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2 Minister conveys condolences of Amir, Crown Prince, PM over death of Carter



5 Louisiana reports first human bird flu-related death in US



8 Meta scraps US fact-checking program ahead of Trump term



16 Late Abraham winner gives Milan Italian Super Cup win over Inter



Amir hails Gulf Cup success

Sheikh Meshal thanks Kuwaiti people and officials, congratulates winners Bahrain



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Shiekh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah poses for a group photo with HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah, ministers, sports officials and organizers of Khaleeji Zain 26 at Bayan Palace on Jan 7, 2025. — KUNA (See Page 2)

NEWS IN BRIEF

Prosecution frees ex-MP on bail

KUWAIT: The public prosecution on Tuesday freed former MP Muhannad Al-Sayer on a KD 1,000 bail pending trial on charges of challenging the authorities of HH the Amir, after detaining him for two days. The former lawmaker was questioned on charges of challenging the authorities of HH the Amir, spreading false news and misusing his mobile phone. Al-Sayer has denied all charges. No date has been set yet for his trial.

Court acquits 3 of terror charges

KUWAIT: The criminal court on Tuesday acquitted three Tunisian men of charges of joining the Islamic State terror group and plotting attacks on worship places. The three men, arrested in a secret service raid a year ago, had denied having any links with IS and insisted they came to Kuwait to work for a delivery company. The trio were charged of joining IS, plotting attacks on Shiite worship places and training in manufacturing explosives.

\$20bn Emirati investment in US

PALM BEACH, Florida: Donald Trump on Tuesday unveiled a \$20 billion Emirati investment in US data centers, as he sought to boost his claims of attracting new support for the economy before he becomes president. "The investment will support massive new data centers across the Midwest, the Sun Belt area, and also to keep America on the cutting edge of technology," Trump told reporters. "Artificial intelligence is very big into the data centers, and that's going to be a very hot item in the coming years." — AFP

11 Yemenis freed from Gitmo

WASHINGTON: The US Defense Department said Monday it had resettled 11 Yemeni detainees from its Guantanamo prison to Oman, leaving 15 people still held at the controversial American base in Cuba. "The United States appreciates the willingness of the government of Oman and other partners to support ongoing US efforts focused on responsibly reducing the detainee population and ultimately closing the Guantanamo Bay facility," the Defense Department said in a statement. — AFP

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah extended his sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Kuwaiti people for their hospitality and good deeds towards Gulf Cup fans that contributed to the success of Khaleeji Zain 26. This came in a speech by HH the Amir during his reception of the supreme organizing committee of the Gulf Cup Tuesday in the presence of HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah and First Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah.

In the speech, HH the Amir thanked Minister of Information and Culture, Minister of State for Youth

Affairs and Chairman of the Supreme Organizing Committee of the Gulf Cup Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, President of Kuwait Football Association and Vice Chairman of the Supreme Committee Sheikh Ahmad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah and the committee members for their efforts. HH the Amir also extended appreciation to HH the Prime Minister and all the concerned ministers, officials and volunteers for their tireless efforts, which culminated in the success of this sporting event that reflected the readiness of Kuwait to organize such tournaments.

HH the Amir congratulated Bahrain on winning the cup, extending appreciation to all participating teams, wishing them success in upcoming events. Furthermore, HH the Amir affirmed full support for

the continuation of the development renaissance witnessed by Kuwait in various fields, especially sports, and the ambition of hosting the Asian Football Cup in the near future.

Minister of Information Al-Mutairi, and on behalf of the supreme committee members, thanked HH the Amir for this reception and the kind sentiments. "Your generous sponsorship of this sporting event was not just a support for sports, but rather a noble message that reflects your constant keenness to consolidate the values of brotherhood and fraternity among the peoples of the Arabian Gulf and to embody Kuwait's pioneering role as a center of love and peace in the region," said Al-Mutairi. The meeting was attended by senior state officials. — KUNA

Tibet quake kills 126, with tremors felt in Nepal, India

BEIJING: A devastating earthquake in China's remote Tibet region killed at least 126 people and damaged thousands of buildings on Tuesday, state media reported, with tremors also felt in neighboring Nepal's capital Kathmandu and parts of India. Videos published by China's state broadcaster CCTV showed houses destroyed with walls torn apart. Rescue workers waded through rubble strewn across the ruins in the aftermath, footage showed, while some gave locals thick blankets to keep warm in sub-zero temperatures.

The quake struck rural, high-altitude Tingri county, about 80 km north of Mount Everest near Chi-

na's border with Nepal, at around 9:00 am (0100 GMT) on Tuesday. "Here the houses are made from dirt so when the earthquake came... lots of houses collapsed," said 34-year-old Sangji Dangzhi, whose supermarket in Tingri suffered considerable damage. Speaking to AFP by phone, Sangji described the situation as "very serious", with ambulances taking people to hospital throughout the day.

Surveillance images published by CCTV showed people running through a store's aisles as shelves shook violently, sending objects like toys tumbling to the ground. At least 126 people have been confirmed dead and 188 others injured as of 7:00 pm, CCTV said. Twenty-eight people in critical condition were transferred to hospital for treatment and 3,609 houses had collapsed, it added.

The China Earthquake Networks Center (CENC) measured the quake's magnitude as 6.8, while the US Geological Survey reported it as 7.1. When tourist Meng Linggang arrived in the town

Continued on Page 6

International flights resume in Damascus

DAMASCUS: International flights resumed at Syria's main airport in Damascus on Tuesday for the first time since Islamist-led forces toppled president Bashar Al-Assad last month. There was an air of excitement at the terminal, AFP journalists saw, with arriving passengers chanting and cheering, some draped in the country's three-star independence flag.

Syrians carrying colorful balloons and flowers greeted passengers who arrived on the first Qatari commercial flight in nearly 13 years, which landed at around 1:00 pm (10:00 GMT). Some of the passengers knelt down to kiss the ground. "I'm waiting for my brother, who I haven't seen in 17 years. He couldn't return... because of the regime," Reem



DAMASCUS: Travelers gesture upon their arrival at Damascus International Airport on Jan 7, 2025. — AFP

Taghleeb, 37, told AFP. "He took the first opportunity to return to Syria on the first Qatari plane," she added, with emotion in her voice. "We're so happy for his return, and for our country's freedom."

Continued on Page 6

Trump Jr visits Greenland as dad eyes island



NUUK: An aircraft carrying Donald Trump Jr arrives in Greenland on Jan 7, 2025. — AFP

COPENHAGEN: Donald Trump Jr made a private visit to Greenland on Tuesday, just weeks after his father restated his interest in the mineral- and oil-rich Danish autonomous territory, which itself wants independence. The US President-elect on Monday called the Arctic island "an incredible place", promising that its people would prosper should it ever be annexed by Washington. "We will protect it, and cherish it, from a very vicious outside World. MAKE GREENLAND GREAT AGAIN!" he wrote on his Truth Social platform.

Trump later refused to rule out military intervention over the Panama Canal and Greenland, both of which he has said he wants the United States to control. "I can say this, we need them for economic security," the incoming US president told reporters. "I am not going to commit to that (no military action). It might be that you have to do something."

As Trump's son touched down in his father's "Trump Force One" private plane on what he said was a day trip, Danish Prime

Continued on Page 6



Local

In my view

Psychological safety at work



By Dr Sajed Al Abdali, MD

In today's high-stakes business environment, an uncomfortable truth lurks in meeting rooms and Zoom calls across the globe: Brilliant ideas often die in silence. Not because they lack merit, but because people don't feel safe enough to voice them. This phenomenon, which organizational psychologists call psychological unsafety, is costing companies far more than most leaders realize.

As a management consultant working with dozens of organizations, I've noticed a pattern: Companies that struggle with innovation and problem-solving often share a common issue — employees hesitate to speak their minds. It's not due to a lack of intelligence or creativity; rather, talented individuals don't feel secure enough to share their ideas.

Consider the research by Gallup, which found that only 3 in 10 US workers strongly agree that their opinions at work count. This disengagement alone costs companies between \$450 billion and \$550 billion annually in lost productivity.

The ripple effects of this silence are profound: Potentially game-changing solutions never surface, small problems snowball into major crises and innovative approaches die before they are even discussed. The cost of organizational silence isn't just theoretical — it has real, measurable impacts on the bottom line. In psychologically safe environments, people feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks. They ask penetrating questions, admit mistakes openly, and challenge established practices without fear of retribution. This isn't about creating a soft environment where standards slip — it's about fostering conditions where truth and innovation can flourish.

Google's landmark Project Aristotle offers compelling evidence of the value of psychological safety. After studying 180 teams, the researchers found that psychological safety was the most critical factor distinguishing high-performing teams from others. Teams with high psychological safety outperformed others in terms of innovation, collaboration, and overall effectiveness.

A technology firm I recently consulted exemplifies this perfectly. Their meetings buzz with phrases like "I might be wrong, but here's what I'm thinking" or "This might sound unconventional..." These tentative beginnings often lead to breakthrough solutions. Their secret? Leadership that treats every idea, even imperfect ones, as valuable stepping stones to better solutions.

Creating psychological safety isn't about grand gestures or formal programs — it's about consistent, deliberate actions that compound over time. Successful leaders focus on several key practices.

First, they model vulnerability. Research from Brené Brown highlights that vulnerability fosters trust and connection. When leaders acknowledge their own uncertainties and mistakes, it signals to others that it's safe to do the same. One CEO I worked with transformed his organization's culture by starting each meeting with a personal lesson learned from a recent mistake.

Second, they reframe failure. Instead of blaming individuals when things go wrong, they focus on what can be learned. According to the Harvard Business Review, organizations that adopt a "learning-oriented" approach to failure experience 23 percent fewer recurring issues and demonstrate higher employee engagement.

Third, they actively seek dissent. The most effective leaders understand that disagreement often holds the seeds of innovation. They deliberately draw out different perspectives, especially from quieter team members, and publicly appreciate those who raise concerns. While top leadership sets the tone, middle managers are the daily architects of psychological safety. Their reactions to ideas, concerns, and mistakes shape whether people feel safe to take interpersonal risks.

A study by McKinsey found that teams with psychologically safe environments were 12 times more likely to report positive work experiences than those without. However, fostering this environment requires managers to shift from command-and-control to coaching and curiosity. Departments transform when managers learn to respond with curiosity rather than judgment. Simple phrases like "Help me understand your thinking" or "What possibilities do you see here?" can open up conversations that lead to unexpected breakthroughs.

While psychological safety can seem intangible, certain indicators reveal its presence or absence: participation rates in meetings, the diversity of voices contributing to discussions, how quickly issues get reported, and the frequency of admitted mistakes. Take healthcare as an example. A study by Johns Hopkins found that improving psychological safety in hospitals could prevent up to 90 percent of medical errors, potentially saving 200,000 lives annually in the US alone. When staff feel secure enough to flag potential issues early, problems get solved before they escalate.

Some view psychological safety as a luxury they can't afford in today's competitive landscape. The evidence suggests the opposite — organizations can't afford to ignore it. Research published in The Journal of Organizational Behavior found that teams with high psychological safety are 35 percent more likely to deliver high-quality outputs and 27 percent more likely to meet their performance goals.

In rapidly changing industries, psychological safety becomes even more crucial. Teams that can openly discuss challenges, experiment with new approaches, and learn from failures adapt faster than those constrained by fear. As work becomes increasingly complex and innovation more essential, psychological safety isn't just a nice-to-have — it's a strategic imperative. Organizations that thrive will be those where every team member feels secure enough to contribute their full potential.

Building this environment requires sustained effort and attention. But as countless examples demonstrate, the returns — in creativity, performance, and human dignity — make it one of the most valuable investments an organization can make. In a business landscape where competitive advantage increasingly flows from human ingenuity and collaboration, can any organization afford to maintain environments where people hold back their best ideas? The answer, increasingly, is no.

Amir honors Gulf Cup committee



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives officials from the the supreme organizing committee of the Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26). The meeting was attended by senior state officials, including HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. — Amiri Diwan photos



KUWAIT: Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah conveys condolences over the passing of former US President Jimmy Carter at the US Embassy on Jan 7, 2025. — KUNA photos

Minister conveys condolences on Carter's death

KUWAIT: Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah visited the US Embassy in Kuwait on Tuesday morning, where he conveyed condolences of HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the government and people of Kuwait over the passing of former US President Jimmy Carter. — KUNA



Sheikh Mohammad signs the condolence book.

Coptic Christians celebrate Christmas



KUWAIT: Coptic Christians celebrate Christmas at the Coptic Church on Jan 7, 2025, with visits by several officials, diplomats and dignitaries. Coptic and Orthodox Christians mark Christmas Day on January 7 according to the old Julian calendar. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwaiti ambassadors present credentials to Iraq, Iran presidents

BAGHDAD/TEHRAN: Kuwait's newly appointed ambassadors to Iraq and Iran, Hassan Zaman and Dr Meshaal Al-Mansour, presented their credentials to Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid and Iranian President Dr Masoud Pezeshkian on Tuesday.

Ambassador Zaman, during his meeting with President Rashid, conveyed the greetings of HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. Zaman reaffirmed his commitment to strengthening Kuwait-Iraq relations, emphasizing the importance of enhancing cooperation and mutual interests in various fields. President Rashid, in turn, praised the longstanding ties between the two nations and expressed his best wishes to the new ambassador for success in his diplomatic mission. He also underscored Iraq's ongoing efforts to foster balanced relations and promote regional peace and stability. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein also welcomed the ambassador, highlighting the historical and social bonds between the countries and stressing the importance of furthering bilateral cooperation.

Meanwhile, Ambassador Al-Mansour, in his meeting with President Pezeshkian in Tehran, conveyed the greetings of Kuwait's leadership and extended their wishes for continued progress and prosperity for Iran. The Kuwaiti ambassador expressed Kuwait's eagerness to enhance bilateral relations, stressing the importance of collaboration in various sectors and continued dialogue on shared regional concerns. President Pezeshkian welcomed the ambassador and emphasized the close ties between Kuwait and Iran, citing shared religious and neighborly bonds. He also conveyed his greetings to HH the Amir and wished the people of Kuwait continued health and prosperity. Both ambassadors' appointments reflect Kuwait's ongoing commitment to strengthening diplomatic ties with neighboring countries and promoting regional stability and cooperation. —KUNA



BAGHDAD: Kuwait's newly appointed Ambassador to Iraq Hassan Zaman presents his credentials to Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid. — KUNA photos



TEHRAN: Kuwait's newly appointed Ambassador to Iran Dr Meshaal Al-Mansour presents his credentials to Iranian President Dr Masoud Pezeshkian.

Local

Kuwait reports stable HMPV rates amid global concerns

Influenza A, B and RSV remain most common respiratory viruses in Kuwait



HANGZHOU: A family member holds an IV drip for a child receiving care at the pediatric department of a hospital in Hangzhou, eastern China's Zhejiang province, on January 6, 2025. — AFP photos



VARANASI: A pedestrian with face covered in cloth, walks past a wall mural promoting awareness on using face masks, in Varanasi on January 7, 2025, amid media reports suggesting that India has detected cases of HMPV.

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Health announced on Tuesday that human metapneumovirus (HMPV) infection rates are stable and within the seasonal norms typically observed at this time of year.

This update comes as global health authorities report an uptick in HMPV cases. In China, an increase in infections among children aged 14 and under has been noted, raising concerns about the potential spread of the virus. Social media images showing overcrowded hospitals in China have fueled fears of a COVID-like outbreak in the region.

In India, media reports have said that seven people have tested positive for HMPV as of Tuesday. Cases of HMPV

have also been steadily increasing in the US since November 2024 with 1.94 percent of weekly tests positive for HMPV as of Dec 28, 2024, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Despite global developments, Dr Al-Muthanna Al-Hasawi, Kuwait's Assistant Undersecretary for Public Health Affairs, reassured the public that no significant rise in HMPV cases has been observed in the country. "We continue to closely monitor global health developments and remain in communication with international health organizations," he said.

Dr Al-Hasawi also pointed out that while HMPV is rising in some countries,

it is not a new respiratory virus. The virus typically causes mild symptoms like fever, cough, congestion, and fatigue. However, it can lead to more severe symptoms in vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems.

In Kuwait, the most common respiratory viruses this season continue to be Influenza A and B, which affect adults, and RSV, which primarily impacts children under five, said Dr Al-Hasawi. He added that the Ministry of Health monitors virus activity through the Emflu platform, which operates in 12 health-care facilities across Kuwait, tracking respiratory infections daily. Healthcare

workers have also been provided with up-to-date guidelines to manage the situation effectively.

Currently, no vaccine is available for HMPV, said Dr Al-Hasawi. Prevention relies on standard measures such as regular handwashing, avoiding contact with symptomatic individuals, and ensuring flu vaccinations are completed to reduce the risk of co-infection.

The World Health Organization (WHO) also confirmed that respiratory virus activity, including HMPV, remains within expected seasonal levels globally. Although HMPV cases have been reported in countries like the United States and China, WHO spokesperson Margret Har-

ris emphasized that there is no emergency response required at this stage. She also noted that hospitalizations remain below last year's levels despite the increase in respiratory infections, including seasonal flu.

HMPV, first identified in 2001, circulates primarily during the winter and spring months. While it can cause severe illness in vulnerable groups, it generally leads to mild symptoms, resembling those of the common cold. WHO has called for strengthened global surveillance, better data sharing between countries, and continued public health measures such as vaccination and proper hygiene to prevent the spread of respiratory viruses. — Agencies

Zain strategic partner of Ya Hala shopping festival

KUWAIT: As part of its continued commitment to strategic partnerships with the public sector to support Kuwait's largest tourism initiatives, Zain has announced its role as a strategic partner for the Ya Hala Shopping Festival. The festival, the largest in the country's history, will run for 70 days from January 21 to March 31, offering exciting raffles and valuable prizes worth \$8 million. The partnership was unveiled at a ceremony organized by the Permanent Committee for Celebrating National Holidays and Occasions at Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Center. The event was attended by the Committee Chair, Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, Minister of Information, Culture, and State Minister for Youth Affairs; Zain Kuwait's CEO Nawaf Al-Gharabally; Dr Nasser Muheisen, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Information; Ziyad Al-Najem, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry; Faisal Al-Shaiji, Chairman of the Kuwait Shopping Festival; Fadhel Al-Dousari, the festival's CEO; and other senior leaders from both the public and private sectors.

Following the resounding success of Khaleeji Zain 26, which enriched Kuwait's tourism and economic scenes with the participation of neighboring Gulf countries, Zain's partnership with the Ya Hala Shopping Festival underscores its commitment to enhancing the private sector's role in supporting public-sector initiatives to drive national development projects. Zain takes pride in being one of the foremost organizations to annually support national celebrations and festivals since 1998. This commitment contributes to promoting domestic tourism, diversifying Kuwait's economy, and solidifying the country's reputation as a leading destination for tourism, entertainment and culture.

True to its tradition, Zain will participate in the



KUWAIT: Minister Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi recognizes Nawaf Al-Gharabally for Zain's partnership.



festival with a unique touch, offering a range of exceptional activities and events that reflect its brand values. Zain: A Wonderful World. These initiatives aim to spread joy and celebration among all members of the community throughout the festival period. The festival boasts prizes worth \$8 million, including \$1

million in cash awards and 120 luxury cars distributed over ten raffles across ten weeks. Each raffle will feature 12 luxury cars and \$100,000 in cash, shared among 100 winners.

Over the course of 70 days, from January 21 to March 31, the Ya Hala Shopping Festival will offer promotional campaigns, discounts, and giveaways from participating entities. These include shopping malls, retail stores, cooperative societies, supermarkets, major companies, e-commerce platforms, and businesses across various sectors.

During the festival, shoppers will receive one raffle coupon for every KD 10 spent at participating entities, qualifying them for the weekly raffles. Additionally, the festival will feature entertainment events and activities inside and outside shopping malls, including drone shows, fireworks display, hospitality for Gulf visitors, and much more.

What you need to know about HMPV

KUWAIT: While global HMPV cases are rising, particularly in China and India, Kuwait's Ministry of Health is reassuring the public that no significant increase in HMPV cases has been observed in Kuwait. Kuwait Times has rounded up answers to some of your most pressing questions about the virus.

What is HMPV?

Human metapneumovirus (HMPV) is a respiratory virus that causes symptoms ranging from mild cold-like signs to more serious conditions, such as bronchitis or pneumonia.

Should people be concerned?

HMPV, first identified in 2001, is not a new virus and typically circulates during the winter and spring months. The World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that respiratory virus activity, including HMPV, remains within expected seasonal levels globally. Although cases have risen in some countries, hospitalizations remain below last year's levels, and no emergency response is required.

Who is at risk?

While HMPV can affect anyone, it is particularly dangerous for young children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems, who are more likely to experience severe illness.

What are the symptoms of HMPV?

Common symptoms include cough, fever, nasal congestion, and shortness of breath. In more severe cases, it can lead to pneumonia or bronchitis, particularly in vulnerable individuals.

How does HMPV spread?

HMPV spreads primarily through respiratory droplets from coughing or sneezing. It can also be transmitted through close contact, like shaking hands, or by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the face.

When Does HMPV circulate?

HMPV typically circulates in late winter and spring, often overlapping with other respiratory viruses like the flu and RSV.

Can HMPV be prevented?

There is no specific vaccine for HMPV, but it can be prevented through good hygiene practices: wash your hands frequently for at least 20 seconds, avoid touching your face with unwashed hands, stay away from sick individuals, and cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.

How is HMPV diagnosed?

HMPV is diagnosed through lab tests that detect the virus's genetic material or antigens in respiratory secretions. Healthcare providers may consider testing for HMPV during its peak season.

Is there a treatment for HMPV?

Currently, no antiviral medication or vaccine exists for HMPV. Treatment focuses on supportive care to alleviate symptoms and help the body recover.



KUWAIT: The Director General of the Kuwait Fire Force, Major General Talal Al-Roumi, speaks to heads and staff of the force's Prevention Sector. — KUNA photos

Fire Force chief urges stricter fire safety inspections

KUWAIT: The Director General of the Kuwait Fire Force, Major General Talal Al-Roumi, stressed the importance of intensifying inspection campaigns to identify buildings and establishments that violate fire safety



Fire Force staff are seen during the meeting.

regulations. In a press statement issued by the Kuwait Fire Force and published by KUNA following his meeting with the heads and staff of the force's Prevention Sector, Al-Roumi emphasized that there will be no leniency towards violators whose actions could lead to accidents and fires. He underscored the necessity of administratively closing such establishments due to the risks they pose to public safety.

In 2024, Kuwait launched a nationwide inspection of commercial housing properties to investigate their compliance to fire safety regulations. The campaign followed a devastating fire that broke out in the early

hours of June 12, 2024, tragically claiming the lives of at least 49 expat laborers, predominantly from India, who lived in a residential building in Mangaf, Kuwait. Authorities placed blame on greedy property owners who disregarded building safety standards. Municipal officials were suspended, and representatives of the company where the laborers worked were referred to prosecution. Real estate companies and employers also issued fire safety notices to their tenants and employees. The incident ignited widespread calls for stricter enforcement of housing safety standards to protect vulnerable foreign laborers.

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Dr Moudi Al-Humoud (right) poses for a photo with Dr Abdullah Al-Maatouq and officials during the signing of a cooperation agreement between Abdullah Al-Salem University and the International Islamic Charity Organization in 2024. — KUNA photos

Kuwait honors prominent artists, educators with state awards

Moudi Al-Humoud, Sanaa Al-Kharraz among figures appreciated by Kuwait in 2024

KUWAIT: Minister of Information and Culture Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi announced the winners of the State Appreciation and Encouragement Awards for 2024 in the fields of arts, literature, and social and human sciences.

In a statement Wednesday, Al-Mutairi, who is also Minister of State for Youth Affairs, and Chairman of the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters said the awards reflect the Kuwait's commitment to honoring its creative individuals across various fields, in recognition of their exceptional contributions and their leadership role in elevating Kuwait's name. He expressed his hope that the awardees would serve as role models for future generations.

He also thanked the winners for their achievements and contributions, which have enriched the cultural, artistic, and scientific movements in the country, and for the efforts of the Supreme Committee in selecting the awardees. He emphasized the importance of continuing efforts to encourage more creativity and innovation in service of national culture.

The 2024 State Appreciation Awards were granted to: Dr Moudi Al-Humoud in the field of social services, for her significant and distinguished contributions to academic life and her prominent role in the educational journey. Al-Humoud is currently Chair of the Founding Administrative Board at Abdullah



Humoud Al-Shayji



Khaled Al-Obaid sits down for an interview with Rotana in this screenshot.



Sanaa Al-Kharraz

Al-Salem University in Kuwait and she is a professor of management at the College of Business Administration, Kuwait University. She previously served as the Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education in Kuwait and also held the positions of Minister of State for Housing and Minister of Planning.

Khaled Al-Obaid in the field of arts, in recognition of his pioneering contributions to the artistic and theatrical movement in Kuwait. The prominent actor

made his debut in 1963 through theater and went on to work across theater, television, and cinema, contributing to dozens of productions.

Sanaa Al-Kharraz in the field of cultural services, for her prominent role in preserving and enhancing national memory. The Kuwaiti singer made her debut in 1977, performing national songs and operettas for Kuwait, and became widely known for her performances in this genre

throughout her career. The 2024 State Encouragement Awards were granted to several writers and artists, including Artist Zahra Jassem for visual and applied arts (painting). Actor Hussein Al-Haddad for his achievements in television acting.

In literature, Poet Mohamed Sarkhouh won the poetry award, while Humoud Al-Shayji was awarded the novel prize. Basima Al-Wazzan received the Children's Literature Award, and Dr Abbas Al-Haddad won the award for linguistic, literary, and critical studies. In the social and human sciences, Nader Al-Azmi was awarded the prize for history and archaeology.

The awards committee withheld several awards this year, including the Stage Direction Award in the arts, the Arab Heritage Achievement Award in literature, and the Historical and Archaeological Studies Award for Kuwait in the social and human sciences. Additionally, no participants were nominated for the Critical Studies Award in Visual Arts, the Critical Studies Award in Music Arts, or the Philosophy Award.

The announcement followed the approval of the results by the Supreme Awards Committee, which is an independent panel composed of prominent cultural, literary, and scientific figures, working in accordance with the award's regulatory guidelines as per Ministerial Decision No 46 of 2016 and its amendments. — Agencies



KUWAIT: Kuwait University engineering students showcase their projects at the 47th edition of the Engineering Design exhibition at the Sabah Al-Salem University City. — KUNA photos

Hundreds of students participate in KU's 47th engineering exhibition

KUWAIT: Kuwait University, through its Engineering Training and Alumni Center at the College of Engineering and Petroleum, launched the 47th edition of the Engineering Design exhibition on Tuesday at the Sabah Al-Salem University City. The exhibition, which ran under the patronage of Dr Nader Al-Jalal, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, attracted the participation of 263 engineers, showcasing the talents of students in various engineering fields.

In a speech delivered on behalf of the University President, Dr Mohammed Al-Mulla, Vice President for Academic Support Services, emphasized the role of the exhibition in fostering a culture of innovation and creativity. He highlighted how the exhibition provides a platform for students to display their skills in engineering design across multiple disciplines, from civil engineering to computer science.

Dr Al-Mulla pointed out that the event plays an essential role in enriching the local market with innovative engineering projects developed by young Kuwaitis. He also praised the work of academic staff, crediting them with fostering human resource develop-



ment and skill enhancement across all engineering sectors in the country.

Dr Khaled Al-Hazzaa, Acting Dean of the College of Engineering and Petroleum, expressed the college's commitment to producing a generation of engineers who are not only skilled but also capable of creating technical solutions to the country's challenges. He described the exhibition as the largest of its kind, supported by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS), and noted that this year's exhibition featured 67 projects from various departments within the College.

The Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, which has supported the event for several years, reiterated its commitment to promoting scientific and technological progress in Kuwait. A statement from KFAS explained that the exhibition serves as a vital tool for nurturing scientific research, encouraging creativity, and creating a competitive environment where students can showcase their talents. It also emphasized the importance of supporting the development of sustainable scientific and technological culture, as well as promoting national talent and innovation.

The foundation noted that its ongoing support for the exhibition is driven by the belief in the importance of honoring innovative engineering projects. These initiatives, KFAS stated, contribute significantly to the development of Kuwait, helping address challenges across various sectors. The foundation also commended the exhibition for providing a valuable platform for showcasing the capabilities of Kuwait's graduating engineers.

The exhibition featured a diverse range of projects, including 13 projects in chemical engineering, 17 in civil engineering, 9 in computer engineering, 12 in electrical engineering, 7 in mechanical engineering, 5 in petroleum engineering, and 4 in industrial engineering. Seven innovative projects across various disciplines were awarded the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences Award, each representing the best project in their respective departments within the college.

By the numbers

Total projects: 67

Total students participated: 263

Engineering disciplines represented

Chemical engineering: 13 projects

Civil engineering: 17 projects

Computer engineering: 9 projects

Electrical engineering: 12 projects

Mechanical engineering: 7 projects

Petroleum engineering: 5 projects

Industrial engineering: 4 projects

Awards

Seven innovative engineering projects were awarded the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) prize across various disciplines.

Exhibition highlights

The exhibition showcases cutting-edge engineering designs by students, contributing to local innovation and the development of the country's workforce. It serves as a platform to highlight the talents of Kuwaiti students and encourages the growth of scientific research and technological advancement in the country.





Winter storm leaves large US region blanketed in snow, ice

Blinken: US-Japan ties solid despite rift over steel deal

Page 7

Page 6



WASHINGTON, DC: US Vice President Kamala Harris (left) and Speaker of the House Mike Johnson (right) depart after the votes were counted and certified during a joint session of Congress at the US Capitol on January 6, 2025. — AFP

US lawmakers certify Trump win

The formality remarkable for its contrast to Capitol riot that took place four years ago

WASHINGTON: Congress on Monday certified US President-elect Donald Trump's election victory, a formality that was remarkable for its contrast to four years ago, when the Republican summoned a mob to Washington that ransacked the US Capitol. The president-elect spent much of his campaign facing prosecution over the 2021 insurrection, when his supporters — fueled by his false claims of voter fraud — rioted to halt the certification of his defeat to Joe Biden.

But Trump, 78, was voted back into office in November and Monday's ceremony went much more smoothly, even with a major winter storm blanketing the capital and much of the country in snow. "Donald J Trump of the state of Florida, has received 312 votes. Kamala D Harris of the state of California has received 226 votes," Harris herself declared to assembled lawmakers after the

counting was complete. Harris — who oversaw the certification as part of her vice-presidential duties — said the official count "shall be deemed a sufficient declaration" for Trump and Vice President-elect JD Vance to take their oaths of office on January 20.

The ceremony marked the final blow to efforts to have the Republican leader face justice over the riot, the culmination of a multi-pronged alleged criminal conspiracy that prosecutors said Trump led — before they dropped all charges upon his election.

Trump has vowed to pardon an unspecified number of the rioters — around 900 of whom have admitted federal charges from trespassing and vandalism to assaulting police — describing them as "hostages." In a Washington Post op-ed, Biden slammed Trump's allies for downplaying the violence of 2021 and urged Americans

to be "proud that our democracy withstood this assault." "We cannot accept a repeat of what occurred four years ago," he said. "An unrelenting effort has been underway to rewrite — even erase — the history of that day."

Indiana conservative Mike Pence had Harris's job — certifying his own defeat alongside Trump — in 2021 when, in a desperate bid to cling to power, the then-president demanded that he reject Biden's victory. Pence, who refused to endorse Trump, hailed "the return of order and civility" in a statement praising "admirable" Harris for fronting up in defeat and fulfilling her duty.

Lawmakers in both parties have occasionally used the certification process to challenge elections, but more than half of House Republicans rejected the results in 2021. No Democratic leaders followed the Republican example this time around and

there were no objections to certifying Trump's victory — a process that took barely half an hour. "I do believe very strongly that America's democracy is only as strong as our willingness to fight for — every single person, their willingness to fight for — and respect the importance of our democracy," Harris told reporters afterward.

"Otherwise, it is very fragile, and it will not be able to withstand moments of crisis. And today, America's democracy stood." Trump was impeached for inciting the 2021 insurrection after delivering a raucous speech outside the White House early in the day, demanding that supporters march on the Capitol and "fight like hell." Thousands attacked the citadel of American democracy — battering police with metal bars and flag poles, smashing windows, sending lawmakers running in fear and chanting "Hang Mike Pence!" — AFP



GOLAN HEIGHTS: Forces loyal to the new Syrian government stand guard in the Syrian town of Madinat Al-Baath, in the UN-patrolled buffer zone in the Zionist-annexed Golan Heights, on January 6, 2025. — AFP

Le Pen, architect of French far-right surge, dies at 96

PARIS: Jean-Marie Le Pen, an extreme right-winger who haunted the French political establishment for decades, died on Tuesday aged 96, dividing opinion until the end.

While the left decried him as a "fascist", many admitted he had succeeded in moving France's political dial to the right. Under his leadership the National Front party, which he co-founded with former Waffen-SS members and neo-Nazi sympathizers, defended a staunchly anti-immigration agenda, with many accusing him of being a xenophobe, racist and anti-Semite. He once dismissed the Holocaust as a "detail" of history. Le Pen, who had been in a care home for several weeks, died at midday (1100 GMT) Tuesday "surrounded by his loved ones", his family said in a statement to AFP.

His daughter Marine, who sparked a family feud by kicking him out of his own party, was on a plane from the cyclone-hit French archipelago of Mayotte when his death was announced. Le Pen's views often sparked massive rejection, even disgust, among mainstream parties, but his electoral success was undeniable. In 2002, he created a huge surprise when he made it to the second-round of the presidential election, having seen off the Socialist favorite Lionel Jospin before losing to conservative Jacques Chirac. Marine Le Pen took the party's leadership in 2011 and pushed her father out four years later, seeking to distance her movement from his extremist reputation.

The revamped party, since renamed National Rally (RN), has had significant electoral successes.

It clocked up strong gains in last year's European Parliament elections, and became the largest single party in a subsequent general election in France, but was not invited to join government.

Jordan Bardella, RN party chief and the right-hand man of Marine Le Pen, said in a carefully-worded tribute Tuesday that Jean-Marie Le Pen had "always served France and defended its identity and sovereignty", calling him "a tribune of the



Jean Marie Le Pen

people". On the hard left, the leader of the LFI party Jean-Luc Melenchon said that with Le Pen's death "the fight against the man is over", though "the fight against the hatred, the racism, the Islamophobia and anti-Semitism that he spread carries on." Francois Ruffin, a left-wing member of parliament, meanwhile called Le Pen "a fascist from another era who is now gone" but "who had left behind "his heirs, who are very much here". — AFP

US records its first human death from bird flu

WASHINGTON: Louisiana health authorities on Monday reported the first human death in the United States linked to bird flu, while noting the patient had underlying medical conditions and that general risks to the public remained "low."

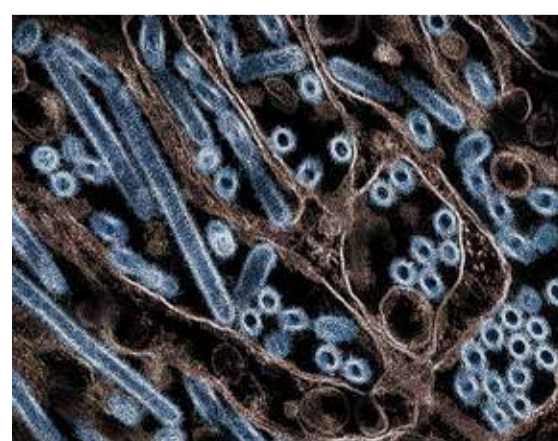
The patient, aged over 65, had been hospitalized in the southern state since at least December, when the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced it as the country's first serious case of human infection from the H5N1 virus. "While the current public health risk for the general public remains low, people who work with birds, poultry or cows, or have recreational exposure to them, are at higher risk," the

Louisiana Department of Health said in a statement announcing the death.

It said the patient had "contracted H5N1 after exposure to a combination of a non-commercial backyard flock and wild birds," but had detected no further H5N1 infections nor evidence of person-to-person transmission in the state. The news comes just days after the federal government awarded an additional \$306 million to bolster H5N1 surveillance programs and research, amid some criticism for President Joe Biden's administration over its response to the simmering issue.

The amount of bird flu circulating among animals and humans has alarmed scientists over concerns it could mutate into a more transmissible form — potentially triggering a deadly pandemic. Since the beginning of the 2024, the CDC has recorded 66 cases of bird flu in humans in the United States.

"We have a lot of data that shows that this virus can be lethal, more lethal than many viruses we worry about," Jennifer Nuzzo, a professor of epidemiology at Brown University, told AFP. "For that reason, people have been quite alarmed about these outbreaks



A colored transmission electron micrograph of avian influenza A H5N1 virus particles (blue), grown in Madin-Darby Canine Kidney (MDCK) epithelial cells. — AFP

that have been occurring on farms and other places in the US and have really been shouting for the US government to do more," she said. — Agencies

Zionists taking arms from locals in Golan buffer zone: Syrian mayor

QUNEITRA, Syria: A Syrian mayor told AFP he had meetings with Zionist entity officers as the military conducted incursions in his village inside a Golan Heights buffer zone, saying they had demanded locals relinquish their weapons. The Zionist entity military, contacted by AFP, said it could not comment.

Mohamed Mreiwel, mayor of the village of Jabata Al-Khashab in Quneitra province, said on Monday that he had met three times with Zionist entity officials who had asked to see him. Zionist entity, long a foe of Syria, has launched hundreds of strikes on Syrian military sites since the fall of president Bashar Al-Assad on December 8, destroying most of the army's arsenal, a war monitor has said.

The same day Assad was toppled by Islamist-led forces, Zionist entity also announced that its troops were crossing the armistice line and occupying the UN-patrolled buffer zone that has separated Zionist entity and Syrian forces on the strategic Golan Heights since 1974. Mreiwel said that in his first meeting with the Zionist entity, "they asked for weapons to be handed over to them within 48 hours".

Residents of the village, which is located in the buffer zone, had complied with the request, he said. Syria's army collapsed in the face of the rebel offensive, with thousands of soldiers, policemen and other security officials deserting their posts. Some Syrians seized weapons left behind by soldiers and security personnel, Mreiwel said, with the Zionist entity army "dedicating an area for people to hand over those weapons". During his latest meeting with the Zionist entity on Sunday, "we told them that we no longer had any weapons and that if we had any, we would hand them over to the Syrian government", said Mreiwel.

He added that he told the Zionist officials that "we are not allowed to meet with you", as Syria and Zionist entity are still technically at war and do not have diplomatic ties. Zionist entity troops have conducted patrols on the main street of Jabata Al-Khashab, an AFP correspondent said.

Zionist tanks are also stationed in nearby Baath City, named for the now suspended political party that ran Syria for decades until Assad's ousting. Zionist entity seized much of the Golan Heights from Syria in war in 1967, later annexing the territory in a move largely unrecognized by the international community. — AFP

International

Winter storm leaves large US region blanketed in snow, ice

Over 2,300 US flights canceled • 200,000 remain without power from Missouri to Virginia

WASHINGTON: A major storm system that blanketed a large swathe of the central and eastern United States in snow and ice—disrupting travel for millions and contributing to at least five deaths—was headed offshore Monday night, forecasters said.

Over 2,300 US flights were canceled on Monday with thousands more delayed amid the winter storm, tracking website FlightAware showed, compounding similar air travel headaches from the day before.

Meanwhile, nearly 200,000 customers remained without power from Missouri to Virginia as frigid temperatures settled in Monday night, according to Poweroutage.us, another tracking site.

The National Weather Service (NWS) said the event, the country's first major winter storm of the year, "will be quickly exiting eastward into the western Atlantic tonight," but that some small snowfall accumulations would continue to be possible in some mountainous and Mid-Atlantic areas.

Behind the storm, there was expected to be frigid temperatures for days, with cities such as Kansas City expecting windchills below zero degrees Fahrenheit (-17 degrees Celsius). The mercury could sink tens of degrees below seasonal norms on the US Gulf Coast. In Washington, several inches of snow did not hinder Congress from meeting to certify Donald Trump's election victory, four years to the day after his supporters stormed the US Capitol to try to overturn his 2020 loss.

President Joe Biden was closely monitoring the severe weather and ready to support affected states, a White House spokesman said. Many residents of the US

capital, where federal offices and schools were closed due to the storm, spent the day outside enjoying the semi-rare snow day, with hundreds even participating in a mass snowball fight.

One woman trekking in skis told AFP she was excited to finally be able to use them this season.

"I probably get to do it once a year in DC because it doesn't snow that much. But I love it," said Nikki White.

As the storm tracked eastward, it brought blizzard conditions to Kansas and Missouri, while parts of Kentucky and elsewhere received dangerous coatings of ice, turning highways into ice rinks and downing trees. The Missouri State Highway Patrol reported two weather-related fatalities, and side late Sunday it had responded to over 1,000 stranded motorists.

In Kansas, two people were killed after the vehicle they were traveling in spun out on a highway, while another person was killed after colliding with an out-of-control tractor trailer, the state's highway patrol reported. Video clips from Kansas showed cars skidding off ice-coated highways and tractor trailers jack-knifing. The system was also blasting chilly winds across the Great Lakes into New York, where some areas have received multiple feet of so-called lake effect snow.

Conditions could prove especially perilous in the Appalachian mountain region, where a deadly hurricane in late September devastated communities and ravaged multiple southeastern states including Kentucky. Scientists say extreme weather is becoming more common and more severe as a result of man-made climate change. — AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: A woman walks her dog near the US Capitol as snow falls during a winter storm. — AFP



NEW ORLEANS: US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden lay flowers as they pay their respects to victims of the January 1 truck attack at a makeshift memorial in Bourbon Street. — AFP

Bidens honor terror victims in New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS: President Joe Biden, accompanied by his wife Jill, on Monday visited Bourbon Street to honor the victims of a New Year's truck-ramming attack that killed 14 people in New Orleans.

The presidential couple stopped to pay their respects at a makeshift memorial near the popular tourist party area in the Big Easy, where suspect Shamsud-Din Jabbar drove his pick-up truck through a dense crowd. After the first lady laid flowers at the site, the pair bowed their heads for a moment of silence. The president, a lifelong Catholic, made the sign of the cross before departing the site.

The first couple met with survivors, relatives of the dead, and law enforcement impacted by the attack, before heading into the city's St. Louis Cathedral for an interfaith memorial service.

Biden has requested "additional federal resources to help the city of New Orleans prepare for upcoming major events," White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said Monday aboard Air Force One en route to New Orleans. Those events include Mardi Gras, the city's weeks-long carnival ending on March 4, and the NFL's Super Bowl championship on February 9.

The New Year's Day attack remains under investigation by the FBI, which declared it an "act of terrorism." Jabbar, a US army veteran who died in a police shootout after the attack, had expressed his support for the Islamic State jihadist group on social media.

An IS flag was attached to a pole on the back of the vehicle used in the deadly assault. — AFP

Mahama sworn in as Ghana's president

ACCRA: Ghana on Tuesday swore in president-elect John Mahama in the capital Accra before some 20 regional leaders as he promises to lift the West African gold and cocoa producer out of the doldrums. Mahama won 56 percent of the vote in the nation's presidential election on December 9, defeating ruling party candidate and Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, who secured 41 percent. He takes over from outgoing president Nana Akufo-Addo, who served two terms in power.

"Today should mark the opportunity to reset our country," the 66-year-old new president, wearing the West African country's national dress, told a jubilant crowd decked in the green, red, black and white hues of his National Democratic Congress (NDC) party. Energy radiated from Accra's Black Star Square, as a sea of elate faces waved Ghanaian and NDC flags, chanted and broke into spontaneous dance to the beat of drums and the blaring honk of vuvuzelas.

Among those present were Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Senegal's Bassirou Diomaye Faye, Burkina Faso's leader Ibrahim Traore, Kenyan President William Ruto, President Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon's Brice Oligui Nguema. Presidents Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone and Mamadi Doumbouya of Guinea as well as former leaders and officials also attended the inauguration. Mahama was sworn in alongside Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, the first woman to become vice president in Ghana.

The landslide comeback for former president Mahama ended eight years in power for the New Patriotic Party (NPP) under President Nana Akufo-Addo, whose last term was marked by Ghana's worst econom-



ACCRA: Ghana's new President John Mahama holds a Bible as he takes oath of office at his inauguration at the Independence Square on January 7, 2025. --AFP

ic turmoil in years, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout and a debt default.

Mahama, who led Ghana from 2012 to early 2017, had previously failed twice to win back the presidency but in December's election managed to tap into expectations of change among Ghanaians.

On Black Star Square, supporters of the elected leader exuded joy, hope and optimism. "I've never been so proud to be Ghanaian," said Akosua Nyarko, 28, a teacher from the southern city of Cape Coast. "The energy here is amazing... This is the dawn of a new era!" Mohammed Abubakar, a 50-year-old farmer from Tamale in northern Ghana, said he was confident Mahama would prioritize rural development.

"Coming here to Accra for this historic event is a dream come true," the farmer said, adding that Mahama's "leadership gives me hope that my children will have a

better future". Kwame Ansah, a 34-year-old trader from the city of Kumasi in Ghana's Ashanti region, said he was ready to support Mahama whom he called a "man of the people". "I believe he will deliver on his promise to create more jobs and improve healthcare," Ansah said.

The economy became a major election issue after Ghana defaulted on its debt and entered into a \$3-billion deal with the IMF. Ghana has only just begun recovering from its worst economic downturn in years, with inflation peaking at 50 percent in late 2022 -- although it has since fallen to 23 percent.

With a history of political stability, Ghana's two main parties, the ruling NPP and the NDC, have alternated in power equally since the return to multi-party democracy in 1992. The country of 33 million people is Africa's top gold exporter and the world's second cocoa producer. — AFP

Trump Jr visits Greenland as...

Continued from Page 1

Minister Mette Frederiksen warned: "Greenland belongs to the Greenlanders." But Trump Jr was at pains to point out he was not there "to buy Greenland". "I will be talking to people. I'm just going there as a tourist," he said on the social media platform Rumble. His father meanwhile dug his heels in, writing on Truth Social after Don Jr landed in Greenland that the island needed "safety, security, strength and PEACE! This is a deal that must happen".

Greenland holds major mineral and oil reserves — though oil and uranium exploration are banned — and has a strategic location in the Arctic, already home to a US military base. Greenlandic media have said he would only be there for several hours and no official meetings were scheduled. "This particular trip is probably just as Trump Jr said himself, to make video content," Ulrik Pram Gad, a Greenland expert at the Danish Institute for International Studies, told AFP. "What's worrying is the way Trump (Sr) is talking about international relations, and it can be even worse if he starts 'grabbing land'."

Trump first said he wanted to buy Greenland in 2019 during his first term as president, an offer immediately quashed by Greenland and Denmark. "Greenland is ours. We are not for sale and will never be for sale. We must not lose our long struggle for freedom," Greenland's Prime Minister Mute Egede said after Trump's Christmas message. "Most Greenlanders will be in line with their prime minister that Greenland is not for sale but open for business," Pram Gad said.

Aaja Chemnitz, a lawmaker who represents Greenland in the Danish parliament, rejected

Trump's offer with a firm "No thank you". "Unbelievable that some people can be so naive as to believe that our happiness lies in us becoming American citizens," she wrote on Facebook, adding that she refused to be "a part of Trump's wet dreams of expanding his empire to include our country".

With 57,000 inhabitants spread out across 2.2 million sq km, Greenland is geographically closer to the North American continent than to Europe. Colonized by the Danes in the 18th century, it is located about 2,500 km from Copenhagen, on which it depends for more than half of its public budget. The subsidies it receives from Copenhagen amount to a fifth of its GDP. The other pillar of its economy is the fisheries industry.

Greenland has been autonomous since 1979 and has its own flag, language and institutions. But justice, monetary, defense and foreign affairs all remain under Danish control. The creation of the post of Arctic ambassador has caused friction between Copenhagen and Nuuk, after Denmark two years ago appointed a diplomat with no ties to the region.

At the end of December, the Danish government announced Nuuk would from now on appoint candidates to the post, and represent the country on the Arctic Council. In his New Year's address, Greenland's prime minister said the territory had to take "a step forward" and shape its own future, "notably when it comes to trading partners and the people with whom we should collaborate closely".

In 2023, plans for a Greenlandic constitution were presented to the local parliament, the Inatsisartut. However, "there has been no public debate on it so far," researcher Ulrik Pram Gad said. The issue could become a talking point during the upcoming campaign for Greenland's legislative elections, which must be held before April 6. "I expect there to be more talks about the formal steps towards independence, how politicians intend to secure the welfare state and the future of Greenland," he said. — Agencies

International flights resume...

Continued from Page 1

A Syrian Airlines plane bound for Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates took off at around 11:45 am, marking the first international commercial flight from the airport since Dec 8, AFP correspondents said. The three-star flag, long associated with opposition to Assad and which the new authorities have adopted, was painted on the plane. "Today marks a new beginning," Damascus airport director Anis Fallouh told AFP.

On Tuesday, Qatar Airways resumed flights to Damascus after a nearly 13-year hiatus, with three weekly flights scheduled. Fallouh confirmed that "the first incoming flight is a Qatar Airways plane". International aid planes and foreign diplomatic delegations had already been landing in

Syria, and domestic flights had also resumed.

"I was afraid that the airport would stay closed. My visa was about to expire, but now I am very happy," Amal Jerudti, a 45-year-old Syrian, told AFP as she awaited her flight to Dubai where she was meeting her relatives. She said airport employees during Assad's rule "were condescending, but today they are very nice and welcomed us with a smile".

State news agency SANA reported that "the first Syrian plane after liberation" took off for Sharjah with "145 Syrian passengers onboard". Ashhad Al-Salibi, who heads the General Authority of Civil Aviation and Air Transport, told reporters that a Sham Wings flight was due to fly to Arbil in Iraq later in the day. Jordan's state-run Petra news agency, citing Civil Aviation official Haitham Misto, said a Royal Jordanian test flight had also departed on Tuesday for Damascus. The flight is "a message of support and solidarity" that also "aims to assess the technical condition of Damascus International Airport", Misto said. — AFP

Tibet quake kills 126, with tremors...

Continued from Page 1

of Lhatse, 65 kilometers from the epicenter, "the buildings had cracked open". "Some of the older houses collapsed, and a large part of the buildings made from bricks had cracked open, with big fissures," the 23-year-old told AFP.

Videos geolocated by AFP to Lhatse showed debris scattered in front of streetside eateries. "There were quite a few (rescue vehicles). One after the other they arrived," Meng added. The area most affected is surrounded by mountainous terrain on the Chinese side of Mount Everest. Tingri, the epicenter, is home to around 62,000 people, and is much less developed than urban centers like Tibet's capi-

tal Lhasa. Many of the fallen houses appeared to be constructed using traditional materials such as stone, mud bricks and wooden beams.

CCTV, citing the emergency command center, reported that the earthquake emergency response status in the region was raised to the highest level. Chinese President Xi Jinping has called for "all-out search and rescue efforts, minimizing casualties to the greatest extent possible, properly resettling affected residents, and ensuring their safety and warmth through the winter", the state broadcaster said.

Temperatures in Tingri are projected to drop to minus 16 degrees Celsius overnight, according to the China Meteorological Administration. Authorities said more than 3,400 rescuers and over 340 medical workers had been deployed. Aid including cotton tents, quilts and cold-weather equipment had been dispatched by central authorities, state news agency Xinhua said. — AFP

International

Blinken: US-Japan ties solid despite rift over steel deal

Washington seeks closer relations with Tokyo to counter China

TOKYO: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisted during a visit to Tokyo on Tuesday that ties with Japan were stronger than ever, days after President Joe Biden blocked Nippon Steel's takeover of US Steel.

Business groups say the move could have a chilling effect on Japan's standing as the biggest foreign investor in the United States, just as Washington seeks closer relations to counter China.

Two weeks before president-elect Donald Trump takes office, and with Marco Rubio slated to replace Blinken, the top US diplomat recalled that he came to Japan on his first trip in 2021. The visits at the beginning and end of his tenure show "the centrality of the US-Japan alliance" for Washington, Blinken told reporters after meeting Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba.

"As we look at the last four years, we've seen an alliance, a partnership, a friendship, that's grown stronger than it's ever been," Blinken said. He pointed to expanding security ties—including three-way partnerships with South Korea and the Philippines and a four-way grouping with Australia and India.

"Our economies are extraordinarily intertwined. We are the largest investors in each other's economies," Blinken said. Japanese firms invested almost \$800 bil-

lion in the United States in 2023.

Blinken made no mention of Biden's decision last week to block Nippon Steel's \$14.9-billion takeover of long-struggling US Steel, citing national security concerns. The two companies filed a lawsuit on Monday against the Biden administration's "illegal interference" in the transaction.

"We're certain the lawsuit will reveal a set of facts that clearly violate the constitution and the law, so I believe we have a chance of winning," Nippon Steel chair Eiji Hashimoto said on Tuesday. Trump, who takes office on January 20, "wants to make manufacturing strong again", Hashimoto added.

"This is exactly in line with what we're doing," he said. Nippon Steel had touted the takeover as a lifeline for a US company long past its heyday but opponents warned that the Japanese owners would slash jobs.

US Steel and Nippon Steel argued in their suit that Biden had blocked the deal for political reasons by ignoring the rule of law to gain favor with workers' unions. Protectionism is expected only to intensify under Trump, who in his first term exited a nascent Pacific-wide trade pact and has vowed to use tariffs to protect US industry. The president-elect made clear on Monday he would not reverse



TOKYO: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) shakes hands with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba at Ishiba's official residence in Tokyo on January 7, 2025. —AFP

the Nippon Steel decision.

"Why would they want to sell US Steel now when tariffs will make it a much more profitable and valuable company?" he wrote on his Truth Social platform. "Wouldn't it be nice to have US Steel, once the greatest company in the world,

lead the charge toward greatness again?"

Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya raised the Nippon Steel case with Blinken and stressed the importance of Japanese investment in the United States, Tokyo's foreign ministry said.

Ishiba said Monday that the United

States should "explain clearly" the security worries cited by Biden. "There are concerns being raised within Japan's industrial world over future Japan-US investment," Ishiba warned in unusually outspoken comments.

Yasuhide Yajima, chief economist at NLI Research Institute, told AFP that Biden's decision would "certainly create a hurdle for Japanese firms, especially manufacturers, to do business over there".

Blinken, however, focused on areas of cooperation. After a sushi breakfast at a famous fish market, he held a working lunch with Iwaya and discussed North Korea's latest missile test, carried out Monday as Blinken visited Seoul. Blinken also spoke with Japanese leaders about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and tensions over Taiwan and China's "dangerous and destabilizing behavior" in the South China Sea, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said. In a key goal for his trip, Blinken voiced confidence that South Korea and Japan would preserve cooperation, including intelligence-sharing on North Korea.

South Korea's conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol has pushed to turn the page on historical tension with Japan, but he was impeached after stunning the nation with a failed attempt to impose martial law last month. —AFP

Indian divers race to reach miners inside flooded pit

GUWAHATI: Indian search teams including military divers worked Tuesday to reach several coal miners trapped underground after water flooded the shaft a day earlier, rescue officials said.

Nine men are reported to be trapped in the mine, with a rescue report saying three bodies had been spotted. Locals said at least 27 workers had entered the mine on Monday morning in the Dima Hasao region of India's northeastern state of Assam, with many managing to escape as gushing waters swamped the pit workings.

State government minister Kaushik Rai told AFP that more than 100 rescuers including soldiers were working to reach the trapped men. India's military said that troops "including divers, sappers, medical teams and support staff swiftly responded" to try to bring the miners out. Images released by the military showed divers in scuba kit being lowered into a deep shaft in a metal bucket. — AFP



GUWAHATI: Divers enter a flooded pit in a coal mine using a pulley, to rescue trapped miners in Umrangso, in the Dima Hasao district of India's northeastern state of Assam on January 7, 2025. — AFP

Report: Top brands bought cotton grown by children in India

NEW DELHI: Some of the best-known global apparel brands procured cotton grown in Indian farms that employ child and bonded laborers, a report by a US-based rights group alleged Tuesday.

An investigation by Transparentem into the working conditions on 90 cotton farms in India's Madhya Pradesh state between 2022 and 2023 revealed "widespread use of child labor and illegal adolescent labor", the New York-based non-profit said.

Transparentem said the "grave abuses" unearthed by its investigation "appear to be endemic to the region" and likely extended to other farms in the area. Under Indian law, children under 14 are prohibited from working in most situations, while those between 14 and 18 are barred from being employed in hazardous occupations. But a mix of lax enforcement and poverty means more than 10 million Indian children between five and 14 continue to work, most of them in the farming sector.

The investigators also found "indicators of forced labor" and "abusive working conditions". Many are trapped by the long-outlawed practice of bonded labor, dubbed "debt slavery" by rights campaigners, in which victims are forced to work to pay back borrowed cash while interest keeps mounting. In its 2024 "List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor", the US Department of Labor identified child labor in cotton produced in India.

According to Transparentem, the investigated farms supplied their produce to three Indian companies. They in turn sold cotton-based products to several high-profile buyers such as Adidas, H&M and The Gap. All three companies told Transparentem that they were part of sourcing arrangements that ensured their cotton inputs are not linked to forced labor.

Transparentem said in late 2023 it contacted 60 international buyers and the three Indian suppliers they sourced material from "to present the findings of its investigation and provide recommendations for remediation". Several of them responded by saying that they were already participating in ethical cotton-sourcing initiatives, the advocacy group said, adding that "many started collaborating on responsive actions". —AFP

S Koreans adopt Trump's 'Stop the Steal' slogan

SEOUL: As impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol has hidden inside his home fending off efforts to arrest him over a failed martial law bid, his supporters have camped outside waving placards bearing a famous Trump-esque slogan. Yoon's defenders have waved American flags and carried signs that read "Stop the Steal", echoing Donald Trump's false claims of voter fraud when he lost the 2020 presidential election to Joe Biden.

South Korea's conservative Christian right wing, an influential support base for Yoon, has co-opted the line to echo his comments that questioned the credibility of the election commission after he briefly imposed martial law last month. Yoon's conservative People's Power Party lost parliamentary polls in April last year and in 2020.

"I firmly believe there was electoral fraud," Jay Yoon, an unrelated supporter of the suspended president aged in her 40s, told AFP outside the presidential residence. "This is something that absolutely cannot occur, and I am perplexed as to why this issue has not been addressed at all." President Yoon said after his December 3 martial law declaration that he had to quell "anti-state forces".

He claimed in a later speech South Korea's Na-

tional Election Commission (NEC) ignored warnings about North Korean threats to voter data and did not fully cooperate with inspections conducted by the intelligence agency. No voter fraud was proven in the 2020 election and no evidence has emerged of voter fraud in the 2024 election despite Yoon's claims, the commission told AFP.

Like the United States, South Korea's "Stop the Steal" campaign has been fuelled by online misinformation about election fraud. AFP's Factcheck team witnessed a resurgence of unsubstantiated election fraud claims after Yoon declared martial law.

The wave of misinformation targeted the NEC, where Yoon sent soldiers the night of his short-lived martial law declaration. Social media users shared old reports about a lawsuit over alleged fraud in the 2020 parliamentary election, even though the suit was dismissed, AFP's Factcheck team reported. Yoon's supporters insist the slogan is underlined by real concerns about South Korea's electoral processes. "We believe the imposition of martial law was an exercise of Yoon's legitimate presidential authority to combat electoral fraud," supporter Brandon Kang, 28, told AFP.

Kang, an office worker, called it "similar to the situation during the (2020) US elections". The American flags at the protests are also a show of support for Seoul's US alliance and criticism of the opposition, accused by Yoon of being in league with nuclear-armed North Korea to undermine the South. Park Jong-hwan, 59, said he flew the US flag in support of Yoon because opposition leader Lee Jae-myung "advocates for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea". — AFP



SEOUL: Supporters of impeached South Korea president Yoon Suk Yeol take part in a rally near his residence in Seoul on January 7, 2025. — AFP

News in Brief

Croatia schools tighten security

ZAGREB: Croatian pupils returned to school on Tuesday after the winter break with tightened security measures in place after a seven-year-old was killed by an intruder last month. On December 20, the last day of school before the holidays, a 19-year-old man entered a primary school in the capital, Zagreb, and stabbed four students and a female teacher. One of the victims of the unprecedented attack, aged seven, died on the spot. —AFP

10 gunmen dead in Mexico

CELAYA, Mexico: Security forces clashed with gunmen on Monday in one of Mexico's most violent states, leaving 10 suspected criminals dead and three police officers injured, authorities said. The early morning shootout happened during a joint patrol by police and the military in the municipality of Yuriria in Guanajuato, a central industrial region that is also home to warring drug cartels. The Guanajuato state security department initially reported that eight gunmen had been killed, but later said two more bodies had been found with gunshot wounds. — AFP

US slams DRC rebels for violations

WASHINGTON: The United States on Monday condemned "brazen ceasefire violations" in the Democratic Republic of Congo by Rwanda-backed M23 rebels, who seized control of a key town in the east at the weekend. "The continued advances by the M23, including the taking of Masisi town this weekend, damage efforts to reach a negotiated peace in eastern DRC while harming and displacing civilians in the area," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said in a statement. —AFP

France confirms first mpox case

PARIS: France has detected its first case of a new mpox virus, the health ministry said Monday, weeks after the World Health Organization maintained its highest alert level amid the epidemic. A case of the clade 1b variant was confirmed in the western Brittany region and "the recommended oversight measures have been implemented", the ministry said in a statement. — AFP

Two asylum seekers found dead

ATHENS: The bodies of two young asylum seekers have been discovered in the sea off Rhodes, near the Turkish coast, the Greek port police said on Tuesday. The migrants were "a teenager and a younger child", the police told AFP. They said the two young males were part of a group of 63 asylum seekers "from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Egypt" who were spotted by police near Ladiko Bay. —AFP

Sri Lanka president to visit China

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's president will travel to the island's largest bilateral lender China next week ahead of his first national budget, the information minister said Tuesday. The visit comes a month ahead of President Anura Kumara Disanayake's first budget, which is expected to outline his plans to sustain the country's painful recovery from its worst economic meltdown in 2022. Disanayake will begin a three-day visit on January 14, said Nalinda Jayatissa. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2025

Meta scraps US fact-checking program ahead of Trump term

The move marks a reversal in Meta's content moderation policies

SAN FRANCISCO: Social media giant Meta on Tuesday scrapped its US fact-checking program for a community-based system similar to X and reduced the curbs on discussions around contentious topics such as immigration and gender identity.

The move marks a reversal in Meta's policy as CEO Mark Zuckerberg has long championed active content moderation despite criticism from conservatives over alleged censorship on its platforms. It also comes shortly after the company named Republican policy executive Joel Kaplan as global affairs head and elected Dana White, CEO of Ultimate Fighting Championship and a close friend of President-elect Donald Trump, to its board.

"We've reached a point where it's just too many mistakes and too much censorship. It's time to get back to our roots around free expression," Zuckerberg said in a video. "We're going to focus on reducing mistakes, simplifying our policies and restoring free expression on our platforms. We're going to tune our content filters to require much higher confidence before taking down content."

The end of the fact-checking program, started

in 2016, caught some partner organizations by surprise. "We didn't know that this move was happening and it comes as a shock to us. This is definitely going to affect us," said Jesse Stiller, managing editor at Check Your Fact. Other partners, including Reuters, AFP and USA Today, did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Meta's independent Oversight Board welcomed the move. The latest changes will affect Facebook, Instagram and Threads - three of the biggest social media platforms with more than 3 billion users worldwide.

Zuckerberg has in recent months expressed regret over certain content moderation actions on topics including COVID-19. Meta also donated \$1 million to Trump's inaugural fund, in a departure from its past practice. "This is a major step back for content moderation at a time when disinformation and harmful content are evolving faster than ever," said Ross Burley, co-founder for non-profit Centre for Information Resilience.

"This move seems more about political appeasement than smart policy."

The success of the move, however, remains to



WASHINGTON: This photo illustration created on January 7, 2025 shows an image of Mark Zuckerberg and a phone displaying the download page for the Facebook app. — AFP

be seen. Elon Musk's X is already under European Commission investigation over dissemination of illegal content in the EU, and the effectiveness of

measures taken to combat information manipulation, including the "Community Notes" system.

The Commission launched the probe in December 2023, several months after X launched "community notes" feature. The Commission spokespersons were not immediately available for comment.

Meta said it would start phasing in Community Notes in the US over the next couple of months and improve the model over the year. It will allow users to call out posts that are potentially misleading and need more context, rather than placing the responsibility on independent fact-checking organizations and experts. Meta will not decide which Community Notes show up on posts.

"It's a smart move by Zuck and something I expect other platforms will follow," X CEO Linda Yaccarino said in a post. Meta will also shift its trust and safety teams overseeing content policies and review content out of California to Texas and other US locations. Meta said it will focus its automated systems on illegal and high-severity violations, including terrorism and drugs. — Reuters

US photo agencies Shutterstock and Getty to merge

NEW YORK: Two of the world's largest picture agencies, Getty Images and Shutterstock, announced plans to merge on Tuesday in a move that will create a giant in the visual content sector. The firms intend to pool their gigantic image platforms, achieving savings of between \$150 million and \$200 million in the three years after the merger is completed, they announced in a joint statement.

The new company, which will be called Getty Image Holdings, will be valued at around \$3.7 billion dollars, according to the press release. "With the rapid rise in demand for compelling visual content across industries, there has never been a better time for our two businesses to come together," said Getty Images chief executive Craig Peters. "By combining our complementary strengths, we can better address customer opportunities while delivering exceptional value to our partners, contributors, and stockholders," he added.

Getty Images Holdings will continue to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange. As part of the deal, Getty Images will offer to pay \$331 million in cash and will also offer 319.4 million of its shares to Shutterstock shareholders. Once the deal is complete, Getty Images shareholders will own approximately 54.7 percent of the new entity, and Shutterstock shareholders will own around 45.3 percent. Craig Peters will be the chief executive of the new company, which will be chaired by Mark Getty, the current chairman of Getty Images, which he co-founded in 1995.

A major provider of stock photography worldwide, Getty Images was first floated on the stock market in 1996 before being taken private again in 2008. In 2018, the Getty family acquired the private equity firm Carlyle's 51 percent stake in the company, inheriting a group weighed down by the substantial debt incurred by its previous owners. The agency returned to the stock market at the end of 2021 in a deal that valued it at around \$4.8 billion. — AFP

South Sudan to resume oil production

JUBA: South Sudan could resume oil production "as early as tomorrow" almost a year after fighting in neighboring Sudan ruptured a key pipeline, the government said Tuesday. The landlocked and impoverished country's vital oil had been shipped to global markets from Port Sudan on the Red Sea, with Sudan taking a cut as a transit fee.

But the pipeline was damaged in February clashes between Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, dramatically denting the young nation's economy. After months of shutdown, South Sudan's government said production would resume from part of a facility operated by Dar Petroleum Operating Company (DPOC). "The Ministry of Petroleum and partners would like to declare that the kick-off date for DPOC resumption is as early as tomorrow," Minister of Petroleum Puot Kang Chol said at a press briefing in capital Juba. He said the ministry was "directing DPOC... to immediately embark on the resumption without any delay". AFP was unable to independently verify if production would restart on January 8.

South Sudan, home to roughly 12 million people, took over about three-quarters of the oil reserves from Sudan when it achieved independence in 2011. Despite its oil riches, the world's youngest nation has struggled to find its footing, battling ethnic violence, chronic instability, poverty and natural disasters. "We know that our economy is suffering," said Chol. "We believe with tomorrow's resumption, that resources will be back to the table." However, he underscored it would be a gradual process with a target of 90,000 barrels a day initially. — AFP

US trade deficit widens to \$78.2bn

WASHINGTON: The US trade gap widened in November according to government data released Tuesday, as imports rose faster than exports ahead of President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House. With Trump set to take office later this month, trade imbalances in the world's biggest economy could again come under the spotlight. In his first term, Trump engaged in a tit-for-tat tariffs war with China, the world's second biggest economy — with an eye on shrinking the trade gap between both countries.

In November, the US trade deficit rose 6.2 percent to \$78.2 billion, said the Commerce Department on Tuesday. This was slightly more than the \$77.9 billion figure expected by a Briefing.com consensus forecast, and marked a widening from October's revised \$73.6 billion figure.

Imports grew 3.4 percent to \$351.6 billion, driven by goods shipments with increases seen in areas ranging from industrial supplies to semiconductors and passenger cars. US exports, meanwhile, also rose by 2.7 percent to \$273.4 billion in November, said the report. Exports of industrial supplies such as crude oil and other petroleum products picked up, alongside those of autos and pharmaceutical preparations. Among countries and regions, the US goods deficit with China stood at \$25.4 billion, while that with the European Union was \$20.5 billion in November, said the Commerce Department.

Strong growth seen in domestic spending indicators should carry through to fourth quarter gross domestic product results, said Carl Weinberg and Mary Chen of High Frequency Economics in a note.

"Everyone should revise their estimate for fourth quarter GDP growth higher after this report," they said. While "there is scant evidence in this report that companies are actually accelerating imports to beat Trump Day One import threats," the analysts cautioned that the president-elect has threatened new tariffs.

Wall Street slips as data sparks doubt on Fed's cycle

NEW YORK: Wall Street's main indexes slipped on Tuesday, weighed down by technology stocks after a batch of upbeat economic data stoked uncertainty among investors about the pace of monetary policy easing that the Federal Reserve could pursue this year. A Labor Department report showed job openings stood at 8,098 million in November, compared with 7.7 million economists polled by Reuters were expecting.

Separately, an ISM survey showed services activity for December stood in expansion territory at 54.1, compared with expectations of 53.3. The index also ticked higher from the previous month's figure. Signs of continued resilience in the economy has pushed back expectations on when the central bank can deliver its first interest rate cut this year, with traders betting on the move to come in June, according to the CME Group's FedWatch tool.

At 10.16 am ET, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 69.82 points, or 0.17 percent, to 42,636.74, the S&P 500 lost 24.88 points, or 0.42 percent, to 5,950.50 and the Nasdaq Composite lost 154.71 points, or 0.80 percent, to 19,710.27. Pressing stocks, yield on the 10-year Treasury note rose to 4.677 percent - its highest level since May 2024. Rate-sensitive sectors such as financials and real estate dipped, while technology stocks dropped 0.8 percent. AI-bellwether Nvidia fell 2.6 percent.

The main focus of the week is the key non-farm payrolls data, along with minutes from the Fed's December meeting expected later in the week. Robert Pavlik, senior portfolio manager at Dakota Wealth, said he expects the central bank to be on hold and



The US trade deficit expanded in November, government data showed. — AFP

"We might expect an uptick in imports from Canada, Mexico and China in the next round of data for December," the analysts said. Looking ahead, importers are likely eyeing negotiations involving a US dockworkers' union as they try to reach agreement on a new labor contract with their employer group before a January 15 deadline.

If both sides cannot reach a deal, there could be a new workers' strike — threatening supply chains.

Meanwhile, activity in the US services sector picked up the pace last month, boosted by strong business activity and supplier deliveries, according to survey data published Tuesday. The Institute for Supply Management's (ISM) services rose to 54.1 percent in December, from 52.1 percent a month earlier — indicating that activity in the sector is continuing to expand.

This was above the market consensus of 53.0, according to Briefing.com. The rise came primarily from the "strength in the Business Activity and Sup-

plier Deliveries indexes," ISM survey chair Steve Miller said in a statement. "Many industries noted that end-of-year and seasonal factors were helping drive business activity or impact inventory management," he continued.

Miller added that at least some of the increased business activity "seems to have been driven by preparation for demand in the new year, or risk management for impacts from ports strikes and potential tariffs." US President-elect Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to impose sweeping tariffs on imports coming into the United States, a move that many economists have said could impact both growth and inflation.

"There was general optimism expressed across many industries, but tariff concerns elicited the most panelist comments," Miller said. Nine services industries reported growth in December, including the index for entertainment and recreation. Six contracted, including forestry, fishing and hunting. — AFP



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

start cutting rates again when payrolls begin to decline a little bit which would then alleviate some of the inflation pressure.

In the previous session, the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq closed short of one-week highs on uncertainty after President-elect Donald Trump denied a report that his team was exploring less aggressive tariff policies. Analysts have said Trump's campaign pledges such as tax cuts, tariffs and loose regulation if implemented could invigorate the economy, although it could increase inflation and slow the pace of rate cuts. His tariff plans if acted upon could also

spark a trade war among the country's top partners.

On the flip side, healthcare stocks led gains among S&P 500 sectors with a 1 percent rise. Vaccine makers such as Moderna, Novavax and Pfizer surged on growing concerns around bird flu. Tesla dropped 2.9 percent after BofA Global Research downgraded the stock to "neutral" from "buy" and weighed on the consumer discretionary sector.

Big banks such as Citigroup added 0.3 percent on bullish coverage from Truist Securities, while Bank of America climbed 0.6 percent after positive ratings from at least three brokerages. — Reuters

NBK extends partnership with Xcite until 2026

Bank offers customers 5% online instant discount, seeks to enhance customer experience

KUWAIT: Seeking to continuously improve customer banking experience through exceptional offers, benefits and rewards, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) has announced extending its exclusive partnership with Xcite by Alghanim Electronics, subsidiary of Alghanim Industries for additional two years until 2026. This partnership provides NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Cardholders with exclusive offers that meet their expectations.



Started in 2024, the partnership will continue to give cardholders 10 percent NBK KWT Points when using their NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card to shop at Xcite instore, online or through the app, as well as 2 percent instant discount on selected products. In celebration of the renewal of this strategic partnership, NBK is delighted to offer a 5 percent online instant discount to all NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Cardholders for purchases made at Xcite from January 9 to January 11, 2025. This exclusive offer is our way of thanking our customers for their loyalty and enhancing their shopping experience with even greater value.

NBK and Xcite are committed to provide various offers and promotions all year round and on special occasions such National Days, Mother's Day, as summer, back to school deals and many more. On this oc-

Hussam Ibrahim

- Our fruitful collaboration with NBK strengthens our position as a leader in the electronics sector

- The partnership allows customers to benefit from the offers and discounts on the latest electronic devices

casation, Anwar Al-Ballam, Senior Products Manager, Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait said, "We are delighted to extend our partnership with a leading electronics brand like Xcite. Through this partnership, we aim to provide our customers with exclusive offers and exceptional rewards throughout the year and on special occasions, so that we always remain closer to our customers."

"NBK maintains solid relationships with leading institutions across different sectors, which we leverage to improve customer banking experience by delivering top-notch offers, discounts and benefits for unmatched banking experience," he added.

"We depend on the extensive experience gained over long decades to understand customers' needs, evaluate their goals, and even exceed their expectations. Therefore, service excellence and top-notch customer experience are embedded in NBK's culture," he continued. "This partnership reflects NBK's dedication to elevating to customers banking experience by providing valuable and competitive banking services tailored to meet their different needs and categories. This comes within our constant endeavors to keep pace with their changing needs and evolving expectations," he explained.

On his part, Hussam Ibrahim, Senior Vice President at Xcite, mentioned, "Renewing our partnership with

English - to 15 locations in Poland and nine in other Baltic and eastern European countries, ramping up westward expansion since February 2022, Khudo said. The group plans to open in Germany, Switzerland and France in 2025 and relaunch a venue in London, he said, adding that the bars are attracting new customers and are profitable. "Before the war we focused on Ukraine because our business was developing there so quickly. But the war kicked us to look more west because of the risk in Ukraine," Khudo said.

Although Ukraine's economy grew in 2023 and is likely to expand in 2024, Economy Minister Yulia Svyrydenko told Reuters in November it was still only at 78 percent of its size before Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. With no end to the conflict in sight, businesses like Khudo's have had to look elsewhere - an economic flip for nearby countries which have also seen labor market strains eased by the arrival of Ukrainian workers.

A Deloitte report in March 2024 estimated that refugees from Ukraine would add up to 1.1 percent to Poland's GDP in 2023 and as much as 1.35 percent longer-term. "When they come to Poland, for example, whether to work or set up businesses, this is an additional stimulus from the economic perspective for consumption and improving the supply of labor," Andrzej Kubisiak, deputy director of the Polish Economic Institute, told Reuters. Another Ukrainian restaurateur, Olga Kopylova, told Reuters she had no plans before the war to take her Chornomorka brand abroad but now has three outlets named Czarnomorka in Poland and two apiece in Bratislava and Vienna.

Coffee chain Aroma Kava moved to Poland in 2022 and has since expanded to 10 locations, while Ukrainian ice cream and frozen products maker Three Bears bought Polish company Nordis. Poland is now the second most important market for digital entertainment provider MEGOGO which has grown by appealing to local residents, mainly through family programming, co-founder Volodymyr Borovyk told Reuters. It entered Poland and Romania - emerging Europe's two most populous countries - in 2023. "The healthy Polish market not only motivates us but also encourages other Ukrainian companies to enter this market with products tailored specifically for Polish consumers," he said. — Reuters



Anwar Al-Ballam

- We aim to provide our customers with exceptional offers and rewards all year round and on special occasions

- The partnership reflects NBK's dedication to elevating customer banking experience and delivering unmatched services

NBK is not just an extension of an agreement, but strengthening a strategic alliance that has transformed customer experience. Over the past year, we have successfully delivered innovative solutions and exclusive offers to KWT Visa Infinite Credit Cardholders, enriching their lifestyle and meeting their expectations. We are committed to maintaining our leadership and innovation, striving to exceed expectations and provide advanced technological services that reflect our shared vision. This renewed partnership is a bold step towards strengthening our position as industry leaders and reaffirming our dedication to always delivering the best to our valued customers."

"This fruitful collaboration with NBK will strengthen Xcite's leading position in the electronics sector, while allowing cardholders to benefit from special offers and discounts on the latest electronic devices, as well as exclusive technological benefits that suit their dynamic lifestyle," he noted.

A card like no other

NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card is the most popular credit card in Kuwait, as it offers customers a unique lifestyle with exceptional rewards, benefits and offers tailored to meet their needs and expectations, and cashback up to KD 1,000 in NBK KWT Points every month.

The card combines an exclusive package of exceptional rewards with a design inspiring national pride, making it a card like no other, and gives customers the flexibility to choose the way they want to earn rewards based on their lifestyle; either the "Spends Tier" or "Merchant Category" option. When choosing the "Merchant Category", customers can earn NBK KWT Points on all payments made using NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card at the selected categories, with 10 percent on dining and telecom, 5 percent on fitness and beauty and 3 percent on clothing, grocery and education.

Meanwhile, when choosing the "Spends Tier" earning option, based on their monthly spends, with up to 5 percent on international POS, up to 4 percent on digital payments, and up to 3 percent on all other spends. The earned NBK KWT Points can be redeemed through NBK Online or Mobile Banking whether as cashback directly to the card, travel booking at more than 800 airlines and 150,000 hotels, e-vouchers from over 190 merchants, or points exchange with most preferred airlines.

NBK Visa Credit Cards offer the best payment method for the convenience and benefits they provide to customers, especially when using them in shopping including NBK Rewards Program as well as Purchase Protection and Extended Warranty.

Ukrainian businesses in emerging Europe eye westward expansion

PRAGUE/WARSAW: Ukrainian businesses that set up or expanded in central Europe after Russia's 2022 invasion are shifting their focus from mainly refugee to local customers as they become more established, with some now eyeing a move further west. As the war closed off opportunities at home and to the east, including Russia, Ukrainian-owned businesses sprang up in neighboring countries, initially targeting their displaced compatriots with food, drink and services.

In Poland, which has a Ukrainian population swelled by the war to more than 1.5 million at current estimates, Ukrainians opened every tenth new business in 2024, according to Polish business associations and economists. Andrii Halytskyi's Lviv Croissants now has 12 shops in Poland after launching there two years ago. It opened its first Czech outlet in October, part of what its founder says is a strategy to build a geographically diverse business by expanding westward and beyond the diaspora.

"While the Ukrainian refugee community in Europe is significant, relying solely on this customer base is not a sustainable long-term strategy," Halytskyi told Reuters. Strong cultural similarities with Ukraine have helped make Poland a natural base for Ukrainian businesses. But many are also looking beyond emerging Europe's largest economy to a much bigger pool of customers.

"Companies initially view Poland as a bridge or springboard to European Union markets," said Dariusz Szymczycha, first vice president of the Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce.

"They want to learn ... the reality, standards, regulations and rules of operating in the European Union." The Piana Vyshnia chain of bars is themed around a traditional cherry liqueur from Ukraine but sees local customers as its main target, founder Andriy Khudo told Reuters. His IF?ST restaurant group has grown the brand - known as Drunken Cherry in



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

Pace of German emissions cuts slows in 2024

BERLIN: German greenhouse gas emissions fell again last year but at a slower rate, due to lagging green energy investment by industry and households, a climate think tank said Tuesday. Emissions in Europe's biggest economy fell by three percent in 2024, a "marked slowdown" from a 10-percent drop the previous year, said a study by Agora Energiewende.

Germany reflects a wider trend across the European Union, where a 3.8-percent emissions drop is expected for 2024, after an eight percent fall in 2023. However, the study said that Germany's 2024 emissions total of 656 million tons did represent a "historic low" and that the year's 18 million-tonne drop was larger than the emissions target enshrined in domestic law. National emissions are down 48 percent from 1990 levels, nearing the EU target of a 55-percent cut by 2030.

But progress continues to lag in sectors such as transport, construction and building use where the think tank warned there is "an urgent need for action". Meanwhile, industrial emissions actually saw a slight rise of two percent despite Germany's general economic stagnation.

When burned, fossil fuels emit greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide that trap heat near the Earth's surface — a phenomenon blamed for making 2024 the hottest year in history.

Agora Energiewende said that 2023's sharp drop was largely attributable to a slowdown in Germany's ailing industrial sector, where emissions fell 12 percent, and not to long-term changes in production methods. This seems to be borne out by the latest figures; with the German economy predicted to have shrunk less rapidly in 2024, sustained industrial emissions have dragged down the overall picture.

Agora Energiewende noted that "in contrast to the electricity sector, no structural progress was

visible in industry, building use and transport". "On the contrary, investments in climate-neutral technologies actually went backwards in comparison with the previous year," the think tank said.

Germany will hold an early general election on February 23 following the recent collapse of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition, and the study noted that economic and political uncertainty is holding back investment by both households and businesses. Sales of heat pumps were down 44 percent on the previous year, and new electric vehicle registrations down 26 percent.

The slight fall in emissions from building use was only due to milder winter weather resulting in reduced need for heating. Eighty percent of last year's emissions fall was thanks to record high production of renewable energy and the continued closure of coal-fired power stations.

Germany's energy regulator said on Friday that renewable sources such as wind, solar and biomass had risen to 59 percent of electricity generation from 56 percent.

"In the electricity sector, the climate protection measures taken in recent years are increasingly bearing fruit," said Agora Energiewende director Simon Mueller. He appealed to political parties now campaigning for elections to take the electricity sector as an example of what needs to be done in the rest of the economy. "Every gas heating system we install and every combustion engine that goes into service is a burden in terms of climate policy because the lifespan of these appliances will end around the time where we must become climate neutral," Mueller said in a press conference.

The conservative CDU/CSU opposition, currently riding high in opinion polls, has said it would reverse the planned phase-out of combustion engine vehicles. The extent to which public funds should be used to support the green transition is a key dividing line between Scholz's Social Democrats, who advocate more investment, and the CDU/CSU, which opposes major new spending.

Mueller said that Germany's next government must provide "clarity that the transition to climate-neutral technologies will be simple and affordable for all", for example by "increasing support for electric vehicles". — AFP



MOSCOW: A billboard promoting contract army service and reading "5 200 000 rubles for the first year of the contract" (about 7 000) is seen in western Moscow on September 11, 2024. — AFP

Business

Eurozone inflation rises, likely forcing slower ECB rate cuts

Lagarde says ECB on target as expected and as planned

BRUSSELS: Eurozone inflation rose in December as energy prices slightly ticked up, official data showed Tuesday, which experts said will likely push the European Central Bank to pursue its rate-cutting cycle more cautiously.

Consumer prices picked up to 2.4 percent last month, as predicted by analysts for Bloomberg and financial data firm FactSet, and up from 2.2 percent in November. Core inflation—which strips out volatile energy, food, alcohol and tobacco prices and is a key indicator for the ECB—was stable at 2.7 percent. The ECB is still expected to cut interest rates at the next monetary policy meeting on January 30, but with price pressures still present in the eurozone it will need to tread carefully despite the signs of economic weakness, analysts say.

"We project that the ECB will only cut rates once in the first half of this year, with additional cuts concentrated in the latter half of 2025," said Charlie Cornes, senior economist at UK-based Centre for Economics and

Business Research. December's rise comes after inflation in the 20-nation single currency area fell to a three-year low of 1.7 percent in September. Consumer prices have since been inching back up to above the ECB's target of two percent, the exact figure hit in October.

The higher reading is due to energy prices rising by 0.1 percent in December, a significant uptick after a fall of two percent in November. Tuesday's data showed food and alcohol prices were stable at 2.7 percent last month, while services inflation rose by four percent last month, up slightly from 3.9 percent in November. Inflation in the eurozone has been brought firmly back down from the highs of more than 10 percent reached in late 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

With weak economic growth, the ECB had turned its attention last year to cutting rates to combat the signs of weakness in the European economy. In December, the ECB reduced its key deposit rate by a quarter point

to three percent, its third cut in a row and fourth since June, when it kicked off its current easing cycle. Experts warned they expected inflation to accelerate further, which would encourage more prudence from the ECB.

"A further increase in the first quarter looks likely. This will keep the European Central Bank on a cautious easing path," said Peter Vanden Houde, an economist at ING Bank.

ECB chief Christine Lagarde insisted in a New Year's message that the bank would focus on further reining in inflation this year. "We have made significant progress in 2024 in bringing down inflation and hopefully 2025 is the year when we are on target as expected and as planned in our strategy," Lagarde said in a January 1 video on social media platform X.

Inflation rose in the eurozone's two biggest economies, Germany and France, to reach 2.8 percent and 1.8 percent respectively in December. Eurostat data also showed Ireland had the lowest rate of inflation in Decem-



FRANKFURT: European Central Bank (ECB) President Christine Lagarde says the eurozone was getting "very close" to reaching the central bank's medium-term inflation goal. — AFP

ber at one percent. Other official data published on Tuesday showed unemployment in the eurozone stood at 6.3 percent in November. — AFP



LONDON: Shoppers walk past stores in Camden in London. — AFP

UK retail sector shows 'minimal' growth in golden quarter

LONDON: Britain's largest retailers including clothes group Next and supermarkets Tesco, Sainsbury's and Lidl were the big winners at Christmas, ahead of what is set to be a tough 2025 marked by spending restraint and tax rises.

Britain's economy has struggled to grow in recent years and companies are now bracing for the new Labour government's solution - a hike in employer taxes to invest in infrastructure and public services, but which bosses fear will lead to higher costs and lower hiring. Trade body the British Retail Consortium (BRC) said growth was minimal in the final quarter of the year - in effect a fall in sales volumes once higher prices are taken into account - and the higher taxes due in April will likely push up prices and cut investment in stores and jobs. Amid the gloom, the biggest companies performed the strongest.

Next, the first major UK-listed retailer to update on Christmas trading, reported on Tuesday a better-than-expected 6.0 percent rise in full-price sales for the nine weeks to Dec 28 and raised its profit outlook for its year to January 2025 for the fourth time in six months.

Its performance was helped by strong international demand. But it warned that UK sales growth is likely to slow in its 2025/26 year as the higher taxes potentially impact prices and employment and begin to filter through into the economy. It said its own prices would rise 1 percent on like-for-like goods. "If you want to find things to worry about in the UK economy, I think employment and prices would be the two things," Next CEO Simon Wolfson told Reuters.

Monthly data from market researcher Kantar showed Tesco, Britain's biggest grocer, No 2 Sainsbury's and No 6 Lidl GB also performed robustly in the Christmas trading period with sales growth of 5.0 percent, 3.5 percent and 6.6 percent respectively in the 12 weeks to Dec. 29.

That contrasted with the BRC's data for overall UK retail sales which showed fourth quarter spending increased just 0.4 percent in annual terms. "Sales growth during the golden quarter of October to December was minimal, reflecting the ongoing careful management of many household budgets during a time when many costs remain at a heightened level compared to past years," Linda Ellett, UK head of consumer, retail & leisure at advisory firm KPMG which helps compile the data, said.

The BRC forecast sales growth of 1.2 percent in 2025, below its projected shop price inflation of 1.8 percent. BRC Chief Executive Helen Dickinson said the forecasts meant sales volumes were likely to fall this year, adding to pressures on retailers including increased National Insurance contributions, a higher national minimum wage and new packaging levies.

"With little hope of covering these costs through higher sales, retailers will likely push up prices and cut investment in stores and jobs, harming our high streets and the communities that rely on them," she said. Separate debit and credit card data from Barclays also painted a weak picture with consumer spending unchanged in December compared with a year earlier.

Spending on essentials dropped by 3 percent, partly due to lower petrol prices, while spending on non-essentials rose. Cinema spending jumped 52 percent, helped by films such as "The Wizard of Oz" spin-off "Wicked", but spending at restaurants and pubs grew only modestly. — Reuters

Malaysia, Singapore announce deal on Johor economic zone

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia and Singapore announced on Tuesday an agreement on a special economic zone in the southern Malaysian state of Johor, aiming to support investment and free up movement of goods and people between the countries. The Southeast Asian neighbors first agreed in principle to jointly develop the economic zone a year ago.

Tuesday's agreement was announced during a visit to Malaysia by Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and senior cabinet ministers. "It's an important project ... we can both be more competitive, enhance our value proposition, and jointly attract more investments to our shores," Wong told a joint press conference with Malaysian counterpart Anwar Ibrahim.

"When negotiating the agreement, both sides have actively engaged stakeholders to ensure that the SEZ has the conditions to help our businesses grow together for the longer term," Anwar said the SEZ was unique initiative as it was rare for two countries to team up on a single project. The two countries are aiming to attract high-value investments into Johor in sectors ranging from manufacturing and logistics to tourism and energy transition, Malaysia's Economic Minister Rafizi Ramli told reporters.

They are targeting 50 projects at the economic zone within the first five years of its inception, and the creation of 20,000 skilled jobs. Malaysia will set up and manage an infrastructure fund to



PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (right) and Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong (left) attend a press conference at the Prime Minister office in Putrajaya on January 7, 2025. — AFP

support companies looking to set up there, while Singapore will create its own fund to facilitate investments and support Singaporean companies operating in Johor, Rafizi said.

Thousands of Malaysians commute every day to small but wealthy Singapore for work and study,

causing frequent traffic congestion on the causeway between the countries, one of the world's busiest border crossings. The two leaders also invited proposals for high-speed rail between the two countries, which Anwar said should be led by the private sector, with limited government involvement. — Reuters

Nippon Steel lawsuit could only buy time to keep deal alive

WASHINGTON: Nippon Steel and US Steel are unlikely to convince a court to scrap President Joe Biden's decision to block their \$14.9 billion merger, but their lawsuit could give them more time to reach a deal with incoming President Donald Trump. The companies argued in a lawsuit announced on Monday that Biden violated the Constitution by blocking the merger via a sham national security review that deprived the companies of their right to a fair process.

Suing the government will be "an uphill battle," said Nick Klein, a national security lawyer with DLA Piper, noting that courts are typically very deferential to the executive branch on national security issues. Still, "the lawsuit will give them more time to negotiate with the new administration or find alternatives that are acceptable," Klein added.

Nippon Steel declined to comment. US Steel did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The remarks show that while the lawsuit itself may be doomed, it could give the deal a new lease on life, if the companies can convince Trump to reverse his opposition. "I am totally against the once great and powerful US Steel being bought by a foreign company, in this case Nippon Steel of Japan," he wrote on his social media platform Truth Social last month.

"I will block this deal from happening. Buyer Beware!!!!" But some lawyers see an opening. Trump "has a history of changing his mind," said Joshua Gruenspecht, a national security lawyer with Wilson Sonsini, who also sees the lawsuit as a play for more time.

The order signed by Biden on Friday gives the companies 30 days to unwind their transaction. While the compa-

nies do not explicitly ask the courts to stay the order, they state in a copy of the complaint shared with Reuters that they intend to ask the government if it plans to enforce the 30-day requirement. If it does, the companies could seek "preliminary relief," the document states. Meanwhile the merger agreement includes an end date of June 18 to obtain regulatory approvals and complete the merger.

The companies claim a national security review led by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the US, which scrutinizes foreign investments for national security threats, was unfairly influenced by Biden, who took aim at the deal in March before the review began. His opposition to the deal, they allege, was aimed at currying favor with United Steelworkers President David McCall, whose endorsement he hoped would help him clinch the swing state of Pennsylvania in the US presidential election in November. US Steel is headquartered there. Biden was later replaced on the ticket by Vice President Kamala Harris, who also opposed the deal and was endorsed by the USW.

The White House and the USW reject the allegations. But the companies say those facts amount to CFIUS and Biden violating their due process rights under the constitution as well as CFIUS statute, for prejudging the case and not basing the decision on true national security risks.

The president, through the committee, "shall review (the deal) to determine the effects of the transaction on the national security of the United States," the statute states. But the fact that the CFIUS statute explicitly bars courts from reviewing presidential decisions, coupled with courts' high degree of deference on national security decisions, means the companies are in a tough spot, according to Tatiana Sullivan, a former CFIUS official at the Pentagon and national security lawyer with Skadden Arps. However, she noted that the companies' arguments that "the President's actions and public comments corrupted the CFIUS process and thus created due process violations are novel claims for the courts to consider." — AFP

Hundreds protest power outages in hilly Pakistan

KHAPLU, Pakistan: Hundreds of people blocked a highway on Tuesday in Pakistan's mountainous northern region in protest against power outages lasting longer than 20 hours, as temperatures plunged to minus 15 degrees Celsius. Routine load-shedding is widespread across fuel-deprived Pakistan, but residents of the mountainous, snow-covered regions in Gilgit-Baltistan endure prolonged blackouts.

"We have been facing the worst kind of pow-

er cuts, we get only one or two hours of electricity during the whole day," Baba Jan, a political activist who organized the protest, told AFP.

Around 1,000 people have joined the demonstration in the picturesque valley of Hunza since Friday, blocking a section of the 1,300-kilometre (808-mile) Karakoram Highway and preventing dozens of freight trucks from crossing into China. People in the region usually rely on wood to keep warm as both gas and fuel-operated generators are too expensive.

"People from all walks of life including the tourists are suffering in extremely cold weather due to the absence of electricity," Zahoor Ali, another protest organizer told AFP.

The highway is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in which China has invested billions of dollars, connecting the northern border to

Indonesia joins BRICS bloc as full member

SAO PAULO: Indonesia formally joined BRICS as a full member, Brazil's government said on Monday, further expanding the group of major emerging economies that also includes Russia, India, China and South Africa. Indonesia's foreign ministry said in a statement on Tuesday that it welcomed the announcement and that "BRICS membership is a strategic way to increase collaboration and partnership with other developing nations."

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous nation, had previously expressed its desire to join the group as a means of strengthening emerging countries and furthering the interests of the so-called Global South. Brazil, which holds the bloc's presidency in 2025, said in a statement that member states approved Indonesia's entry by consensus as part of an expansion push initially endorsed at the 2023 BRICS summit in Johannesburg. The South American nation noted that Jakarta's bid got the green light from the bloc in 2023 but the Southeast Asian country asked to join following the presidential election held last year. President Prabowo Subianto took office in October.

"Indonesia shares with the other members of the group support for the reform of global governance institutions, and contributes positively to the deepening of cooperation in the Global South," the Brazilian government said. The BRICS group also includes Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. — Reuters

the southern coastal city of Gwadar. "The Karakoram Highway at Ali Abad in Hunza is completely blocked for traffic... business between Pakistan and China is suspended for days owing to the blockade," local trader Javid Hussain told AFP.

"For the smooth running of business between Pakistan and China, the government should take steps to end the power crisis in the region." Pressure on the electricity grid increases during peak winter and summer seasons, leading to planned load-shedding as the government grapples with an energy supply crisis, exacerbated by political instability and economic stagnation.

Owing to its remoteness, Gilgit-Baltistan is not connected to the national grid and fails to generate enough power from dozens of hydro plants while thermal plants have proven costly. — AFP

Lifestyle

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2025



US actress Demi Moore poses with the Best Performance by a Female Actor in a Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy award for "The Substance" in the press room during the 82nd annual Golden Globe Awards at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP photos



(From left) US actor Dennis Quaid, French director Coralie Fargeat, US actress Margaret Qualley and US actress Demi Moore arrive for the screening of the film "The Substance" at the 77th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France, on May 19, 2024.



Coralie Fargeat attends the 82nd Annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton on January 5, 2025 in Beverly Hills, California.

'Comeback' queen Demi Moore 'has always been here,' says director

Demi Moore's Golden Globe best actress win for "The Substance" has, almost overnight, transformed the 1990s megastar into a seemingly unlikely favorite for the Oscars. In her acceptance speech Sunday, the 62-year-old - who once generated headlines as much for her love life and naked Vanity Fair covers as for her hit films - said she had long been dismissed as a "popcorn actress," and had never "won anything as an actor."

But for Coralie Fargeat, the French director who also wrote Moore's new, blood-drenched body horror film, there is nothing surprising about the late-career reappraisal her leading lady is now enjoying. "It was so moving to see Demi on that stage," Fargeat told AFP, the morning after Moore's big win.

The movie allowed audiences "to see who she is as an actress, and not project any more the stereotype that if

you're beautiful, you can't be a good actress." "It is being called a comeback. But she has always been here," Fargeat added. Society's obsession with pigeonholing and pinning expiration dates on women is the core premise of "The Substance."

In the film, globally distributed by MUBI, Moore's character Elisabeth is a fading movie star, who is abruptly fired from her hit TV fitness show as she turns 50. Out of desperation, she injects herself with a mysterious serum which allows her to live in a younger version of her body - as long as she returns to her older form every week. Inevitably, the allure of remaining young proves too strong, especially after Elisabeth's stunningly youthful alter ego is catapulted to fame by creepy male executives.

'Dream' Fargeat had long been a fan of

Moore's acting work, which included hits like "Indecent Proposal" and "Ghost," as well as more divisive fare like "G.I. Jane." "I could like or not like the movies, but I think she always delivered pretty great performances," said the director. But Moore's real-life career also incarnated "this iconic star" represented by her character in "The Substance." "Someone who has been totally valued for this dream, this fake promise that if you're young, beautiful, you're going to be happy and successful," said Fargeat.

"And when this goes away, it's like all your life is going away." Even so, Moore's pitch-perfect casting as Elisabeth nearly did not happen. Fargeat at first assumed Moore would not be interested in a role requiring extensive nudity and countless, grotesque scenes of gore and decay. But the director picked up a copy of Moore's 2019 memoir "Inside Out," which laid bare the actor's

battles with ageism and misogyny, as well as addiction, abuse and very public divorces.

"When I read her book, I really saw that she was ready to take the level of risk that the movie requested," said Fargeat. Early conversations included the significant amount of unflinching and often unflattering nudity required by Fargeat's vision. "The film is really about women's bodies. I wanted to tell my stories [in] the flesh," recalled Fargeat. Fargeat also admits she was a demanding and meticulous director on set, requiring "a lot of takes."

Moore has spoken about losing 20 pounds (nine kilos) and contracting shingles due to the intense strain of filming, while co-star Margaret Qualley described being in the movie's prosthetic suits as "torture" that triggered panic attacks. "If the lead performance isn't ready to go that far, the whole movie falls apart," said Fargeat. Moore

"took the risk to follow the vision of the movie... that's very, very brave and courageous," she said.

Oscars race

With the Globes win, more attention will come to "The Substance" - both from wider audiences, and Oscars voters, who are picking their final nominees on ballots due this week. Fargeat herself could earn nods for best director and best original screenplay, and "The Substance" is tipped by many pundits to make the best picture list. But few would now bet against Moore for best actress.

"From the beginning, I believed that this can happen," said Fargeat. "That's what cinema is about - creating things that people are not expecting." "I'm just immensely proud to have created this part." — AFP

Zendaya and Tom Holland engaged: US media

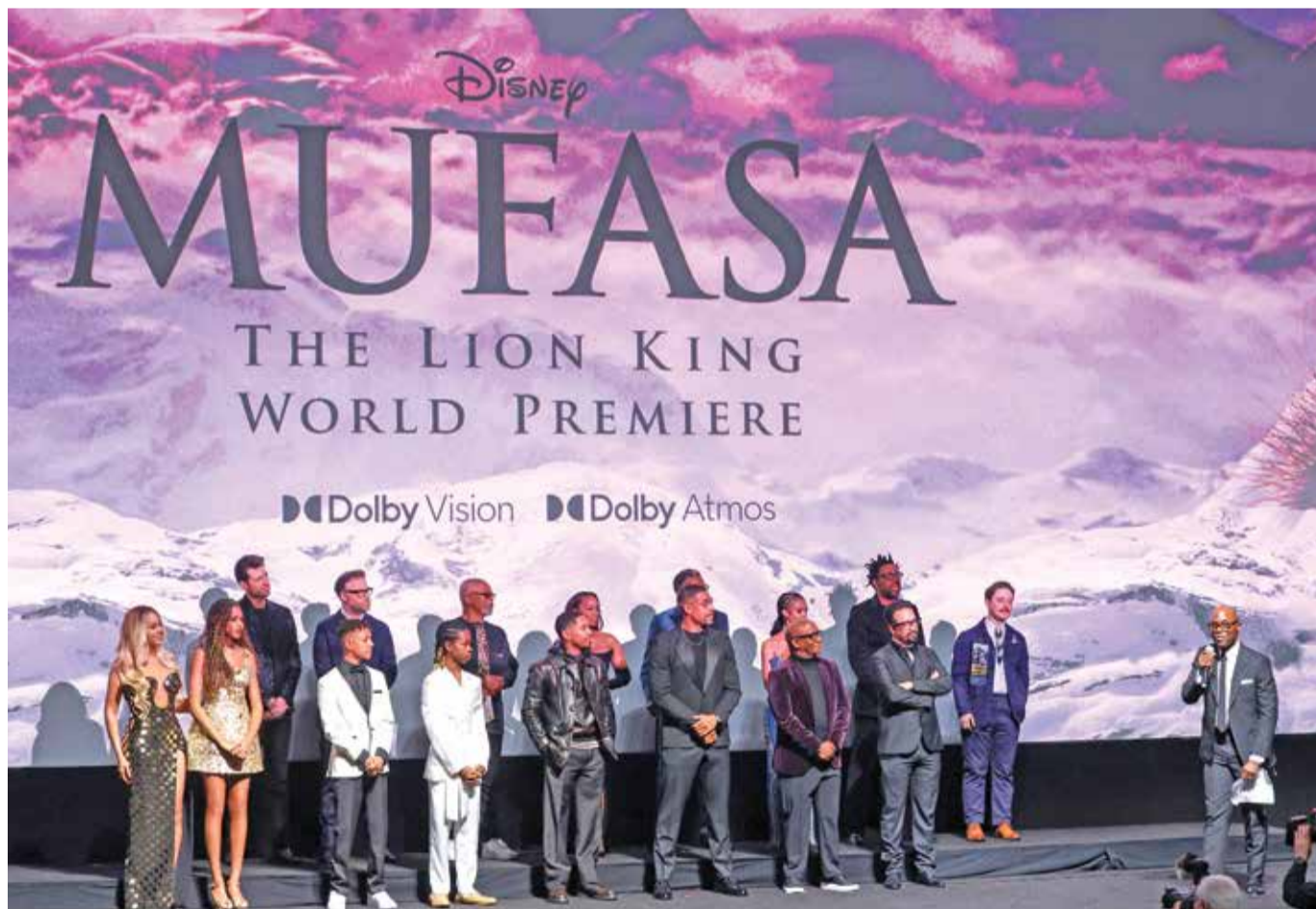
"Spider-Man" co-stars Zendaya and Tom Holland are engaged, US media reported Monday, the day after she was spotted wearing a huge diamond ring. The internet caught fire when Zendaya, 28, appeared on the Golden Globes red carpet on Sunday night with an enormous rock on her finger, with social media users speculating Holland had popped the question. Specialist outlet TMZ reported Monday the pair, who have been dating since 2021, took their relationship to the next level during a cozy Christmas together.

The British actor, 28, went down on one knee "in a very intimate setting in one of Zendaya's family homes in the United States," TMZ said. "We're told Tom didn't make a huge show of the engagement - it wasn't a big, over-the-top proposal - instead, it was very romantic and intimate. "Our sources say the family wasn't there... it was just a sweet moment between Tom and Zendaya."

The pair, who met on the set of "Spider-Man: Homecoming," are one of Hollywood's most beloved couples, despite fiercely guarding their privacy. Holland was not at the Globes on Sunday - Hollywood's first major event of the awards season - but Zendaya was there as a nominee for "Challengers," a love triangle set in the world of tennis. But the glitzy ceremony was not without romance: Timothee Chalamet and girlfriend Kylie Jenner set tongues wagging when some of their steamy displays of affection were caught on camera. — AFP



Zendaya and Tom Holland are interviewed by Jessica Shaw for SiriusXM's Town Hall with the cast of Spider-Man: No Way Home on December 10, 2021 in New York City. - AFP



Beyoncé, Blue Ivy Carter, Billy Eichner, Theo Somolu, Seth Rogen, Braelyn Rankins, John Kani, Kelvin Harrison Jr, Anika Noni Rose, Aaron Pierre, Keith David, Tiffany Boone, Lebo M, Kagiso Lediga and Barry Jenkins attend the World Premiere of Disney's "Mufasa: The Lion King" at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California on December 9, 2024.

'MUFASA' ROARS TO TOP OF NORTH AMERICA BOX OFFICE

Disney's animated drama "Mufasa: The Lion King" reigned over North America's box office this weekend, surpassing "Sonic the Hedgehog 3" to start the new year with an estimated \$23.8 million take, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported. The showing pushed "Mufasa" to a domestic total of \$168.6 million over three weekends, propelling it into the top 15 of 2024 releases, Variety reported.

With an additional \$307 million earned internationally, the Barry Jenkins-directed film appears on track to reach the half-billion-dollar mark. "Sonic," the Paramount action comedy about a speedy blue hedgehog, slowed a bit as the year-end holiday season wound down in the United States and Canada, taking in \$21.2 million for the Friday-through-Sunday period. The videogame-based film has now compiled \$187.5 million in domestic ticket sales



US actor Keith David and his wife Dionne Lea Williams

and \$148 million abroad, for a total of \$333.5 million. Focus Film's vampire pic "Nosferatu" - the latest remake of the 1922 silent classic inspired by Bram Stoker's "Dracula" - held tight in third place at \$13.2 million.

Down one spot from last weekend

was Disney blockbuster "Moana 2," at \$12.4 million. With accumulated ticket sales of \$425 million domestically and \$535 million overseas, its \$960 million total puts it on the verge of passing "Despicable Me 4" (\$969 million) as the third top-grossing release of 2024 and brings it close to the \$1 billion milestone. In fifth place, also down one spot from last weekend, was Universal's musical fantasy "Wicked." This latest take on the magical world of Oz logged ticket sales of \$10.2 million, even after becoming available for on-demand video viewing.

Rounding out the top 10 were:

- "A Complete Unknown" (\$8.1 million)
- "Babygirl" (\$4.5 million)
- "Gladiator II" (\$2.7 million)
- "Homestead" (\$2.1 million)
- "The Fire Inside" (\$1.2 million). — AFP



US singer Chloe Bailey



US singer actress Blue Ivy Carter attends the world premiere of Disney's "Mufasa: The Lion King".



Squirrel monkeys are pictured during a photocall.

Breeding success: London zoo counts its animals one-by-one



A zookeeper poses with a squirrel monkey during a photocall.



A zookeeper poses with a brown-nosed coati during a photocall.



A zookeeper poses as Humboldt penguins swim in their pool during a photocall.

With bunches of lettuce and bucketloads of nuts, London Zoo kicked off its annual animal count Friday, coaxing everything from goats to gorillas out of their enclosures for the celebrated stocktake. The zoo, which is nearly two centuries old, performs the nearly week-long formal tallying early each January, with several new additions already proving to be the highlights.

"We've had some really successful breeding successes over the last year," animal operations manager Dan Simmonds told AFP, listing the 11 penguin chicks, three Asiatic lion cubs and two baby gorillas born in 2024. The zoo also rescued from Chile 53 Darwin's frogs, which are among so-called Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered (EDGE) species, and bred a number of Socorro doves now extinct in the wild.

The keepers in the various enclosures will be kept "very busy" over the coming days as they count more than 10,000 animals from over 400 species, Simmonds noted. "We've been on the go since before six o'clock this morning, and we'll be going through 'til the end of daylight today, and then repeating for quite a few more days, until we've completed the entire count," he said.

Lemur yoga

But with morning temperatures close to zero degrees Celsius (32 Fahrenheit) in mid-winter London, some inhabitants required a little more encouragement to emerge from their heated cabins. The zoo's eight ring-tailed lemurs, endangered primates that hail from the dry forests and bushy scrubland of Madagascar, were especially shy at sunrise.

A couple eventually wandered over to an outdoor heat lamp, where they happily perched in unison in yoga-like poses. The rest of the Lemuridae huddled for warmth under heaters inside. "The lemurs will sunbathe and do their famous yoga pose -- it enables them to get the sun rays into the core of their body," noted Simmonds.

Over at Gorilla Kingdom, there was no trouble luring the seven-strong troop of western lowland gorillas from their pens for visual confirmation of their numbers. Its two newest members -- Juno and Venus, born in January and February last year -- hung on to their mothers as the troop scrambled out to grab an assortment of mixed vegetables. "We're really excited about the baby gorillas," said Glynn Hennessy,

lowland gorillas live in the tropical and swamp forests of west and central Africa, where their numbers are threatened by deforestation, hunting and disease.

Memorizing penguins

Elsewhere at the zoo, the Humboldt penguins, which come from Peru and Chile, were busy swimming or basking in some morning sunshine as the count got underway. In addition to the birth

bracelets type of thing, so if you really need to, or if you've forgotten, then you can refer to the chart and formally identify them. "But keepers don't generally need to do that. They can just do it all from memory." The zoo's diverse array of invertebrates must also be accounted for in the stocktake, a requirement of its zoological license.

That includes a new thriving hive of honeybees -- happily counted as one



Gernot, a Western lowland gorilla, is pictured during a photocall for the annual animal count at ZSL London Zoo in central London. — AFP photos

the zoo's lead keeper of primates.

"It's been a long effort to get a male in, for him to have courtship with the females and then produce two offspring for us. "And we're seeing their characters come through every single day," he added of Juno and Venus. "They're very different, but it's wonderful to see the family group really having a few more members in it now." Western

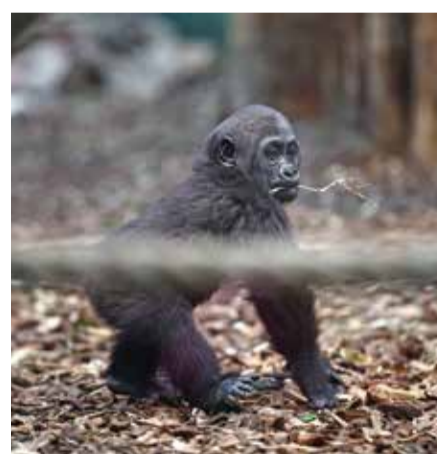
of 11 chicks last year, five new adults arrived from other European zoos, increasing the colony to 65. Despite the large tally, their keepers can recognize them each individually, according to Simmonds.

"It's amazing -- I certainly couldn't do that," he added, noting each had a small bracelet as a back-up to identify them. "Think Taylor Swift friendship

to avoid trying to tally dozens of busy bees on the move. Once complete, the count will be shared with other zoos worldwide -- via a database called ZIMS Species360 -- where it is used to help manage the global conservation breeding programs for endangered animals. — AFP



A zookeeper poses with Humboldt penguins during a photocall.



Venus, a ten-month-old Western lowland gorilla, is pictured during a photocall.



A zookeeper poses with a brown-nosed coati during a photocall.

Lost boy survives five days in Zimbabwe park teeming with lions

A seven-year-old boy was found alive after being lost for five days in a reserve home to lions and other wild animals in northern Zimbabwe, the wildlife authority said. The boy wandered into the Matusadona National Park next to his village on December 27 and was found five days later and about 50 kilometers (about 30 miles) away, ZimParks spokesperson Tinashe Farawo said.

He had survived on wild fruit and

water that he found by digging into a river bank, a technique known in Zimbabwe's drought-prone areas, Farawo said in a statement. "Remarkably, it is estimated that he walked through the harsh terrain of the lion-infested Matusadona National Park for 49 kilometers from his village to the point where he was found," Farawo said.

Rangers, locals and police launched a search for the child immediately after hearing that he was missing but their

efforts were hindered by heavy rain. His footprints were spotted on December 30 and the boy, Tinotenda Pundu, was found early the following day, he said.

The child was admitted to hospital and was frail but had no visible injuries, said lawmaker Mutsa Murombedzi, who is from the area. "It was a miracle that he survived," she told AFP. "He was clever enough to... sleep on perched rocks so that lions and other wildlife could not get to him," she said. "Vil-

lagers helped with the search, playing drums hoping that he would follow the sound," the MP said. But he was only found with the help of rangers who were able to go deeper into the wilderness to look for him.

The Matusadona National Park, near Zimbabwe's Lake Kariba, is home to a range of wild animals including lions, leopards, elephants and buffalo, according to its website. — AFP



Cubans walk past a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad. — AFP photos



A man walks past a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad.



A man pushes a wheelchair past a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad.



A man walks past a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad.



A man pushes a cart past a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad in Havana.

'You need to be happy': **GRAFFITI** encourages Cuban self-reflection

Graffiti on walls around Havana telling Cubans "you need to be happy" has encouraged introspection and inspiration in a country where censorship has forced many street artists to emigrate or abandon their work. The simple but striking message that began appearing more than a year ago is the creation of "Mr. Sad," a 27-year-old sociologist who, under the cover of anonymity, pushes the limits of rebellion on the communist-run island.

"My intention is just to create a mirror so that people have the opportunity to take a moment to see what's inside them," he told AFP. The artist said he was inspired by the tradition of visual propaganda that Cuba has cultivated in the decades since the revolution that brought the late Fidel Castro to power in 1959. Revolutionary slogans that have adorned public space on the island of 10 million inhabitants for years, such as "Homeland or death, we will win," have gradually lost their connection with the Cuban identity, he said. In the 1960s, "Cuba became the standard bearer of counterculture," he said in front of his graffiti inside the ruins of what was once an elegant apartment block with a sea view. "Society has evolved. It no longer



A man walks past a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad.

identifies with what happens in public spaces," he said.

He decided to turn his message into an "order but a kind one" because, he believes, Cubans are so used to orders "that only an order can attract attention." The phrase has been spray-painted or scribbled in pen on walls, road signs and disused shop windows, as well appearing on stickers and T-shirts.

observing society from street walls "2+2=5" has gone into exile.

Another, Yulier P., remains on the island but no longer paints. Both were previously arrested and said they were forced to paint over their murals, although some are still visible in the capital. Even so, Mr. Sad prefers to work during the day, choosing busy places like bus stations. He said people had told him on social media that his words helped them to make important decisions, including fleeing domestic violence, addressing gender identity issues or even deciding against suicide.

Independent filmmakers Lilian Moncada, 22, and Erika Santana, 23, were also inspired by the slogan, which they used for the name of their short film. Santana plays the role of a woman "fighting her own demons" who needed to hear Mr. Sad's message, said the actress, who has the phrase tattooed on her forearm.

Cubans "have the right to be happy, to look inward and move forward, despite the problems" shaking the island, which is mired in its worst economic crisis in three decades, Moncada said. - AFP

'Despite the problems'

Graffiti emerged in Cuba in the early 2000s as a response to the needs of a changing society, Mr. Sad said. However, some of its creators have faced hostility and surveillance from the authorities, because graffiti is above all a form of rebellion, he added. One artist who signs his graffiti featuring masked characters



Cubans walk near a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad.



A man works next to a wall bearing a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad.



A man walks past a graffiti reading "You need to be happy" by Cuban artist Mr Sad.

Thailand tourism bounces back, with 35 million visitors in 2024

Thailand welcomed more than 35 million international tourists in 2024, surpassing the government's target, as the country strives to revive its sluggish economy, officials said Monday. The nation's vital tourism sector accounts for almost 20 percent of its GDP but has struggled in the wake

of the Covid-19 pandemic and changing traveler habits.

More than 35 million visitors visited the kingdom in 2024, around four million shy of its pre-pandemic high in 2019, according to the Ministry of Sports and Tourism. China has reclaimed its position as the top source of visitors in Thai-

land - after seeing a decline post-pandemic - with more than six million visitors last year, followed by Malaysia and India.

The kingdom - known for its pristine beaches and iconic temples - generated more than 1.6 trillion baht (\$46 billion) from tourist spending in 2024, accord-

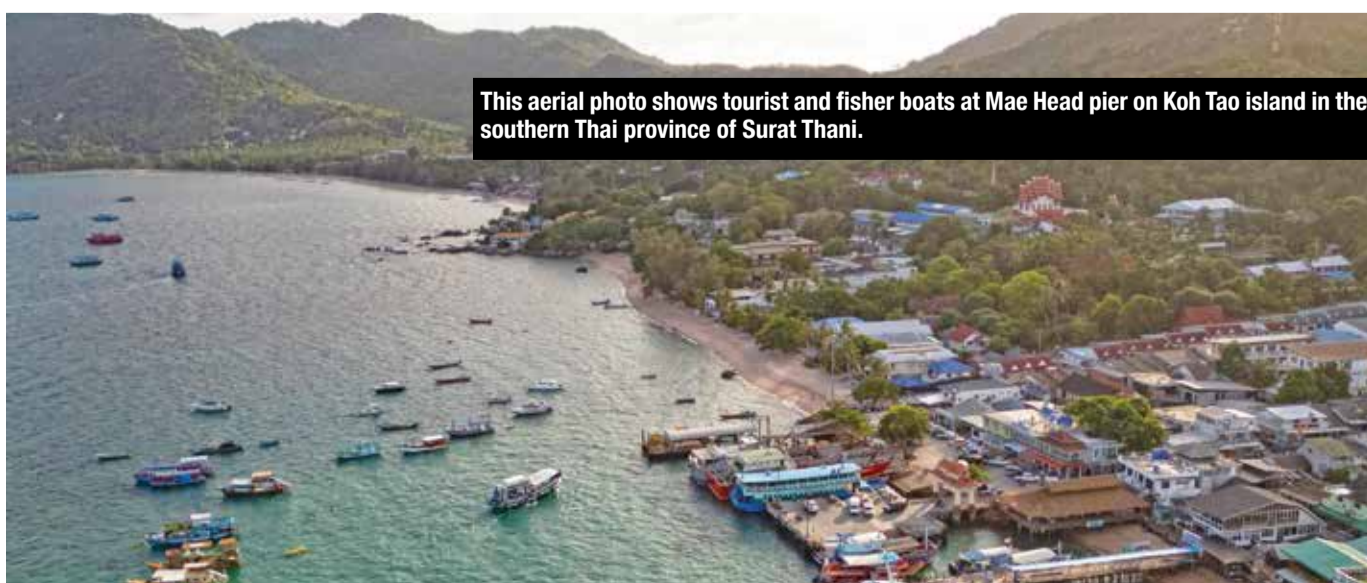
ing to tourism minister Sorawong Thienthong. The Thai government under former prime minister Srettha Thavisin introduced a number of measures to attract foreign visitors, including a free visa program for Chinese and Indian tourists.

After exceeding its target of 35 mil-

lion tourists in 2024, the government has set a target of 39 million visitors in 2025. The World Bank has estimated that the country will exceed its pre-pandemic level in 2025, but tourists are spending less than they did before. - AFP



Tourists ride a longtail boat past Wat Arun temple along the Chao Praya river in Bangkok.



This aerial photo shows tourist and fisher boats at Mae Head pier on Koh Tao island in the southern Thai province of Surat Thani.

Sports

Sabalenka eyes Australian Open hat-trick but Swiatek, Gauff lurk

Swiatek is a major champion but never shone at Melbourne Park

MELBOURNE: World number one Aryna Sabalenka is gunning for a third consecutive Australian Open crown but will face a stiff challenge from Iga Swiatek, Coco Gauff and last year's runner-up Zheng Qinwen. Sabalenka won the Brisbane International on Sunday but the headline was in Sydney where a red-hot Gauff beat Swiatek in the United Cup final in a statement victory.

The 20-year-old American Gauff bounced back impressively from parting with coach Brad Gilbert to win the WTA 1000 in Beijing and the WTA Tour Finals to end 2024. The world number three again looked in prime form as she inspired the US to victory over Poland in the mixed-teams event and confidence is high heading into Melbourne.

"Honestly, before every Grand Slam I have the belief that I can win," said Gauff, who triumphed at the 2023 US Open for her only major title so far. "And especially after the US Open, I proved that I could do it. I definitely have belief that I can win."

The United Cup was Swiatek's first event since it was revealed she had served a one-month doping suspension. The world number two began her 2025 campaign with four straight singles wins until coming up against Gauff, where she went down 6-4, 6-4 a week before the start of the Australian Open.

Swiatek is a five-time major champion but she has never shone at Melbourne Park, only progressing beyond the fourth round in 2022, when she was upset by Danielle Collins in the semi-finals. The Pole also appears to be carrying a niggling left thigh injury that needed strapping during the week, but she brushed off any fears after the United Cup final. "I was just tired," the 23-year-old said. "You know, the volume at the beginning of the tournament especially has been pretty big. But honestly, it's all good."

Ominous Sabalenka

Sabalenka is the woman to beat in Australia af-

ter the best season of her career in 2024, capped by being named WTA Player of the Year last month. The Belarusian will be the first woman to win the Australian Open three years in a row since Martina Hingis in 1999 should she go all the way.

The 26-year-old showed she was in the mood with a romp to the trophy at the season-opening Brisbane International, dropping only one set. "Mentally, physically, I'll be ready to go at the Australian Open," she said.

"I definitely feel confident in my game." The victory continued her superb form from 2024 where she reached seven finals and won four tournaments. She began 2024 by successfully defending the Australian Open and bookended it by lifting her first US Open, as well as winning WTA 1000 events in Cincinnati and Wuhan.

Sabalenka recaptured the number one ranking from Swiatek, who had mysteriously pulled out of the WTA's Asian swing citing "personal matters". Only later was it revealed Swiatek had been absent because of a one-month ban for testing positive for a banned heart medication. She denies knowingly doping. China's Zheng had a stellar 2024 including winning Olympic gold but she goes into the first Grand Slam of the year without playing a warm-up event.

Osaka threat

Other fancied players, Jasmine Paolini, Mirra Andreeva and two-time Melbourne champion Naomi Osaka have all shown glimpses of their best form to begin the season. Late bloomer Paolini, 29, won two of her three singles at the United Cup to follow a 2024 where she reached the finals at Roland Garros and Wimbledon and rose to world number four.

Former number one Osaka returned to the circuit last year after the birth of her daughter



Aryna Sabalenka

but failed to recapture the form that took her to four Slam crowns. Now under the wing of Patrick Mouratoglou, who formerly coached Serena Williams, she reached her first final since 2022 at Auckland before pulling out on Sunday with an abdominal problem.

Osaka, who is not thought to be badly injured, is ranked 50 and so will be unseeded and a dangerous potential early opponent for anyone. Teenage sensation Andreeva, a semi-finalist at Roland

Garros in 2024, is expected to figure at the sharp end of Grand Slams this season.

The 17-year-old Russian already has one WTA title to her name and although she lost in the semi-finals at Brisbane to Sabalenka, the match was a lot closer than the 6-3, 6-2 scoreline suggested. One current Grand Slam champion will be absent, however, as Wimbledon winner Barbora Krejčíková of the Czech Republic has pulled out with a back injury. — AFP

Sinner turns focus to Australian Open

MELBOURNE: World number one Jannik Sinner said Tuesday his "amazing" 2024 was history as he warmed up for the defence of his Australian Open title with a tough exhibition match victory on Melbourne's centre court.

The Italian is coming off a breakthrough year in which he backed up his maiden Grand Slam title at Melbourne Park by winning the US Open and ATP Finals. He then starred for Italy as they claimed a second consecutive Davis Cup triumph, ending as the world's undisputed top player.

The 23-year-old skipped any lead-up events to the opening major of the year and instead flew straight to Melbourne for his first match of 2025. He faced a testing battle on a hot afternoon against Australian world number 25 Alexei Popyrin, eventually prevailing 6-4, 7-6 (7/2), rallying from 5-2 down in the second set on Rod Laver Arena.

"2024 was an amazing season for me, but it has already gone now," said Sinner, who spent Christmas at home in the snow and arrived in Melbourne to a 40 degree Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) day. "So many things have happened for me on this court and off the court," he added.

"I'm very happy to be back, even if it is a kind of exhibition. For us it's always very important trying to feel the court, the pace. "In my mind, I know how much work we have put in, which hopefully will give me confidence and we will see how it goes," he added.

The Australian Open starts on Sunday. Sinner is kicking off his campaign with a doping cloud hanging over him after testing positive for traces of the steroid clostebol in March. He was exonerated by the International Tennis Integrity Agency, which accepted his explanation that the drug entered his system when his physiotherapist treated a cut.

British politicians call to boycott Afghanistan match

LONDON: A group of more than 160 British politicians have called on the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to boycott next month's Champions Trophy match against Afghanistan as a stand against the Taliban regime's assault on women's rights.

Female participation in sport has effectively been outlawed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, a move that puts the Afghanistan Cricket Board in

Vaughan supports shake-up 'to keep Test cricket relevant'

SYDNEY: Former England captain Michael Vaughan threw his support on Tuesday behind a two-tier structure "to save" Test cricket with the ICC reportedly meeting this month to discuss the issue. Vaughan joined former India coach Ravi Shastri in urging a shake-up which would include relegation and promotion to help ensure the survival of the red-ball game.

Both men were on commentary duties during the thrilling five-Test series between Australia and India which the hosts won 3-1 in front of huge crowds. "It has been a series that has only served to strengthen my views on where the game is head-



MELBOURNE: Jannik Sinner of Italy hits a return during a men's singles practice match against Australia's Alexei Popyrin ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne. — AFP

But the World Anti-Doping Agency appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport and the Italian is still awaiting the verdict.

Meanwhile, Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka says she and her American rapper boyfriend Cordae have split up just days ahead of the Australian Open.

The couple have been together since 2019 and share a young daughter, Shai. "Hi everyone, just wanted to say that Cordae and I are no longer in a relationship," the four-time Grand Slam champion wrote on Instagram late Monday.

"No bad blood at all, he's a great person and an awesome dad. "Honestly really glad our paths crossed because my daughter is my biggest blessing and I was able to grow a lot from our experiences together."

She ended the post with a red heart emoji, without saying when they parted ways. Osaka reached her first WTA final since 2022 at the Auckland Classic over the weekend. But she pulled out with an abdominal injury after taking the opening set 6-4. The 27-year-old was not thought to be badly hurt, with the Australian Open starting on Sunday. — AFP

direct contravention of the International Cricket Council's rules.

The England men's ODI side are due to face Afghanistan in Lahore on February 26. A wide cross-party group from the House of Commons and House of Lords, including Reform UK leader Nigel Farage and former leader of the Labour party Jeremy Corbyn, called on the ECB "to speak out against the horrific treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban."

Afghanistan are still allowed to compete by the ICC and ECB CEO Richard Gould responded by suggesting a uniform approach from all member nations is the best way forward. "The ECB strongly condemns the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime," he said.

"The ICC Constitution mandates that all mem-

ber nations are committed to the growth and development of women's cricket. In line with this commitment, the ECB has maintained its position of not scheduling any bilateral cricket matches against Afghanistan.

ed and what administrators should be looking at," Vaughan said in a column for The Telegraph in London and The Sydney Morning Herald.

"I believe it is a four-day product with a set number of overs each day enforced, three matches minimum per series and two divisions of six, including promotion and relegation," Shastri said the Australia-India series proved Test cricket continued to hold its own in the face of ever-increasing T20 franchise cricket.

But, like Vaughan, it only reinforced his view that to survive, the biggest teams needed to be playing each other more often. The Herald reported Tuesday that Australia, England, India and the International Cricket Council's new chairman Jay Shah would meet this month to discuss a two-tier structure.

Any move to two divisions would kick in after the end of the current Future Tours Programme in 2027, it added, citing sources with knowledge of

ber nations are committed to the growth and development of women's cricket. In line with this commitment, the ECB has maintained its position of not scheduling any bilateral cricket matches against Afghanistan.

"While there has not been a consensus on further international action within the ICC, the ECB will continue to actively advocate for such measures. A coordinated, ICC-wide approach would be significantly more impactful than unilateral actions by individual members."

Afghanistan have become a greater force in white ball cricket in recent years, rising to eighth in the ODI world rankings. They beat England at the 2023 ODI World Cup and reached the semi-finals of the T20 World Cup last year, eliminating Australia in the process. — AFP

the talks. "I was delighted to read in this masthead the ICC are considering a two-tier structure from 2027 which could see the Ashes staged twice every three years," said Vaughan.

"I have been saying for a long time this is the way to keep Test cricket relevant by ensuring the best play the best as often as possible, and we get fewer mis-matches. "There is much to iron out before any major changes are made for 2027, but there is time."

The ICC has been contemplating a two-tier system for years but the plans have never got off the ground. A proposal for a de facto premier league featuring the top seven sides was on the agenda of the world governing body in 2016.

It was scrapped after the powerful Indian board led a backlash. While India stand to gain from playing more matches against teams such as England and Australia, the BCCI said at the time the cost to smaller cricketing nations was too great. — AFP



Clive Lloyd

Windies great Lloyd flays two-tier Test structure

SYDNEY: West Indies great Clive Lloyd is "disturbed" by the idea of a two-tier structure for test cricket and believes efforts should instead be focused on ensuring struggling teams play more often against the top sides.

According to a report in the Sydney Morning Herald, India, Australia and England are in talks to divide test cricket into two divisions to allow cricket's "Big Three" to play each other more often.

The International Cricket Council's (ICC) Indian chairman Jay Shah will meet representatives of the Australian and English boards this month, the report said. Lloyd was fiercely critical of the idea, which he believed could be catastrophic for the likes of the West Indies, which ruled the game in the 1970s and 1980s when he was captain.

"I think it will be terrible for all those countries who worked so hard to get the test status," the 80-year-old told an online media interaction. "Now they'll be playing among themselves in the lower section. How are they going to make it to the top? When you play against better teams."

The ICC did not offer any immediate comment on whether the proposal was under consideration.

T20 onslaught

Test cricket is reeling under the popularity of T20 leagues across the world, but the format produces intense drama at the top level. India just played a blockbuster series in front of huge crowds in Australia, and their next test assignment is another five-match series in England in June-July.

Former India coach Ravi Shastri is a vocal supporter of the two-tier concept, which he believes can help test cricket survive against T20. "The top teams play against each other more often, so there is a contest. You want contests," Shastri told SEN radio during India's fifth test against Australia.

Lloyd warned that being banished to the lower tier with a corresponding drop in funding could lead to the disintegration of the West Indies team, which is made up of players from 15 island nations.

"Our islands have got to play together. We've been doing that for years," he added. While a cricket-mad India has emerged as the game's financial engine, Lloyd recalled how the West Indies contributed to the game's development, including by lending their players to county cricket in England in the 1970s.

"We were the cash cows for a lot of countries over the years ... people must recognize that," he said. "But we are at that situation now where we need the help, and we can't get it." — Reuters

Sports

Forest tame Wolves to maintain unlikely EPL title challenge

Defeat leaves Wolves outside the relegation zone

WOLVERHAMPTON: Nottingham Forest's stunning season continued with a 3-0 victory at Wolves on Monday to give manager Nuno Espirito Santo a winning return to Molineux.

England international Morgan Gibbs-White and the in-form Chris Wood struck before half-time to take Forest to within six points of leaders Liverpool, who they host in their next Premier League game. Substitute Taiwo Awoniyi rounded off the scoring and a sixth consecutive win for Forest in stoppage time. Defeat leaves Wolves outside the relegation zone only thanks to goal difference as they suffered a first defeat under new boss Vitor Pereira. Forest remain third in the table but move level on points with Arsenal.

Even if a shock title challenge proves beyond Espirito Santo's men, they are building up an impressive cushion in the race for Champions League football next season. They are five points clear of fifth-placed Newcastle and six in front of struggling champions Manchester City in sixth. A top-four finish would guarantee a return to the continent's elite competition for the first time in 45 years for the two-time European champions. However, fifth could also be good enough depending on how English club fare in European competition this season.

"We need to stay humble. We haven't achieved anything yet, we need to work until the end and this can lead us to good moments," said Espirito Santo. Gibbs-White savored his return to the club where he spent the early part of his career.

In front of the watching new England manager Thomas Tuchel, the midfielder did his case for further international recognition no harm with a cool finish from Antony Elanga's pass. Forest's unexpected rise from battling relegation until the final day of last season into Champions League contenders has been built on a solid defense and Wood's purple patch.

The New Zealand international turned in Callum Hudson-Odoi's low cross for his 12th goal of the season to double the visitors' lead just before half-time. Wolves pressed and probed for a way back into the game after the break but were toothless in the ab-



WOLVERHAMPTON: Players compete for the ball at a corner during the English Premier League football match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Nottingham Forest at the Molineux stadium in Wolverhampton, central England on January 6, 2025. — AFP

sence of talisman Matheus Cunha through suspension. Mats Sels was forced into one brilliant save to deny Jorgen Strand Larsen to preserve a ninth clean sheet of the season and fourth in a row.

That solidity is familiar to Wolves fans from Espirito Santo's time in charge of their club between 2017 and 2021. The Portuguese coach led Wanderers from the Championship into Europe for the

first time in 39 years. Now after troubled spells at Tottenham and Saudi club Al-Itihad, he is recreating that magic to leave Forest fans in dreamland. "As coaching staff we have this natural ambition of improving the players, this is what we are obsessed with," he added. "If we improve the players then the team will improve and if the team improves then the club will improve and the city will be happy." — AFP

Liverpool's Slot wary of goal-hungry Spurs in League Cup clash

LONDON: Tottenham Hotspur are a dangerous opponent and Liverpool will have to work to prevent them from enforcing their style of play when the sides meet in a League Cup semi-final first-leg clash, manager Arne Slot said on Tuesday.

Liverpool and Spurs employ aggressive and attacking brands of football, with the last match between the sides in December resulting in a thrilling 6-3 win for the Merseyside club. With both teams having scored more than 40 goals in the Premier League, another goalfest could be on the cards.

"We expect before we go into the game is that two teams have such a clear identity and playing style. Both teams are trying to force that identity towards the other," Slot told reporters ahead of the match at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

"Large parts of the away game two weeks ago we could show our identity. But they in large parts showed how good they are. Scoring three



Arne Slot

goals against us is a big compliment." Slot also hinted that he would shuffle his pack for the match, adding: "If you look at all the fixtures this season, there's so many things going into a line up. It's going to be a decision made about what is the best line up for tomorrow.

"In my opinion the best line up might be ones who don't start a lot... Maybe some of those players will play tomorrow. Maybe players who have played a lot will play," Slot added that midfielder

Dominik Szoboszlai, who has been dealing with illness, was unlikely to start the semi-final tie.

The Dutch manager also once again defended Trent Alexander-Arnold, after the right back drew some criticism from pundits for his performance in their 2-2 draw with Manchester United amid reports of a move to Real Madrid. "I think we were all disappointed, not only Trent. We were all disappointed," Slot said.

"Parts of our game we weren't completely happy with. It wasn't only Trent, there were more things we could have done better. Trent didn't play his best game, but some others also didn't play their best. "If you play 50, 60 games in a season, one of them won't be your best performance. Maybe we should highlight these players are playing so well despite playing two games in a week."

Alexander-Arnold is part of a trio of key players including top scorer Mohamed Salah and captain Virgil van Dijk whose contracts are nearing an end, but Slot shot down any suggestion that the uncertainty was affecting the players on the pitch.

"If everybody plays well, nobody is distracted by their 'contract distraction'," he added. "Nine times out of 10, (results are) down to how well the other team plays." — Reuters

Taste of 2034 WCup as Saudi Asian Cup stadiums named

KUALA LUMPUR: Fans and players will get a taste of what the 2034 World Cup in Saudi Arabia will be like when the kingdom hosts the Asian Cup, with officials announcing Tuesday dates and stadiums for the regional showpiece.

Saudi Arabia was in December controversially awarded the World Cup but first it hosts the Asian Cup in 2027. The tournament will be from January 7 to February 5 that year and be held in the capital Riyadh, plus Jeddah and Al Khobar, the Asian Football Confederation said, launching a two-year countdown.

Among the venues announced Tuesday for the 24-team regional competition were the 70,000-capacity King Fahd Sports City Stadium and King Saud University Stadium, both in Riyadh, which have also been earmarked to hold World Cup games.

Likewise the 60,000 King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah. The Asian Cup will be spread across eight stadiums. "Confirming the dates and selecting the stadiums for the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 is a strategic milestone in our journey to host the tournament," said Yasser al-Mishehal, president of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation. — AFP

Olmo situation overshadowing Barca in Super Cup

BARCELONA: Barcelona coach Hansi Flick is hoping to win the first silverware of his reign this week in the Spanish Super Cup in Saudi Arabia but the Dani Olmo registration debacle rumbles on firmly in the foreground.

Holders Real Madrid, also the reigning Spanish and European champions, are favorites for the trophy, after thrashing Barcelona 4-1 in last season's final. Ernesto Valverde's Athletic Bilbao face Barca in the first semi-final on Wednesday looking to win it for the first time since beating the Catalans in the 2021 showpiece, qualifying this season as Copa del Rey winners.

Carlo Ancelotti's Madrid tackle last season's Copa runners-up Real Mallorca in Thursday's second semi, with the final set for Sunday in Jeddah at the King Abdullah Sports City stadium. Barcelona named Olmo, and young forward Pau Victor who

is similarly unable to play, in their travelling party to head to the Gulf state. Until they hear otherwise from Spain's top sports court (CSD), neither Olmo or Victor can play for the rest of the season in any competition.

Barcelona said at the weekend they would take their case to the CSD after two attempts to renew the duo's licenses were rebuffed by courts, while La Liga and the Spanish football federation have rejected Barcelona's registration attempts.

Both playmaker Olmo, Barcelona's marquee summer signing, and Victor were given short-term licenses at the start of the season as the financially-struggling Catalans wrangled their way around La Liga's stringent budget controls when defender Andreas Christensen suffered an injury, offering a loophole.

Defender Ronald Araujo is also in the squad after making his comeback from injury during a 4-0 win over Barbastro in the Copa del Rey on Saturday, which Olmo and Victor were forced to miss. "It's left a bad taste because they are our teammates... we hope the club can resolve the issue," said Araujo.

"We now have to turn our attention to Wednesday's (clash) against Athletic." Despite leading La Liga for a lengthy stretch, a string of poor results



Dani Olmo

in November and December sunk Barcelona into third place. Stopping the rot with even a minor trophy would give a needed morale boost for a flagging side. Flick said vital teenage winger Lamine Yamal should be fit to feature after an ankle injury.

'Best in the world'

Barcelona have won one of the four Spanish Super Cups to take place in Saudi Arabia, beating Real

Madrid in the 2023 final, for their record-extending 14th triumph. Madrid, who won the first of those in 2020, when it also became a four-team competition, trail Barcelona by one.

Despite a poor start to the season Ancelotti's side have maneuvered their way into first place and also won the UEFA Super Cup in August. Star summer arrival Kylian Mbappe seems to be finding his footing and with the in-form Jude Bellingham and Vinicius Junior, Madrid's attacking trident marks them out as favorites.

Brazilian winger Vinicius was sent off in his team's 2-1 win at Valencia on Friday in La Liga but is expected to feature in Saudi Arabia with a league ban likely—although if issued a more severe penalty could also miss the tournament.

Ancelotti said Vinicius was sorry after his red card and that he has "improved so much that he is the best player in the world". The 24-year-old finished second in the 2024 Ballon d'Or voting to up-roar at the Santiago Bernabeu, but was later given FIFA's The Best award.

Vinicius scored a hat-trick in last season's final in a pivotal match for him, going on to star in the team's league and Champions League victories after a slow start to the season. — 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, **Kizhakethil Thomas** Renjith Kesamathu, holder of Indian Passport No T2810205 having permanent address Kesamathukizhakethil, Omalloor via, Mathoor PO., Pathanamthitta District, Kerala, India PIN: 689657, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (given name) Renjith and (surname) Kesamathukizhakethil Thomas.

06/01/2025

Last-gasp Abraham goal wins Super Cup for Milan over Inter

Milan equal Inter's haul of eight wins in the competition



RIYADH: AC Milan's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Italian Super Cup final football match between Inter Milan and AC Milan at the Al-Awwal Park in Riyadh. — AFP

RIYADH: A goal in added time from Tammy Abraham completed a stunning comeback for AC Milan who won the Italian Super Cup with a dramatic 3-2 victory over city rivals Inter Milan in Monday's final in Riyadh after going two goals down early in the game. The win denied Inter what would have been an unprecedented fourth consecutive Super Cup trophy, and allowed Milan to equal Inter's haul of eight wins in the competition, with new manager Serge Conceicao lifting a trophy in his second game in charge.

The game was preceded by a spectacular light show at the King Saud University Stadium but the match only really sparked into life in the final seconds of the opening half. Mehdi Taremi teed up Lautaro Martinez with a pass across the box and the forward used some neat footwork

to deceive Malick Thiaw before firing a low shot through the legs of Theo Hernandez which beat Mike Maignan at his near post.

Two minutes after the interval Inter continued where they had left off. Stefan de Vrij played a long ball over the top which Taremi controlled beautifully and he drilled his shot into the bottom corner to double their advantage. Milan responded by sending on Rafael Leao, who immediately won a free kick just outside the area which Hernandez curled low around the wall and the ball crept just inside the post to re-open the tie.

A rejuvenated Milan pushed for an equalizer. Tijjani Reijnders had a shot blocked by the face of Alessandro Bastoni and Inter keeper Yann Sommer pulled off a fine save from an Alvaro Morata header.

Inter then had a chance to restore their two-

goal advantage, but Carlos Augusto's header from close range came off the upright and into the arms of Maignan on the goal-line, but Milan found the equalizer with 10 minutes remaining.

Christian Pulisic, surrounded by three Inter players, controlled a cross from Hernandez and steered his shot into the far corner and it looked like the tie would be decided by a shootout, with no extra time to be played.

Milan, however, continued to press and they were rewarded when Leao pulled the ball back across the goal and Abraham, another substitute, was there for the simplest of tap-ins to break Inter hearts. Conceicao, who replaced the sacked Paulo Fonseca last week, celebrated wildly with his players, while the Inter team slumped to the floor in disbelief. — Reuters

Giannis triple-double propels Bucks over Raptors

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo posted his fourth triple-double of the season and Damian Lillard scored 25 points to lead the Milwaukee Bucks to a 128-104 NBA victory over the Toronto Raptors on Monday.

Antetokounmpo scored 11 points, grabbed 12 rebounds and kept the Bucks offense clicking with his season-high 13 assists as the Bucks snapped a two-game skid. Milwaukee had lost four of their last five matches, with all of those defeats coming against teams with losing records. But they handled the 8-28 Raptors convincingly despite the absence of Khris Middleton with an ankle injury.

Bucks coach Doc Rivers said Antetokounmpo's passing—including 10 assists in the first half—"set the whole tone to our team." "When your best player does that it becomes contagious and the ball just moved," Rivers said. The only downside for the Bucks was a cut Antetokounmpo suffered on his right little finger when he hit the rim on a block attempt late in the first half. Rivers said it required stitches to stop the bleeding, but Antetokounmpo wanted to stay in a game in which he and Lillard were both able to rest the entire fourth quarter anyway.

In Chicago, Zach LaVine scored 35 points with 10 rebounds and eight assists as the Bulls rallied from a 19-point third-quarter deficit to beat the San Antonio Spurs 114-110. Coby White added 23 points, driving for a go-ahead layup then throwing down a dunk to put the Bulls up 113-110 with 15.9 seconds left, and LaVine adding a final free throw to close it out.

The Bulls withstood another standout performance from San Antonio star Victor Wembanyama, who had 23 points, 14 rebounds, four assists and eight blocked shots. In Detroit, Cade Cunningham scored 32 points and handed out nine assists as the Pistons erased an early 22-point deficit to beat the Portland Trail Blazers 118-115. Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 11 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter for Detroit, including a pair of back-to-back three-pointers that put the Pistons up 109-106 with less than three minutes to play. Phoenix coach Mike Budenholzer's decision to shake up his starting lineup paid dividends in Philadelphia, where Bradley Beal came off the bench and scored 25 points to lead the Suns to a 109-99 victory over the short-handed 76ers.

With the Suns on a four-game losing streak, Budenholzer shifted Beal and Jusuf Nurkic to reserve roles. Phoenix trailed by as many as 12 points in the first quarter and were down by four at half time. But Beal scored 20 points in the second half and the Suns bench out-scored the Sixers reserves 54-7 overall. Tyrese Maxey scored 31 points and handed out 10 assists, and Kelly Oubre Jr. scored 26 points with 11 rebounds for Philadelphia, who were without Joel Embiid and Kyle Lowry. — AFP

Loeb limps home as teenager wins Dakar Rally stage

AL HENAKIYAH: Sebastien Loeb struggled to complete Stage 3 of the Dakar Rally on Tuesday after rolling his car near the start, a setback that is likely to cost him his dream of a first title in the event. The nine-time World Rally Champion went off the road 12 kilometres into the 327-stage between Bisha and Al Henakiyah. After a nasty bounce his Dacia performed several impressive rolls, which seriously damaged the vehicle.

The 50-year-old Frenchman and his Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin set off again after a five-minute stop for repairs, but struggled throughout the rest of the stage. Loeb, who has finished second three times in the Dakar Rally, ended the stage in 4 hours 20 minutes 12 seconds, more than an hour behind the day's winner, 19-year-old South African Saood Variawa.

"We were able to continue but suddenly the steering rod broke, I think because of the rollover," said Loeb at the finish. "Then we had a problem with the engine overheating. We tried to finish the stage. We managed to do so, but we lost an hour."

"It wasn't the kind of day we prefer. We lost an hour and we got the feeling that we were in 'it' up to our necks. But it is what it is, we just have to continue. We'll keep on racing and we'll see, even if winning the rally is starting to look complicated."

Variawa, in a Toyota, finished 33 seconds ahead of Frenchman Guerlain Chicherit in a Mini. Another South African Toyota driver, Henk Lategan retained the overall lead after finishing 12th on the



MEDINA: French driver Sebastien Loeb and co-driver Fabian Lurquin drive their damaged Dacia on a track after crashing during stage 3 of the 47th Dakar Rally, between Bisha and Al Henakiyah, on January 7, 2025. — AFP

day, 7mins 31sec behind Variawa.

Variawa is 41st, 7 hours 47 minutes 11 seconds behind after losing eight hours the day before following a head-on collision with team-mate and compatriot Giniel de Villiers. Loeb sits 16th, almost an hour and a quarter off first. He also lost 30 minutes on Sunday when a fan problem caused his engine to overheat.

Reigning champion Carlos Sainz had retired on

Monday after his Ford Raptor flipped, damaging its roll bar. With rain forecast, the stage was shortened from the original 496 km. In the motorbike competition, Spaniard Lorenzo Santolino, riding a Sherco and making his seventh appearance in the Dakar Rally, won a stage for the first time.

Australian Daniel Sanders still leads the overall standings. The Rally through Saudi Arabia ends on January 17 in the Empty Quarter desert. — AFP