIG). In addition, Burgan Bank sponsored the FERYA culinary experience by Fohgah App, Bader Al-Shatti and Jassim Al-Jarki, which took place over two days at Assima Mall, witnessing the participation of 2,000 food enthusiasts.



A group photo of Burgan employees during their participation in the Ramadan Iftar meals distribution initiative with Kuwait Food and Relief Bank.



A scene from the "Feykom Tarab? Sukkar Zeyada!" concert.



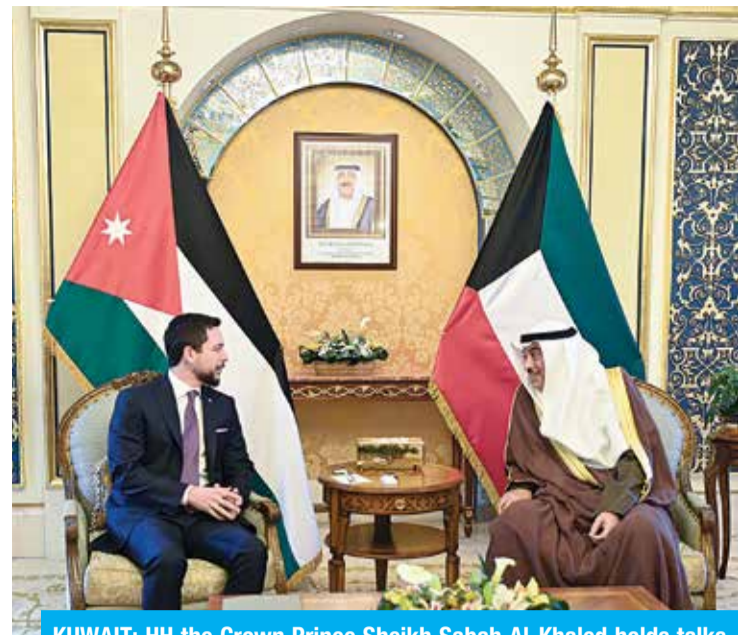
A Group photo from the banking awareness workshop held for AUK students by Burgan Bank.



NEW YORK: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah speaks during 'Summit of the Future' on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.



NEW YORK: Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled meets UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. — AFP and KUNA photos



KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled holds talks with the Crown Prince of Jordan Al-Hussein bin Abdullah II during his official visit to Kuwait.

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled shapes Kuwait's diplomacy in 2024

Crown Prince represents Kuwait's leadership on the global stage



KUWAIT: Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled takes a group photo with senior officials and dignitaries during the Fourth Dushanbe Conference.

KUWAIT: His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah has had an eventful debut year as Crown Prince, with a series of diplomatic, social, and international engagements that highlight Kuwait's active role in regional and global affairs. From hosting official visits to addressing international forums, His Highness has been at the forefront of key national and international events throughout 2024.

National unity and diplomacy

On June 1, 2024, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled was appointed Crown Prince of Kuwait, taking the oath of office the following day, June 2. His Highness began his tenure with a series of important meetings, starting with a gathering on June 10 with members of the Al-Sabah family at the family Diwan in Bayan Palace. The meeting underscored the importance of unity and solidarity within the leadership of Kuwait. Later that month, His Highness the Crown Prince hosted a gathering at Bayan Palace, welcoming a large number of citizens and further solidifying his commitment to maintaining open communication with the public.

Global engagement

A few days after taking the oath as Crown Prince, His Highness held pivotal talks with Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, during an official visit to the Kingdom. The meeting took place at the Peace Palace in Jeddah, focusing on strengthening bilateral ties between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

As part of his international engagements, His Highness the Crown Prince traveled to New York in September to head Kuwait's delegation at the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly. During his visit, he delivered Kuwait's speech at the Future Summit and participated in the General Debate, where he addressed global issues and Kuwait's role in promoting peace and



KUWAIT: Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah addresses members of the Al-Sabah family on June 10, 2024.

cooperation on the international stage. His Highness's activities also included the celebration of the anniversary of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative on September 26, where he underscored Kuwait's dedication to regional cooperation and multilateral collaboration.

On October 2, His Highness arrived in Doha to lead the Kuwaiti delegation at the 3rd Asia Cooperation Dialogue Summit. His participation in this summit aimed to enhance Kuwait's role in fostering closer ties within the Asian region, promoting dialogue and cooperation on key economic and political issues.

Global security and climate action

In November, His Highness the Crown Prince delivered the opening speech at the 4th International Conference on "Enhancing International Cooperation in Combating Terrorism," held in Kuwait. The conference, which was attended by over 450 participants from United Nations member states, aimed to strengthen international cooperation in combating terrorism and promoting peace and security.



RIYADH: Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled attends the OIC and the Arab League summit on Nov 11, 2024.

Additionally, His Highness the Crown Prince played a key role at the extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh on November 11, where he addressed regional issues and the importance of unity among Arab and Islamic nations in addressing common challenges.

In a significant contribution to global climate efforts, His Highness also participated in the 29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29) in Baku, Azerbaijan, on November 13. In his address, he emphasized Kuwait's commitment to tackling climate change and fostering international cooperation to achieve sustainable development.

Strengthening regional ties

The year ended with a significant visit from Prince Hussein bin Abdullah II, Crown Prince of Jordan, who visited Kuwait on December 15. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah warmly received Prince Hussein at Bayan Palace, marking a strong reaffirmation of the ties between Kuwait and Jordan.



JEDDAH: Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud receives His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled and his accompanying delegation during a visit in June.

Throughout 2024, His Highness the Crown Prince has shown exemplary leadership in reinforcing Kuwait's diplomatic relations, both regionally and globally. His engagements have highlighted his dedication to strengthening Kuwait's position on the world stage, addressing critical issues such as international security, climate change, and sustainable development, while continuing to foster unity and cooperation at home.

The Crown Prince's active participation in these high-level meetings, summits, and official visits further underscores his commitment to advancing Kuwait's foreign policy objectives and promoting the country's interests in various international forums.

Kuwait to open support offices for students abroad

KUWAIT: The higher education ministry is planning to open support offices for its cultural offices abroad, Dr Nader Al-Jallal, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, announced Sunday. This initiative aims to enhance the ministry's engagement with Kuwaiti students studying abroad, further supporting the country's ongoing efforts to develop national competencies.

The announcement followed a virtual meeting with the heads of the ministry's cultural offices, where key topics included the number of Kuwaiti students studying abroad, particularly in fields like medicine, and how these numbers align with the needs of Kuwait's local workforce. At the meeting, Dr Al-Jallal acknowledged the academic challenges faced by students abroad, particularly regarding English language proficiency, and proposed revisiting the IELTS score requirements for scholarship eligibility.

The minister also stressed the need for increased collaboration with international universities. He emphasized that expanding scholarship opportunities and forming new ac-

ademic partnerships would provide Kuwaiti students with greater access to diverse educational opportunities and enhance their global competitiveness.

The meeting was attended by Acting Undersecretary Lamia Al-Melhem, Director General of the National Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education Dr Jassim Al-Ali, and Acting Assistant Undersecretary for Scholarships Ghaida Madhkour.

During the meeting, Dr Al-Jallal emphasized that this initiative is part of a broader, comprehensive strategy to enhance the study-abroad scholarship program, which plays a key role in building the Kuwaiti human capital. He stressed that the program is critical to developing Kuwait's educational sector and contributing to the achievement of sustainable development and a knowledge-based economy. Dr Al-Jallal also discussed the crucial role that cultural offices play in the academic journeys of Kuwaiti students abroad. These offices serve as vital links between students and international educational institutions, as well as connecting them to the Ministry of Higher Education. The Minister noted that the new support offices would strengthen this network and ensure better communication, allowing for the rapid resolution of any academic issues that students may face.

One of the key topics raised during the meeting was the need to align the number of students sent to study in medical fields with the Ministry of Health's anticipated



KUWAIT: Dr Nader Al-Jallal, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, is seen with ministry officials during a meeting with heads of the ministry's cultural offices abroad. — KUNA

needs over the next five years. The officials also discussed the number of students being sent to study in other disciplines and whether those numbers align with the requirements of various sectors within the country.

The minister acknowledged some academic challenges faced by students, particularly in relation to English language proficiency, and proposed reviewing the English language requirements, such as the IELTS score needed for scholarship eligibility.

Dr Al-Jallal also encouraged further collaboration with

international universities, aiming to expand scholarship opportunities and create more academic partnerships that would benefit Kuwaiti students. He emphasized the need for these collaborations to align with the nation's strategic objectives, ensuring that the next generation of graduates is well-equipped to meet the demands of Kuwait's economic and social development.

Al-Ali emphasized the importance of maintaining the quality of education at foreign institutions, stressing the ministry's efforts to ensure that only accredited universities are included in Kuwait's scholarship program. He outlined efforts to monitor academic institutions abroad and provide continuous quality assessments to ensure Kuwaiti students receive high-quality education.

Madhkour said the scholarship sector is undergoing significant transformation, with continued efforts to improve the services provided to students. She emphasized that the ministry is working hard to develop a supportive environment for students to thrive in their academic pursuits.

The meeting concluded with a strong commitment from all parties to continue enhancing the scholarship system, strengthen communication between the ministry and cultural offices, and ensure that Kuwaiti students abroad have the resources and support they need to succeed academically and contribute to Kuwait's future development. — KUNA

Local

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Social affairs ministry investigating corruption at disability authority

KUWAIT: The social affairs ministry is calling on citizens to report any suspected cases of corruption at the Public Authority for Disability Affairs. This comes after Minister of Social Affairs Dr Amthal Al-Huwailah issued a decision to form a committee tasked with receiving, investigating, and looking into allegations of corruption at the Public Authority for Disabled Affairs (PADA). In a statement issued Sunday, the authority said the decision is "a strategic move" aimed at promoting transparency, integrity, and ensuring the highest levels of oversight and accountability. The initiative opens the door for citizens to report any suspected cases or violations within the authority's system, in line with high-level directives to combat all forms of corruption. The authority called on anyone who possesses information regarding possible corruption to come forward, assuring that all reports would be handled with the utmost confidentiality through the email complains@pada.gov.kw

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Madagascar ring-tailed lemurs huddle together at the Exzootic Indoor Zoo at the Avenues Mall in Kuwait city on December 29, 2024. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti, US and Google officials are seen during the opening of Google Cloud's new offices in the country on July 10, 2024. — KUNA photos



SEATTLE: Kuwait's Undersecretary of Finance Aseel Al-Munifi and Microsoft's Executive Vice President of Public Sector Angela Heise sign a memorandum of understanding during a meeting in the presence of officials.

Kuwait's digital transformation gains momentum in 2024

Partnerships with Google, Microsoft aim to enhance fintech, business sectors

By Khaled Al-Abdulhadi

KUWAIT: Kuwait's technological advancements and collaborative efforts in 2024 reflect a comprehensive approach to modernization across various sectors. From enhancing educational tools and cybersecurity measures to fostering financial technology, the government aims to create a secure, efficient, and inclusive digital environment. At the same time, collaboration with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is strengthening Kuwait's position in addressing digital challenges and supporting sustainable growth.

Google Cloud

In July, the Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA) announced the opening of new Google Cloud offices in the country. This move is aimed at driving digital transformation by creating a collaborative hub for innovation and offering expert support to local businesses. Additionally, in October, Communication Minister Omar Al-Omar highlighted training initiatives that would attract foreign investment and foster a fully digitalized environment. Google's "Cloud Day" event also saw the launch of a joint training program focused on building national skills in

Artificial Intelligence and cybersecurity technologies.

Financial sector growth

Kuwait's financial sector is undergoing a major digital transformation. In October, the Capital Markets Authority (CMA) registered its first companies under securities-based financial technology services, a step towards enhancing financial inclusion and supporting the growth of fintech. Furthermore, the CMA issued Module 19 of its Executive Bylaws, introducing a framework for crowdfunding services and automated investment advisors.

In December, the Ministry of Finance signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Microsoft in Seattle to advance Kuwait's digital transformation. The MoU focuses on modernizing financial and administrative systems through the latest technologies, including artificial intelligence and cloud services. This partnership aims to boost the efficiency of government services, with Microsoft providing technical support to the ministry.

Cybersecurity initiatives

Kuwait is also prioritizing cybersecurity as part of its digital transformation. The Central Agency for Information Technology, in partnership with Mi-

crosoft, launched the "Zero Trust" initiative. This program aims to bolster cybersecurity in government agencies by employing Microsoft's solutions to safeguard people, devices, data, and applications against cyber threats. This initiative is expected to enhance the efficiency of government spending while reducing operational costs.

The Ministry of Information recently signed a cooperation agreement with the National Cybersecurity Center to enhance cybersecurity measures, training, and media collaboration. The partnership is expected to improve operational mechanisms within the ministry, especially for Kuwait State TV studios. The National Cybersecurity Center will provide ongoing technical support, regular assessments of digital devices, and training courses to elevate cybersecurity awareness among media personnel. Additionally, the ministry plans to promote community awareness of cybersecurity through various media channels.

Education sector innovations

In the education sector, Kuwait introduced 5,125 interactive screens to enhance digital learning for both students and teachers. These screens are designed to improve classroom interaction, clarify ed-

ucational materials, and encourage teamwork. They also provide access to a wider range of educational resources, supporting distance learning and the development of digital skills. This technological integration is part of Kuwait's effort to prepare students for a digital economy and future workforce demands.

Regional cooperation

Kuwait is also enhancing its collaboration with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to drive regional digital initiatives. Communications Minister Omar Al-Omar met with GCC Secretary-General Jassem Al-Budaiwi to discuss joint efforts to support and develop digital initiatives across member states. This meeting underscores the GCC's aim to strengthen relations and integration in critical fields to achieve sustainable development and prosperity.

In a recent lecture at Sabah Al-Salem University, Maher Al-Saleh, Director of the Communications and e-Government Department at the GCC General Secretariat, outlined plans to enhance communication and technology integration across member states. These initiatives include a unified communications area, joint IT investments, and shared e-government services, all aimed at fostering collaboration and addressing emerging digital challenges.

Minors authority raises children's eco-awareness

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: As part of efforts to enhance its recreational and educational activities, the Public Authority for Minors Affairs took a group of children under its care on a special visit to an indoor zoo at The Avenues mall. The visit aimed to introduce them to the world of animals and raise their awareness of the importance of preserving the natural environment. Dalal Al-Nouri, Director General of the Public Authority for Minors Affairs, emphasized in a press statement the authority's dedication to providing enjoyable educational experiences for the children under its care. She also highlighted the authority's commitment to instilling environmental values in the children through such visits.

The visit was conducted under the supervision



KUWAIT: A child poses with a rabbit at the zoo located inside The Avenues Mall. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

of the authority's staff and witnessed significant engagement from the children. It included guided tours led by specialists, introducing the children to various animal species, their natural habitats, and behaviors, as well as information on methods to protect endangered animals.

Children of all ages were captivated by the variety of animals, while the animals responded with playful movements and jumps within their en-



A guide explains details about the animals and their habitats as children listen attentively.

losures, as though attempting to engage with them. The kids expressed their excitement with joyful cheers as they touched the animals, exploring their textures and forming a direct connection. Participants enthusiastically engaged in hands-on activities, such as feeding the animals with guidance from experts and learning about biodiversity and the responsibility of future generations to protect the planet.



A parent visiting the zoo with her child watches as a lizard moves inside its enclosure.



A visitor observes ring-tailed lemurs.



North Korea calls for 'toughest' US strategy at party meeting

Georgia's new president sworn in amid political showdown

Page 6

Page 7



Guatemalan migrants deported from the United States walk down the runway after arriving at the Guatemalan Air Force Base in Guatemala City on December 27, 2024. — AFP

Trump sides with Musk in visa row

Cracks develop in Trump's coalition over immigration

WASHINGTON: US president-elect Donald Trump weighed in Saturday in a bitter debate dividing his traditional supporters and tech barons like Elon Musk, saying that he backs a special visa program that helps highly skilled workers enter the country. "I've always liked the (H-1B) visas, I have always been in favor of the visas, that's why we have them" at Trump-owned facilities, the president-elect told the New York Post in his first public comments on the matter since it flared up this week.

An angry back-and-forth, largely between Silicon Valley's Musk and traditional anti-immigration Trump backers, has erupted in fiery fashion, with Musk even vowing to "go to war" over the issue. The altercation was set off earlier this week by far-right activists who criticized Trump's selection of Sriram Krishnan, an Indian American venture capitalist, to be an adviser on artificial intelligence, saying he would have influence on the Trump administration's immigration policies.

Trump's insistent calls for sharp

curbs on immigration were central to his election victory in November over President Joe Biden. Trump has vowed to deport all undocumented immigrants and limit legal immigration. But tech entrepreneurs like Tesla's Musk — as well as Vivek Ramaswamy, who is set to join Musk in co-chairing a government cost-cutting panel — say the United States produces too few highly skilled graduates, and they fervently champion the H-1B program.

Musk, who migrated from South Africa on an H-1B, posted Thursday on his X platform that luring elite engineering talent from abroad was "essential for America to keep winning". Musk's electric-car company Tesla obtained 724 of the visas this year. H-1B visas are typically for three-year periods, though holders can extend them or apply for green cards.

Adding acrimony to the debate was a post from Ramaswamy, the son of immigrants from India, who deplored an "American culture" that he said

cherishes mediocrity, adding that the United States risks having "our asses handed to us by China". That angered several prominent conservatives who were backing Trump long before Musk noisily joined their cause this year, going on to pump more than \$250 million into the Republican's campaign.

"Looking forward to the inevitable divorce between President Trump and Big Tech," said Laura Loomer, a far-right MAGA figure known for her conspiracy theories, who often flew with Trump on his campaign plane. "We have to protect President Trump from the technocrats." She and others said Trump should be promoting American workers and further limiting immigration.

Musk, who had already infuriated some Republicans after leading an online campaign that helped tank a bipartisan budget deal last week, fired back at his critics. Posting on X, he warned of a "MAGA civil war" over the visas, which he said were critical "for those who want America to win."

Musk swore at one critic, adding: "I will go to war on this issue."

That, in turn, drew a volley from Trump strategist Steve Bannon, who wrote on the Gettr platform that the H-1B program brings in migrants who are essentially "indentured servants" working for less than American citizens would. Bannon, a longtime Trump confidante, critiqued "big tech oligarchs" for supporting the H-1B program and cast immigration as a threat to Western civilization. In a striking jab at Trump's close friend Musk, Bannon called the Tesla CEO a "toddler".

Some of Trump's original backers say they fear he is falling under the sway of big donors from the tech world like Musk and drifting away from his campaign promises. It was not immediately clear whether Trump's remarks might soothe the intraparty strife, which has exposed just how contentious changing the immigration system might be once he takes office in January. — Agencies

Jailed PKK leader says 'ready' to support peace drive

ISTANBUL: Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), is "ready to make a call" to back a new initiative by the Turkish government to end decades of conflict, Turkey's pro-Kurd party said Sunday. Two lawmakers from the DEM party made a rare visit to Ocalan on Saturday on his prison island, the first by the party in almost a decade, amid signs of easing tensions between the Turkish government and the PKK. On Friday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government approved DEM's request to visit the founder of the PKK, which is designated a terror group by Turkey and its Western allies. Ocalan has been serving a life sentence on the island of Imrali south of Istanbul since 1999.

The government's approval of the visit comes two months after the head of Turkey's nationalist MHP party, Devlet Bahceli, extended Ocalan a shock olive branch, inviting him to parliament to renounce terror and disband his group, a move backed by Erdogan.

"I have the competence and determination to make a positive contribution to the new paradigm started by Mr Bahceli and Mr Erdogan," Ocalan said, according to a DEM statement Sunday.

Ocalan said the visiting delegation would share his approach with both the state and political circles. "In light of this, I am ready to take the necessary positive steps and make the call."

The PKK has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, claiming tens of thousands of lives. A peace process between the PKK and the government collapsed in 2015, unleashing violence especially in the Kurdish-majority southeast. The new initiative launched in October by Bahceli, who has been fiercely hostile to the PKK, sparked a public debate, with Erdogan hailing it as a "historic window of opportunity". But a deadly terror attack in October on a Turkish defense company in the capital Ankara, for which PKK militants claimed responsibility, put those hopes on hold. Turkey launched strikes on Kurdish militants in Iraq and Syria after the attack, which killed five people.

"Re-strengthening the Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood is not only a historical responsibility but also... an urgency for all peoples," Ocalan said, according to the DEM statement. He said all the efforts would "take the country to the level it deserves" and become a "very valuable guide for a democratic transformation". "It's time for Turkey and the region for peace, democracy and brotherhood". The new outreach by both sides comes as Islamist rebels consolidate their control in neighboring Syria after toppling its strongman president Bashar Al-Assad.

Turkey hopes Syria's new leaders will address the issue of Kurdish forces in the country, which Ankara sees as a terror group affiliated to the PKK. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told his US counterpart Antony Blinken in a phone call on Saturday that Kurdish fighters "cannot be allowed to take shelter in Syria", according to the ministry spokesman.

According to the DEM statement, Ocalan said developments in Syria had shown that outside interference would only complicate the problem, and a solution could no longer be postponed. — AFP

Some Americans in Panama reject Trump's canal threat

AGUA CLARA, Panama: For dozens of US tourists watching a cargo ship pass along the Panama Canal, Donald Trump's threat to possibly wrest back control of the waterway is nonsensical.

"I think it is 100 percent Panama, yeah, and it should stay such," said one, Natalia Glusack, a 47-year-old accountant from California vacationing with her mother. She was among around 50 Americans standing in a viewing area at a visitors' center to watch a 266-meter (870-foot) Danish-flagged freighter move along the canal.

None of those interviewed backed President-elect Trump in his repeated threats that he could seize control of the canal after he returns to the White House next month. Trump has claimed that American ships are charged "unfair" fees for passing through the canal, and made unsubstantiated allegations that China controls it.

Panama's government has resolutely rejected Trump's accusations and his threat. So too did all the US citizens asked at the canal viewing area, on the Atlantic Ocean entrance to the cross-continent

channel. "Donald Trump claims a lot of things, and that doesn't make them true," said Mindy Holland, a retiree from New York.

"He likes to bring up dramatic things and get people riled. But it belongs to Panama... because that was part of the agreement" the two countries signed in 1977, said Paola Metzner, a 74-year-old retiree also from New York. Canal construction was started in 1881 by French companies, but in the face of daunting conditions—tropical diseases ran rampant in rugged and steamy terrain, and thousands of workers died—they abandoned the project. The United States later took it over, and the canal was finally inaugurated in 1914, its 50-mile (80-kilometer) channel under US administration.

But in 1977, under President Jimmy Carter, the United States signed a treaty ceding the canal to Panama's control in return for a guarantee that the waterway would stay neutral in perpetuity. Some analysts see Trump's threats as simply a negotiating tactic to force Panama to lower transit fees.

Others, though, remember how US forces invaded Panama in 1989 to depose the country's military leader Manuel Noriega, who had been indicted in the US on charges of drug smuggling and money laundering. Some of the US tourists in Panama favored the first hypothesis, that Trump was posturing as a business tactic. Trump "is, to the core, a businessman who only cares about money... There is a lot

forces of the Palestinian Authority in a heinous crime," the family said in a statement released on Sunday.

"As the family of martyr Shatha Al-Sabbagh, we hold the Palestinian Authority and its security forces directly responsible for this crime." Describing the incident, the family said she was with her mother when she was shot in a neighborhood that was "fully lit... and there were no clashes" at the time.

"Despite this, the snipers of the security forces shot her directly," the statement said. Palestinian group Hamas also accused the PA forces of killing her. "The cold-blooded and deliberate killing of journalist Shatha... is a criminal act that adds to the dark record of these security apparatuses, which have committed crimes of killing, arresting and mistreating our people," Hamas said in a statement.

The Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate called for an independent investigation to uncover the circumstances of her death. There have been several fatalities in the Jenin area amid ongoing clashes between Palestinian militants and security forces of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority led by president Mahmud Abbas. Her death brings the total number of deaths since the clashes began on December 5 to 11.



The Danish cargo ship Lars Maersk sails through the Agua Clara Locks of the Panama Canal in Colon City, Panama, on December 28, 2024. — AFP

of benefit potentially if he can argue that he is saving US companies money," said Alan Muller, a retired financial consultant from Washington.

Muller, 75, said Trump "understands that most people are not going to study the history and truth of the Panama Canal treaty. They're only going to say, yay, he is standing up for us." Panamanian President Jose Raul Mulino on Thursday ruled out negotiations with Trump over the canal and denied that China interferes in its operation. He said there would be no reduction in tolls for US vessels using the canal. — AFP



Mourners pray by the body of Shatha Al-Sabbagh, a Palestinian journalism student killed overnight by a bullet to the head whose family claims was fired by Palestinian security forces. — AFP

Fighting between the two sides is rare, but the Jenin refugee camp and its surrounding area have experienced intense violence this month. — AFP

Palestinian woman shot dead in Jenin camp: Family

RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories: A Palestinian woman was shot dead overnight at the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, with her family on Sunday accusing the Palestinian Authority's security forces of killing her. Shatha Al-Sabbagh, a journalism student in her early 20s, was killed by a bullet to the head, which her family said was fired by a security forces sniper while there was no fighting going on.

The security forces of the PA, however, blamed Palestinian militants, saying she was shot during night-time clashes at the camp. The Palestinian security forces said in a statement that the "heinous crime was committed by outlaws inside the Jenin camp". But her family insisted that the Palestinian security forces were responsible. She was killed by "a sniper's bullet from the security

International

Georgia's new president sworn in, escalating political showdown

Zurabishvili and protesters declare Kavelashvili 'illegitimate'

TBILISI: Georgia inaugurated a far-right governing party loyalist as president Sunday, escalating a political showdown moments after his pro-EU predecessor declared herself the "only legitimate president".

The inauguration of former footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili ratchets up a months-long political crisis that has seen huge pro-European Union demonstrations. Outgoing head of state Salome Zurbishvili and protesters have declared Kavelashvili "illegitimate", demanding a re-run of the October general elections that they say the governing Georgian Dream party rigged.

"Our history clearly shows that, after countless struggles to defend our homeland and traditions, peace has always been one of the main goals and values for the Georgian people," Kavelashvili said after taking the presidential oath in parliament. Georgian Dream has presented itself as the sole guarantor of stability in the country, accusing the West of trying to drag Tbilisi into the Ukraine conflict.

Kavelashvili, known for his far-right views and derogatory comments against LGBTQ people, went on to praise "our traditions, values, national identity, the sanctity of the family, and faith".

Moments earlier and a few minutes' walk away at the presidential palace, Zurbishvili said that while she would vacate the premises, her fight against Georgian Dream would continue.

"I remain the only legitimate president," she told a crowd. "I will leave the presidential palace and stand with you, carrying with me the legitimacy, the flag and your trust." In a symbolic gesture, Zurbishvili wore the same white-and-black attire—the colors of Georgian flag—she was dressed in during her inauguration six years ago.

She reiterated that redoing the "illegitimate" election would be the "formula to resolve such a crisis". Following her address outside the presidential palace, thousands of protesters moved toward parliament, with some holding up red cards in a clear nod to Kavelashvili's football career. They dispersed shortly afterward, vowing another protest later in the evening. Interior ministry said six protesters were detained outside parliament.

Local media reported that several people were injured during the violent arrests, despite protesters complying with police orders to clear the road. Zurbishvili has emerged as the most popular politician and a last hope for protesters who accuse Georgian Dream of steering Tbilisi away from the West and toward Moscow. "We trust her, we follow her, and for now, she's our guide," 42-year-old Shorena Aleksia, who attended the demonstration, told AFP. Georgia has been in political turmoil since October's disputed parliamentary elections and the government's decision to shelve EU membership talks. — AFP



Mikheil Kavelashvili, elected by lawmakers as Georgia's new President, takes the oath during his swearing-in ceremony at the parliament in Tbilisi, on December 29, 2024. — AFP

Shark kills man fishing in Australia's Great Barrier Reef

SYDNEY: A shark has attacked and killed a 40-year-old pastor who was fishing with his family in the waters of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, officials said. The predator bit him on the neck on Saturday afternoon off Humpy Island on the country's east coast, emergency services said.

"The man was fishing with family members when he was bitten by a shark," Queensland state police said in a statement. He sustained "life-threatening injuries" and died about an hour-and-a-half later, police said, adding that a report would be prepared for the coroner.

A Queensland ambulance spokeswoman told AFP on Sunday that he died at the scene after sustaining a "significant life-threatening wound to his neck".

Humpy Island, which lies in the Great Barrier Reef's Keppel Bay Islands National Park, has a popular camping ground that gives easy access to reefs for diving and snorkeling. Community leaders spoke of their distress at the loss of Luke Walford, a youth pastor at the Cathedral of Praise church in the central Queensland town of Rockhampton. Walford, who had posted photos on social media of himself in a wetsuit during a previous fishing trip, was believed to have been spearfishing at the time of the attack.

"We are all very much still in shock," said Donna Kirkland, who represents Rockhampton in the Queensland state parliament. "A family friend, not only to my own family but countless others. He was an inspirational leader as a children's and youth pastor," she said in a statement. — AFP

Sudan government rejects UN-backed famine declaration

CAIRO: The Sudanese government rejected on Sunday a report backed by the United Nations which determined that famine had spread to five areas of the war-torn country.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) review, which UN agencies use, said last week that the war between Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces had created famine conditions for 638,000 people, with a further 8.1 million on the brink of mass starvation. The army-aligned government "categorically rejects the IPC's description of the situation in Sudan as a famine", the foreign ministry said in a statement.

The statement called the report "essentially speculative" and accused the IPC of procedural and transparency failings. They said the team did not have access to updated field data and had not consulted with the government's technical team on the final version before publication.

The IPC did not immediately respond to AFP's request for comment. The Sudanese government, loyal to army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, has been based in the Red Sea city of Port Sudan since the capital Khartoum became a warzone in April 2023.

It has repeatedly been accused of stonewalling international efforts to assess the food security situation in the war-torn country. The authorities have also been accused of creating bureaucratic hurdles to humanitarian work and blocking visas for foreign teams.

strike warning to the aircraft's attempt to land on the runway again," an official said.

A passenger texted a relative to say a bird was stuck in the wing, the News1 agency reported. The person's final message was, "Should I say my last words?" Video shows the plane coming off the tarmac and hitting a wall, but officials dismissed speculation that the length of the runway was a factor in the crash. Lee Jeong-hyun, chief of Muan fire station, said the cause was "presumed to be a bird strike" but that the exact details would be announced after a full investigation.

Low-cost carrier Jeju Air said it "sincerely" apologized — with top officials shown bowing deeply at a press conference in Seoul — and vowed to do all it could to help. Boeing said in a statement that it was in touch with Jeju Air and stood "ready to support them". Engine maker CFM International said, "We are deeply saddened by the loss of Jeju Air flight 2216. We extend our heartfelt sympathies to the families and loved ones of those on board."

South Korea's acting President Choi Sang-mok, who only took office Friday, convened an emergency cabinet meeting and then visited the crash site at Muan. "The entire government is working closely together to manage the aftermath of the accident... making every effort to ensure thorough support for the bereaved families," he said. The country declared a seven-day national mourning period effective from Sunday, with memorial altars to be set up nationwide.

Two Thai women were on the plane, aged 22 and 45, Thai government spokesperson Jirayu Houngsub said. The Thai foreign ministry later confirmed both were among those killed. Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra sent condolences to the families of the dead and injured in a post on X, saying she had instructed the foreign ministry to provide assistance.

It is the first fatal accident in the history of Jeju Air, one of South Korea's largest low-cost carriers, which was set up in 2005. On Aug 12, 2007, a Bombardier Q400 operated by Jeju Air carrying 74 passengers came off the runway due to strong winds at the southern Busan-Gimhae airport, resulting in a dozen injuries.

South Korea's aviation industry has a solid track record for safety, experts say. A number of fatal aviation accidents have occurred globally due to bird strikes, which can cause a loss of power if the animals are sucked into the air intakes. In 2009, a US Airways Airbus A320 famously landed in New York's Hudson River after bird strikes on both of its engines, in an incident widely known as the "Miracle on the Hudson" because there was no loss of life. — Agencies



Sudanese students sit for their exams at their school in Port Sudan on December 28, 2024. — AFP

The International Rescue Committee said the army was "leveraging its status as the internationally recognized government (and blocking) the UN and other agencies from reaching RSF-controlled areas". Both the army and the RSF have been accused of using starvation as a weapon of war. The

war in Sudan has killed tens of thousands of people and uprooted over 12 million people, including millions who face dire food insecurity in army-controlled areas. Across the country, more than 24.6 million people—around half the population—face high levels of acute food insecurity. — AFP

Plane crash kills 179 in S Korea's...

Continued from Page 1

over the victims of the tragic accident, wishing the injured a speedy recovery. Inside the airport terminal, tearful family members gathered to wait for news. An official began calling out the names of the 65 victims who had been identified, with each name triggering fresh cries of grief from waiting relatives. Only two people — both flight attendants — were rescued from the tail section of the burning plane.

The two survivors were transferred to separate hospitals in Seoul, the Yonhap news agency reported. "When I woke up, I had already been rescued," a 33-year-old flight attendant told doctors, according to Ju Woong who heads the Ewha Womans University Seoul Hospital. He suffered multiple fractures, while the other crewmember — a 25-year-old woman — injured her ankle and head, Yonhap reported.

Passengers were ejected from the aircraft after it collided with the wall, leaving little chance of survival, a local fire official told families at a briefing, according to a statement released by the fire brigade. "The plane is almost completely destroyed," he was quoted as saying. Both black boxes — the flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder — have been found, deputy transport minister Joo Jong-wan said at a briefing.

Under floodlights, rescue workers used a giant yellow crane to lift the burned-out fuselage of the orange-and-white aircraft on the runway at Muan — some 288 km southwest of Seoul. Bits of plane seats and luggage were strewn across the field next to the runway, not far from the charred tail, offering a glimpse into the catastrophic impact of the crash.

All of the passengers were Korean apart from two Thais, with the youngest a three-year-old boy and the oldest a 78-year-old, authorities said. "I had a son on board that plane," an elderly man waiting in the airport lounge, who asked not to be named, told AFP. "My younger sister went to heaven today," a 65-year-old woman, who gave only her surname Jo, told AFP.

The accident took place in a matter of minutes as Jeju Air Flight 2216 tried to land — with the control tower issuing a bird strike warning and shortly afterward the pilots declared mayday and then attempted to land from the opposite direction, a transport ministry official said. "It took approximately three minutes from the control tower's mention of a bird

Gaza braves Zionist terror...

Continued from Page 1

Meanwhile, Gaza health officials said that a 20-day-old baby died on Sunday from "severe cold" as the war-ravaged Palestinian territory grapples with winter weather. Jumaa Al-Batran died from the cold, while his twin brother remains in the intensive care unit at a local hospital, the health ministry said in a statement.

Azerbaijan says Russia shot at...

Continued from Page 1

"The facts are that the Azerbaijani civilian plane was damaged from the outside over Russian territory, near the city of Grozny, and almost lost control," Aliyev told state television. "We also know that electronic warfare systems put our plane out of control... At the same time, as a result of fire from the ground, the tail of the plane was also severely damaged," he said.

Aliyev said that while "of course, our plane was hit by accident", Baku was angry that Moscow had apparently tried to hide the cause of the crash and demanded its ally admit what happened. He said it was "regrettable and surprising" that Moscow "put forward theories" that, he said, "clearly

Marwan Al-Hamas, head of field hospitals in Gaza, confirmed the death. He said it brought to five the total number of children "who have died due to severe cold" in recent weeks. "There is no electricity. The water is cold and there is no gas, heating or food," said Yahya Al-Batran, the father of the child. "My children are dying in front of my eyes and nobody cares. Jumaa has died and I fear that his brother Ali may follow."

Yahya Al-Batran said he and his wife were living in a tattered tent in the city of Deir el-Balah in central Gaza. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people are crammed into unsuitable tents, most of which were hastily set up in Deir el-Balah and in the southern areas of Khan Yunis and Rafah. — Agencies

showed the Russian side wanted to cover up the issue".

"For the first three days, we heard nothing from Russia except some absurd theories," he said, adding that these included the plane hitting a flock of birds. He called the theory "completely removed" from reality, pointing out that the plane's "fuselage is riddled with holes". Russia has said Grozny was being attacked by Ukrainian drones the day the AZAL flight tried to land.

Aliyev urged Moscow to issue a public apology to his country, saying Baku had made official "demands" to Russia two days ago. "First, the Russian side must apologize to Azerbaijan. Second, it must acknowledge its guilt. Third, those responsible must be punished, brought to criminal responsibility, and compensation must be paid to the Azerbaijani state, as well as to the injured passengers and crewmembers. These are our conditions," Aliyev said, in unusually strong language towards Moscow. — Agencies

Syria leader says elections could...

Continued from Page 1

Sharaa said earlier this month that Syria's relations with Russia should serve common interests. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the status of Russia's military bases would be the subject of negotiations with the new leadership in Damascus. "It is a question not only of maintaining our bases or strongholds, but also of the conditions of their operation, maintenance and provision, and interaction with the local side," he said in an interview with Russian news agency RIA published on Sunday.

Sharaa also said he hoped the administration of US President-elect Donald Trump would lift sanctions imposed on Syria. Senior US diplomats who visited Da-

ascus this month said Sharaa came across as pragmatic and that Washington has decided to remove a \$10 million bounty on the HTS leader's head.

Syria's new authorities have arrested nearly 300 people, including informants, pro-regime fighters and former soldiers, in a crackdown on loyalists to Assad, a monitor said Sunday. The security forces of the new administration launched a large-scale operation on Thursday against Assad's militias. "In less than a week, nearly 300 people have been detained in Damascus and its suburbs, as well as in Homs, Hama, Tartus, Latakia and even Deir Ezzor," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor.

The official Syrian news agency SANA also reported arrests this week targeting "Assad militia members" in Hama and Latakia provinces, where weapons and ammunition were seized. Among those arrested, according to the Observatory, were former regime informants, pro-Iranian fighters and lower-ranking military officers accused of killings and torture, Abdel Rahman

International

North Korea calls for 'toughest' US strategy at party meeting

Kim oversees key meeting to chart country's course for 2025

SEOUL: North Korea will launch its "toughest" ever strategy to counter the United States, state media said Sunday, reporting on a key year-end party meeting overseen by leader Kim Jong Un.

The nuclear-armed state held a five-day party meeting last week as part of a drive to chart the country's course for 2025, the official Korean Central News Agency reported in a lengthy English dispatch. "The US is the most reactionary state that regards anti-communism as its invariable state policy," the report said.

It slammed growing ties between South Korea, the US and Japan, saying it had "expanded into a nuclear military bloc for aggression". It also said South Korea had "turned into an out-and-out anti-communist outpost of the US". "This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how," KCNA said.

Against this backdrop, Kim's speech to top officials "clarified the strategy for the toughest anti-US counteraction to be launched aggressively", the report said without providing details.

The meeting reviewed the response to widespread flooding earlier this year, and also included

a vow to boost ties with "friendly" countries. Such party meetings, and Kim's speeches to officials, are typically used by Pyongyang to make key policy announcements.

The KCNA report comes after Seoul's military claimed that more than a thousand North Korean soldiers had been killed or wounded since they entered combat in Ukraine as part of a military deal between Pyongyang and Moscow. North Korea and Russia have strengthened their military ties since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

A landmark defense pact between Pyongyang and Moscow—signed in June when Russian President Vladimir Putin North Korea—came into force this month.

Putin hailed it as a "breakthrough document". North Korean state media said Friday that Putin sent a New Year's message to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, saying, "the bilateral ties between our two countries have been elevated after our talks in June in Pyongyang".

Ukraine's allies have called Pyongyang's growing involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine a "dangerous expansion" of the conflict. — AFP



This picture released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on December 29, 2024 shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attending the enlarged meeting in Pyongyang. — AFP

Shock, grief at South Korea air crash site

MUAN, South Korea: The stench of gasoline hangs over Muan International Airport. Behind a police cordon, plane seats, suitcases and twisted bits of metal are scattered, close to the wrecked fuselage of Jeju Air flight 2216. The Boeing 737-800 carrying 181 people from Bangkok to South Korea crashed as it attempted an emergency landing Sunday, smashing into a wall and bursting into flames, leaving all but two people aboard feared dead.

Hundreds of emergency workers put out the fire and combed through the wreckage, but only two people, both flight attendants, were rescued alive, with 177 confirmed dead. By late afternoon, floodlights illuminated the twisted wreckage as a huge yellow crane lifted the fuselage, allowing officials to continue the search and rescue mission.

Behind a police cordon tape stretched across the wire fence at the edge of the runway, plane seats and other chunks of metal could be seen, offering a glimpse into the catastrophic impact of the crash. Inside the airport terminal, family members gathered to wait for news, many looking stunned and tearful. One woman was carried away on a stretcher, apparently having passed out from shock. The boards typically used for arrival and departure information were instead

displaying the names, dates of birth and nationalities of the victims. "I had a son on board that plane ... He has yet to be identified," one elderly man waiting in the airport lounge, who asked not to be named, told AFP.

Wailing and screaming echoed through the two-storey airport, as the names and identities of victims were confirmed. Many of the passengers, who were all Korean nationals except for two Thais, had been returning home after their winter holidays. "My younger sister went to heaven today," one 65-year-old woman who gave only her surname Jo told AFP.

Her sister had been in Bangkok with her friends on holiday, the woman, wearing a mask and a grey knit hat, said. "My husband is now trying to check whether she's been identified," Jo added. The flight had 175 passengers, including two Thai nationals, and six crew onboard. According to authorities, the youngest passenger was a three-year-old boy and the oldest was a 78-year-old.

Five of the dead were children under the age of 10, authorities said, citing the passenger manifest.

The only sounds near the crash site were the whirring of cameras and the murmur of reporters broadcasting live, as hundreds of relatives, lost for words, awaited news of their loved ones aboard the burned plane. In the area around the runway, AFP reporters could see duty-free booklets and sanitary gloves worn by the flight crew scattered across the field, not far from the charred tail of the aircraft.

It is the deadliest aviation acci-



Firefighters and rescue personnel carry the body of a victim near the scene where a Jeju Air Boeing 737-800 series aircraft crashed southwest of Seoul on December 29, 2024. — AFP

dent on South Korean soil and the worst in years involving the country's carriers. A moment of silence was held at sporting events, including volleyball and basketball games, on Sunday. All major South Korean broadcasters changed their schedules to emergency news programming.

End-of-the-year entertainment award shows and comedy shows were cancelled. The accident comes as South Korea is in the midst of political chaos, after suspended president Yoon Suk Yeol was impeached earlier this month over his ill-fated attempt to declare martial law. The acting president was also impeached Friday, leaving the country with its third leader in three weeks. Civic groups

said they were reviewing whether to postpone mass impeachment rallies in light of the accident.

Heartbreaking stories of family members were also shared online, with one saying his mother and his five aunts were one the plane. "I was told they would arrive around 8:50 am today, so I came to the airport to pick up my mother and aunts, but I've heard no word from them," he told local media anxiously. The message from the parent and passenger reads: "Wait, a bird is stuck in the wing. Unable to land now... Should I leave a will?" It was the last message, sent at 9:01 am. Their child replies: "Why can't I make a call with you?". It was delivered at 9:37 am and has remained unread. — AFP

Experts question bird strike as cause of jet crash

SEOUL: Uncertainties surround the deadliest crash on South Korean soil, experts said on Sunday, questioning initial suggestions that a bird strike might have brought down the Jeju Air flight.

The apparent absence of landing gear, the timing of the twin-engine Boeing 737-800's belly-landing at Muan International Airport and the reports of a possible bird strike all raised questions that could not yet be answered. The single-aisle aircraft was seen in video broadcast on local media skidding down the runway with no visible landing gear before slamming into a wall in an explosion of flame and debris.

"Why didn't fire tenders lay foam on the runway? Why weren't they in attendance when the plane touched down? And why did the aircraft touch down so far down the runway? And why was there a brick wall at the end of the runway?" said Airline News editor Geoffrey Thomas.

South Korean officials said they were investigating the cause of the crash of Jeju Air Flight 7C2216, including a possible bird strike. The crash killed 179 of the 181 people on board. A spokesperson for Jeju Air was not immediately available for comments. Jeju Air declined to comment on the cause of the accident during news conferences, saying an investigation is under way. Under global aviation rules, South Korea will lead a civil investigation into the crash and automatically involve the National Transportation Safety Board in the United States where the plane was designed and built.

The flight data recorder was found at 11:30 am

(0230 GMT), about two and a half hours after the crash, and the cockpit voice recorder was found at 2:24 pm, according to South Korea's transport ministry. "That gives you all the parameters of all the systems of the plane. The heartbeat of the airplane is on the flight data recorder," Thomas said. "The voice recorder will probably provide the most interesting analysis of what went on on this tragic crash."

Experts caution that air accidents are usually caused by a cocktail of factors and it can take months to piece together the sequence of events in and outside the plane.

In the space of a few minutes, the control tower issued a bird strike warning, pilots declared mayday and then attempted to land, officials said, although it was not clear whether the aircraft had hit any birds. Experts said it seemed unlikely a bird strike would have caused the landing gear to malfunction.

"A bird strike is not unusual, problems with an undercarriage are not unusual. Bird strikes happen far more often, but typically they don't cause the loss of an airplane by themselves," Thomas said. Australian airline safety expert Geoffrey Dell said, "I've never seen a bird strike prevent the landing gear from being extended." Australian aviation consultant Trevor Jensen said fire and emergency services would normally be ready for a belly-landing, "so this appears to be unplanned".

A bird strike could have impacted the CFM International engines if a flock had been sucked into them, but that would not have shut them down straightaway, giving the pilots some time to deal with the situation, Dell said. It was unclear why the plane did not decelerate after it hit the runway, Dell and Jensen said.

Typically in a belly-landing, "You are going to land on your engines and you're going to have a bumpy ride," Thomas said. "You come in with minimum fuel, you have fire tenders in attendance, covering the runway with foam and you

by Cambodian police in September and convicted and sentenced to four years in prison on December 2 for attempted cross-border human trafficking.

The women "and three of their babies" were sent home to Manila early Sunday and taken to a government shelter for trafficking victims, the Social Welfare Department said in a statement. Ten of the repatriated women are still pregnant, Irene Dumlao, the Social Welfare Department's Assistant Secretary told AFP.

"All 13 (women) departed Phnom Penh and arrived safely in Manila following the grant of royal pardon by His Majesty Preah Bat Samdech Preah



People and relatives of passengers of the crashed Jeju Air Boeing 737-800 aircraft react at Muan International Airport in Seoul on December 29, 2024. — AFP

land at the furthest end of the runway and usually it ends up being an OK situation." After the control tower issued the bird strike warning and the pilots declared mayday, the pilots attempted to land on the runway from the opposite direction, a transport ministry official said.

"In the process of landing it hit a navigation safety facility called a localizer and collided with the wall," the official said. Joo Jong-wan, deputy transport minister, said the runway's 2,800-metre length was not a contributing factor, and that the walls at the ends had been built according to standards.

"Both ends of the runway have safety zones with green buffer areas before reaching the outer wall," he told a separate briefing. "The airport is designed according to standard aviation safety guidelines, even if the wall may appear closer than it actually is."

The captain had worked at that rank since 2019 and had logged 6,823 flight hours, the ministry said. The first officer had worked at that rank since 2023 and had logged approximately 1,650 flight hours. — Reuters

Boromneath Norodom Sihamoni," the Philippine foreign ministry said in a separate statement. The Cambodian court ruling had said it had strong evidence showing that the 13 had "the intention... to have babies to sell to a third person in exchange for money, which is an act of human trafficking".

The court did not give details on what would happen to the babies. The Philippine foreign department statement warned "surrogacy is banned in Cambodia and any violation thereof is punishable under Cambodian laws". The social welfare ministry statement said "there is no law prohibiting or allowing surrogacy in the Philippines, providing a legal grey area prone to abuse".

News in Brief

Three die in Channel crossing bid

LILLE, France: Three migrants died Sunday in an attempt to cross the English Channel from France to Britain, a local mayor told AFP. The deaths take this year's casualty toll from failed clandestine crossings to a confirmed 76. The boat that was to take the migrants Sunday ran into trouble near Bleriot-Plage, a public beach in Sangatte close to the French Channel port of Calais, at around 6:00 am (0500 GMT), an emergency services source said. — AFP

15 bodies found in south Mexico

MEXICO CITY: At least 15 bodies were recovered from pits in a southeastern state of Mexico plagued by drug cartel violence, according to the governor. In a post on platform X, Chiapas State Governor Eduardo Ramirez detailed an operation to restore stability to Frailesca, an agricultural region near Guatemala where rival cartels have been involved in a turf war. "Unfortunately, 15 bodies (have been found) so far in secret graves in two properties," Ramirez wrote on Saturday. — AFP

UK to tax private schools

LONDON: The UK will end a tax exemption for private schools on Wednesday, the center-left Labour government has announced, in a move set to raise over £1.5 billion (\$1.9 billion) for public education. After years of worsening educational inequalities, from January 1, private schools will have to pay 20 percent value added tax on tuition fees, which will be used to fund thousands of new teachers and improve standards in state schools. "It's time things are done differently", finance minister Rachel Reeves said in a statement on Sunday. — AFP

Suriname funeral for Bouterse

PARAMARIBO, Suriname: Suriname's government announced Saturday that the small South American nation will not hold a state funeral for its ex-president Desi Bouterse, who this week died a fugitive from justice aged 79. Current President Chan Santokhi "has decided, based on his powers and advice received, that there will be no state funeral... No period of national mourning." Foreign Minister Albert Ramdin told a press conference. Bouterse was a former military man who twice mounted coups, in 1980 and again in 1990, to take charge as a dictator. — AFP

Police commander killed in Iran

TEHRAN: A "terrorist attack" killed a police commander on Saturday in Bandar-e Lengeh, a coastal city in Iran's southern province of Hormozgan, local media reported. Tasnim news agency said the commander "was targeted" in the deadly attack. "The attacker was also killed," Tasnim said. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, a rarity in the province located about 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) south of Tehran. — AFP

In 2016, Cambodia issued a snap ban on commercial surrogacy after neighboring Thailand pulled the plug on the trade the previous year—putting an abrupt end to a thriving industry for hopeful parents, many from Australia and the United States. But demand for commercial surrogacy remains high after China eased its one-child policy and agencies in Cambodia continue to offer the service.

Sources in the kingdom have previously told AFP that couples—mostly from China—are willing to pay between \$40,000 to \$100,000 to surrogacy agents to find a Cambodian woman who can carry their child. — AFP

Cambodia pardons jailed surrogate Philippine mothers

MANILA: Cambodia has pardoned and sent home 13 Philippine women who were jailed over a scheme to become surrogate mothers, an outlawed practice, the Philippine government said on Sunday.

They were among 24 foreign women detained

MONDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2024

US investors eye bull market in 2025

Inflation remains key worry with new tariffs in view



MIAMI, Florida: Travelers wait to check in for their flights at the Miami International Airport.— AFP

NEW YORK: Investors are expecting more gains for the US stock market in 2025 after two straight standout years, fueled by a solid economy supporting corporate profits, moderating interest rates and pro-growth policies from incoming president Donald Trump.

The benchmark S&P 500 up over 23 percent year-to-date, even with a recent speed bump, and is on pace for its second straight year of gains exceeding 20 percent, lifted by megacap tech stocks and excitement over the business potential of artificial intelligence. Investors are more confident about the economy than this time a year ago, with consumers and businesses having absorbed higher interest rates and the Federal Reserve now lowering them — albeit by not as much as hoped. Corporate profits are also expected to be strong, with S&P 500 earnings projected to rise 14 percent in 2025, according to LSEG IBES. On the other side of the ledger, inflation remains stubborn, and Wall Street is wary of a rebound that could lead the Fed to change course on its easing cycle. Indeed, stocks pulled back sharply on Wednesday after the central bank projected fewer rate cuts next year as it braced for firmer inflation.

Such prospects could become more likely if Trump implements tariffs on US imports that lead to higher consumer prices. Stock valuations, meanwhile, are around their steepest levels in more than three years, leaving greater potential for turbulence. “We’ve

been on quite the tear coming off the lows back at the end of 2022. It’s been pretty eye-watering,” said Garrett Melson, portfolio strategist at Natixis Investment Managers. “Animal spirits... are certainly running pretty wild right now, but you might need to temper that a little bit as you start to move through the year,” said Melson, who thinks the stock market could still produce solid gains of around 10 percent in 2025 if not the returns of the prior two years.

Wall Street firms are mostly projecting gains for the market next year, with S&P 500 year-end targets ranging from 6,000 to 7,000. The index was last hovering around 5,900. Optimistic investors can point to a bull market that is neither old nor over-extended, by historic measures.

The current bull market for the S&P 500 that began in October 2022 is less than half as long as the average length of the 10 prior ones, according to Keith Lerner, co-chief investment officer at Trust Advisory Services. The S&P 500’s roughly 64 percent gain during this latest run trails the 108 percent median gain and 184 percent average rise of the prior bull markets, according to Lerner.

“If you zoom out a little bit, yes, we have a lot of gains, but if you look at a typical bull market, it suggests that we still have further gains to go,” Lerner said. Other historic signs also bode well. The S&P 500 has gained an average of 12.3 percent following the eight instances of back-to-back 20 percent

annual gains since 1950, according to Ryan Detrick, chief market strategist at Carson Group, compared to a 9.3 percent overall average increase over that time. The index increased six of the eight times.

Bolstering the upbeat sentiment is the prevailing sense on Wall Street that the economy has weathered the rate hikes the Fed implemented starting in 2022 to quell inflation. A Natixis Investment Managers survey conducted in recent weeks found 73 percent of institutional investors said the US will avoid a recession in 2025. That’s a sharp turnaround from a year ago, when 62 percent projected such a downturn in the coming year. Citigroup’s economic surprise index, which measures how economic data performs versus expectations, has been solidly positive for the past two months, another rosy sign for investors.

Adding to expectations of a solid economy, Trump is expected to pursue an agenda that includes tax cuts and deregulation that supports growth. “We’re leaving 2024 on pretty good footing, and we think there is some re-acceleration in 2025,” said Sameer Samana, senior global market strategist at Wells Fargo Investment Institute. “Markets tend to front-run the economy, so they will position for that economic re-acceleration sooner rather than later.” However, stocks are also leaving 2024 at elevated valuations: The S&P 500 is trading at nearly 22 times expected earnings over the next 12 months, according to

LSEG. That is well above its long-term average of 15.8, and not far from the 22.6 level it reached earlier this month, its highest since early 2021.

Investors maintain that valuations can stay high for long periods and do not necessarily indicate imminent declines. But future gains may rest more on earnings growth, while higher valuations could make stocks more easily rattled by any disappointments. Risks include policy uncertainty such as Trump’s expected push to raise tariffs on imports from China and other trading partners, which analysts estimate could hurt corporate profits. Higher tariffs could also increase inflation, which is another worry for investors. The pace of inflation has fallen dramatically since hitting 40-year highs in 2022, but remains above the Fed’s 2 percent target. The latest reading of the consumer price index found a 2.7 percent annual inflation rate. “How low we can get rates is really going to be dependent on how low we can get inflation,” said Michael Reynolds, vice president of investment strategy at Glenmede. “If we see inflation settling out to the 3-ish percent range, we think the Fed’s not going to be as aggressive next year.” Glenmede is recommending investors take a neutral posture on overall portfolio risk, including for equities.

“Investors should be what I would call cautiously optimistic,” Reynolds said. “We ... have an economy that’s showing signs of late-stage expansion alongside valuations that are pretty rich.” — Reuters

Egypt holds trial run of Suez Canal channel 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. Its revenue from the waterway, the gateway to the shortest route between Europe and Asia, has nevertheless tumbled since Yemen’s Houthis began attacking ships in the Red Sea in November 2023 in what they say is solidarity with Palestinian militants in Gaza.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi said on Thursday that due to “regional challenges”, the



The Maersk Sentosa container ship sails southbound to exit the Suez Canal in Suez, Egypt in this file photo.

country had lost approximately \$7 billion in Suez Canal revenue in 2024, marking more than a 60 percent drop from 2023. According to the Suez Canal Authority, the latest expansion extends the total length of the canal’s two-way section to 82 km from a previous 72 km. The canal is 193 km long in total.

“This expansion will boost the canal’s capacity by an additional 6 to 8 ships daily and enhance its ability to handle potential emergencies,” the Suez Canal Authority said in its statement. Earlier this year, Egypt said that it was considering an additional expansion project separate to the 10 km channel extension. — Reuters

For German ‘sick leave detective’, business is booming

FRANKFURT: Rising sick leave rates may be bad news for German companies at a time the economy is already ailing—but for private eye Marcus Lentz, it has been a boon for his business.

He is seeing a record number of requests from firms for his agency to check up on employees suspected of calling in sick when they are actually fit to work. “There are just more and more companies that don’t want to put up with it anymore,” he told AFP, adding his Lentz Group was receiving up to 1,200 such requests annually, around double the figure from a few years earlier.

“If someone has 30, 40 or sometimes up to 100 sick days in a year, then at some point they become economically unattractive for the employer,” he said in an interview at his office in the gritty district around Frankfurt’s main train station. From auto ti-



Private detective Marcus Lentz poses for photos in his office in Hanau, western Germany. In Germany’s faltering economy, the sharp rise in sick leave among workers has become a major concern for business leaders. — AFP

lans to fertilizer producers, companies are ringing the alarm about the impact of high rates of sick leave on Europe’s biggest economy.

While some say changes to reporting in sick have made it easier to fake illnesses, experts insist the rea-

sons behind the rising numbers are more complex, ranging from increases in mental illnesses to more work pressure.

Many agree that the trend is weighing on Germany at a time the country’s woes, from a manufacturing slowdown to weak demand for its exports, have led some to once again dub it “the sick man of Europe”. “The impact is significant and certainly affects economic activity,” Claus Michelsen, chief economist at the German association of research-based pharmaceutical companies, told AFP.

The association calculated that higher rates of absenteeism at work due to illness shaved 0.8 percent off Germany’s output in 2023 — helping push the economy into a 0.3 percent contraction. Workers in Germany on average took 15.1 days of sick leave last year, up from 11.1 days in 2021, according to federal statistics agency Destatis. The TK, one of Germany’s major statutory health insurers, reported the average number of sick days among workers it covers was 14.13 in the first nine months of the year—a record high. According to OECD data, Germans missed on average 6.8 percent of their working hours in 2023 due to illness—worse than other EU countries such as France, Italy and Spain. — AFP

Turkey unveils \$14bn development plan for Kurdish southeast

SANLIURFA, Turkey: Turkey announced on Sunday a \$14 billion regional development plan that aims to reduce the economic gap between its mainly Kurdish southeast region and the rest of the country.

The announcement comes amid increased hopes for an end to a decades-long insurgency waged by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in southeast Turkey as well as the advent of a new leadership in neighboring Syria with cordial ties to Ankara. The eastern and southeastern provinces of Turkey have long lagged behind other regions of the country in most economic indicators including gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, partly as a result of the insurgency.

Turkish Industry Minister Fatih Kacir told reporters in the southeastern city of Sanliurfa that the government would spend a total 496.2 billion lira (\$14.15 billion) on 198 projects across the region in the period to 2028. “With the implementation of the projects, we anticipate an additional 49,000 lira (\$1,400) increase in annual income per capita in the region,” he added.

According to 2023 data, the per capita income of Sanliurfa stood at \$4,971, well below the national average of \$13,243. Regarding the prospects for peace in southeast Turkey, two Turkish lawmakers met the PKK’s jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan on Saturday, the first such visit in a nearly a decade, and they quoted him as indicating he might be ready to call on the group’s militants to lay down their weapons. The visit followed a call by a close ally of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan on Ocalan to end the PKK’s 40-year insurgency, in which more than 40,000 people have been killed.

The conflict between the Turkish state and PKK, now centered on northern Iraq, was mainly focused on southeast Turkey in the past. “Terrorism has caused great harm to eastern and southeastern regions of the country... A terror-free Turkey will create great benefit to the region,” Turkish Vice President Cevdet Yilmaz said on Sunday at the event in Sanliurfa. Turkey and Western countries classify the PKK as a terrorist organization. Yilmaz also referred to recent developments in Syria, where Islamist rebels backed by Turkey took power this month after the overthrow of President Bashar Al-Assad and his flight to Russia. “The opportunities that will come with the new era in Syria will increase the welfare of our entire country. Our southeastern region will benefit more from these developments,” Yilmaz said. — Reuters

NBK MONEY MARKETS REPORT

US consumer confidence falls amid global policy updates

BoJ's Ueda seeks to assess risks before deciding on rate hikes

KUWAIT: The Conference Board's Consumer Confidence Index, a crucial gauge of consumer sentiment and spending in the US economy, has fallen short of expectations with a reading of 104.7, well below the projected 112.9. This figure not only missed economists' forecasts but also represented a decline from the previous level of 112.8, signaling declining consumer optimism.

As a leading indicator, the Consumer Confidence Index is often used to anticipate future spending patterns, with higher readings typically reflecting optimism that fuels spending and economic growth, while lower readings suggest caution that may reduce economic activity. This unexpected decline may also be interpreted as a bearish signal for the US dollar, given that stronger consumer confidence generally supports the currency by signaling robust economic prospects. In contrast, weaker readings, like the current one, are often viewed as negative for the dollar.

The drop in consumer confidence is likely to draw close attention from economists and policymakers, potentially influencing decisions on fiscal and monetary policy aimed at fostering economic stability. Businesses, too, may adjust their strategies to align with shifting consumer sentiment, highlighting the far-reaching impact of this metric.

While the lower-than-expected index raises concerns about future consumer spending and economic growth, it is just one of many factors shaping the broader economic landscape, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive view of the economy.

US new home sales

In November 2024, sales of new single-family homes in the US increased by 5.9 percent from the previous month to an annualized rate of 664,000, exceeding market expectations of 666,000. Sales rose sharply in the South (13.9 percent) and the Midwest (17.3 percent) but declined in the West (-7.5 percent) and the Northeast (-41 percent). The median price of new homes was \$402,600, with an average price of \$484,800. The inventory of homes for sale stood at 481,000, representing 8.9 months of supply at the current sales pace.

Rates – December 29th, 2024

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	Low	High	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.0423	1.0382	1.0445	1.0427	1.0200	1.0700	1.0470
GBP	1.2564	1.2498	1.2592	1.2579	1.2400	1.2800	1.2572
JPY	156.46	156.32	158.08	157.82	154.00	159.00	156.14
CHF	0.8917	0.8912	0.9027	0.9017	0.8800	0.9100	0.8927

The Richmond Manufacturing Index reported an actual value of -10 in December, matching expectations and improving from the previous -14. The Richmond Business Conditions Index remained steady at 14 after a revision. However, the Philadelphia Fed Non-Manufacturing Index recorded a decline, with an actual value of -6, worse than the expected -2.4. Despite minor improvements in manufacturing, the broader US manufacturing and services data remain weak, with signs of deteriorating conditions in non-manufacturing sectors.

Unemployment claims

The latest Initial Jobless Claims data revealed a modest decline in the number of people filing for unemployment benefits for the first time, coming in at 219,000. This figure was lower than both the forecasted 223,000 and the previous reading of 220,000, signaling a slight improvement in the job market. The 4,000 drop from expectations and the 1,000 decline from the prior data point suggest steady progress in employment conditions. As one of the earliest US economic indicators released each week, the Initial Jobless Claims data is closely watched, with low-

er-than-expected numbers generally seen as a positive sign for the economy. Fewer claims indicate fewer individuals are seeking unemployment benefits, reflecting a healthier labor market. This improvement is considered bullish for the U.S. dollar, as it points to economic strength and stability. Although the decrease is small, it underscores the resilience of the job market, particularly in the face of a forecasted increase. Moving forward, this data will remain an important metric for assessing the health of the economy and its potential impact on financial markets. The Greenback surged the week, last trading at 107.998.

Canadian GDP

Canada's economy grew by 0.3 percent in October 2024, beating expectations of 0.2 percent, driven by gains in oil and gas extraction (2.4 percent) and manufacturing (0.3 percent), following an upward revision of September's growth to 0.2 percent. However, GDP likely contracted by 0.1 percent in November, with declines in mining, oil and gas, and transportation offset by growth in accommodation, food services, and real estate. The Bank of Canada recently cut its policy rate by 50 bps to 3.25 per-

cent to address slower growth, with further gradual cuts expected. Markets see a 72 percent chance of an additional 25 bps cut in January. The USD/CAD currency pair last seen trading at 1.4407


BoJ monetary policy

Bank of Japan Governor Kazuo Ueda emphasized the need for careful assessment of economic and financial risks before making any decisions on interest rate hikes, without signaling an imminent policy shift. He highlighted that any adjustments in monetary policy would depend on economic activity, price developments, and financial conditions. Ueda's cautious tone follows a dovish message that surprised markets, weakening the yen by casting doubt on rate hikes in January. While the BoJ kept its benchmark rate at 0.25 percent in December, Ueda stressed the importance of monitoring data, including spring wage talks and US economic trends, to guide future actions.

The USD/JPY currency pair last seen trading at 157.82

Kuwait

Kuwaiti dinar
USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30810.



AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 26 DECEMBER 2024

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Market	M. Cap (KD ml)	Last Close	WTD %	MTD %	YTD %	Quantity Traded	Value Traded	No. of Trades	P/E	P/B	% of Total M. Cap
Premier Market	35,985	7,870.29	0.9%	1.4%	5.3%	434,652,855	137,925,702	26,073	16.5	1.4	80.9%
Main Market	8,511	6,730.39	1.4%	1.8%	20.8%	860,377,006	115,260,763	45,012	13.5	1.0	19.1%
All Share	44,495	7,350.86	1.0%	1.4%	7.8%	1,295,029,861	253,186,464	71,085	14.9	1.1	100%

Sector	M. Cap (KD ml)	Last Close	WTD %	MTD %	YTD %	Quantity Traded	Value Traded	No. of Trades	P/E	P/B	% of Total M. Cap
Banking	26,988	1,801.53	0.9%	1.5%	9.4%	130,892,924	59,473,138	8,630	18.1	1.5	60.65%
Basic Materials	524	928.52	2.7%	-1.4%	24.5%	2,202,668	1,497,462	580	12.8	2.3	1.18%
Consumer Discretionary	1,392	2,032.13	1.7%	-3.4%	26.7%	32,542,231	20,332,446	4,123	23.9	1.5	3.13%
Consumer Staples	319	1,050.75	2.9%	8.0%	59.5%	3,256,910	2,604,601	325	45.9	1.6	0.72%
Energy	239	1,178.60	-0.8%	-1.6%	24.2%	9,224,641	1,322,106	631	10.1	1.4	0.54%
Financial Services	5,275	1,513.98	1.0%	3.4%	24.9%	561,606,732	90,954,878	28,295	14.4	1.1	11.86%
Health Care	218	455.33	-2.7%	-2.7%	-5.6%	2	0.798	2	17.3	1.4	0.49%
Industrials	2,449	722.50	3.1%	2.2%	-20.4%	154,629,263	23,779,713	8,879	12.4	1.1	5.50%
Insurance	864	2,107.48	5.8%	6.3%	-8.1%	51,240,555	3,263,994	1,957	9.8	1.2	1.94%
Real Estate	2,912	1,372.17	-0.3%	-1.3%	13.1%	337,193,768	45,525,435	15,676	15.3	0.9	6.54%
Technology	14	1,047.60	-0.7%	-4.0%	81.1%	243,197	32,837.86	64	NM	1.2	0.03%
Telecommunications	3,129	1,024.07	-0.5%	1.7%	-7.3%	9,779,473	4,059,509	1,670	15.7	1.4	7.03%
Utilities	171	407.89	1.3%	-5.5%	-10.4%	2,217,497	340,344	253	17.6	1.4	0.38%

Top Gainers

Stock	last Close	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
MRC	110	29.72%	9,358,851	1,002,237,987	952
ALKOUT	1,190	22.05%	2,242	2,298	14
WETHAQ	56.5	18.95%	50,068,942	2,734,972	1,743
GINS	1,269	14.22%	2,730	3,323	11
IFAHR	1,610	11.19%	6,858,623	10,085,987	950

Top Losers

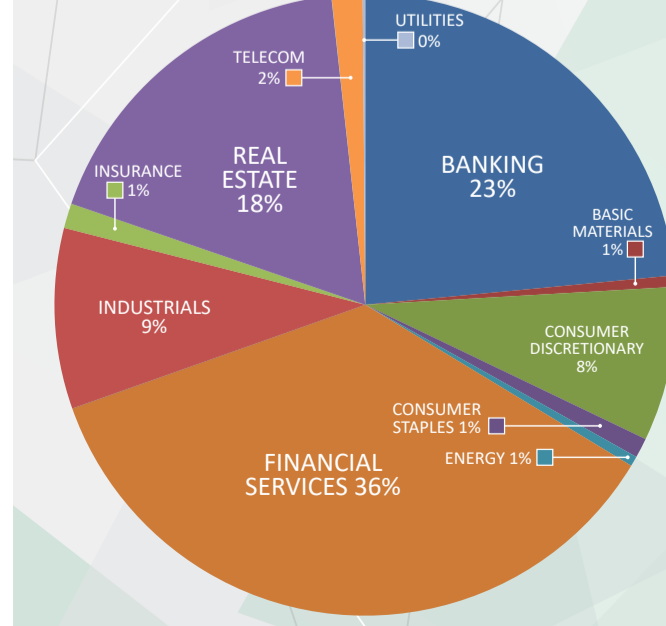
Stock	last Close	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
KBT	85.4	-17.09%	82,967,192	7,867,459	3,663
ACICO	80.5	-12.60%	23,786,065	2,006,303	1,057
SOOR	209	-11.44%	798,249	172,354	279
KMEFIC	217	-9.58%	53,340,014	11,714,244	3,511
ATC	389	-9.53%	2	1	2

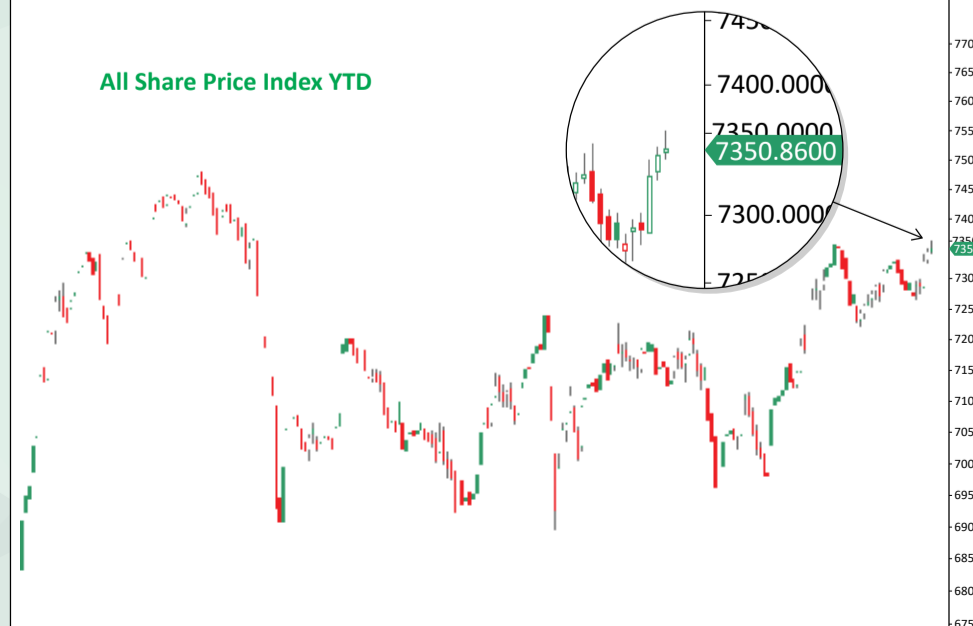
Top Volume

Stock	Last	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
KBT	85.4	-17.09%	82,967,192	7,867,459	3,663
ARABREC	88.5	-1.56%	60,797,185	5,569,853	1,775
KPROJ	96.5	4.32%	58,365,259	5,572,562	1,801
MADAR	110	7.84%	54,266,075	6,542,536	3,365
KMEFIC	217	-9.58%	53,340,014	11,714,244	3,511

Top Value

Stock	Last	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
KFH	749	0.67%	29,656,631	22,097,922	3,407
ARZAN	264	3.94%	49,570,587	12,933,169	1,725
KMEFIC	217	-9.58%	53,340,014	11,714,244	3,511
IFAHR	1,610	11.19%	6,858,623	10,085,987	950
BOUBAYAN	568	3.09%	17,829,016	10,024,955	1,536





Market Summary:

- Premier and Main markets' volume and value dropped by 25%, 26%, and 30%, 22%, respectively.
- Premier and Main indexes had a strong week, marching upwards.
- Technically, the All Share Index closed at 7,350, with support levels at 7,350, 7,318, and 7,303, and resistance at 7,379. The Premier Index closed at 7,870, with support levels at 7,834, 7,811, and 7,767, and resistance at 7,876. The Main Index closed at 6,730, with support levels at 6,726, 6,675, and 6,625, and resistance at 6,790.

What does 2025 hold for interest rates, inflation and US consumer?



MIAMI: A sign hangs on the wall outside of a Container Store on December 23, 2024 in Miami, Florida.

WASHINGTON: Brian Blank is a finance scholar and Fed watcher who researches how companies navigate downturns and make financial decisions, as well as how markets process information. Brandy Hadley is a finance professor who leads a student-managed investment fund and studies corporate decision-making and incentives. Together, they're also the resident economic oracles at The Conversation US, and their forecast for 2024 held up notably well. Here, they explain what to expect from 2025.

Heading into 2024, we said the US economy would likely continue growing, in spite of pundits' forecast that a recession would strike. The past year showcased strong economic growth, moderating inflation, and efficiency gains, leading most economists and the financial press to stop expecting a downturn.

But what economists call "soft landings" – when an economy slows just enough to curb inflation, but not enough to cause a recession – are only soft until they aren't.

As we turn to 2025, we're optimistic the economy will keep growing. But that's not without some caveats. Here are the key questions and risks we're watching as the US rings in the new year. Some people expected a downturn in 2022 – and again in 2023 and 2024 – due to the Federal Reserve's hawkish interest-rate decisions. The Fed raised rates rapidly in 2022 and held them high throughout 2023 and much of 2024. But in the last four months of 2024, the Fed slashed rates three times – most recently on Dec. 18.

While the recent rate cuts mark a strategic shift, the pace of future cuts is expected to slow in 2024, as Fed Chair Jerome Powell suggested at the December meeting of the Federal Open Market Committee. Markets have expected this change of pace for some time, but some economists remain concerned about heightened risks of an economic slowdown. When Fed policymakers set short-term interest rates, they consider whether inflation and unemployment are too high or low, which affects

whether they should stimulate the economy or pump the brakes. The interest rate that neither stimulates nor restricts economic activity, often referred to as R* or the neutral rate, is unknown, which makes the Fed's job challenging.

However, the terminal rate – which is where Fed policymakers expect rates will settle in for the long run – is now at 3 percent, which is the highest since 2016. This has led futures markets to wonder if a hiking cycle may be coming into focus, while others ask if the era of low rates is over.

This shift in the Federal Reserve's approach underscores a key uncertainty for 2025: While some economists are concerned the recent uptick in unemployment may continue, others worry about sticky inflation. The Fed's challenge will be striking

The outlook for 2025 remains promising, with continued economic growth driven by resilient consumer spending, steadying labor markets, and less restrictive monetary policy

the right balance – continuing to support economic activity while ensuring inflation, currently hovering around 2.4 percent, doesn't reignite.

We do anticipate that interest rates will stay elevated amid slowing inflation, which remains above the Fed's 2 percent target rate. Still, we're optimistic this high-rate environment won't weigh too heavily on consumers and the economy. While gross domestic product growth for the third quarter was revised up to 3.1 percent and the fourth quarter is projected to grow similarly quickly, in 2025 it could finally show signs of slowing from its recent pace. However, we expect it to continue to exceed consensus forecasts of 2.2 percent and longer-run expectations of 2 percent.

Analysts said stock markets could change direction as investors returned from holiday and reassessed the risks of elevated US inflation under Trump for richly-valued Wall Street equities.

"There is some potential upside left for this bull market, but it is limited," said Pictet Asset Management chief strategist Luca Paolini. "(Trump's) inauguration day is a potential inflection point and all the (prospective) good news will be in the price by then," Paolini added.

MSCI's broad global share index was 0.32 percent lower on Friday to remain 1.07 percent higher for the week. MSCI's broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan eased 0.12 percent, marking a 1.5 percent weekly rise, while Tokyo's Nikkei rose 1.8 percent. Europe's Stoxx 600 was 0.27 percent firmer on Friday and 0.7 percent higher for the week.

The dollar index, which measures the currency against six other major currencies, eased 0.09 percent, looking at a small weekly gain, and to close 2024 with a more than six percent year-on-year gain. Dollar/yen was down 0.15 percent, but near levels last seen in July, while the greenback was also showing a 5.3 percent gain this month against the yen and a near 12 percent advance for 2024 against the weakened Japanese currency. The euro, up 0.09 percent, stayed close to two-year lows.

The BoJ held back from a rate hike this month. Governor Kazuo Ueda said he preferred to wait for clarity on Trump's policies, underscoring rising angst among central banks worldwide of US tariffs hitting global trade. Fed Chair Jerome Powell said earlier this month that US central bank officials "are going to be cautious about further cuts" after an as-expected quarter-point rate reduction. The US economy also faces the impact of Donald Trump, who has proposed deregulation, tax cuts, tariff hikes and tighter immigration policies that economists view as both pro-growth and inflationary.

Traders, meanwhile, anticipate the Bank of Japan will keep its monetary policy settings loose and the European Central Bank will deliver further rate cuts. Traders are pricing in 37 bps of US rate cuts in 2025, with no reduction fully priced into money markets until June, by which time the ECB is expected to have lowered its deposit rate by a full percentage point to 2 percent as the euro zone economy slows.

Higher US rate expectations pulled the 10-year Treasury yield, which rises as the price of the fixed income security falls, to its highest since early May early on Thursday, at 4.641 percent. It was last up 1.4 basis points at 4.595 percent. The two-year Treasury yield, which tracks interest rate forecasts, traded around 4.32 percent off 1.2 bp since late Thursday. US debt trends also sent euro zone yields higher, with Germany's benchmark 10-year bund yield rising 4.8 bp to 2.372 percent on Friday. — Reuters



This illustration picture shows a one hundred US dollar banknote (center) and Uruguayan peso bills in Montevideo on December 27, 2024. —AFP photos

While inflation has declined from 9.1 percent in June 2022 to less than 3 percent, the Federal Reserve's 2 percent target remains elusive. Amid this backdrop, several new risks loom on the horizon. Key among them are potential tariff increases, which could disrupt trade, push up the prices of goods and even strengthen the US dollar.

The average effective US tariff rate is 2 percent, but even a fivefold increase to 10 percent could escalate trade tensions, create economic challenges and complicate inflation forecasts. Consider that, historically, every 1 percent increase in tariff rates has resulted in a 0.1 percent higher annual inflation rate, on average. Still, we hope tariffs serve as more of a negotiating tactic for the incoming administration than an actual policy proposal.

Tariffs are just one of several proposals from the incoming Trump administration that present further uncertainty. Stricter immigration policies could create labor shortages and increase prices, while government spending cuts could weigh down economic growth.

Tax cuts – a likely policy focus – may offset some risk and spur growth, especially if coupled with productivity-enhancing investments. However, tax cuts may also result in a growing budget deficit, which is another risk to the longer-term economic outlook. Count us as two financial economists hoping only certain inflation measures fall slower than expected, and everyone's expectations for future inflation remain low. If so, the Federal Reserve should be able to look beyond short-term changes in inflation and focus on metrics that are more useful for predicting long-term inflation. Labor markets have softened but remain resilient.

Hiring rates are normalizing, while layoffs and unemployment – 4.2 percent, up from 3.7 percent at the start of 2024 – remain low despite edging up. The US economy could remain resilient into 2025, with continued growth in real incomes bolstering purchasing power. This income growth has supported consumer sentiment and reduced inequality, since low-income

households have seen the greatest benefits.

However, elevated debt balances, given increased consumer spending, suggest some Americans are under financial stress even though income growth has outpaced increases in consumer debt. While a higher unemployment rate is a concern, this risk to date appears limited, potentially due to labor hoarding – which is when employers are afraid to let go of employees they no longer require due to the difficulty in hiring new workers. Higher unemployment is also an issue the Fed has the tools to address – if it must. This leaves us cautiously optimistic that resilient consumers will continue to retain jobs, supporting their growing purchasing power.

The outlook for 2025 remains promising, with continued economic growth driven by resilient consumer spending, steadying labor markets, and less restrictive monetary policy. Yet current price targets for stocks are at historic highs for a post-rally period, which is surprising and may offer reasons for caution. Higher-for-longer interest rates could put pressure on corporate debt levels and rate-sensitive sectors, such as housing and utilities.

Corporate earnings, however, remain strong, buoyed by cost savings and productivity gains. Stock performance may be subdued, but underperforming or discounted stocks could rebound, presenting opportunities for gains in 2025.

Artificial intelligence provides a bright spot, leading to recent outperformance in the tech-heavy NASDAQ and related investments. And onshoring continues to provide growth opportunities for companies reshaping supply chains to meet domestic demand. To be fair, uncertainty persists, and economists know forecasting is for the weather. That's why investors should always remain well-diversified.

But with inflation closer to the Fed's target and wages rising faster than inflation, we're optimistic that continued economic growth will pave the way for a financially positive year ahead. Here's hoping we get even more right about 2025 than we did this past year.

Global stocks and dollar fall in thin year-end trade

NEW YORK/LONDON/SINGAPORE: Global stocks, the dollar and some Treasury yields looked set to wrap up Christmas week on Friday with minor retracements of broad up-trends, succumbing to a dearth of interest and participation heading into the last weekend of the year.

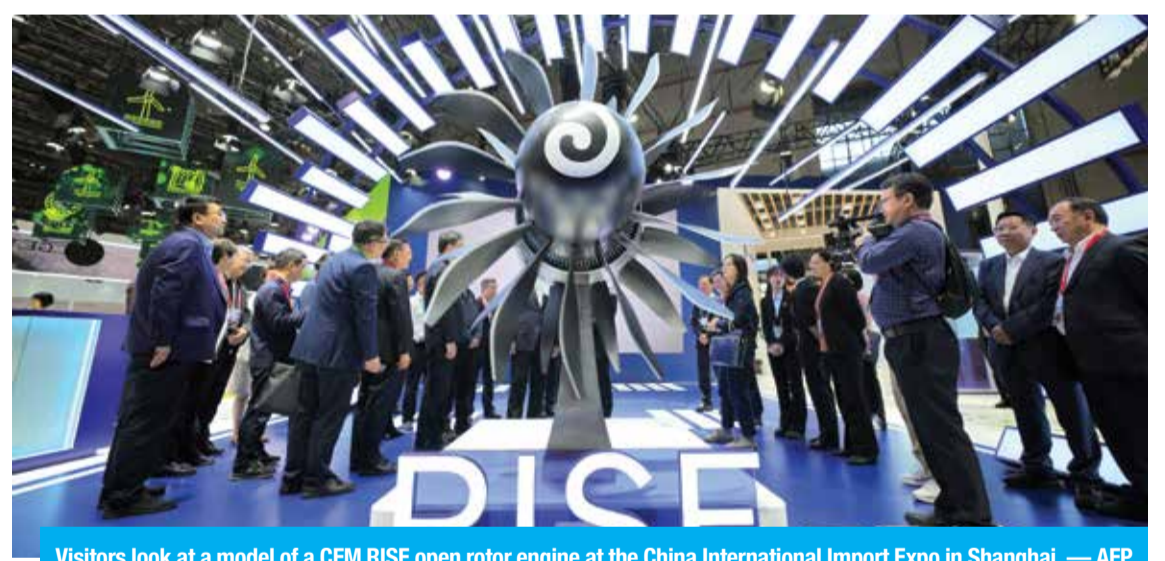
Wall Street's main indexes opened lower, dampening an upbeat holiday-shortened week that started out looking like a classic "Santa Claus" rally was unfolding. The benchmark 10-year Treasury yield was up slightly but hovered below a near-eight-month high reached Thursday, while shorter-term Treasury yields eased. The US dollar was headed for an almost 7 percent annual gain while Japan's yen was set for a fourth consecutive year of losses



MUMBAI: Pedestrians walk past the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) building in Mumbai on January 23, 2024. —AFP

on Friday, as traders anticipated robust US growth, as well as tax cuts, tariffs and deregulation by the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump, would make the Federal Reserve cautious on rate-cutting well into 2025.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average was 0.56 percent lower after the open. The S&P 500 fell 0.65 percent, leaving Wall Street's benchmark on course for a 1 percent weekly gain. The Nasdaq Composite was down 0.79 percent in early trade. The Dow is up 14 percent in 2024, the S&P 500 is up 25 percent and the tech-heavy Nasdaq is up 30 percent.



Visitors look at a model of a CFM RISE open rotor engine at the China International Import Expo in Shanghai. — AFP

Chinese bond market sees more pain in 2024

HONG KONG/SHANGHAI: Investors in Chinese bonds head for 2025 betting there will be no miraculous recovery in the economy, putting them at odds with an equities market that has wagered on a revival in consumption. Although China's closed capital account diminishes the 33 trillion yuan (\$4.6 trillion) market's worth as an economic forecaster, the signal from ten-year bond yields scraping record lows almost daily and long bonds falling below Japanese yields still shows a deep-set negativity about the outlook.

"The bonds are basically saying that, yes, there is a (stock market) rally out there, but we don't buy this rally for the long term," said Bhanu Baweja, chief strategist for UBS Investment Bank in London.

"Bonds are saying that this is not an earnings-based rally, this is not a reflation-based rally."

A benchmark ten-year yield down more than 80 basis points this year to a record low of 1.78 percent reflects a banking system overflowing with cash and a market broadly expecting slow growth and hardly any inflation.

Bond prices move inversely to yields and, because sovereign debt is regarded as a safe asset, they are affected by a combination of inflation expectations, interest rates, creditworthiness and appetite for risk in other asset classes. Since September, as China has cut interest rates and made numerous promises to

stabilize financial and property markets, boost economic growth and revive consumption, equity markets have rallied and pushed price-to-earnings ratios sharply higher.

Bonds have made an almost opposite move, particularly at the long end where 30-year yields have been driven below 2 percent. Thirty-year yields in Japan, an economy which has become a byword for deflation and slow growth, are 2.24 percent. "I think the Chinese bond yields should be lower if they were to reflect the current economic situation in the country," said Edmund Goh, investment director of fixed income at abrdn in Singapore. "We think it's difficult to see meaningful inflation given the property situation in China now and the government is determined not to create another property bubble."

In March, China's government set a growth target of "around 5 percent" for this year, but the world's second-biggest economy has struggled for momentum and grew just 4.6 percent in the third quarter. Goldman Sachs sees growth slowing to 4.5 percent next year.

Part of the backdrop to the bond rally is a lack of alternatives. Chinese banks are bursting with more than 300 trillion yuan in deposits and with loan growth in the doldrums, much of that ends up flowing to money markets and bonds – pushing down yields. The yield on the popular Tianhong Yu'Ebao money fund, which is China's largest with more than 600 million investors, hit a record low at 1.266 percent this week.

"Onshore lenders are facing the question of whether to give out loans to businesses, or to play it safe with risk-free Chinese government bonds," said Clarissa Teng, fixed income allocation strategist at the chief investment office of UBS global wealth management in Hong Kong. — Reuters

MONDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2024



Afghan craftsman Sakhi uses a hatchet as he makes Rubab, a string instrument of dried mulberry wood from deserts, at a workshop in Herat.



Afghan musician Majid plays the Rubab instrument at a house in Kabul.



Afghan craftsman Sakhi uses a hatchet as he makes Rubab.



UNESCO-listed musical instrument stifled in Afghanistan

Wood shavings littered the floor of Sakhi's cramped workshop in the Afghan city of Herat as another Rubab, the national musical instrument of his homeland, took shape under his deft hands. Sakhi has crafted two Rubabs a month for decades, and he refuses to set down his tools even as a Taliban crackdown strangles music in Afghanistan. "I know only this and I need to make money somehow," said Sakhi, surrounded by Rubabs in different stages of completion.

But far more important to him than money is the "cultural value," said the craftsman in his fifties, whose name has been changed for his safety along with those of others interviewed by AFP. "The value of this work for me is... the heritage it holds. The heritage must not be lost," he said. The UN agency UNESCO agrees, recognizing in December the art of crafting and playing the Rubab as intangible cultural heritage in Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Made of dried mulberry wood and often inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the lute-like Rubab is one of the oldest instruments in the region, its twanging sound stretching back thousands of years. But that heritage is threatened in Afghanistan under the Taliban authorities' near-total ban on music, considered corrupting in their strict interpretation of Islamic law.

Since coming to power in 2021, Tale-

ban authorities have banned music in public, from performances to playing tracks in restaurants, in cars or on radio and TV broadcasts. They have shuttered music schools and smashed or burned musical instruments and sound systems. Many Afghan musicians fled out of fear or in need of work after losing their livelihoods in one of the world's poorest countries where jobs are scarce.

The Taliban authorities have encouraged former musicians to turn their talents to Islamic poetry and unaccompanied vocal chants — also the only forms of music allowed under their previous rule from 1996-2001.

'Peace to the soul'

Amateur Rubab player Gull Agha has a picture of his teacher from that time, the pieces of his Rubab broken by Taliban authorities cradled in his lap. Since their return, Taliban morality police have also destroyed one of Gull Agha's Rubabs and made him swear to stop playing. But he still sometimes strums a Rubab he made himself for tourists visiting Herat, long a cradle of art and culture in Afghanistan, though he laments that it slips easily out of tune.

"The main thing that motivates me to continue playing the Rubab is to make a contribution to Afghanistan — we should not let the skills of our country be forgotten," he said. But as professional musicians went into exile and his former



An Afghan amateur Rubab player Gull Agha displays the Rubab instrument at a shop in Herat. —AFP photos

students saw no future in practicing, he fears the craft will atrophy.

"It's our duty to pass on our local music to the next generations as our ancestors passed it down to us," said the 40-year-old. "Rubab is an art... art brings peace to the soul." He started playing more than 20 years ago during a music revival in Afghanistan after the end of the previous Taliban rule. At that time, organisations to support artists sprung up in the country. Mohsen, a long-standing artists' union member, choked back tears as he recalled how their musicians were always "a fixture of the happy moments in people's lives".

"Unfortunately, happiness has been taken from this nation as well as from the artists," he

said. Mohsen is still optimistic about the future of the Rubab in Afghanistan, saying musicians inside and outside the country have been spurred to keep its traditional music alive. "People don't play for money now, they play to bring joy to others and so the music survives," he said. "No force, no person, no system can silence its sound."

'Never lost'

Rubab player Majid was once a fixture of the many musical performances in the capital Kabul. But he had not played the Rubab for more than three years out of fear of being overheard, until one December afternoon when he picked up a Rubab in a house near a

street of now-shuttered music shops. Smiling, he struck the strings but stopped abruptly as the courtyard door banged open, fearing it was Taliban forces.

The neck of his 35-year-old Rubab was previously broken when morality police raided homes after the Taliban takeover. He repaired it the best he could, and still regularly tends to his "dear Rubab," he said, gently running his hands over the instrument. "As long as I live, I will keep it with me, and I hope my children will keep it... but no matter what, Rubab culture will not be lost," said the 46-year-old. "Music is never lost. As they say, 'There can never be a death without tears or a wedding without music.'" —AFP

Australia's Raygun says row over musical 'all resolved'

Australian Olympic breakdancer Rachael "Raygun" Gunn says her legal dispute with the makers of a parody musical about her has been resolved, with a new version planned. The 37-year-old hit out at online reaction to the "Raygun: The Musical" affair as "so negative and awful, just awful". Gunn's performances at the Paris Olympics — which included kangaroo hops and "The Sprinkler" — failed to impress the judges and was lampooned around the world.

The comedian behind the musical, Stephanie Broadbridge, cancelled the original show before it opened this month, saying Gunn's lawyers had threatened action to protect her reputation and dance moves. "I'm really pleased to say we have resolved everything," Gunn said in a video posted to her Instagram account.

"We've managed to come to an agreement. As you know, she gets to go ahead with the musical — she's got a new name, new poster, and she still gets to take that show on the road," Gunn said she was "sorry for any hurt" caused in the dispute, stressing that was never her intention.

"This has been a stressful time for me and it's been tough for me," she said, adding that she was keen to "put the whole thing to bed". Broadbridge posted a message on Instagram as well, saying she was "deeply sorry" for the backlash against the breakdancer. The comedian unveiled a poster for the new show: "Breaking The Musical", which was subtitled "A completely legal parody musical".

The poster describes the show as being ranked number one "by the world musical sports federation" and also features a silhouette of a kangaroo doing a dance step similar to Gunn's signature move. The musical is scheduled to tour Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. "The show is a comedy show, it is based entirely on stuff I read on the internet. It is a fictional telling of a moment in Australian history," Broadbridge said. — AFP



People play cards as they sit at a coffee shop in the center of Damascus.



Two men play backgammon as they sit at a coffee shop in the center of Damascus.



Two men smoke waterpipes as they sit at a coffee shop in the center of Damascus on December 28, 2024.

'No more fear': Stand-up comedy returns to post-Assad Syria

In post-Assad Syria, stand-up comedians are re-emerging to challenge taboos, mocking the former president and his regime and even testing the waters with Damascus's new rulers. Melki Mardini, a performer in the Syrian capital's stand-up scene, is among those embracing newfound freedoms. "The regime has fallen," he declares from the stage, referring to Bashar Al-Assad's abrupt departure earlier this month, ending more than half a century of his family's rule. The audience at an art gallery hosting the show remains silent.

"What's the matter? Are you still scared?" Mardini says, triggering a mix of awkward laughter and applause. "We've been doing stand-up for two years," says the 29-year-old. "We never imagined a day would come when we could speak so freely." Now, his performances are "safe spaces," he says. "We can express our views without bothering anyone, except Bashar." Under the old regime, jokes about elections, the dollar or even mentioning the president's name could mean arrest or worse.

Chatting with the audience during his set, Mardini learns one man is a psychiatrist. "A lord in the new Syria!" he exclaims, imagining crowds rushing into therapy after five decades of dictatorship. For two hours, 13 comedians — including one woman — from the collective Styria (a play on the words Syria and hysteria) take the stage, sharing personal stories: an arrest, how they dodged compulsory military service, how they sourced dollars on the black market.

'Syria wants freedom'

"Syria wants freedom!" declares Rami Jabr as he takes the stage. "This is our first show without the mukhabarat in the room," he quips, referring to the feared intelligence agents. He reflects on his experience in Homs, dubbed the "capital of the revolution" in March of 2011 when anti-government protests broke out in the wake



File photo shows Mary Obaid performs during a comedy night titled 'Styria' which is an Arabic mash-up of Syria and hysteria, in Damascus on April 24, 2023.



File photo shows Hussein Al-Rawi performs during a comedy night titled 'Styria' which is an Arabic mash-up of Syria and hysteria, in Damascus on April 24, 2023. —AFP photos

of the Arab Spring, followed by brutal repression. A commercial representative for a foreign company, Jabr recalls being detained for a month by various security services, beaten and tortured with a taser, under the accusation that he was an "infiltrator" sent to sow chaos in Syria.

Like him, comedians from across the country share their journeys, united by the same fear that has suffocated Syrians for decades living under an iron fist. Hussein Al-Rawi tells the audience how he never gives out his address, a vestige of the paranoia of the past. "I'm always afraid he'll come back," he says, referring to Assad. "But I hope for a better Syria, one that belongs to all of us."

'Pivotal moment'

Said Al-Yakhchi, attending the show, notes that free speech is flourishing. "During the last performance before the regime fell, there were restrictions," says the 32-year-old shopkeeper. "Now, there are no restrictions, no one has to answer to anyone. There's no fear of any-

one." Not even Syria's new rulers — a diverse mix of rebel groups, including Islamists and former jihadists, who quickly marched on Damascus and toppled Assad's government.

"We didn't live through a revolution for 13 or 14 years... just to have a new power tell us, 'You can't speak,'" Mardini says. When not performing on stage, Mary Obaid, 23, is a dentist. "We unload everything we've been holding inside — we do it for all Syrians," she says. "Each person shares their own experience. The audience reacts as if each story has happened to them too." Of the country's new leaders, Obaid says she will wait to see "what they will do, then we'll judge".

"Right now, we feel freedom," she says. "We hope we won't be targets of harassment." "We're at a pivotal moment, transitioning from one era to another," she adds. "Now we are the country of freedom, and we can put forward all our demands. From now on, never again fear." — AFP

Lifestyle



A general view of a damaged sidewalk in front of the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio in Wajima city, Ishikawa prefecture.

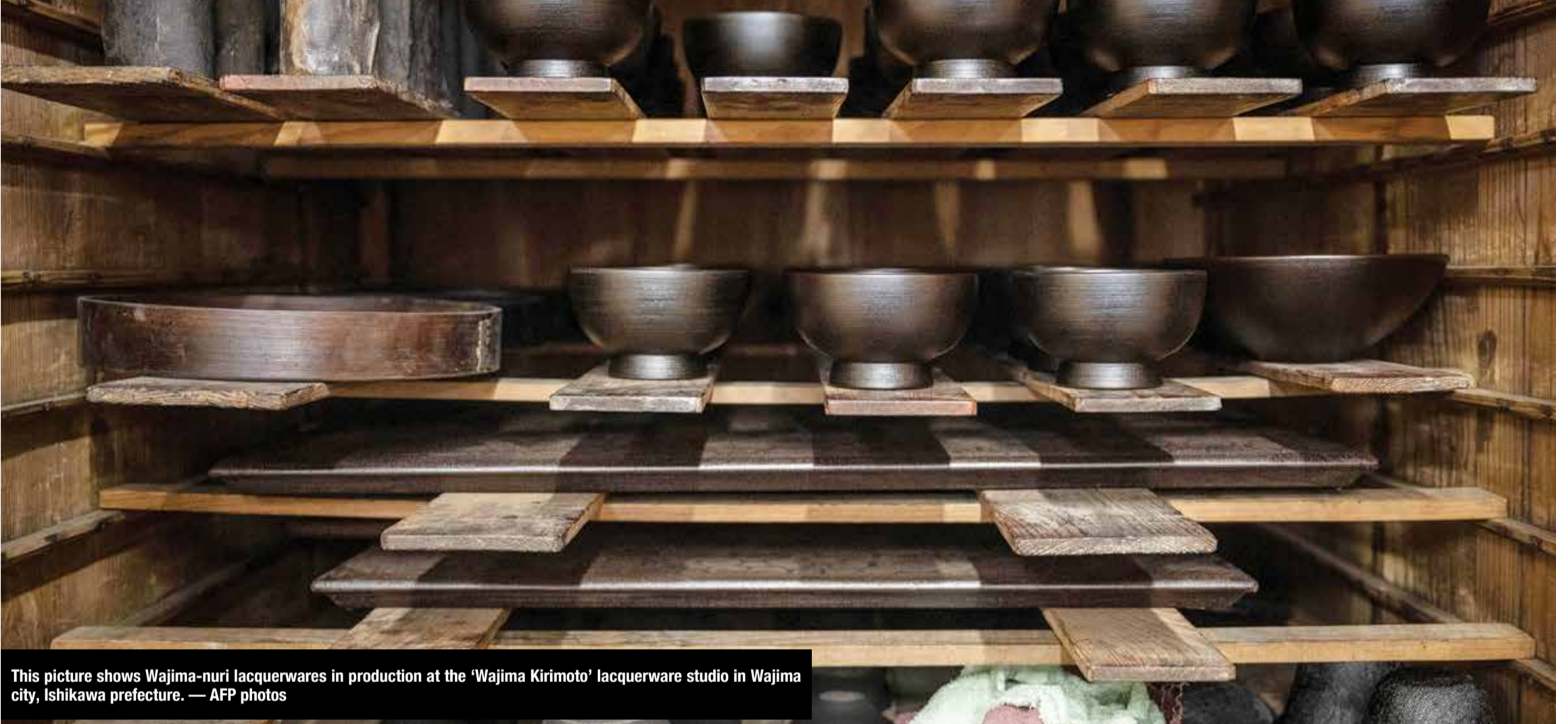


A general view of the Wajima-nuri lacquerware at the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio.



Japanese lacquerware maker Takaho Shoji posing for photographs at his desk in the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio.

JAPAN'S WAJIMA CRAFTMAKERS SEE HOPE IN DISASTER-HIT REGION



This picture shows Wajima-nuri lacquerwares in production at the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio in Wajima city, Ishikawa prefecture. — AFP photos

Lacquerware maker Takaho Shoji hunches over his desk in the disaster-hit city of Wajima in central Japan, applying another layer of coating to a dark, wooden box. One brushstroke at a time, the 53-year-old is determined to bring life back to his remote community after a devastating New Year's Day earthquake, followed by severe floods. "I need to do whatever I can to move forward with the reconstruction, and to continue this tradition and pass it on to the next generations," said the soft-spoken father of two.

"We have to work harder together, otherwise the local lacquerware industry will fade." Wajima, a coastal city with a population of just over 20,000, is a nationally celebrated center for fine lacquerware. Products made there are known as Wajima-nuri, and a basic soup bowl can command a price of \$150 or more. This year brought death and suffering to the city and its surrounding communities at the tip of the Noto Peninsula.

As families prepared for their New Year's Day dinners, a terrifying 7.5-magnitude jolt accompanied by powerful aftershocks destroyed houses and businesses. Sweeping fires, a tsunami and landslides engulfed the region and forced most residents and their visiting relatives to flee to evacuation shelters. Then, as they tried to rebuild their lives, torrential rain flooded the city in September, destroying more homes.

The disasters also shattered the network of roughly 700 artisans and workers in Wajima's lacquerware industry, which has been losing workers like other fine crafts. Damage to the city has been so extensive that municipal officials are not even certain how many craftspeople are still active.

'Warmth and wellbeing'

Wajima-nuri is known for its durability and delicate designs and is often used in tableware like bowls and chopsticks. With its understated elegance, the technique is also used to create high-end furniture and home decor. More than 100 steps are involved in the production of Wajima-nuri. The tasks are distributed among specialized artisans, some focusing on lacquer coating and others on carving and shaping.

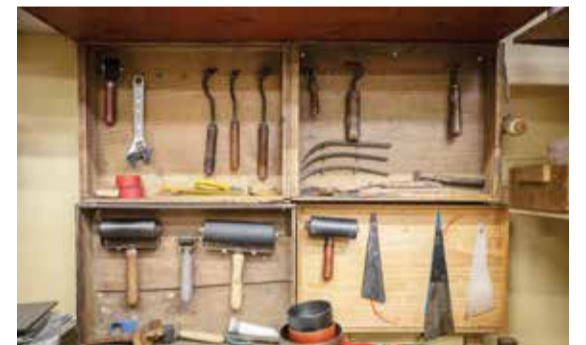
Among the city's lacquerware professionals trying to restore the network of artisans is Taiichi Kirimoto, the seventh-generation proprietor of a Wajima-nuri



Japanese lacquerware maker Takaho Shoji working at his desk in the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio.



Japanese lacquerware maker Takaho Shoji showing his hands at his desk in the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio.



This picture shows tools hanging on a wall by the desk of Japanese lacquerware maker Takaho Shoji at the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio.

ri studio. He and his wife now live at his company's gallery space after they lost their house, but he has wasted little time in moving forward. He worked with renowned architect Shigeru Ban to build temporary work spaces made with cardboard materials, and he has travelled around the country promoting his studio's work and providing places of work for artisans.

"Lacquerware provides a sense of comfort and warmth and wellbeing to people. Perhaps this is different from modern convenience," said Kirimoto, who has worked with top brands including Louis Vuitton. "I absolutely do not see a choice to leave this city or to move to another profession."



Taiichi Kirimoto, the seventh-generation proprietor of a Wajima-nuri lacquerware studio.



A general view of a Wajima-nuri lacquerware made for Louis Vuitton at the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio.



Japanese lacquerware maker Takaho Shoji working at his desk in the 'Wajima Kirimoto' lacquerware studio.

Uncertain future

Among Kirimoto's staff artisans is Shoji, a specialist in coating. An avid angler, Shoji was alone at a local port late afternoon when the earthquake struck, knocking him onto his back. Sea water roared and receded fast, exposing the seabed before rushing back as a tsunami. With landslides blocking the roads home, he decided to spend the night in his car on higher ground. The next day, he was reunited with his family but his house was unsafe to live in. They moved into an evacuation shelter and he began helping others in his community.

Shoji encouraged others to stay in the city after the quake. But after the September floods, he questioned whether it was the right decision. "That's what worries me the most -- when you lose people, it devastates the community," he said. Shoji still believes the Wajima-nuri tradition, a source of local pride, can bring energy back to his home city in its time of dire distress. He is testing new methods, inspired by the centuries-old tradition, to bring lacquerware into the modern era. "Our future is uncertain. But I want to do something to move things forward," he said.—AFP

Picturesque Japan hot spring town limits day trippers

A Japanese hot spring town popular for its photogenic snowy scenes began limiting entry to day-trippers in a trial to tackle overtourism during winter. Ginzan Onsen, a remote town in northern Yamagata region, draws around 330,000 visitors each year. Many share photos online of its old-fashioned buildings blanketed in snow and illuminated by lamplight that create

a nostalgic atmosphere. However, authorities in Ginzan Onsen, as in more famous destinations such as Kyoto and Mount Fuji, have become fed up with a rise in road problems, quarrels and other nuisances. From Monday, only people staying at local hotels will be allowed to enter the town after 8 pm, while those wishing to visit between 5 pm and 8 pm will need a reservation. Japan has seen a record influx of foreign tourists this year as the weak yen swells a post-pandemic travel boom.

"Traffic jams have sometimes been caused by cars getting stuck in the snow, because travellers were driving with normal tyres" instead of with snow tyres, said Takayuki Saito, head of commerce and tourism for the municipality of Obanazawa, where the town is located. "We've also heard of cas-

es of emergency vehicles not being able to reach" Ginzan Onsen due to congestion, Saito told AFP. Driving there "can be dangerous with poor visibility in snowstorms" in winter, he said.

Until the end of February, day-trippers will be asked to park at a tourism center two kilometers (1.2 miles) away and pay for a shuttle bus. The official website for Ginzan Onsen said the trial had been launched after years of debate, adding that authorities were hoping to maintain a good relationship with visitors.

When heavy traffic recently stopped an ambulance, "an emergency service team made it to the scene by running, but it was truly a life-and-death situation," the site said. "Some visitors are verbally abusive" when officials come to help cars stuck in

snow, according to the site, which it described as "unbearable". More than 33 million foreign visitors have entered Japan so far this year, breaking 2019's full-year record of nearly 32 million. Locals in Japan's ancient capital Kyoto have complained of tourists harassing the city's famed geisha and decided to ban visitors from entering private alleys.

Authorities have also introduced an entry fee and daily cap on numbers on Mount Fuji's most popular trail, while barriers were installed outside a convenience store nearby to stop crowds of snap-happy visitors getting injured on the road.—AFP



Participants parade during the Calabar Carnival in Calabar on December 28, 2024. — AFP photos

Calabar Carnival: Africa's largest celebration of music, dance and culture

By Sahar Moussa

The Calabar Carnival, held annually in Cross River State, Nigeria, is one of Africa's largest and most celebrated cultural events. Typically taking place throughout December, the carnival's main festivities peak around Christmas and continue into the New Year, marking the holiday season with a vibrant display of music, dance, and cultural heritage.

First organized in 2004, the Calabar Carnival was created to promote tourism and celebrate the rich traditions of the Cross River region. Over the years, it has grown to become Nigeria's largest carnival and a globally recognized festival.

At the heart of the event is the grand street procession, where participants, adorned in elaborate costumes, perform traditional dances and showcase floats that reflect diverse cultural themes. This procession serves as the festival's centerpiece, drawing massive crowds from around the world.

In addition to the grand parade, the carnival features the Miss Calabar Carnival pageant, where young women compete for the prestigious title. The event also hosts a variety of performances, including live music concerts and traditional dances. The carnival's international appeal continues to grow, attracting performers and tourists from across the globe.

With its ever-increasing quality and scale, the Calabar Carnival has cemented its status as Nigeria's biggest carnival and an internationally renowned festival.



A participant helps another participant tie her boots before the parade during the Calabar Carnival in Calabar.



Participants parade during the Calabar Carnival in Calabar.



Participants parade during the Calabar Carnival.



Participants pose for a photograph.



A participant poses for a photograph.



A participant poses for a photograph.



Participants dance as they join the parade during the Calabar Carnival.



Participants dance as they parade during the Calabar Carnival.



Participants parade during the Calabar Carnival in Calabar.

Sports

Bumrah gives India a shot at win, but Australia lead by 333

Both teams are seeking to go 2-1 up in the series

MELBOURNE: Indian seamer Jasprit Bumrah unleashed more destructive bowling but Australia stubbornly battled back to reach 228-9 on Sunday, leading by 333 runs in an absorbing fourth Test.

Bumrah scythed through the middle order on day four in Melbourne to record figures of 4-56 off 24 overs and hand India an outside chance of victory in a match the home side have mostly dominated. However, India's hopes were diminished by a stubborn, unbeaten final-wicket stand of 55 from 17.5 overs.

Nathan Lyon was at the crease on 41 while number 11 Scott Boland had seen off 65 balls to be 10 not out at the close. Up by 105 runs on the first innings, Australia were rocked by losing four wickets for 11 midway through the second session to slump to 91-6.

Marnus Labuschagne and Pat Cummins responded with a vital partnership of 57, taking the steam out of Bumrah's assault. A charmed Labuschagne scored 70, to back up his first-innings 72, while Cummins produced a captain's knock of 41 -- giving him a career-high combined 90 runs for the Test.

Both teams are seeking to go 2-1 up in the series heading into the fifth and final Test in Sydney. Australia remain in the stronger position on a pitch showing signs of variable bounce. "Their middle to lower order batting has been exceptional for the last four or five series we've played against them, so never comfortable with any amount of runs," said Labuschagne after play ended. "At one stage we probably would have taken a 270 lead, and now the lower order has just put us in an amazing position with 333."

Brilliant Bumrah

The conditions were exploited brilliantly by Bumrah, who continued his dominance across a series in

which he has claimed 29 wickets. The 31-year-old powered past 200 Test victims and he boasts the lowest average at 19.45 of all 85 bowlers to have reached that milestone.

Labuschagne was beaten on numerous occasions by Bumrah's jagging deliveries but kept his nerve in a 139-ball knock. The Australian number three was fortunate, on 46, to survive a straightforward dropped chance in the slips by Yashasvi Jaiswal.

Jaiswal also couldn't grasp a sharp chance under the helmet offered by Cummins in the final over before tea. Labuschagne was trapped lbw by lively seamer Mohammed Siraj before Mitchell Starc was run out for five. Spinner Ravindra Jadeja had Cummins caught behind, heralding the 10th-wicket stand which could yet prove pivotal to the outcome.

Siraj sparks collapse

Siraj, who took 3-66, sparked the earlier collapse, dismissing first-innings centurion Steve Smith for 13. Bumrah was at his best when removing Travis Head, Mitchell Marsh and Alex Carey cheaply in rapid-fire fashion. All-rounder Marsh was caught behind without scoring, continuing a series in which he has made little meaningful contribution.

"It just happened so quickly," said Labuschagne of Australia's middle-order collapse. "As a new batter coming in, it's very difficult to start in any Test match, but let alone when Bumrah's got his tail up with the ball nipping around." Australia lost both openers before going to lunch at 53-2.

Teenage opener Sam Konstas was unable to match the fearless deeds from his debut first-innings of 60, this time bowled for eight by Bumrah. Usman Khawaja was bowled for 21 by Siraj, having been dropped early on by the butter-fin-



MELBOURNE: Australia's Mitchell Starc (R) is run out on day four of the fourth cricket Test match between Australia and India at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne on December 29, 2024. — AFP

gered Jaiswal at leg gully.

India were earlier dismissed for 369 in reply to Australia's first innings 474, after adding 11 to their overnight score, with maiden centurion Nitish Kumar Reddy the last man out, caught in the deep for 114.

Reddy, playing just his fourth Test, finished with the highest Test score in Melbourne for any player batting at number eight or lower. He believed India could successfully chase a "big total" if they apply themselves. "If you ask me, everyone is capable of playing on this pitch," he said. — AFP

Rabada unlikely batting star as South Africa edge Pakistan in thriller

CENTURION: An emotional Temba Bavuma hailed the character of his team after South Africa qualified for the World Test championship final with a dramatic two-wicket win over Pakistan on the fourth day of the first Test at SuperSport Park on Sunday.

Needing 148 to win, South Africa crashed to 99 for eight owing to superb bowling by Mohammad Abbas. But Kagiso Rabada turned batting hero as he and Marco Jansen took South Africa to victory with an unbeaten ninth wicket partnership of 51.

Rabada, so often a match-winner as a bowler, went on the attack as a batsman, hitting an unbeaten 31 off 26 balls, while Jansen provided solid support in making 16 not out. "It is an emotional moment for me," South African captain Bavuma said at the post-match presentation.

"As a team, we have overcome a lot. We haven't been super-dominant with our performances, we haven't been ruthless but we have always found a way to ensure the result was on our side. Today was testament to that. It speaks a lot to the talent and character of the group."

South Africa's win meant that only one of Australia and India can qualify for the final at Lord's in June. Pakistan captain Shan Masood said he was proud of the effort of his players but lamented the failure to

take ruthless advantage of their opportunities.

"Twice we had them eight down and with the bat we could have extended our first innings and could have extended our lead (in the second innings). We have to learn to seize the moments."

'The only spike'

Masood said Abbas, playing in his first Test in more than three years, had been "sensational". The 34-year-old Abbas took a career-best six for 54. He bowled unchanged for 19.3 overs—four of them on Saturday when he took his first two wickets—in a spell of unremitting accuracy on a pitch which gave seam bowlers help throughout the match.

Man of the match Aiden Markram and Bavuma batted solidly at the start of the day after resuming on 27 for three. However, Markram was bowled by Abbas for 37 by a virtually unplayable ball which kept low and seamed back off the pitch.

Bavuma and David Bedingham added another 34 runs until Bavuma uncharacteristically charged down the pitch at Abbas and was given out caught behind for 40. He walked off immediately but Ultra Edge technology showed the only 'spike' was when the ball brushed his trouser pocket.

It was the first of four wickets which fell for three runs in 12 balls. Naseem Shah bowled Kyle Verreynne and Abbas had Bedingham and Corbin Bosch caught behind off successive deliveries. Rabada and Jansen saw South Africa through to lunch at 116 for eight—then polished off the match



CENTURION: South Africa's Kagiso Rabada reacts after being hit by the ball on the head from a delivery by Pakistan's Naseem Shah (unseen) during the fourth day of the first cricket Test match between South Africa and Pakistan. —AFP

in just 5.3 overs after the interval, with each stroke cheered by the home spectators. Both sides have a short break before they meet for the second and final Test in Cape Town on January 3. — AFP



The victorious weightlifting team.

Kuwait weightlifting team win medals in Arab championship

DOHA: The Kuwait weightlifting team won a number of medals on Saturday at the Arab Weightlifting Championship for men and women in the Qatari capital Doha. Weightlifter Maryam Dhiab won three gold medals in the young women (cubs) category for body weight (64 kilograms), where the player lifted (snatch) 60 kilograms and (nitre) 60 kilograms. Maryam Bujbara came in sixth place in the adult category for body weight (64 kilograms), as the player lifted (snatch) 43 kilograms and (nitre) 50 kilograms.



Hanan Al-Amir came in fourth place in the adult category for body weight (71 kilograms), as the player carried 65 kilograms in the (snatch) lift and 75 kilograms in the (nitre) lift. Essa Shaher won three bronze medals in the youth (cubs) category for body weight (73 kilograms), as the player carried 70 kilograms in the (snatch) lift and 80 kilograms in the (netter) lift. While the player Mohammed Abdul Rida came in fourth place in the men's category for body weight (73 kilograms), as the player lifted 100 kilograms in the (snatch) lift and 136 kilograms in the (nitre) lift. The Arab Weightlifting Championship for men and women started Friday, in the Qatari capital Doha and will continue until December 31.

Moeller wins super-G to record maiden World Cup victory

BORMIO: Norwegian Fredrik Moeller registered his first World Cup victory on Sunday, winning the men's super-G at Bormio which will be the venue for the 2026 Olympics alpine ski events. The 24-year-old—who had finished fourth in the previous two super-Gs—was two tenths of a second faster than Vincent Kriechmayr of Austria. Swiss racer Alexis Monney filled out the podium, 0.24sec off the pace.

Moeller's first World Cup triumph followed that in Saturday's downhill of Monney, who said it had been

Nearly 600 take part in 7th Kuwait Amateur League

KUWAIT: The National Cancer Awareness Campaign "CAN" organizes the seventh Kuwaiti Amateur Football League 2024-2025 under the auspices of the Public Authority for Sport and the Kuwait Football Association with the participation of 14 teams from academies accredited by Public Authority for Sport and the participation of nearly 600 young athletes, and since the interest in youth, hobby development and a healthy lifestyle is one of the most important goals of the campaign, more than 500 Kuwaiti players between the ages of 17 years and above participated in the league, the Kuwait Football League started on November 14, 2024 and continues for three months, ending at the beginning of February 2025.

This is what was confirmed by Abdullah Khalid Al-Saleh - Director of Haidu Academy "CAN", he also indicated that Haidu Academy "CAN" topped Group A with (7 points), and the Victory team with (7 points), add-

ing that the league, which is held for the seventh year in a row, has become one of the distinguished leagues produced by Kuwaiti youth aware of the importance of practicing sports and commitment to it, and the health impact it has on its practitioners.

The organizing committee of the seventh league extends sincere thanks and appreciation to everyone who contributed to the emergence of this league in this form, especially as it has become a distinctive imprint in the world of sports, and wishes success to all participating teams and taking first places, and the sports activities implemented by Haidu "CAN" sports arm aims to instill the rules of sports, its importance and the need to practice it permanently for children because of its importance for those who persist in it, as it previously held a tournament entitled "CAN Academy Football Championship" for the second year in a row for age groups from 4 to 15 years, this came as a result of the campaign's belief that there are many young people who are aware of the importance of practicing sports and commitment to it, and the health impact it has on those who practice it.

The campaign believes that there are many parents who work to encourage their children to practice sports. Sport for children is an opportunity to develop personality traits to be a positive personality beneficial to oneself and society.

It contributes to the formation of the child's personality and moral principles and the acquisition of ball ethics characterized by cooperation:



as children who practice sports can be a good example to their peers at school or the regiment, as it helps to form new friendships that may last a lifetime starting from the stadium, or the academy they participate in, and teaches children the spirit of teamwork and the benefits of social interaction.

In Sydney, women's world number four Jasmine Paolini crushed Belinda Bencic 6-1, 6-1 in just 57 minutes to ensure Italy beat Switzerland. Men's world number six Casper Ruud, meanwhile, survived a tough examination from Tomas Machac, but his efforts were in vain as Norway crashed to the Czech Republic. Zverev broke Monteiro in the opening game of each set, preventing him from threatening in the 80-minute contest. The one-two singles punch left Germany in an unfamiliar position at the tournament it won last year.

Zverev helps champions Germany knock Brazil out of United Cup

SYDNEY: Germany took a solid first step on Sunday in defence of their United Cup title with world number two Alexander Zverev and Laura Siegemund powering them past Brazil, who were knocked out of the mixed-team tournament. Zverev assured the win by dominating Thiago Monteiro 6-4, 6-4 after Siegemund began with a 6-3, 1-6, 6-4 victory over Beatriz Haddad Maia, who is ranked 63 places above her at 17. The result in Perth eliminated the South Americans from group play after a previous loss to China. Germany face the Chinese on Monday with the winner advancing to the quarter-finals.

"This is the first time we've ever been up 2-0," Zverev said. "Last year, I played deciding (mixed doubles) matches every time. It's nice to have this (tie) in the bag. I'm very happy to be playing for Germany again."

Siegemund fought for more than two-and-a-half hours to subdue Haddad Maia, winning five first-set games in a row before stumbling to lose the second set. The German came out ahead after three consecutive service breaks late in the final set for a 5-4 lead and secured her win on a first match point. — AFP

Sports

Jalen Brunson's 55 points propel Knicks to OT win over Wizards

Giddey scores 23 points to lead Bulls over Bucks

LOS ANGELES: Jalen Brunson delivered a 55-point masterpiece as the New York Knicks rallied from a double-digit fourth-quarter deficit to beat the Washington Wizards 136-132 in overtime on Saturday. Brunson scored 42 of his points in the second half and overtime to help the Knicks fend off the lowly Wizards for a seventh straight NBA victory. It was his third 50-point game as a Knick, and New York needed all of his output against a Washington team playing without Kyle Kuzma and their leading scorer Jordan Poole.

Justin Champagnie put up a career-high 31 points for the Wizards, who led by as many as 11 in the third quarter and took an eight point lead into the fourth. They pushed their lead to 100-90 early in the final period and after a pair of lead changes the Wizards were up 119-114 with 1:07 remaining. Brunson converted a three-point play then tied it at 119-119 with another driving basket and they went to overtime, where Brunson and Josh Hart each drilled a pair of clutch free-throws to close it out. "We were a step behind until the fourth," Brunson said. "(We) found a way to turn it up and came out with the win."

Brunson connected on 18 of 31 shots from the floor and made three of the Knicks' 10 three-pointers. "I read the game, and then I find a way to impact it," he said. "Tonight it was scoring." He was particularly pleased to hit 16 of his 17 free-throws—including making five of six from the line in overtime.

"It's great, knowing I haven't made a bunch of free throws this year, I've been terrible. But I made it

when it was needed," Brunson said. Elsewhere in the league, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 22 points and Jalen Williams added 20 for the Western Conference-leading Oklahoma City Thunder in a comfortable 106-94 victory over the Hornets in Charlotte.

It was a 10th straight regular-season win for the Thunder—a run broken up by a loss to Milwaukee in the NBA Cup final which didn't count toward the season schedule. In Chicago, Josh Giddey scored 23 points with 15 rebounds and 10 assists to lead the Bulls in a 116-111 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks, who were without ailing star Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Nikola Vucevic added 23 points and 13 rebounds for the Bulls. Damian Lillard, who like Antetokounmpo had been listed as questionable for the game because of illness, scored 29 points and handed out 11 assists for the Bucks.

Lakers win without LeBron

Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James was also sidelined by illness, but the Lakers, fueled by 36 points from Anthony Davis, beat the Sacramento Kings 132-122. Davis added 15 rebounds and eight assists and Austin Reaves scored 26 points with 16 assists for the Lakers.

De'Aaron Fox scored 29 points and handed out 12 assists for the Kings, who were playing their first game since head coach Mike Brown was sacked. Doug Christie, promoted to the interim head coach job, presided over their sixth straight defeat.



INGLEWOOD: Anthony Davis #3 of the Los Angeles Lakers drives to the basket during the game against the Sacramento Kings on December 28, 2024 at Intuit Dome in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

In San Francisco, Jonathan Kuminga matched his career high with 34 points and drilled three free-throws in the final 29 seconds to help the Golden State Warriors hold off the Phoenix Suns 109-105. Dennis Schroder struggled much of the night but produced a huge three-pointer with 1:23 remaining then forced a turnover and made a pair of clutch free-throws for the Warriors, who

snapped a three-game skid.

Stephen Curry scored 22 points and Draymond Green and Trayce Jackson-Davis added 16 apiece for Golden State while Kevin Durant paced the Suns with 31. In Denver, Nikola Jokic scored 37 points and Jamal Murray added 34 for the Nuggets, who withstood Detroit's fourth-quarter surge for a 134-121 victory over the Pistons. — AFP

Zain Esports racks up another year of success, impressive growth

KUWAIT: Zain Group, a leading provider of innovative technologies and digital lifestyle and ICT solutions operating in eight markets across the Middle East and Africa, announces the end of another successful year for Zain Esports, the e-gaming arm of the Group.

During 2024, Zain Esports undertook 50 tournaments and activations across Zain operations in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, and Iraq. Since first launching in 2021, Zain Esports has attracted around 70,000 participants and garnered over 160 million social media impressions regionally.

Moreover, Zain Esports currently has 210,000 social media followers and during 2024, over 820,000 unique viewers watched Zain Esports tournaments streamed live on Twitch and YouTube.

Zain has invested heavily in network upgrades in recent years, with gaming being one of the most significant business use cases for 5G and fiber-to-the-home (FTTH). Zain was able to identify this opportunity early on, working to cultivate the e-gaming community across the Middle East in general, and within its markets of operation in particular.

This investment in network and resources has resulted in the development of a vibrant e-gaming ecosystem across regional markets, with Zain Esports leading and involved in multiple gaming activities centered around the main esports titles, namely Fortnite, Counter Strike, Call of Duty, PUBG Mobile, League of Legends, FC 24 (previously FIFA), Valorant, etc.

Region wide: Notably during 2024, Zain Esports partnered with Riot games in more than 15 venues across eight countries to launch the League of Legend MENA servers that saw more than five-thousand gamers participate and received more than 45 million impressions.

Kuwait - Zain Esports conducted multiple offline FC (football) tournaments in Kuwait throughout



2024 with hundreds of gamers competing in the 62 matches that were played.

Saudi Arabia - Zain Esports local arm PLAYHERA continued to support the Saudi gaming system

Bahrain - Zain Esports partnered with universities to launch the Zain University League within the Kingdom, seeing more than 300 up and coming gamers participate in various tournaments and workshops held in the recently established Zain Esports Lab within the Zain HQ offices.

Jordan - Zain partnered with the First Jordan Gaming and Esports Summit, as well as being the main sponsor of the Jordanian Esports Federation—collaborating in multiple tournaments across the year. Zain Esports in Jordan holds regular activations at its new state-of-the-art venue, the Dome, in partnership with gamergg, a Jordanian esports company specializing in tournament organization.

Iraq - Zain Esports participated in the Esports World Cup 2024 Tekken 8 held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Zain Esports in Iraq was a strategic partner of the Iraq International Information & Telecommunication Technology Expo (ITEX), supporting its monthly events of esports tournaments.

Malek Hammoud, Zain Group Chief Investment and Digital Officer said, "Gamers around the world

are a passionate community, and in the Middle East this is no different. Zain remains committed to supporting the growth and development of this exciting, often youth-oriented activity, and we are extremely grateful to our partners and collaborators with whom we organize events, which capture the imagination and translate into successful opportunities for Zain Esports. All our stakeholders are impressed in how Zain Esports has evolved to become an integral part of the Zain's data services across our footprint, with its popularity and reach having a positive impact on brand recognition and customer acquisition."

Beyond the brand and financial benefits accruing from participating in online gaming for the players, Zain's activities in this area support operating companies to connect with the gaming community and provide data and similar high-value services. Spectators are also able watch the gaming and content live over Zain Esports social media channels, predominantly Twitch and YouTube, as well as over regular posts on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. With the continual investments in 5G and FTTH network upgrades across its markets, Zain Esports will be empowered to offer more appealing activities and competitions in gaming during 2025 and beyond.

Drama, dreams: Japan's popular school football breeds future stars

TOKYO: Japan's national high school football tournament is thriving after more than 100 years, attracting huge crowds, millions watching on TV and breeding future stars, despite professional clubs trying to lure away young talent. The annual tournament kicked off on Saturday and is still regarded as the pinnacle of amateur football with young players dreaming of playing in the final in front of tens of thousands at the National Stadium in Tokyo.

Matches are a massive occasion for the whole school as student cheering squads wave flags, bang drums and roar on their teams in a spectacle of

noise and colour. "All the teams are at a similar level of technical ability so it's about who wants to win the most," 18-year-old Junpei Fukuda, the leader of Ryutsukeizai University Kashiwa High School's cheering squad, told AFP.

"We want our voices to be the loudest." Unlike in Europe, where young players are snapped up by professional club academies, high school football in Japan still attracts elite talent. Many go on to the professional game and play for their country with current Japan stars such as Daizen Maeda and Reo Hatate of Celtic and Crystal Palace's Daichi Kamada all having played high school football.

The landscape has begun to change in recent years, with more top young players turning their backs on the high school game and joining the youth teams of top-flight J. League clubs instead. The school tournament's quality has taken a hit as a result, but its magic endures for many.

Ryutsukeizai Kashiwa midfielder Kanaru Matsumoto, who will turn professional with the J. League's Shonan Bellmare next year, said the tournament was "the stage I've aspired to play on ever since I was little". "The main reason I came to this school was because I thought I could play at the national high school tournament here," the 17-year-old said.

The national high school tournament was first played in 1917, long before professional football came to Japan with the J. League in 1993. Teams from each of Japan's 47 prefectures, with two from Tokyo, compete in a knockout competition over 18 days with matches played in and around the capital.

All games are televised locally and the semi-finals and final are broadcast to a national audience, with millions tuning in. Last season's final in Tokyo was played in front of 55,000 fans, comfortably eclipsing most J. League attendances. — AFP

Impressive Herbert leads Chargers into playoffs

MIAMI: Justin Herbert threw three touchdowns as the Los Angeles Chargers booked an NFL playoff berth with a 40-7 win at the New England Patriots on Saturday. But the Denver Broncos' hopes of joining the Chargers in the post-season suffered a blow as they lost an overtime thriller to the Cincinnati Bengals 30-24. The Patriots, who suffered a sixth straight defeat, were booed off the field by the remaining fans at Gillette Stadium as they fell to 3-13 on the season. For the Chargers it was a job well done as the confident Herbert ensured a second playoff spot in three seasons with another accomplished display.

Herbert completed 28 of 38 passes and threw for 281 yards against a Patriots defense that caused few issues against the passing game. The Chargers took the lead late in the first quarter thanks to a beautiful 23-yard Herbert pass, superbly caught by the diving Derius Davis.

After a Cameron Dicker field goal early in the second, Herbert found rookie receiver Ladd McConkey at the back of the end-zone with a pinpoint pass to make it 17-0. Patriots rookie quarterback Drake Maye, who was evaluated for a possible concussion after a first-quarter hit, returned in the second and hit DeMario Douglas with a fine 36-yard touchdown pass to give the Patriots some hope. But the Chargers ran away with the game, with Herbert again connecting with McConkey—this time with a 40-yard pass down the middle. A two-yard rush from J.K Dobbins in the fourth completed the rout.

Herbert's performance meant he set a record for the most passing yards in the first five years of an NFL career—passing Peyton Manning's tally of 20,618 yards. Herbert was quick to give credit for his achievement to his team-mates. "It says so much about the guys we had catching those passes and a great offensive line giving me the time to get the ball off and (the defense) getting me the ball back," he said. "I couldn't have done it without them," he added. — AFP



KASHIWA: Picture taken on December 13, 2024 shows members of Ryutsukeizai University Kashiwa High School football club taking part in a training session at their school football field in Kashiwa city of Chiba prefecture. — AFP

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

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

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

Hospitals

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

Change of Name

I 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

Man City stop the rot with victory at Leicester

Spurs held 2-2 by Wolves in exciting clash



LEICESTER: Manchester City's Norwegian striker #09 Erling Haaland (2L) heads home their second goal during the English Premier League football match between Leicester City and Manchester City at King Power Stadium in Leicester, central England on December 29, 2024. — AFP

LEICESTER: Manchester City provided Pep Guardiola some relief with a 2-0 victory at Leicester to secure just a second win in 14 games for the crisis-hit English champions on Sunday. Savinho and Erling Haaland struck either side of half-time as City ended a run of eight away games without a win.

The performance was still far from the standards that Guardiola's side have set in winning an unprecedented four consecutive English top-flight titles. But the effusive celebrations of Haaland's header 16 minutes from time showed that three points was all that mattered for the visitors to at least temporarily halt their remarkable slump.

Victory lifts City up to fifth but they are still 11 points behind leaders Liverpool, who have two games in hand. Defeat leaves Leicester still rooted in the bottom three. Guardiola made just one change from the 1-1 Boxing Day draw against Everton as Kevin De Bruyne replaced his Belgian international colleague Jeremy Doku.

De Bruyne's fitness struggles have played a part in City's slump and he immediately showed what Guardiola's men have been missing for most of the season. Rico

Lewis picked out De Bruyne, who cushioned a cross into the path of Haaland but his low effort was well saved by Leicester's stand-in goalkeeper Jakob Stolarczyk.

Leicester have now lost their last four games after a bright start to Ruud van Nistelrooy's reign. The Foxes were left to rue not taking their chances to inflict more misery on a City side still showing a clear lack of confidence. Any time the home side crossed into City territory in the first half they appeared a major threat.

Jamie Vardy would surely have won a penalty had he not strayed offside before being brought down by Stefan Ortega, while James Justin's header hit the post after a goalmouth scramble. City, though, got the crucial opening goal on 21 minutes. Stolarczyk should have done better than to parry Phil Foden's long-range effort into the path of Savinho, who swept the rebound into the roof of the net for his first City goal. Chances continued to come and go for Leicester early in the second half.

Goals from Chris Wood and Morgan Gibbs-White gave Nottingham Forest a 2-0 win over Everton on Sunday to move up to the heady heights of second in the Premier League after another superb performance

away from home. The win gives Forest, who battled relegation for much of last season, 37 points after 19 games. They are five behind leaders Liverpool, who have two games in hand and face West Ham United later on Sunday.

Forest are one ahead of third-placed Arsenal, who are not in action again until New Year's Day, and two ahead of Chelsea, who can overtake them if they beat Ipswich Town on Monday. Everton got off to a bright start as Iliman Ndiaye created the game's first chance, slicing through the heart of the Forest defence before firing a shot high over the bar in the sixth minute.

That positive opening came to an abrupt end when the visitors took the lead in the 15th minute as Chris Wood nodded a long ball to Anthony Elanga on the counter-attack. The Swedish winger headed it back into his path, teeing New Zealander Wood up to deftly lift it over the advancing Jordan Pickford and into the net.

Gibbs-White made it two on the hour mark as Wood rescued a broken-down counter-attack by sliding the ball through to him in the penalty area to cut back in-

side and fire home. Everton did their best to knock the visitors out of their stride, picking up four yellow cards during some tough tackles, and defender James Tarkowski sailed close to the wind with a couple of challenges that could have earned him a second booking. With Forest sitting back and protecting their lead, the Toffees enjoyed plenty of possession and registered 13 shots on goal, but only two of them were on target as their four-match unbeaten run came to an end.

Crystal Palace edged bottom-placed Southampton 2-1 at Selhurst Park on Sunday, securing their second home win in the Premier League thanks to goals from Eberechi Eze and Trevor Chalobah. The victory lifted Palace one place in the standings to 15th, while Southampton remained winless under new manager Ivan Juric, suffering a second consecutive defeat following their 1-0 Boxing Day loss to West Ham United.

Southampton had the more energetic start and took the lead in the 14th minute after Kyle Walker-Peters skipped past Daniel Munoz and his cross found Adam Armstrong, who set up Tyler Dibling for a simple tap-in. Palace pressed hard for an equalizer and

made it 1-1 in the 31st minute when Trevor Chalobah headed in from a corner before Eze sealed the three points for the home side with a strike from the edge of the box.

Struggling Tottenham Hotspur had to settle for a 2-2 home draw against a revived Wolverhampton Wanderers side after a late strike by Norwegian substitute Jorgen Strand Larsen in an entertaining Premier League clash on Sunday. Wolves had taken the lead after seven minutes through Hwang Hee-Chan who fired a low shot that went in off the post after a short free kick, but Spurs equalized five minutes later when Rodrigo Bentancur's header beat keeper Jose Sa from a corner.

Tottenham spurned the chance to go in front before halftime when Son Heung-Min's spot kick was saved but they did go in ahead after Brennan Johnson struck from close range. The second half was end-to-end with Strand Larsen scoring in the 87th minute.

The result left Spurs languishing in 11th with 24 points from 19 games - the first time they will finish the year lower than seventh since the 2008-09 season. Wolves are 17th on 16 points and stand two points above the relegation zone. — Agencies

Khaleeji Zain 26 final moved to Jan 4

KUWAIT: The competitions committee of the Gulf Football Federation has decided to postpone the final match of the Khaleeji Zain 26 championship to Saturday, January 4, instead of Friday, January 3. The dates and venues of the two semifinal matches remain unchanged, with Saudi Arabia facing Oman at 5:30 pm on Tuesday, Dec 31 at Jaber Al-Mubarak Stadium, and Kuwait playing Bahrain at 8:45 pm on the same day at Jaber International Stadium.

Khalid Al-Muqrin, head of the GCC Football Federation's competitions committee, confirmed that a proposal to postpone the semifinal matches was not discussed. He added that the decision to delay the final by one day aimed to provide the finalists with additional rest. All four federations of the semifinal teams agreed to the proposal.

Renard: Title is our goal

The Khaleeji Zain 26 tournament has entered its final stages, with Saudi Arabia advancing to the semifinals after defeating Iraq 3-1 in the final round of Group B. Yemen achieved a historic victory over Bahrain in the same round.

Saudi coach Herve Renard expressed dissatisfaction with his team's performance despite the win. "We were not good in the first half, but our performance improved in the second half, and we succeeded in scoring goals," Renard said during the post-match press conference. He emphasized that the team's goal is to win the championship,



Herve Renard

stating, "Reaching the semifinals is not enough. Our main goal is to win the title."

Renard praised striker Abdullah Al-Hamdan for his two goals that sealed the victory and highlighted the importance of improving the team's mindset and physicality in duels.

Casas: Absences affected performance

Iraqi coach Jesus Casas attributed the loss to a penalty kick that shifted the match's momentum. He acknowledged that absences within the squad had a significant impact but emphasized that the Gulf Cup experience was valuable for testing new players. Casas reassured fans that the team's exit from the tournament would not affect their progress in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, where Iraq currently holds second place in their group.

Talajic: Yemen deserved to win

Bahrain's coach Dragan Talajic commended Yemen for their strong performance and historic



Dragan Talajic

victory. "We played with a full team of substitutes today," Talajic said, adding that while he aimed to win every game, the team is now focusing on their semifinal against Kuwait.

Ould Ali celebrates Yemen's historic win

Yemeni coach Nouredine Ould Ali dedicated his team's 2-1 victory over Bahrain to Yemeni fans and players. "We achieved our first Gulf Cup victory, and we dedicate it to the Yemeni people," he said. The win marked Yemen's first triumph in 21 years of Gulf Cup participation.

Media praise for Khaleeji Zain 26

Gulf and Arab media have lauded the organizational and media efforts behind Khaleeji Zain 26, hosted at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. Journalists highlighted Kuwait's administrative and media success, crediting the tournament's smooth coverage to the diligent work of the media center and committee. Emirati journalist Mohammed Al-Jawkar not-

ed the exemplary coordination at the media center, while sports commentator Khalil Al-Balushi praised the fraternal atmosphere of the Gulf championship. Iraqi journalist Saif Al-Malki commended Kuwait's preparations, and Qatari journalist Ahmed Salim appreciated the detailed daily updates provided by the media committee. Saudi commentator Ali Al-Mohsen described the tournament as a sports carnival that reflects Kuwait's rich football history.

First-round statistics

- Goals: 34 goals scored (16 in the first half, 18 in the second half).
- Offense: Saudi Arabia led with eight goals; Iraq scored the fewest with two.
- Defense: Kuwait and Oman had the strongest defenses (three goals conceded each); Saudi Arabia conceded the most (six goals).
- Historic victory: Yemen achieved their first Gulf Cup win after 21 years and scored four goals in the tournament for the first time.
- Unbeaten teams: Kuwait and Oman remain unbeaten.
- Fastest goal: Qatar's Almoez Ali scored in the second minute against Oman.
- Own goal: Bahrain's Ibrahim Al-Khattal scored the only own goal against Yemen.
- Penalty kicks: Six awarded; five converted, one missed (by UAE's Fabio Lima).
- Red cards: Four issued, including to players from the UAE, Qatar, Yemen and Bahrain.
- Yellow cards: 57 shown, with three matches seeing the most (eight each).
- Top scorers: Oman's Essam Al-Subhi and Saudi Arabia's Abdullah Al-Hamdan lead with three goals each.