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## US, Russia hold talks in Saudi

Kuwait welcomes talks • Ukraine rejects deals without its consent

### Uzbek President meets Crown Prince



KUWAIT: Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev meets at his residence in Bayan Palace HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, before concluding his official visit to Kuwait on Feb 18, 2025. — KUNA (See Page 3)

RIYADH: The United States and Russia said on Tuesday they had agreed to press ahead with efforts to end the war in Ukraine after holding talks in the Saudi capital at which Kyiv was not represented. The 4-1/2-hour meeting in Riyadh marked a crucial moment – the first time that US and Russian officials have sat down together to discuss ways to halt the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War Two. Ukraine says it will not accept any deal imposed on it without its consent.

Kuwait on Tuesday welcomed Saudi Arabia's hosting of talks between the US and Russia, hoping that the gathering would achieve its objectives of bolstering global peace and security. US national security adviser Mike Waltz told reporters in Riyadh that the war must come to a permanent end, and this would involve negotiations over territory. "Just a practical reality is that there is going to be some discussion of territory and there's going to be discussion of security guarantees," he said.

Addressing Ukrainian and European concerns, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said no one was being sidelined, the European Union needed to be

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RIYADH: US Secretary of State Marco Rubio shakes hands with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during their meeting at Diriyah Palace on Feb 18, 2025. — AFP

### Zain KSA reports highest revenue of \$2.8bn in 2024



Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi

RIYADH: Zain Group's operation in Saudi Arabia (Zain KSA) released its financial results for 2024, reporting an all-time high revenue of SAR 10.4 billion (\$2.8 billion), compared to SAR 9.9 billion (\$2.6 billion) in 2023, reflecting a 5 percent growth. The company reported net profit of SAR 596 million (\$159 million) for 2024 compared to SAR 1,267 million in 2023.

Commenting on the results, Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO & Zain Saudi Arabia Vice-Chairman Bader Al-Kharafi said: "This impressive growth in Zain KSA's constantly improving financial results for 2024 are attributed to the team's focus on operational efficiency, digital innovation, new business verticals and expansion of 5G services."

With the sustained upward financial and operational performance, Zain KSA's Board of Directors recommended to distribute cash dividends of SAR 0.5 per share (5 percent) to shareholders for 2024. The financial results highlight Zain KSA's operational strategy, focusing on providing the best user experience for individuals and businesses over a powerful 5G network – one of the most advanced in the region – positioning Zain KSA as the digital provider of choice in Saudi Arabia. (See Page 8)

### Lebanon slams occupation as Zionists remain

KFAR KILA, Lebanon: Lebanese leaders said Beirut was in contact with Washington and Paris to press the Zionist entity to fully withdraw from south Lebanon, branding its presence in five points an "occupation" after a ceasefire deadline expired on Tuesday. The UN called the incomplete pullout a violation of a Security Council resolution, though it has allowed many displaced residents to return to border villages, many largely destroyed in more than a year of hostilities between the Zionist entity and Hezbollah.

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun said Beirut was in contact with truce brokers the United States and France to press the Zionist entity to complete its withdrawal, after an initial late January deadline set under the deal was already extended. Decision-makers are "unified in adopting the diplomatic option, because nobody wants war", Aoun said, according to a statement.

Earlier Tuesday, Lebanon said any Zionist presence on its soil constituted an "occupation". In a statement, Aoun, along with Lebanon's prime minister and parliament speaker, warned the government would ask the UN Security Council to push the Zionist entity to leave, and said that Lebanese armed forces were ready to assume duties on the border, adding Beirut had "the right to adopt all means" to make Zionists withdraw.

Continued on Page 6



ADAISEH, Lebanon: People inspect their destroyed homes in this southern village on Feb 18, 2025, following the withdrawal of Zionist troops. — AFP

### Palestinians flee West Bank camps amid Zionist raids

JERUSALEM: Tens of thousands of Palestinians living in refugee camps in the occupied West Bank have left their homes as a weeks-long Zionist offensive has demolished houses and torn up vital infrastructure in the heavily built up townships, Palestinian authorities said. Zionist forces began their operation in the refugee camp in the northern West Bank city of Jenin on Jan. 21, deploying hundreds of troops and bulldozers

that demolished houses and dug up roads, driving almost all of the camp's residents out.

"We don't know what's going on in the camp but there is continuous demolition and roads being dug up," said Mohammed Al-Sabbagh, head of the Jenin camp services committee. The operation has since been extended to other camps, notably the Tulkarem refugee camp and the nearby Nur Shams camp, both of which have also been devastated.

The camps, built for descendants of Palestinian refugees who fled or were driven from their homes in the 1948 war around the creation of the Zionist entity, have long been major centers for armed groups. They have been raided repeatedly by the Zionist military but the current operation, which began as a

Continued on Page 6



TULKAREM: A Zionist army excavator demolishes a residential building in this camp for Palestinian refugees in the occupied West Bank on Feb 18, 2025. — AFP

### Delta passengers dangle from seats as plane flips over

TORONTO: A Delta Air Lines regional jet flipped upside down upon landing at Canada's Toronto Pearson Airport on Monday amid windy weather following a snowstorm, injuring 18 of the 80 people on board, officials said. Three people on flight DL4819 from Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport suffered critical injuries, among them a child, a Canadian air ambulance official said, with 15 others also immediately taken to hospitals.

The US carrier said a CRJ900 aircraft operated by its Endeavor Air subsidiary was involved in a single-aircraft accident with 76 passengers and four crew members on board. The 16-year-old CRJ900,

Continued on Page 6



TORONTO: Emergency personnel work at the scene of a Delta Airlines plane crash at Toronto Pearson International Airport on Feb 17, 2025. — AFP





## Local



Group photo of the Gulf Ministers of Youth and Sports.



# Minister underlines importance of unified initiatives for youths

## Gulf Ministers of Youth and Sports hold 38th meeting

KUWAIT: Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi stressed on Tuesday the importance of continuing to launch unified Gulf initiatives for youth in the fields of education, training, innovation, scientific research, sports and culture to provide a supportive and stimulating environment for them to develop and innovate and to enable them to participate effectively in building their societies. This came in a speech by Minister Al-Mutairi while chairing the 38th meeting of the Gulf Ministers of Youth and Sports, held in Kuwait in the presence of the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jassem Al-Budaiwi and the ministers of youth and sports from the GCC countries.

At the beginning of his speech, Minister Al-Mutairi conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, along with their wishes for the success of this meeting and for achieving its desired goals in serving the path of joint Gulf cooperation and the advancement of our countries and our youth.

He said that "the meeting represents an important milestone in the path of joint Gulf action to shape the future of Gulf youth," noting that its success requires commitment to transforming these bright visions to support Gulf youth into programs and initiatives that can be implemented and measured by their impact, that address their needs, and provide them with the opportunities they deserve. He added that "the GCC countries possess tremendous youth energies that represent a fundamental tributary to achieving sustainable development, and working to direct them in the right way requires everyone to intensify efforts to develop policies and programs that enhance their capabilities and open new horizons for growth and excellence."

Minister Al-Mutairi explained that empowering youth lies in providing them with opportunities to launch into



Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi chairs the 38th meeting of the Gulf Ministers of Youth and Sports. — KUNA photos

entrepreneurship, innovation and technology, given their creative energies and exceptional capabilities that qualify them to provide innovative solutions that enhance the development process and enable them to translate their ideas and ambitions into projects that contribute to building their countries and elevating the capabilities of our countries at regional and international levels.

He stated that instilling the values of volunteering and initiative among young people is a fundamental pillar in building a conscious and influential youth personality that is proud of its common Gulf identity and aware of its role in continuing the process of construction and development, indicating that the Gulf countries' journey in supporting youth has formed a beacon for ambitious youth who seek to excel on the global stage.

Minister Al-Mutairi stressed that the partnership between the government sector, the private sector, and civil society has become an urgent necessity to enhance efforts

to empower youth and develop their capabilities as a collective responsibility that requires the integration of roles and the unification of efforts in order to achieve common goals and provide them with the space to contribute to shaping the future of their countries.

He pointed out that sports have become an essential element in enhancing the spirit of competition and creativity among young people, stressing that the Gulf countries have proven their ability to consolidate their position in this field by hosting and organizing many major sporting events at regional and international levels. This success resulted from careful planning, investment in sports infrastructure, supporting youth energies, and enabling them to participate effectively in organization and competition.

Minister Al-Mutairi expressed the Gulf people's optimism for the future through hosting major sports events that provide greater opportunities for Gulf youth to innovate and excel, thereby consolidating the region's position as a global sports center. He congratulated our brothers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on winning the bid to host the AFC Asian Cup (2027) and the World Cup Finals (2034).

He expressed full confidence in the Kingdom's ability to organize these two global sporting events with the highest levels of excellence and creativity, reflecting its leading position and great potential in hosting major events. Minister Al-Mutairi extended his sincere thanks and gratitude to Qatar for its dedicated efforts and tireless work during its previous presidency of the Council, which effectively contributed to enhancing youth and sports cooperation. He praised the role of the General Secretariat of the Gulf Cooperation Council and all those responsible for organizing this meeting for their significant efforts.

For his part, the Secretary-General of the Council, Jassem Al-Budaiwi, said in his speech at the meeting that "youth are at the forefront of the concerns of the leaders of our Gulf countries due to their pivotal role in achieving sustainable development, as they are the driving force be-

hind building a prosperous future." Al-Budaiwi added that "based on this vision, the GCC countries have been keen to empower youth, enhance their participation in various sectors, and create a supportive environment for them to be creative, innovative, and pioneering, contributing to achieving their aspirations and ambitions. They have also included the needs of youth in their national strategies in a way that keeps pace with global changes and enhances optimal investment in human capital."

He explained that Gulf societies are young, which requires providing this group with promising opportunities to build the future of their countries. He expressed his pride in the GCC countries' remarkable progress in global innovation and youth development indices at both the Arab and international levels, embodying the success of the policies and strategies adopted by the GCC countries to enhance the status of youth.

He stressed the keenness of the GCC countries to continue this journey and enhance Gulf cooperation to launch qualitative initiatives that keep pace with the aspirations of youth and support their effective contributions to building a prosperous future for our countries and societies. He emphasized the importance of joint Gulf action and continuous coordination to enhance the youth journey with the support of ministries and youth organizations in the GCC countries.

Al-Budaiwi also asserted that the Cooperation Council will persist in its efforts to enhance the status of youth and achieve the visions of our national countries toward a brighter future, extending his sincere thanks and gratitude to Minister Al-Mutairi for the generous hosting and strenuous efforts in organizing this meeting. Al-Budaiwi praised the sports and youth achievements made by the Gulf countries recently, illustrating the interest and care of the leaders of the GCC countries for these two important sectors, and congratulated Kuwait on the occasion of the 64th anniversary of National Day and the 34th anniversary of Liberation Day. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Minister of Health Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi inaugurates the new medical clinic at Jazeera Airways Terminal 5 (T5). — KUNA

## MoH inaugurates medical clinic at Terminal 5

KUWAIT: Minister of Health Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi inaugurated the new medical clinic at Jazeera Airways Terminal 5 (T5) with the aim of enhancing the ministry's services provided to travelers by being present in all main passenger buildings at the airport. Assistant Undersecretary for Public Health Affairs at the Ministry Dr Munther Al-Hasawi said in a press statement on Monday that these clinics operate around the clock and provide integrated medical services for emergency cases, supported by qualified medical and nursing staff, as well as health inspectors.

Al-Hasawi stressed that these clinics play a pivotal role in implementing preventive measures through medical examinations for travelers coming from certain destinations, as needed, to prevent the spread of diseases in Kuwait. In addition, they provide health awareness and guidance to ensure safe travel. He added that the presence of clinics in various passenger buildings contributes to enhancing the comfort of travelers, which reflects the ministry's commitment to raising the quality of health services provided at the airport. This also reflects the joint cooperation between various government agencies to achieve health development goals and ensure the highest levels of safety and comfort for travelers.

The Minister of Health inspected the Kuwait Airport Health Center and medical clinics in the passenger buildings (T1 - T4 - T5) to assess their readiness and the level of health services provided to travelers while supporting health prevention efforts at airports. This is part of the framework to support the preventive health system, enhancing health security and rapid medical response. — KUNA

## Indian embassy gifts a collection of books to AUK

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: The Indian Embassy gifted a collection of English books on India to the American University of Kuwait (AUK) on Tuesday as a gesture to strengthen cultural cooperation between the embassy and AUK. "This is a small way of starting our cooperation with AUK," Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika said at a ceremony which was jointly organized by AUK and the Indian Embassy on the university premises. AUK President Dr Rawda Awwad, embassy and university officials were present.

The ambassador said the embassy is keen on working with universities in Kuwait to forge greater cultural cooperation between the young generations of both countries,

## PAAET remembers sacrifices of martyrs

KUWAIT: The Director General of the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), Dr Hassan Al-Fajjam, stressed on Tuesday the importance of remembering the sacrifices of martyrs and the contributions of ancestors in building a secure and united Kuwait. Al-Fajjam told KUNA on the sidelines of the authority's unified ceremony on the occasion of the national holidays that they are keen to celebrate this cherished memory in the hearts of Kuwaitis and to recall the history of ancestors in both peace and war, which established the foundation of present-day Kuwait.

He also emphasized the significance of honoring the martyrs of the brutal Iraqi invasion and recognizing their role in liberating the country. Al-Fajjam extended his highest congratulations to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, and the Kuwaiti people on the occasion of the national holidays, asking Allah Almighty to perpetuate the blessings of security, safety, stability, and prosperity for Kuwait and its citizens.

He emphasized the authority's commitment to continuing the process of building the country by promoting science and raising the country's profile in regional, international and global forums. The celebration, which was held in the flag square of the General Authority's office, included various segments performed

alluding to the strong historical past between India and Kuwait. "This is an effort to bring the young generation of India and Kuwait together. Because they may not be aware of the history of our countries as some of the older generation," he said. The collection of books is diverse in nature. "The books give a bird's eye view of different states of India, culture, philosophy, international relations, etc. I am sure that students of AUK will be interested to learn many diverse facts about India," he said.

Referring particularly to a book in the collection, "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World", written by India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Dr Swaika said: "It says about how Indian foreign policy has been shaped in today's uncertain geopolitical world and how India is navigating through it."

Talking about possible collaborative initiatives, the ambassador said there is a good scope of educational exchanges between AUK and Indian universities. He also proposed holding collaborative cultural events and film festivals on the AUK campus. Appreciating the initiative, Dr Awwad said, "It is a gift and no money can replace this. It is knowledge that always remains both priceless and timeless," she



Dr Rawda Awwad takes a look at the books on display at the India Corner at AUK library.

pointed out. "Libraries are repositories of knowledge. They provide us with an opportunity to raise important questions, answers to which we may not have. They provide us with moments of exploration, an opportunity for understanding ourselves and our place in the world," she said, adding that the university is looking forward to further cooperation with the Indian Embassy.



Director General of the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training Dr Hassan Al-Fajjam



Part of the exhibition.



Kuwaiti Army Brass Band participates in the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training's celebration.

by students from the schools of Jahra Governorate, along with an accompanying exhibition that featured a range of national activities and

events, with participation from approximately 37 entities from both inside and outside the Authority. — KUNA



## Local

# Uzbekistan leader's visit boosts economic, diplomatic relations

## Mirziyoyev praises efforts of Amir to support security and stability in Middle East



**KUWAIT:** President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his accompanying delegation left the country on Tuesday after an official visit to Kuwait during which he held official talks with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah was at the forefront of those who saw him off at the airport.

**KUWAIT:** A joint statement issued following the official visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to Kuwait stressed the importance of enhancing political dialogue, trade and economic relations, cultural and humanitarian exchanges, and cooperation between security and defense agencies and law enforcement agencies.

The following is the text of the statement: "In response to the invitation of the Amir, His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid an official visit to Kuwait from February 17 to 18, 2025. This visit was marked by a constructive and fraternal atmosphere, as the leaders agreed to strengthen cooperation between the two countries in all fields.

The President of Uzbekistan praised the efforts of His Highness the Amir to support security and stability in the Middle East. His Highness also commended the efforts of the President of Uzbekistan in establishing peace, security, good neighborliness, and supporting integration paths in the Central Asian region. The President of Uzbekistan offered his congratulations to Kuwait on the occasion of its assumption of the presidency of the Gulf Cooperation Council for this year.

The two sides praised the remarkable development in relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and the Central Asian countries. His Highness the Amir welcomed Uzbekistan's chairmanship of the consultative meetings of the heads of state and its contribution to strengthening regional communication and sustainable development. The two sides welcomed the upcoming second summit of the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Central Asian countries, to be held in the city of Samarkand.

The Kuwaiti side, in its capacity as the current chairman of the Gulf Cooperation Council, confirmed its full commitment to supporting and deepening cooperation between the Council and the Central Asian countries in various fields. The two sides carefully discussed the main di-



**Visiting President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the official delegation on Monday visited Kuwait's Al-Salam Palace Museum. The president toured the palace accompanied by the Advisor at the Amiri Diwan Mohammad Abdullah Abu Al-Hasan.**



mensions of Kuwaiti-Uzbek relations and identified the main paths for their future development. Based on the level of cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kuwait, the two sides reaffirmed the importance of strengthening political dialogue, trade and economic relations, cultural and humanitarian exchanges, and cooperation between security and defense agencies.

In an effort to consolidate and expand the partnership between the two countries, the two sides stressed the following points: (1) The two sides agreed to continue efforts to develop a comprehensive partnership in all areas of mutual benefit. They also emphasized the importance of holding annual political consultations at the level of senior officials on a rotating basis to discuss the agenda of bilateral relations and common interests, in addition to regional and global issues.

(2) Creating a commission on trade, economic, and technical cooperation to expand joint cooperation in various fields such as finance, trade, digital economy, investment, energy, construction, transport infrastructure, innovation, renewable energy, agriculture, labor force, culture, tourism and education. The two sides agreed to hold regular meetings between the relevant authorities of the

two countries. The Kuwaiti side expressed its intention to encourage the private sector in Kuwait.

(3) To explore investment opportunities in Uzbekistan through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, while the Uzbek side confirmed its readiness to attract Kuwaiti investors and provide the necessary support in accordance with the applicable legislation. The two sides reached an agreement to exchange technology and expertise in order to enhance crop and livestock productivity and improve food security through joint cooperation between the public and private sectors in the two countries.

(4) Air routes: The two countries will work on developing the tourism sector and facilitating the necessary procedures for this purpose. Both sides agreed to expand the scope of cooperation with the aim of improving the public.

(5) Medical and Health: They agreed to exchange ideas in the fields of healthcare, medicine, and pharmacy and to continue dialogue in the medical system.

(6) Defense, security agencies, and law enforcement agencies agreed to expand cooperation in the fields of personnel training, information and communications technology, artificial intelligence, and cy-

bersecurity. The two countries stressed the need to respect sovereignty and territorial integrity.

(7) The two sides expressed their solidarity in establishing and strengthening relations without interference in internal affairs and peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with the UN Charter and international law.

(8) The two sides expressed their intention to develop existing forms of cooperation and introduce new forms in the fields of culture, education, science, sports, tourism, and popular diplomacy with the aim of strengthening the bonds of friendship. They stressed the importance of enhancing cooperation in promoting the heritage and culture of both countries, their languages, and their achievements by organizing exhibitions and cultural and artistic events.

(9) The two sides highlighted the importance of expanding cooperation in higher education through strengthening partnerships between higher education institutions, exchanging faculty and students, expanding scholarship programs, and establishing joint educational programs between colleges and universities.

(10) Kuwait and Uzbekistan reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening secu-

urity, peace, and stability at regional and global levels and expressed their readiness to expand cooperation within the framework of the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Non-Aligned Movement, and other international organizations. The Uzbek side also welcomed the Kuwaiti initiative to transform the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) into a regional organization.

(11) The two sides expressed their satisfaction with the fruitful outcomes of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's official visit to Kuwait and stressed that this visit has formed a solid foundation for strengthening the comprehensive partnership between the two countries.

(12) They welcomed the signing of several agreements aimed at enhancing bilateral cooperation and strengthening relations between the two countries in various fields.

(13) President Shavkat Mirziyoyev thanked the Amir, His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, for the warm welcome and generous hospitality. He also congratulated His Highness on the upcoming national holidays in Kuwait, as Kuwait celebrates the sixty-fourth anniversary of national day and the thirty-fourth anniversary of liberation. — KUNA

## 'Young Ambassadors' program prepares youth for leadership

**KUWAIT:** Director of the NATO and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Center Mohammad Al-Arifan stressed the importance of transferring live, interactive and diplomatic experiences to young people to prepare them for future leadership. This was stated by Al-Arifan to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) during an event hosted by the center as part of the "Young Ambassadors" program, launched by the Office of the United Nations Coordinator, alongside the Canadian and British embassies in Kuwait, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the participation of several diplomatic bodies.

Al-Arifan noted that the center aims through this event to introduce participating students to NATO and its central regional role at both military and diplomatic levels, in addition to its role in exchanging expertise and training courses. He added that the event includes training for participants by simulating meetings of NATO members and the ambassadors of the countries they represent, through live training focused on interaction, exchange of views and gaining experience in dealing with political and military events and developments.

He explained that the center is hosting a representative from NATO headquarters from the Public Diplomacy Sector, Damien Arnaud, and NATO professional photographer Eric Longtang, to share their experience in the alliance and answer questions from program participants. For his part, NATO representative from the Public Diplomacy Sector, Damien Arnaud, emphasized in a similar statement to KUNA the importance of enhancing the diplomatic and political efficiency of youth by preparing them to exchange dialogue, opinions, and respect differing viewpoints.

He mentioned that their participation aims to introduce the methods of the alliance's work and its approach to various issues, alongside its goals, strategies and most significant achievements. Additionally, it aims to introduce its relationship with non-member states like Kuwait, which is a strategic ally outside NATO countries, having strengthened its pivotal partnership with the alliance by establishing the regional center for the Istanbul Peace Initiative in the country since 2017. — KUNA



**Kuwait Towers monument design in the city of Kerkouane. — KUNA photos**

## Tunisia's memorial initiative symbolizes depth of Kuwait ties

**TUNIS:** A delegation from the College of Architecture at Kuwait University departed for Tunisia to supervise the design of two memorial monuments, funded by the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), to be built in the capital and the other in the ancient city of Kerkouane. The project's supervisor at the fund, Dhahouk Al-Banwan, told KUNA that Tunisia took the initiative to donate two land sites to Kuwait for implementing memorials that symbolize the depth of the bilateral relations, adding that two Kuwaiti female students won the two monument projects.

In a statement to KUNA, Dr Mohammad Al-Ajmi, a professor in the Architecture Department at KU, commended these projects proposed by governmental and private bodies for their role in encouraging students to participate in important initiatives that contribute to enriching their academic careers. For her part, architecture student Jana Al-Abduljader, who won the design for the Tunis Capital Monument, told KUNA that this experience is an exceptional opportunity for her to enhance her vision in architectural design, noting that the monument takes the form of a sailboat inspired by the national anthems of Kuwait and Tunisia.



**Design of the sailboat monument.**

In turn, architecture student Noura Al-Babtain, who won the design for the monument in Kerkouane, said that the design reflects historical and cultural values through an artistic vision that combines heritage and modernity, adding that the design represents a bus station in the ancient city. The female students expressed their gratitude for the opportunity and pride in being chosen by the fund and the university to represent Kuwait through their designs.

The two students were accompanied by a delegation from the Kuwait Fund, including coordination and follow-up specialist Abdulrazzaq Al-Sanea, engineering consultant Rawya Al-Awadhi, and university professors, as they visited the relevant sites to conduct a field survey and take measurements for comparison. The project, funded by KFAED, is being implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy and Planning, the Municipality of Tunis, and the Municipality of Kerkouane. — KUNA



**Architecture students Noura Al-Babtain and Jana Al-Abduljader.**

## Cabinet hails Uzbek president's visit as catalyst for closer ties

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Cabinet on Tuesday praised the recent visit of Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev as instrumental in boosting bilateral relations, hailing the productive talks held with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The Uzbek leader's visit, which yielded four agreements across diverse fields, is expected to give impetus to bilateral relations, the Cabinet said during its weekly session presided over by Acting Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah, hoping these deals would keep ties with Tashkent on an upward trajectory.

With Kuwait's 64th National Day and the 34th anniversary of its Liberation Day fast approaching, the Cabinet took the opportunity to congratulate the nation and Kuwait's political leadership on the joyous occasion, wishing that Kuwait would remain firmly on the path towards development and prosperity.

Kuwait's Communication Minister Omar Al-Omar then addressed the Cabinet regarding his recent participation in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Action Summit held in the French capital Paris, where he was the representative of His Highness the Amir, stating that the event underlined the growing significance of the AI industry as a contributor to national development plans. The Cabinet then approved the activities of a higher committee formed ad hoc to investigate and resolve citizenship issues, which involve cases of individuals whose citizenship has been revoked in accordance with relevant laws. — KUNA



## Local

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In my view

Even if she did not  
say it, it's the truth?

By Dr Khalid Al-Saleh

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Did she say it, or was it a remark as she climbed the guillotine? She did not exceed forty years of age. Her remark is what made the imaginations of writers depict that famous sentence that became the title of many events: "O, freedom, how many crimes are committed in your name?" Madame Laurent (Madame Roland) was a French political activist who supported the French Revolution, which lasted from 1789 to 1799. During that revolution, she disagreed with some of the leaders and was punished in November 1793. Laurent was gone, but her sentence remained the title of many events that followed. Today, we need to repeat this sentence every day, but how much of the patriotism shouted today by those around us is just a slogan? There are thousands of guillotine makers living among us, and in the name of the homeland and social issues, they push reformers to the guillotine. I know some liberals who only talk about freedom and patriotism while fighting the constituents of our nation, its language, and its religion. Crimes are committed in the name of patriotism. I know some minorities who only talk about equality and justice, while some manage their affairs and extend their helping hands abroad to strangers to fight for justice and equality. How many crimes are committed in the name of justice and equality?

In Gaza, where the Western world does not see its people, countries that talk about democracy and human rights do not mind expelling the people of Gaza from their homeland. In Syria today, thousands of voices on social media platforms are crying out against the new regime - but in what name? In the name of freedom, equality and rejection of sectarianism. There are voices that have been silent on all kinds of destruction, tyranny, killings, and displacement for decades. A beautiful country in our Arab world has been lost. Unfortunately, some of its people have committed countless crimes, assassinations, destruction, smuggling and drug trafficking, all in the name of resistance. How many crimes have been committed in your name of resistance? The real enemies of our homelands are those who dress in values to kill values. We know them by the tone of their speeches and by their actions. May Allah protect us from their evil.

Turkish ambassador  
congratulates Kuwait

Tuba Nur Sonmez

We celebrate alongside with Kuwait's Amir His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah as well as the government and people of Kuwait, the founding of the modern Kuwaiti state. We also commemorate the 34th anniversary of Kuwait's liberation. These two days symbolize pivotal moments in Kuwait's history, highlighting the sacrifices and resilience of



the Kuwaiti people in defending their pride, freedom, and sovereignty. As the ambassador of Turkey, I am deeply honored to witness and be part of this auspicious celebration and commemoration. The saying, "A friend in need is a friend indeed" perfectly captures the long-standing

fraternal ties between Turkey and Kuwait. This bond has been proven time and again over more than six decades of diplomatic relations. The anniversary of Kuwait's liberation serves as a powerful reminder that the international community stands firmly by the rule of law. This was clearly demonstrated during the liberation of Kuwait, in which Turkey played a pivotal role in supporting Kuwait's freedom from the Iraqi occupation in 1991.

Turkey stood firmly on the side of international legitimacy, strongly endorsing United Nations resolutions that called for the withdrawal of Iraqi forces. From the very beginning of the crisis, Ankara took a decisive stance in support of Kuwait's sovereignty, actively participating in the imposition of international sanctions on the Iraqi regime of the time. In addition, Turkey took a bold economic step by shutting down the Iraqi oil pipeline that passed through its territory, further pressuring the Iraqi government.

During Operation Desert Storm, Turkey provided military facilitation to the allied forces through its bases and reinforced its troops along the Iraqi border, effectively diverting Iraqi military resources and preventing reinforcements from reaching Kuwait. Following Kuwait's liberation, Turkey continued its unwavering support for Kuwait across various domains, strengthening the bonds of brotherhood between the two nations. This commitment has laid the foundation for ongoing cooperation in security, stability, and development. I am also pleased to note that these fraternal ties were elevated to the level of strategic partnership during H.H. Amir Sheikh Meshal's visit to Turkey last year, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Turkey and Kuwait serve as anchors of stability in the region, and the growing cooperation between our countries benefits not only our respective nations but also the broader region. As Kuwait continues its path toward prosperity and stability, Turkey will remain a steadfast ally of Kuwait. Long live the State of Kuwait, and may the fraternal ties between Turkey and Kuwait continue to flourish!



President of the International Islamic University Malaysia, Prof Dr Osman Bakar, honors the General Coordinator of the Symposium and Supervisor of the Department of Studies and External Relations at the General Secretariat of Endowments, Reham Bokhwa.



Ambassador of Kuwait to Malaysia Rashid Mohammed Al-Saleh honors the Deputy Director General for Projects at the International Islamic Charitable Organization Abdulrahman Al-Mutawa.

Kuwait supports developmental  
endowment initiatives: Envoy  
Initiative aligns with Kuwait's vision to support sustainable development

KUALA LUMPUR: Kuwait's Ambassador to Malaysia, Rashid Al-Saleh, affirmed on Tuesday Kuwait's keenness to support developmental endowment initiatives, noting the importance of employing technology to serve communities and investing in digital assets to enhance innovation in the field of Islamic endowment. This statement was made by Al-Saleh during the symposium 'Digital Endowments: Their Legitimacy, Applications, and Impact on Sustainable Development,' sponsored by the General Secretariat of Kuwait Endowments and hosted by the International Islamic University in the capital, Kuala Lumpur.

"Based on Kuwait's pioneering role in supporting developmental and endowment initiatives and its belief in the importance of using technology to serve communities, we see digital assets as an unprecedented opportunity to enhance innovation in the field of endowment in light of the rapid digital transformations witnessed by the world," he said. He emphasized the importance of expanding the horizons of endowment work to include digital assets and motivating individuals and institutions to convert part of their digital properties into sustainable endowments that transcend geographical borders and benefit broad segments of societies around the world.

He pointed out that this initiative aligns with Kuwait's vision to support sustainable development, highlighting its role in promoting endowments as an effective tool for achieving social solidarity and contributing to creating a more sustainable future and digital justice for all. Al-Saleh praised the efforts made by the General Secretariat of Endowments and the fruitful cooperation with the International Islamic Charitable Organization of Kuwait for initiatives that serve endowment work.

For her part, the general coordinator of the symposium and supervisor of the Department of Studies and External Relations at the General Secretariat of Endowments of Kuwait, Reham Bokhwa, informed KUNA that the decision to choose Malaysia as the host for the symposium stemmed from its pioneering experiences in the field of endowments, whether cash or in-kind, along with its leadership in endowing sukuk and its advanced expertise in

financial technology. Bokhwa explained that the International Islamic University of Malaysia hosts an elite group of specialized scholars who have extensive experience in the fields of endowments and technology. She noted that the General Secretariat of Endowments had previously cooperated with the university in organizing and sponsoring earlier scientific symposia. She expressed hope that this symposium would provide a fruitful platform for exchanging knowledge and experiences while enhancing cooperation to build a sustainable endowment future. Additionally, she expressed her aspiration that the symposium would yield practical, applicable outcomes and recommendations. For his part, Deputy Director General for Projects at the Kuwait International Islamic Charitable Organization, Abdulrahman Al-Mutawa, stated similarly to KUNA that the organization pays great attention to the endowment sector, highlighting that its inception stemmed from the idea of endowment, making it an essential part of its development strategies.

Al-Mutawa explained that the idea of holding this symposium originated from the International Forum for Development Organizations based in Turkey, where the International Islamic Charitable Organization embraced, studied, and developed the idea before submitting it to the General Secretariat of Endowments, which undertook to sponsor and organize it. He expressed his aspiration that the symposium would yield practical recommendations that would enable charitable societies to develop their endowments and transform them into advanced digital models in line with artificial intelligence and the technological revolution. He stressed the importance of innovation in digital endowment as an effective tool for serving human communities and enhancing the sustainability of development projects. In his opening speech for the symposium, the President of the International Islamic University Malaysia, Dr Osman Bakar, stated that it "reflects the established Islamic values and the importance of integration between academic activities and endowment practices."

In this context, Bakar praised the efforts of the State of Kuwait, represented by the General Secretariat of Endow-

ments and the International Islamic Charitable Organization, in organizing and sponsoring this symposium, based on the spirit of unity and solidarity to serve society. He explained that digital endowment represents a modern trend in the field of endowments, as it provides innovative opportunities to contribute to charitable work and achieve social and humanitarian goals, stressing that this endowment model can extend its impact to include various parts of the world, especially in countries facing conflicts and humanitarian crises such as Palestine, Syria and Sudan.

He emphasized the importance of integration and harmony in the digital strategy to ensure the establishment of a sustainable digital endowment based on the principles of economic and social justice. He stated that digital endowment can be harnessed to serve a wide range of objectives, such as providing education, supporting healthcare, promoting community development, and economically empowering individuals, in addition to contributing to increased agricultural, industrial, and technical production, along with many other areas that enhance societies' ability to develop and improve the quality of life for individuals.

For his part, the CEO of Waqf Malaysia, Dr. Ridwan Bakar, reviewed the Malaysian experience in the field of endowment in his opening speech, pointing out the prominent role of non-governmental organizations in supporting and developing endowment projects. Bakar stated that digital endowment is a new concept that opens up broad horizons for contributing to charitable work and enhances the achievement of social and humanitarian goals through innovative tools that keep pace with technological developments. He addressed the challenges and risks associated with digital endowment, explaining that the most prominent of these are operating costs, information security, competitive awareness, and the variation in the market value of digital assets, noting that meeting these challenges requires relying on digital assets with high technical specifications, in addition to providing efficient management capable of effective operation, enhancing competitiveness, and ensuring that endowment services reach beneficiaries in the best possible way.—KUNA



Minister of Education Jalal Al-Tabtabaei inaugurates the 15th edition of the International Invention Exhibition in the Middle East. — KUNA photos

Innovation and Invention  
exhibition boosts Kuwait's  
scientific stature

KUWAIT: Director of the Innovation and Invention Support Department at the General Secretariat of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Ali Al-Mulla, affirmed that the Middle East International Invention Exhibition boosts Kuwait's position as a regional hub for scientific innovation. In a statement to KUNA, Al-Mulla stated that cooperation between GCC countries in research and development is a strategic step toward building a knowledge-based economy and fostering innovation.

He described the exhibition as a leading venue for innovators to present their inventions, connect with investors and explore future opportunities for commercialization. Al-Mulla also announced that the GCC Secretariat will present three awards as part of its recognition program aimed at encouraging creativity and supporting investors across the region. He emphasized that this initiative reflects the Gulf Cooperation Council's commitment to fostering research, empowering innovators, and creating an ecosystem where ideas evolve into potential projects.

He added that 12 participants in the exhibition are supported by the GCC Secretariat, with each member state nominating two inventors through a selection process managed by national patent offices or relevant innovation entities. A professor at

Kuwait University's College of Medicine, Dr Mohammad Al-Ansari introduced his invention, "VT Skin Regeneration Treatment," a breakthrough in burn treatment and dermatological care. Al-Ansari, who holds a patent for the treatment, explained that it also serves as an anti-aging solution and mitigates the side effects of light therapy.

The product is currently used in dermatology clinics and hospitals across 35 countries. Another inventor from the UAE, Ali Al-Loughani, presented his "Sustainable Hydroelectric Power Station," an innovative solution to global energy challenges. He explained that his system combines solar energy and hydrogen fuel cells to develop a hybrid energy system that enhances efficiency and reduces environmental impact, while optimally utilizing renewable energy sources.

Al-Loughani emphasized the project's adaptability across residential, commercial, and industrial sectors, aiming to optimize energy consumption and reduce emissions, aligning with global sustainability goals. From Oman, Bader Al-Muqbali introduced his "Remote-Controlled Electrical Ring Main Unit (RMU) Operator," designed to enhance safety for engineers by reducing risks associated with manual operations.—KUNA

NBK sponsors  
Sheikhan Al-Farsi  
School walkathon

KUWAIT: Demonstrating its commitment to supporting initiatives that promote awareness of physical activity and healthy values within the community, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) took part in the walkathon organized by Sheikhan Al-Farsi School. Through its participation in this walkathon, NBK aims to support schools involved in the Bankee program across various domains, including sports, education, and other impactful areas.

The initiative underscores the significance of the Bankee program and its crucial role in promoting financial literacy among students, while introducing them to fundamental economic concepts and practices. As part of fostering essential financial practices such as earning, spending, responsibility, and financial obligations, the students used Bankee's virtual currency, Bankoz, to purchase tickets for their parents. This initiative enabled parents to take part in the walkathon, further enhancing the practical application of financial skills in everyday life.

The walkathon featured a variety of recreational and cultural events, attracting a large number of students and parents. Participants emphasized the significance of such initiatives in raising awareness about the importance of public health and physical activity. The event not only encouraged students to adopt a healthy lifestyle but also fostered the spirit of cooperation

and reinforced positive values within the community. NBK supports events like this that reflect his commitment to social responsibility across all segments of society. We continuously strive to strengthen our role as an active partner in initiatives that contribute to the development of various sectors, including education, health, and sports." NBK remains committed to fostering productive cooperation with all state institutions to drive social development and enhance human resources, which are the cornerstone of growth and prosperity. This is particularly true in the field of education, where the bank is dedicated to providing comprehensive support for its advancement.

Participating parents expressed their gratitude for the crucial role played by NBK in supporting education and instilling positive values in the younger generations. They highlighted how the Bankee program has significantly enhanced their children's skills and behaviors, particularly in managing financial matters. They also noted the remarkable improvement in their children's financial literacy following the program's implementation in their schools.

NBK is committed to the importance of initiatives led by the private sector in collaboration with government entities, aiming to equip young people with the essential knowledge and skills. These initiatives are vital for the well-being and prosperity of both Kuwaiti individuals and society as a whole. The Bank was awarded the Bronze Award by Qorus in the Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) category for Bankee Program. This recognition highlights NBK's commitment to incorporating sustainability and ESG standards into its operations and initiatives.







Syrians return to Homs, 'capital of the revolution'

## Philippine Coast Guard slams 'dangerous' China maneuvers

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TAWILA: Displaced Sudanese women and children gather at a camp near the town of Tawila in North Darfur. — AFP photos



TAWILA: A Sudanese woman, accompanied by children, walks at a camp near the town of Tawila in North Darfur.

# Sudan paramilitaries kill over 200

## Three-day assault on White Nile state villages sends thousands fleeing their homes

**PORT SUDAN, Sudan:** Sudanese paramilitaries killed more than 200 people in a three-day assault south of Khartoum, a monitoring group said Tuesday, as the government said the real toll was more than double. The foreign ministry, loyal to the army in its war with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, said "433 people, including infant children" had been killed.

The RSF attack on the White Nile state villages of Al-Kadaris and Al-Khelwat — some 90 kilometers (55 miles) south of the capital — sent thousands fleeing their homes, eyewitnesses told AFP. Since Saturday, RSF fighters have engaged in "executions, kidnappings, enforced disappearances and property looting" targeting unarmed civilians, according to the Emergency Lawyers group, which documents rights abuses. The attack — which the lawyers called "genocide" — has left hundreds wounded or missing, the group said, with some residents shot at and drowned while trying to flee across the Nile River.

Since the war broke out in April 2023, both the army and the paramilitaries have been accused of war crimes. The RSF, which the United States determined last month had committed genocide, have been accused of carrying out summary executions, ethnic cleansing and systematic sexual violence. The war has killed tens of thousands, displaced more than 12 million and created what the International Rescue Committee has called the "biggest humanitarian crisis ever recorded".

Control over White Nile state, which extends from just south of Khartoum to the South Sudanese border, is currently divided by the warring parties. The army controls the south, including state capital Rabak, as well as two major cities and a key military base. The RSF holds the northern parts of the state bordering Khartoum, including the villages where the latest attacks took place. A medical source told AFP Monday they were not able to confirm a toll. "Some bodies are still lying in the street, and some were killed in their homes and no one can

reach them," they said, requesting anonymity for their safety. Fighting has intensified across Sudan in recent weeks as the army advances in an effort to reclaim full control of the capital from paramilitaries.

The United Nations children's agency said on Sunday children in Khartoum were trapped in "a living nightmare" between indiscriminate shooting, looting and forced displacement. UNICEF said it had also received alarming accounts of families being separated, with children reported missing, abducted and subjected to sexual violence.

The UN human rights office said Tuesday "entrenched impunity" had fuelled gross human rights violations across Sudan. "Continued and deliberate attacks" on civilians including "summary executions, sexual violence and other violations and abuses underscore the utter failure" by both sides to respect international humanitarian law, it said in a statement.

The UN also called for the expansion of the Interna-

tional Criminal Court's jurisdiction and an arms embargo — in place since 2004 — to cover all of Sudan instead of just the Darfur region. The vast western region, home to around a quarter of Sudan's population, has seen escalating violence in recent weeks as the RSF seeks to consolidate its hold there. The paramilitary group has intensified attacks on North Darfur state capital El-Fasher, the only major town in Darfur it does not control. The UN says thousands of families have fled from RSF attacks on villages surrounding El-Fasher.

Last Tuesday, it stormed the nearby Zamzam displacement camp, which has suffered a months-long famine because of an RSF siege. The famine has since taken hold in five areas of the country, according to a UN-backed assessment, and is expected to spread to five more including El-Fasher itself by May.

Across Sudan, eight million people are on the brink of starvation, while nearly 25 million — around half of the population — suffer dire food insecurity. — AFP

## Zionist companies display weapons at UAE defense fair

**ABU DHABI:** Zionist entity arms manufacturers on Monday showcased their weapons and other products at a defense fair in the United Arab Emirates, amid a fragile ceasefire in a 15-month war that has devastated the Gaza Strip. A Zionist entity pavilion stands among industry giants at the International Defense Exhibition (IDEX) and the Naval Defense and Maritime Security Exhibition (NAVDEX), held in the Gulf country's capital Abu Dhabi until Friday.

"We are very pleased to be here," said Boaz Levy, the president and CEO of IAI, ranked among the 100 largest arms companies in the world in 2023, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Last year, as civilian casualties mounted in Gaza, the French government banned Zionist entity companies

from setting up stands or exhibiting hardware at the EuroNaval defense trade fair. The decision was later thrown out by a Paris court.

According to SIPRI, the three Zionist entity manufacturers in the ranking, prominently featured at the Abu Dhabi show, recorded a record turnover of \$13.6 billion in 2023, driven by Zionist entity's offensive on Gaza. But for Levy, this has not stopped them from collaborating with allies in the region.

"Of course, some of our products are there (in Gaza), but we are a company that deals with technology and giving the end user the capabilities... required in the field, and that's what we are doing on a day-to-day basis," he said. The UAE normalized ties with Zionist entity in 2020 under the Abraham Accords brokered by the United States during the first Donald Trump administration. Since then, Zionist entity arm manufacturer EMTAN has attended every defense fair in Abu Dhabi. "We work a lot with the Abraham" countries, said sales manager Ron Pollak, whose firm makes small arms, rifles, pistols and submachine guns. "We really, really enjoy the hospitality and the friendship that we encounter here in the UAE." — AFP

## Florida man shoots two Zionists thinking they are Palestinians

**WASHINGTON:** A Florida man was arrested and charged with two counts of attempted murder after shooting at a vehicle with two men who he thought were Palestinians but turned out to be Zionist visitors, local authorities said. The website of Miami-Dade County Corrections says the suspect, 27-year-old Mordechai Brafman, was charged with two counts of attempted murder and booked on Sunday for the shooting on Saturday.

A police report shared by Miami Beach Police showed that Brafman, when interviewed by police, said

that while he was driving his truck in Miami Beach, he saw two people he thought were Palestinian. He said that he then stopped, shot at and killed them, according to police. However, the victims survived. One was shot in the shoulder and the other had a wounded forearm. They turned out to be Zionist visitors and not Palestinians, police said. Further complicating the incident, one of the injured men reportedly posted "death to the Arabs" in a message on social media after the shooting.

Human rights advocates say there has been a rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian hate in the United States. Other recent US incidents include the attempted drowning of a 3-year-old Palestinian American girl in Texas, the fatal stabbing of a 6-year-old Palestinian American boy in Illinois, the stabbing of a Palestinian American man in Texas, the beating of a Muslim man in New York, a violent mob attack on pro-Palestinian protesters in California and the shooting of three Palestinian American students in Vermont. — Agencies

## Palestinians to decide Gaza future: Qatar

**DOHA:** Qatar, a key mediator in the Gaza conflict, said on Tuesday that Palestinians — not outsiders — must decide the territory's future after the Zionist entity war.

Foreign ministry spokesman Majed Al-Ansari told a Doha news conference that the issue was "a Palestinian question", after Zionist entity insisted on removing Hamas and the United States proposed taking over the territory. "From our perspective, this is a Palestinian question on what happens post this conflict," said Ansari when asked about Zionist entity's stated objective to eliminate Hamas.

"It is a Palestinian question on who represents the Palestinians in an official capacity and also the political groups and parties in the political sphere," he said. Zionist entity foreign minister Gideon Saar said earlier Tuesday that negotiations for the next phase of the Gaza ceasefire, which Qatar helped broker, would begin this week. The second phase of the truce is meant to facilitate the release of all remaining hostages seized during Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack that sparked the war, and lead to a permanent end to the fighting. — AFP

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## International

# Syrians return to Homs, 'capital of the revolution'

## The siege of Homs lasted two years and killed around 2,200 people: Rights group

**HOMS, Syria:** Once dubbed the capital of the revolution against Bashar Al-Assad, Homs saw some of the fiercest fighting in Syria's civil war. Now, displaced people are returning to their neighborhoods, only to find them in ruins. It was in Homs that rebels first took up arms to fight Assad's crackdown on protests in 2011.

The military responded by besieging and bombarding rebel areas such as Baba Amr, where US journalist Marie Colvin and French journalist Remi Ochlik were killed in a bombing in 2012.

Since Assad's ouster, people have started returning to neighborhoods they fled following successive evacuation agreements that saw Assad take back control. "The house is burned down, there are no windows, no electricity," said Duaa Turki at her dilapidated home in Khaldiye neighborhood. "We removed the rubble, lay a carpet" and moved in, said the 30-year-old mother of four. "Despite the destruction, we're happy to be back. This is our neighborhood and our land." Her husband spends his days looking for a job, she said, while they hope humanitarian workers begin distributing aid to help the family survive.

The siege of Homs lasted two years and killed around 2,200 people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. During the siege, thousands of civilians and rebels were left with nothing to eat but dried foods and grass. In May 2014, under an evacuation deal negotiated with the former government, most of those trapped in the siege were evacuated, and two years later, Assad seized the last rebel district of Waer.

"We were besieged... without food or water, under air raids, and barrel bombings," before being evacuated to the rebel-held north, Turki said.

AFP journalists saw dozens of families returning to Homs from northern Syria, many of them tearful as they stepped out of the buses organized by local activists. Among them was Adnan Abu al-Ezz, 50,

whose son was wounded by shelling during the siege and who later died because soldiers at a checkpoint barred him from taking him to hospital. "They refused to let me pass, they were mocking me," he said with tears in his eyes. "I knew my house was nearly destroyed, but I came back to the precious soil of Homs," he said. While protests and fighting spread across Syria over the course of the 13-year war, Homs's story of rebellion holds profound symbolism for the demonstrators.

It was there that Abdel Basset Al-Sarout, a football goalkeeper in the national youth team, joined the protests and eventually took up arms. He became something of a folk hero to many before he joined an Islamist armed group and was eventually killed in fighting. In 2013, his story became the focus of a documentary by Syrian filmmaker Talal Derki named "The Return to Homs", which won international accolades. Homs returnee Abu al-Moatasim, who remembers Sarout, recounted being detained for joining a protest. When he saw security personnel approaching in a car, he prayed for "God to drop rocket on us so I die" before reaching the detention center, one of a network dotted around the country that were known for torture. His father bribed an officer in exchange for his release a few days later, he said.

In Baba Amr, for a time early in the war a bastion of the rebel Free Syrian Army, there was rubble everywhere. The army recaptured the district in March 2012, following a siege and an intense bombardment campaign. It was there that Colvin and Ochlik were killed in a bombing of an opposition press center.

In 2019, a US court found Assad's government culpable in Colvin's death, ordering a \$302.5 million judgment for what it called an "unconscionable" attack that targeted journalists.

Touring the building that housed the press center, Abdel Qader Al-Anjari, 40, said he was an activist helping foreign journalists at that time. "Here



**HOMS:** A girl holds an independence-era Syrian flag out of the window of a bus carrying displaced Syrians returning home after years of displacement in the northern Aleppo province, at the entrance of the central city of Homs on February 10, 2025. — AFP

we installed the first internet router to communicate with the outside world," he said. "Marie Colvin was martyred here, targeted by the regime because they did not want (anyone) to document what was happening," he said. He described her as a "friend" who defied the "regime blackout imposed on journalists" and others documenting the war. After leaving Homs,

Anjari himself became a rebel fighter, and years later took part in the offensive that ousted Assad on December 8, 2024. "Words cannot describe what I felt when I reached the outskirts of Homs," he said.

Now, he has decided to lay down his arms. "This phase does not call for fighters, it calls for people to build a state," he said. — AFP

## Relief as boats resume on DR Congo's war-torn Lake Kivu

**BUKAVU, DR Congo:** Traders and travelers packed their belongings and paid their fares early on Tuesday for the long boat journey across eastern DR Congo's Lake Kivu, the first sailing between the lake's two main ports for weeks after fighting disrupted the service.

Fighting between Rwanda-backed M23 fighters and government forces has raged for months in the towns, villages and cities on the DRC side of the lake, which straddles the border with Rwanda.

M23 has taken control of both provincial capitals

on the lake—Bukavu on the southern side fell on Sunday weeks after the fighters captured the city of Goma in the north—giving them total control of the lake that sits in between the cities. Passengers lined up at dawn in Bukavu, a city of more than a million people, to board the first boat to Goma, for a journey that takes between four and six hours.

"We are happy, this decision gives us some relief," Lueni Ndale, a worker at a local shipping company, told AFP. At 0640 GMT the three-storey "Emmanuel" boat, filled with around 100 passengers, left the port of Bukavu. "I had come to Bukavu to attend a wedding, but unfortunately the events took me by surprise, it was difficult to join my family," said Goma resident Justin Mutabasha who was travelling back to the city.

Bukavu depends in part on agricultural products grown in North Kivu and transported to the city from the port of Goma in the absence of passable

roads. Many of Tuesday's passengers were traders going to Goma to pick up food products and bring them back to resell in Bukavu.

"Life had become difficult for us, it was even difficult to have someone who could lend us money when we were unemployed, I am really happy," said baggage handler Amani Kalimira. Boat tickets cost between \$10 and \$27 -- an increase on previous prices because of an increase in fuel prices, Ndale said. M23 has in recent months seized swathes of territory in east Democratic Republic of Congo, having once again taken up arms in late 2021, in a country that has been plagued by decades of conflicts. The UN rights office in Geneva on Tuesday accused M23 of carrying out "summary executions" of children in Bukavu, warning that the situation in eastern DRC was "deteriorating sharply, resulting in serious human rights violations and abuses". — AFP



**GOMA:** Residents buy tickets to board a ferry traveling to Goma, in Bukavu on February 18, 2025. — AFP

## US, Russia hold talks in Saudi...

**Continued from Page 1**

involved at some point, and any solution must be acceptable to all parties. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he had postponed a visit to Saudi Arabia planned for Wednesday until next month, and that talks on how to end the war with Russia could not be held behind Ukraine's back.

The Ukrainian leader spoke after a nearly three-hour meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Turkish capital Ankara. "Ukraine, Europe in a broad sense — and this includes the European Union, Turkey, and the UK — should be involved in conversations and the development of the necessary security guarantees with America regarding the fate of our part of the world," Zelensky said. Any efforts to broker an end to the conflict should be "fair", he added.

Standing beside Zelensky, Erdogan offered Turkey as the "ideal host" for any talks on ending the conflict, recalling how the sides had met in Istanbul back in 2022, just weeks after Russia invaded. "Turkey will be an ideal host for the possible talks between Russia, Ukraine and America in the near future," he added, saying the Istanbul talks had been "an important reference point and the platform where the parties came closest to an agreement".

Even before the Riyadh talks took place, President Donald Trump's administration was accused by some European politicians of handing free concessions to Moscow last week by ruling out NATO membership for Ukraine and saying it was an illusion for Kyiv to believe it could win back the 20 percent of its territory now under Russian control.

As the meeting in the Saudi capital was underway, Russia hardened its demands. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told reporters in Moscow it was "not enough" for NATO not to admit Ukraine as a member. She said the alliance must go further by disavowing a promise it made at a summit in Bucharest in 2008 that Kyiv would join at a future, unspecified date. "Otherwise,

this problem will continue to poison the atmosphere on the European continent," she said. Zelensky has consistently demanded NATO membership as the only way to guarantee Kyiv's sovereignty and independence from its nuclear-armed neighbor. Ukraine agreed to give up its Soviet-era nuclear weapons in 1994 in exchange for assurances of independence and sovereignty within its existing borders from Russia, the US and Britain.

As European countries discuss the possibility of contributing peacekeepers to back any Ukraine peace deal, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also said in Riyadh that Moscow would not accept the deployment of NATO troops there, whatever flag they were operating under. "Of course, this is unacceptable to us," he said.

The comments by Lavrov and Zakharova signaled that Russia will keep pressing for further concessions in the negotiations. The opening encounter on Tuesday saw Lavrov and Kremlin foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov — two veterans who have spent a combined 34 years in their current roles — negotiate with three Trump administration officials in their first month on the job.

Both sides said no date had been set for a meeting between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, which both men say they want. But the fast-moving diplomacy, beginning with a Putin-Trump phone call only six days ago, has triggered alarm in Ukraine and European capitals that the two leaders could cut a quick deal that ignores their security interests, rewards Moscow for its invasion and leaves Putin free to threaten Ukraine or other countries in the future.

US State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said the two sides agreed to appoint "respective high-level teams to begin working on a path to ending the conflict in Ukraine as soon as possible in a way that is enduring, sustainable, and acceptable to all sides". Russian negotiator Ushakov told reporters after the talks: "It was a very serious conversation on all the questions we wanted to touch upon." Rubio said he had come away convinced that the Russian side was "willing to begin to engage in a serious process to determine how quickly and through what mechanism can an end be brought to this war". Teams would work on restoring the countries' respective diplomatic missions in Washington and Moscow, Rubio said. — Agencies

forces brought them some food yesterday but the army is still bulldozing and destroying the camp."

The Zionist raids have demolished dozens of houses and torn up large stretches of roadway as well as cutting off water and power, but the military has denied forcing residents to leave their homes. "People obviously have the possibility to move or go where they want, if they will. But if they don't, they're allowed to stay," Lieutenant Colonel Nadav Shoshani told reporters.

The operation began as the Zionist entity moved to banish the main UN Palestinian relief organization UNRWA from its headquarters in East Jerusalem and cut it off from any contact with Zionist officials. The ban, which took effect at the end of January, has hit UNRWA's work in the West Bank and Gaza, where it provides aid for millions of Palestinians in the refugee camps. — Reuters

## Delta passengers dangle from seats...

**Continued from Page 1**

made by Canada's Bombardier and powered by GE Aerospace engines, can seat up to 90 people. At least one of the two wings was no longer attached to the plane, video showed after the accident.

In one video posted on Snapchat, passenger Ashley Zook appeared to be dangling from her seat inside the plane, whose lights had gone out, strapped in place by her seatbelt. Moments later, the video cut to Zook walking beside the overturned plane as she was buffeted by the wind. "I was just in a plane crash, oh my god," she said breathlessly.

Skier Pete Koukov, another passenger, shared another video on Instagram, filming himself climbing out of the plane door as a flight attendant in an Endeavor Air uniform helped people get out. "Drop everything, drop everything, come on," the flight attendant urged, balanced on the underside of the wing.

Standing outside, Koukov cursed repeatedly as he walked away from the plane, as others behind him staggered out of the aircraft, some clutching belongings. "Being alive feels pretty cool today," he wrote in the video description. Koukov later told CNN that "we were upside down hanging like bats" and that "didn't know anything was the matter" until the plane hit the ground.

Another passenger John Nelson posted a video of the aftermath on Facebook, showing a fire engine spraying water on the plane that was lying belly-up on the snow-covered tarmac. He later told CNN

there was no indication of anything unusual before landing. "We hit the ground, and we were sideways, and then we were upside down," Nelson told the television network. "I was able to just unbuckle and sort of fall and push myself to the ground. And then some people were kind of hanging and needed some help being helped down, and others were able to get down on their own," he said.

Toronto Pearson Airport said earlier on Monday it was dealing with high winds and frigid temperatures as airlines attempted to catch up with missed flights after a weekend snowstorm dumped more than 22 cm of snow at the airport. The Delta plane touched down in Toronto at 2:13 pm after an 86-minute flight and came to rest near the intersection of runway 23 and runway 15, FlightRadar24 data showed. The reported weather conditions at time of the crash indicated a "gusting crosswind and blowing snow," the flight tracking website said.

Toronto Pearson Fire Chief Todd Aitken said late on Monday the runway was dry and there were no crosswind conditions, but several pilots Reuters spoke to who had seen videos of the incident pushed back against this comment. US aviation safety expert and pilot John Cox said there was an average crosswind of 19 knots from the right as it was landing, but he noted this was an average, and gusts would go up and down.

"It's gusty so they are constantly going to have to be making adjustments in the air speed, adjustments in the vertical profile and adjustments in the lateral profile," he said of the pilots, adding that "it's normal for what professional pilots do." Investigators would try to figure out why the right wing separated from the plane, Cox said. — Agencies

## Lebanon slams occupation as...

**Continued from Page 1**

In the south, many returned to destroyed or heavily damaged homes, farms and businesses after more than a year of fighting between the Zionist entity and Hezbollah that included two months of all-out war, which halted with the Nov 27 ceasefire. "The entire village has been reduced to rubble. It's a disaster zone," said Alaa al-Zein, back in Kfar Kila.

The Zionist entity had announced just before the pullout deadline that it would keep troops in "five strategic points" near the border, and on Tuesday its Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said they would withdraw "once Lebanon implements its side of the deal". The Zionist army had said it would remain on the five hilltops, overlooking swathes of both sides of the border, "temporarily" to "make sure there's no immediate threat".

Lebanon's army announced it had deployed, start-

ing Monday, in 11 southern border villages and other areas from which Zionist troops have pulled out. The official National News Agency said two people were found alive in Kfar Kila, three months after contact was lost. One was a Hezbollah fighter thought to have been killed. The agency also said that "enemy forces" set off a powerful explosion outside the village of Kfarshuba.

In a joint statement, UN envoy Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert and the UNIFIL peacekeeping force said that at "the end of the period set" for the Zionist entity's withdrawal and the Lebanese army's deployment, any further "delay in this process is not what we hoped would happen". They said it was a violation of a Security Council resolution that ended a 2006 Zionist-Hezbollah war.

In Lebanon, the cost of reconstruction is expected to reach more than \$10 billion, while more than 100,000 people remain displaced, according to the United Nations. Despite the devastation, returning resident Zein said his fellow villagers were adamant about going home. "The whole village is returning, we will set up tents and sit on the ground" if need be, he said. — AFP

## Palestinians flee West Bank camps...

**Continued from Page 1**

ceasefire was agreed in Gaza, has been on an unusually large scale.

According to figures from the Palestinian Authority, around 17,000 people have now left Jenin refugee camp, leaving the site almost completely deserted, while in Nur Shams 6,000 people, or about two thirds of the total, have left, with another 10,000 leaving from Tulkarem camp. "The ones who are left are trapped," said Nihad Al-Shawish, head of the Nur Shams camp services committee. "The Civil Defense, the Red Crescent and the Palestinian security



## International

# Philippine coast guard slams 'dangerous' China maneuvers

## PLAN helicopter flew within three meters of our surveillance flight: Manila

MANILA: The Philippine Coast Guard condemned "dangerous" maneuvers by a Chinese Navy helicopter on Tuesday that it said flew within three meters (10 feet) of a surveillance flight carrying a group of journalists over the contested Scarborough Shoal. An AFP photographer on the flight described seeing the helicopter tail the plane before drawing near the left wing, close enough to see personnel aboard filming them. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) helicopter had been "as close as three meters" to the fisheries bureau's Cessna, the coast guard said in a statement. "This reckless action posed a serious risk to the safety of the pilots and passengers."

The plane had been flying about 213 meters (700 feet) above the water on a mission to observe Chinese vessels around the shoal. The Scarborough Shoal—a triangular chain of reefs and rocks in such a manner. "Less than 10 feet. So that's very dangerous. It can definitely affect the stability of the aircraft," Tarriela told a briefing after the incident.

China claims the South China Sea almost in its entirety despite an international ruling in 2016 concluding this has no legal basis. Coast guard spokesman Commodore Jay Tarriela told reporters Tuesday's incident was the first time a PLAN helicopter had been used against a Philippine patrol plane in such a manner. "Less than 10 feet. So that's very dangerous. It can definitely affect the stability of the aircraft," Tarriela told a briefing after the incident.

Asked if the encounter marked an escalation, Tarriela said he believed China was taking a "calibrated approach" to such interactions, while reiterating President Ferdinand Marcos's declaration that the country's mutual defense treaty with the United

States could be invoked if a death were to result.

Tian Junli, spokesperson for China's Southern Theater Command and senior colonel of the Air Force, said the Philippine aircraft had "illegally intruded into Chinese airspace over Huangyan Island", using the Chinese name for the shoal. He said naval and air units were deployed "to track, monitor, warn, and expel the aircraft in accordance with the law and regulations", adding that the "actions of the Philippine side seriously violated China's sovereignty".

The Philippine government said later on Tuesday evening that it would file a formal diplomatic protest over the incident.

The incident comes less than a week after Australia rebuked Beijing for "unsafe" military conduct, accusing a Chinese fighter jet of releasing flares within 30 meters of a surveillance plane patrolling above the South China Sea. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said at the time the Australian plane had "deliberately intruded into the airspace around China's Xisha Islands", Beijing's name for the Paracel Islands, which Vietnam and Taiwan also claim.

The Scarborough Shoal has been the site of repeated confrontations as Manila has resupplied Filipino fishermen in the area. It lies 240 kilometers (150 miles) west of the Philippines' main island of Luzon and nearly 900 kilometers (560 miles) from Hainan, the nearest major Chinese land mass.

In December, the Philippines said the Chinese coast guard used water cannon and "sideswiped" a government fisheries department vessel. Manila released a video appearing to show a Chinese coast guard ship directing a torrent of water at the BRP Datu Pagbuaya.

world when they were detained in January. According to social media posts, they crossed into Iran from Armenia in December and were gradually making their way to Australia.

On Friday, Britain's Foreign Office said it was "providing consular assistance to two British nationals detained in Iran" and was in contact with Iranian authorities. Last week, Iran's official IRNA news agency said British ambassador Hugo Shorter met with the couple at the Kerman prosecutor's office.

The agency also published a photo of the meeting, with the couple's faces blurred. The British government advises against all travel to Iran. Several other Europeans are held in custody in Iran, which has conducted multiple prisoner exchanges with Western governments in recent years.

In January 2023, Iran announced the execution of British-Iranian dual citizen Alireza Akbari, prompting outrage among Western governments including Britain which called it "barbaric".

Akbari had been convicted of spying for Britain. In January, Iran released Italian journalist Cecilia Sala who was arrested the month before for "violating the law of the Islamic republic".

Her release came days before Italy freed Iranian national Mohammad Abedini, who was arrested in Milan in December at the behest of United States. The US had accused him of violating US sanctions and supplying sophisticated drone navigation technology to Iran's military. Iran had denied any link between Sala and Abedini's cases. French



TOKYO: International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi (right) speaks to Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya (not seen) during a meeting in Tokyo on February 18, 2025. — AFP

year, is 1.24 million cubic meters.

Japan plans to recycle roughly 75 percent of the removed soil—the portion found to have low radioactivity levels. If this material is confirmed safe, authorities want to use it for building road and railway embankments among other projects. The remaining soil will be disposed of outside the Fukushima region

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist government, which imposed direct rule in 2019, says that the multi-billion-dollar drive is bringing a "new era of peace" and "unprecedented development". New Delhi says it will boost trade and tourism, while also bolstering military access across the restive territory and to strategic border zones with Pakistan and China.

"Authorities say construction within 500 meters (yards) on either side of the highway around Srinagar is banned. But last year, authorities unveiled plans to build more than 20 "satellite townships" along the route, with drawings showing highrise developments it called a "Pearl in the Paradise". Kashmiri political parties are demanding to know who the housing is for, accusing Modi's government of wanting to change Kashmir's demographic makeup to create a Hindu majority—something the authorities do not comment on.

Goldie Osuri, who studies Indian policies in Kashmir at Britain's University of Warwick, uses a phrase often associated with Zionists' occupation of the West Bank to describe the situation: a "settler colonial land grab". "Kashmiri farmers... are being dispossessed of their land and livelihoods in the name of Indian development as 'a gift' for Kashmir," Osuri told AFP.



An aircraft identified by the Philippine Coast Guard as Chinese Navy helicopter (left) flies near the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) plane during an aerial reconnaissance flight at Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea on February 18, 2025. — AFP

Other footage apparently taken from the Philippine ship showed its crew shouting "Collision! Collision!" as the much larger Chinese vessel nears its right-hand side before crashing into it.

Manila and treaty ally Washington have deepened their defense cooperation since Marcos took office in 2022 and began pushing back against China's claims to the South China Sea. The Philippines

said in December it hoped to acquire the US Typhon missile system as part of a push to secure its maritime interests. The mid-range missile system, deployed in 2024 for annual joint military exercises, has a range of 480 kilometers (300 miles), although a longer-range version is in development. China has warned that acquiring the system risks triggering an "arms race". — AFP

## Iran charges jailed British couple with espionage

TEHRAN: Iran has charged British couple Craig and Lindsay Foreman with espionage, accusing them of collaborating with Western intelligence services, following their arrest last month, the judiciary said Tuesday.

Judiciary spokesman Asghar Jahangir said the pair were alleged to have entered Iran "posing as tourists" and gathered information before their arrest in the southeastern province of Kerman.

The judiciary's Mizan Online website quoted Kerman chief justice Ebrahim Hamidi as saying the couple's links to foreign intelligence services had been confirmed. "Additional investigations are still ongoing," Hamidi added.

Jahangir was quoted as saying they had been taken into custody by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on "espionage charges". The Foremans were accused of gathering "information from several provinces" and "cooperating with covert institutions linked to the intelligence services of hostile and Western countries", the spokesman said.

The BBC had reported that the couple were in their early 50s and on a motorbike trip around the

## UN nuclear chief to view tainted Fukushima soil

TOKYO: The UN nuclear watchdog chief will visit storage facilities for vast quantities of soil contaminated in the 2011 Fukushima disaster for the first time this week.

Japan's government must decide what to do with the soil—enough to fill 10 baseball stadiums—scrapped from the wider Fukushima region as part of efforts to remove harmful radiation. That is on top of the monster task of decommissioning the Fukushima Daiichi plant, which went into meltdown after being hit by a tsunami in the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl.

Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), will tour the plant on Wednesday. He will also be shown some of the 13 million cubic meters of soil and 300,000 cubic meters of ash from incinerated organic material. For comparison, the capacity of the Tokyo Dome arena, where pop superstar Taylor Swift performed last

## Infrastructure push engulfs Kashmir farmers' land

SRINAGAR: Farmers in Indian-administered Kashmir say a major government infrastructure drive is taking their deeply cherished land, fearing it spearheads a push to "Hinduise" the disputed Muslim-majority territory.

Musadiq Hussain said that police "destroyed" his rice crop when a large chunk of his smallholding was expropriated to make way for a four-lane, 60-kilometre (40-mile) highway around the key city of Srinagar. "It has affected my sense of who I am and my self-respect," said 41-year-old Hussain, adding he can no longer grow enough rice and vegetables to feed his family.

"I feel like my mind is shrinking, just like my land." Hussain's land was taken in 2018 but the process has intensified in recent years. The road, along with other highways and railways, is also swallowing swathes of orchards prized for their almonds, apples and other fruit in the Himalayan region, split between India and Pakistan since 1947.

### News in Brief

#### Suspected drug pusher dies in Spain

MADRID: A suspected drug trafficker died on Monday night off the southern coast of Spain while being chased by a police boat, the authorities said Tuesday, the latest such incident in the region. The chase began shortly before 10:00 pm when Spain's Civil Guard spotted a suspicious boat loaded with packages with four people on board some 20 nautical miles from the mouth of the Guadalquivir River near the city of Cadiz, a spokesman for the police force told AFP. One of the passengers, a 23-year-old Moroccan, fell into the water during the chase. — AFP

#### Indian court bails UK arms dealer

NEW DELHI: India's top court on Tuesday granted bail to a British arms dealer imprisoned for more than six years on charges of bribing officials over a multimillion-dollar helicopter deal. Christian Michel has been in jail since December 2018 after he was extradited from Dubai. The Supreme Court said that while the "investigation is still ongoing", Michel must be released on conditions laid down by a lower court. — AFP

#### Thai police bust \$187m scam gang

BANGKOK: Thai police have smashed a \$187 million international fraud ring, arresting 10 suspects including Chinese nationals, officers said Tuesday, in the kingdom's latest move against online scam centers. Thailand's Central Investigation Bureau arrested the suspects on charges of "fraud, cyberfraud and accomplice to money laundering" and is seeking 22 more—believed to include Thais, Chinese and Koreans. — AFP

#### South Korean actor released

SEOUL: South Korean actor Yoo Ah-in was released from prison Tuesday after receiving a suspended sentence for the illegal use of the anesthetic drug propofol, the Seoul High Court said. Yoo, whose real name is Uhm Hong-sik, was accused of using propofol on 181 occasions between 2020 and 2022. The drugs were administered at professional clinics, under the guise of having cosmetic procedures done. He was found guilty in September by a lower court and sentenced to one year in prison with a fine of two million won (\$1,400). — AFP



An undated handout picture shows Craig and Lindsay Foreman posing for a selfie photograph at an unknown location. — AFP

couple Cecile Kohler and Jacques Paris have been jailed since May 2022 on charges of espionage, a capital offence in Iran. In June, Iran released two Swedes, one of them a European Union diplomat, in exchange for a former official held in Sweden, in a swap mediated by Oman. In 2023, Oman also brokered the release of six European detainees in Iran, including Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele, who had been convicted of espionage and spent more than a year in custody. — AFP

ahead of a 2045 deadline. The central government has said it intends to confirm the disposal site this year, with Fukushima's regional governor reportedly urging it to come up with a plan quickly.

The IAEA published its final report on the recycling and disposal of the soil in September, saying that Japan's approach was consistent with UN safety standards.

The Fukushima plant on Japan's northeast coast was hit by a huge earthquake-triggered tsunami in March 2011 that killed 18,000 people. Although almost all areas of the Fukushima region have gradually been declared safe for residents, many evacuees have been reluctant to return because they are worried about persistent radiation or have fully resettled elsewhere. Stripping topsoil from the land was "very effective" to decontaminate areas close to waterways, said Olivier Evrard, research director at France's Atomic Energy Commission.

"However, it also has many disadvantages. It had an enormous cost, it generated a massive amount of waste and still poses fertility issues" for agriculture, said Evrard, an expert on the Fukushima decommissioning process. It stands in contrast to the decision to fence off a large area after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and more or less "leave it to wildlife", he said. — AFP



SRINAGAR: Kashmiri farmer Musadiq Hussain, speaks during an interview with AFP, at his paddy field near an under-construction highway at Budgam district in Jammu and Kashmir. — AFP

She called the project a bid to "Hinduise" Kashmir at the expense of Kashmiri Muslims. After New Delhi ended Kashmir's constitutionally enshrined partial autonomy in 2019, land laws also changed. That allowed all Indians to buy land in Kashmir for the first time. Thousands of acres of "state lands" were added

to registers to attract outside businesses.

"This is a land grab in plain sight," said Waheed Ur Rehman Para, a member of Kashmir's local assembly. Many say that has undermined previous land reforms that granted ownership or farming rights to hundreds of thousands of people. — AFP



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2025

# Zain KSA reports highest ever revenue of \$2.8 billion in 2024

## Al-Kharafi: Focus on operational efficiency, digital innovation and expansion of 5G services



Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO

- Focus on operational efficiency, digital innovation, new business verticals and expansion of 5G services driving growth
- Normalized net profit soared 354% to reach SAR 596 million (\$159 million) in 2024
- EBITDA growth of 12% to reach SAR 3.3 billion (\$886 million)
- Board recommends dividend distribution for third consecutive year

**RIYADH:** Zain Group's operation in Saudi Arabia (Zain KSA) released its financial results for 2024, reporting an all-time high revenue of SAR 10.4 billion (\$2.8 billion), compared to SAR 9.9 billion (\$2.6 billion) in 2023, reflecting a 5 percent growth.

The company reported net profit of SAR 596 million (\$159 million) for 2024 compared to SAR 1,267 million in 2023, which included one-off gain of SAR 1.1 billion from sale of 8,069 towers recognized during 2023. Adjusting this one-off gain, normalized net-profit grew 354 percent. EBITDA reached SAR 3.3 billion (\$886 million), a 12 percent growth YoY.

With the sustained upward financial and operational performance, Zain KSA's Board of Directors recommended to distribute cash dividends of SAR 0.5 per share (5 percent) to shareholders for 2024. The financial results highlight Zain KSA's opera-

tional strategy, focusing on providing the best user experience for individuals and businesses over a powerful 5G network – one of the most advanced in the region – positioning Zain KSA as the digital provider of choice in Saudi Arabia. Consumer and enterprise revenue segments continued to grow during the year, with sustained demand for 'Yaqoot' all-digital service and attaining a high ROI in adjacent businesses, specifically fintech through 'Tamam Finance.'

Commenting on the results, Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO & Zain Saudi Arabia Vice-Chairman, Bader Al-Kharafi, said, "This impressive growth in Zain KSA's constantly improving financial results for 2024 are attributed to the team's focus on operational efficiency, digital innovation, new business verticals and expansion of 5G services. This is supported by the provision of a great customer



Zain KSA HQ

mobile and data experience that is instrumental in growing its enterprise and individual customer base. Furthermore, the close cooperation and support of the resources of Zain Group is a vital element in Zain KSA's forward trajectory."

Al-Kharafi concluded, "The operation is playing its key role as a major contributor to Saudi Arabia's

ICT sector; a position it has earned through vast investments in 5G network expansion and multiple initiatives aimed at further developing Saudi nationals. Zain KSA's productive relationship with The Communications, Space & Technology Commission, emphasizes the company's dedication to supporting the targets of the Kingdom's Vision 2030."



KUWAIT: Aseel Suleiman Al-Munifi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance, chairs the committee of Heads and Directors of Tax Departments in the GCC.



GCC Heads and Directors of Tax Departments gather for a group photo during the 14th meeting of the committee in Kuwait.

## Kuwait hosts GCC tax meeting to review tax policies

By Passant Hisham

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait hosted the 14th meeting of the Committee of Heads and Directors of Tax Departments in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries on Tuesday, focusing on the latest developments in tax policies, particularly the application of selective tax and value-added tax (VAT) across the region. Discussions also explored strategies to enhance taxation frameworks in line with global best practices and further strengthen economic integration among member states.

Chaired by Aseel Suleiman Al-Munifi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance, the meeting saw the participation of senior tax officials from GCC countries, including Khaled Ali Al-Sunaidi, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic and Development Affairs at the GCC Secretariat. The gathering is part of ongoing efforts to achieve greater coordination in financial and tax policies, supporting economic growth and ensuring financial sustainability across the region.

Al-Munifi emphasized the importance of regional collaboration in shaping effective tax policies. "This

meeting represents an opportunity to reinforce cooperation, exchange expertise, and coordinate policies to achieve integration in the tax field," she said. She also highlighted Kuwait's role in leading discussions to address challenges and align tax strategies, stating, "Through Kuwait's presidency of this 14th meeting, we aim to work collectively – removing obstacles, exploring new opportunities, and advancing economic development across the region."

She also conveyed the greetings of Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Investment, Noura Suleiman Al-Fassam, who expressed confidence in the impact of this meet-

ing. "Bringing together leading tax officials from the GCC, this forum is an essential step toward building a tax system that balances economic and social objectives, ensures fairness in expenditure distribution, facilitates the business environment, and enhances coordination among tax authorities," she conveyed.

Al-Munifi reaffirmed Kuwait's commitment to fostering stronger tax cooperation within the GCC. "We remain dedicated to supporting joint GCC efforts that refine tax coordination mechanisms. We hope this meeting leads to meaningful outcomes that strengthen the region's tax system and promote economic unity," she concluded.

"We're driven by curiosity about the nature of the universe – that's also what causes us to be a maximally truth-seeking AI, even if that truth is sometimes at odds with what is politically correct."

Musk has promoted Grok 3 as "scary smart," with 10 times the computational resources of its predecessor that was released in August last year. The flagship product of his xAI company was trained on synthetic data and employs self-correction mechanisms that avoid errors – known as "hallucinations" – that plague some AI chatbots and lead them to process false or misleading data as fact.

"Grok 3 has very powerful reasoning capabilities, so in the tests that we've done thus far, Grok 3 is outperforming anything that's been released, that we're aware of, so that's a good sign," Musk said in a video call last week with the World Governments Summit in Dubai. Grok 3 will be made available first to Premium+ paid subscribers of X – formerly Twitter, which Musk acquired in 2022 – before rolling out to other users. The upgraded chatbot enters a crowded field with countries racing to introduce more sophisticated – and cost-effective – AI products.

Chinese startup DeepSeek shocked the global AI

industry last month with the launch of its low-cost, high-quality R1 chatbot – a direct challenge to US ambitions to lead the world in developing the technology. Grok 3 is also going up against OpenAI's chatbot, ChatGPT – pitting Musk against collaborator-turned-arch rival Sam Altman.

Musk and Altman were among the 11-person team that founded OpenAI in 2015. Created as a counterweight to Google's dominance in artificial intelligence, the project got its initial funding from Musk, who invested \$45 million to get it started.

Musk left three years later, and then in 2022 OpenAI's release of ChatGPT created a global technology sensation – one that did not feature Musk at its center and which made Altman a star.

Their relationship has become increasingly toxic and litigious ever since, with OpenAI's board last week rejecting a Musk-led offer to buy out the company for close to \$100 billion.

Trump has put technology front and center of his new administration. Tech billionaires featured prominently at his inauguration and he has announced a number of major AI infrastructure initiatives from the White House. Musk has become a

## Tesla begins hiring in India after Musk-Modi meet

**MUMBAI:** Electric vehicle maker Tesla has begun hiring in India, with the company of tycoon Elon Musk issuing advertisements days after US President Donald Trump's right-hand man met with India's premier.

Tesla has more than a dozen job listings on its website, for both the capital New Delhi and economic hub Mumbai, including for a store manager and service technicians.

The job listings were posted on the employment website LinkedIn on Monday. Tesla's India push comes after Musk met one-on-one with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington, raising questions over whether the world's richest man was meeting the Indian leader in an official or business capacity.

Musk has been seeking business opportunities in the world's most populous nation, with media reports last year suggesting it was scouting for factory and showroom locations. Musk has also sought to open his satellite internet service Starlink in India, with communications minister Jyotiraditya Scindia in November saying the company would be allowed to operate if it complies with "security" regulations. The potential launch of Starlink – with its network of low Earth orbit satellites capable of providing internet to remote and disconnected locations – in the world's most populous country has been accompanied by fierce policy debates and alleged national security concerns. Musk was due to visit India in 2024, following suggestions that he would announce major investment plans, but later cancelled the trip due to what he said were "very heavy Tesla obligations". While India's electric car market is small, it still represents a growth opportunity for Tesla which is battling increased Chinese competition and its first slump in annual EV sales.

India has long had steep import taxes for electric vehicles – Musk once complained they were among the "highest in the world" – which had prevented Tesla from making inroads in the absence of local manufacturing. But India last year cut import taxes on electric vehicles for global automakers that committed to invest \$500 million and start local production within three years. — AFP

## Musk launches 'scary smart' AI chatbot

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Elon Musk's artificial intelligence company unveiled on Monday the latest version of its chatbot, Grok 3, which the billionaire hopes will find traction in a highly competitive sector contested by the likes of ChatGPT and China's DeepSeek.

The launch comes as the world's richest man is deploying the enormous powers granted him by US President Donald Trump to restructure and dismantle federal agencies.

The unprecedented cost-cutting drive has raised conflict-of-interest questions, given that many of those agencies have regulatory oversight on elements of Musk's sprawling business empire. "Grok is to understand the universe," Musk said at the start of the Grok 3 launch presentation.



A tablet screen displays the logo of DeepSeek, a Chinese artificial intelligence company that develops open-source large language models, and the logo of OpenAI's artificial intelligence chatbot ChatGPT. — AFP

key figure in the administration, as one of Trump's closest advisers and the head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which has begun a radical overhaul of the US government bureaucracy. — AFP



## Business

# Burgan reports solid financial results for fiscal year 2024

## Bank maintains its stable financial outlook and robust market position

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank ("Burgan" or "the Bank") announced its financial results for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2024 (FY'24).

The Bank's good performance in FY'24 reflects a focus on executing its strategy, achieving growth, and delivering consistent profitable performance while maintaining robust asset quality and resilient capital levels. The Bank generated a net income of KD 46 million in FY'24 compared to KD 44 million reported the year before – marking a growth of 7 percent y-o-y. This performance was primarily driven by well-diversified and resilient revenue streams, risk-calibrated asset growth, and lower cost of credit.

The Bank reported total revenues of KD 229 million during FY'24, marking a 3 percent y-o-y increase. Higher revenues were driven by a net interest income of KD 157 million (+17 percent y-o-y) – supported by higher net interest margins (NIMs) of 2.3 percent (+20bps y-o-y). NIMs were higher due to noticeable business growth across franchises and higher margins. The Bank's Credit Costs (net of recoveries) were significantly lower at 14bps for the year. Such low credit costs indicate the inherent strength of the Bank's credit portfolio.

Meanwhile, hyperinflation (IAS 29) related losses were significantly lower in 2024 at KD 24 million, compared to KD 32 million reported the year before – reflecting an improvement of 25 percent y-o-y, which was largely driven by the improved inflationary situation in Turkey along with other key macro parameters.

Burgan continued on its growth trajectory with its asset base reaching KD 8.2 billion (+10 percent y-o-y). The Bank's loans and advances were up by 6 percent y-o-y to reach KD 4.5 billion, mainly supported by Kuwait's loan portfolio, which was up by 7 percent y-o-y. Total customer deposits were up by 10 percent to reach KD 4.9 billion. It is worth highlighting that despite the elevated interest rates and highly competitive landscape, the Bank leveraged its strong franchise to attract new CASA deposits, increasing volumes by 5 percent y-o-y.

Burgan maintained its asset quality during FY'24 with a Non-Performing Loan (NPL) ratio of 1.8 percent (an improvement of 20bps y-o-y) and a Provision Coverage of 162 percent. Moreover, the Bank's capital metrics remained solid with a Common Equity Tier 1 (CET1) ratio of 12.6 percent, and a Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 18.6 percent, compared to the regulatory minimum ratios of 10.5 percent and 14.0 percent respectively. Additionally, as of Q4'24, the Group continues to maintain adequate liquidity levels with a Liquid Coverage Ratio (LCR) and a Net Stable Funding Ratio (NSFR) of 153 percent and 116 percent respectively, which is well above the minimum regulatory requirements of 100 percent.

In light of the 2024 performance, Burgan's Board of Directors recommended a cash dividend of 6 fils per share and a bonus share of 5 percent for the full year ending 31 December 2024, subject to shareholders' approval at the Annual General Meeting.

Commenting on the Bank's financial results, Burgan's Chairman, Sheikh Abdullah Nasser Al-Sabah, said: "On behalf of Burgan's Board of Directors and Executive Management, I am delighted to announce our collective success for another year: delivering on our promise to our shareholders, customers, employees, and the community to deliver long-term value and banking excellence. Burgan's continued growth is a testament to the soundness of the strategic goals that guide its institutional operations and the future-focused vision shaping its performance. Today, more than ever, we remain focused on cementing ourselves amongst the most modern and progressive banks in Kuwait."

The Chairman noted that Burgan's steady growth and unwavering excellence in delivering top-tier banking services are due to the intricate balance that the Bank preserves between its commitment to market expansion, digital advancement, infrastructure fortification, continuous operational upgrading, dedicated human capital development, prudent risk management, and vigilant cybersecurity.

Burgan Bank's healthy financial performance and solid credit standing were further endorsed by the evaluations of leading rating agencies. In 2024, Capital Intelligence, Fitch, Moody's, and S&P affirmed Burgan's long-term issuer default ratings at A+, A, Baa1, and BBB+ respectively with a stable outlook, reflecting last year's ratings. Additionally, Fitch Ratings upgraded Burgan Bank Turkey's Long-Term Foreign-Currency (LTFC) Issuer Default Rating (IDR) to 'BB-' from 'B' and Long-Term Local-Currency (LTLC) IDR to 'BB-' from 'B+', with a stable outlook.

In yet another affirmation of the Bank's healthy credit profile, Burgan successfully concluded its first-ever "KD-denominated" perpetual bond issuance in the local market with an issue size of KD 150 million. The issuance was oversubscribed, confirming strong investor interest and confidence in Burgan's credit profile. This issuance was part of the wider funding strategy of the Bank, which included the



Sheikh Abdullah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Chairman

Tony Daher, Group Chief Executive Officer

issuance of KD 150 million worth of new AT1 bonds and subsequent redemption of legacy \$500 million AT1 bonds issued in FY'19 on its first-call date.

Further attesting to the Bank's position as a trusted financial partner, Burgan was voted the Best Domestic Bank in Kuwait in the 2024 Euromoney Trade Finance Survey. Additionally, the Bank ranked 35th on The Banker magazine's list of Top 100 Arab Banks in 2024 and 89th on Forbes Middle East's Top 100 Listed Companies in 2024.

Burgan's Chairman concluded his statement by confirming that, "In adherence to our philosophy, 'Driven By You', and our unwavering commitment to the highest environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards, our achievements throughout FY'24 were guided and fueled by our ultimate goal to deliver an outstanding banking experience that responds to our customers' evolving needs whilst contributing to our valuable community's holistic development. As we review a year in achievements, we continue to build a resilient foundation for greater future success."

### Advancing banking for Burgan customers and community

With customers being at the heart of every business consideration, innovative offerings, or operational upgrades, 2024 witnessed the introduction and enhancement of numerous products and services that serve customers' needs across all segments at Burgan.

"As a Bank that is 'Driven By You', Burgan's success over the past year was inspired by our customers' growing aspirations and the market's ambitious growth," said Tony Daher, Group Chief Executive Officer at Burgan Bank. "Today the market and our customer base include wider circles and more segments with diverse financial needs and growth goals. Upholding our promise to deliver an unmatched banking experience, our teams work tirelessly to understand our varying customers' evolving needs and combine them with the latest technologies and global trends."

Among the areas where Burgan Bank made notable advancements is Private Banking and Wealth Management, which was reintroduced to the market with a new brand and identity, complemented by a suite of new and enhanced products and services, under a motto of "Building Trust and Growing Wealth". To guarantee that Burgan's High-Net-Worth-Individuals (HNWI) and Ultra-High-Net-Worth-Individuals (UHNWI) receive a best-in-class service, the Bank acquired a range of new investment licenses from the Capital Markets Authority (CMA), including custodian, investment advisory, portfolio management, and unregistered securities brokerage licenses, to fulfill clients' investment and wealth management ambitions in line with their individual portfolios, liquidity requirements, and capacities for risk.

Besides broadening the range of products and services, Burgan Bank expanded

the network of branches that serve Private Banking and Wealth Management clients across Kuwait, which now includes Al-Adailiya and Al-Shaheed branches. In addition to the branch expansion serving this segment of clients, Burgan also inaugurated a new branch that serves corporate customers in Sabhan, as well as another branch in Da'iya that serves retail customers.

The Bank's efforts to elevate its customers' experience also included every segment from kids to youth and adults. Burgan introduced notable enhancements to the awal and Youth accounts, in addition to launching the most exclusive invitations-only Visa credit card, targeted at the Bank's UHNW clients. Under the umbrella of its fruitful partnership with Visa, Burgan Bank also relaunched its co-branded Qatar Airways credit and prepaid cards, offering cardholders exclusive benefits and rewards.

### Reimagining banking with state-of-the-art digital solutions

In adherence to the Bank's strategic goal for digitally transforming and technologically elevating its operations and offerings, as well as its active contribution to Kuwait's Vision 2035 goal for digital transformation, Burgan launched several digital banking solutions that aim to enhance all customers' banking journey. Furthermore, to support its steadfast digital transformation strategy, Burgan signed an agreement with market-leading Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) to upgrade its core banking system by implementing the TCS BaNCs suite of products. The deal confirmed the Bank's commitment to fortifying its digital infrastructure for a seamless transition from traditional to digital banking.

Additionally, Burgan was among Kuwait's earliest adopters of the GCC real-time cross-border payments system AFAQ. Shortly after plugging into AFAQ, the Bank announced the launch of the instant payment service WAMD, developed by KNET, which customers can conveniently utilize using the Burgan Mobile application.

Furthermore, the Bank's Turkish digital banking brand ON achieved a significant milestone in 2024 by reaching more than 1 million customers within only three years of its launch. ON, with its next-generation banking approach and renewed brand identity of "comfortable banking", delivered remarkable growth in the highly competitive Turkish banking sector across all critical metrics. According to the Remote Acquisition Market Share Report published monthly by the Banks Association of Turkey (TBB), ON's remote acquisition market share increased by 96.5 percent y-o-y to reach 5.7 percent in 2024.

### Enhancing offerings to attain market leadership

In line with its strategy of asset reallocation and building new revenue streams, Burgan Bank signed a Share Purchase Agreement (SPA) to acquire United Gulf Bank B.S.C (UGB) – a wholesale bank li-

censed and headquartered in Bahrain – from United Gulf Holding Company B.S.C. (UGH) for \$190 million after receiving all regulatory approvals (in Kuwait and Bahrain). This transaction, which is expected to be completed within the first quarter of 2025, provides Burgan with an opportunity to tap into key high-growth sectors of Islamic financing and investments while creating significant cross-selling and up-selling opportunities.

The Bank also underscored its dedication to contributing to Kuwait's economic growth and development with the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Korea Finance for Construction (KFNCO), making Burgan the sole representing bank in Kuwait for the South Korean co-op institution, as part of the latter's strategic expansion across the Middle East.

### Nurturing the people who nurture the business

Guided by its strategic mission to be an employer of choice, Burgan Bank upheld its promise throughout 2024 to contribute actively to hiring and developing Kuwait's aspiring national talents and promising professional calibers. "None of our achievements would be possible without our exceptional Burgan talents who nurture leading financial solutions from idea to product," said Daher. "An important pillar of our institutional success is owed to the inspiring environment of continuous learning we foster at Burgan, where learning opportunities are available to all employees at their fingertips, allowing them to develop and grow at their pace of choice and along their fields of interest."

As a certified Great Place to Work, Burgan Bank upheld its commitment to human capital development throughout 2024, which is evident in its numerous L&D achievements. This includes the graduation of the second cohort from Burgan's flagship talent development program, Ro'ya, which aims to prepare high-potential calibers for leadership roles as middle, senior, and executive managers. The Bank also celebrated a new group of talents who were carefully selected to enroll in the third round of Ro'ya. Additionally, Burgan introduced the Ro'ya Mentorship Module for Visionary Leaders, designed specifically to prepare emerging senior leaders on the personal and professional fronts with the guidance of Burgan's senior executives.

Other talent development programs that enabled Burgan's finest talents to unlock their full potential include Entilaqah, designed to equip fresh graduates for the professional market; the Investment and Wealth Management Academy, designed in partnership with Fitch Learning to support the Bank's expanding Private Banking and Wealth Management services; and Burgan Cares, which supports employees in their pursuit of earning their Bachelor's and Master of Business Administration (MBA) degrees. In addition to the numerous programs that Burgan's dedicated teams develop to support aspiring talents' personal and professional growth, the Bank also collaborated with leading educational institutions to guarantee that its staff receive best-in-class L&D opportunities. Among the Bank's most notable partnerships on the talent development front is with the Kuwait Institute for Banking Studies (KIBS), which saw the graduation of many Burgan talents from its leading programs, such as the Kuwait Graduate Development Program (KGDP).

Stemming from its firm belief that learning is an expansive experience that takes on many forms, Burgan Bank developed its iconic Burgan Talks into a podcast series, which features some of the Bank's leadership figures as well as market experts who share their valuable experiences in life as well as in the industry. Furthermore, the Bank expanded its efforts to develop national calibers to include budding talents who have recently graduated or are yet to graduate. This includes the Empower Her summer internship program, which hosted 18 aspiring young women, introducing them to the professional world of banking through some of Burgan's most inspiring female figures. It also includes Burgan Lab Academy, a forward-looking program designed to prepare young, aspiring fresh graduates for a career in tech development, which is now integral to the growth and expansion of banking services worldwide.

Beyond Burgan's expansive L&D efforts, the Bank has also exhibited its commitment to developing an inviting, comfortable, and holistically nurturing work environment through various programs that address employees' diverse needs. Among the Bank's efforts on this front is growing all staff's paid-leave credit to include their birthdays, allowing them to achieve a healthier work-life balance that accounts for their personal priorities as much as work responsibilities.

In addition, the Bank reaffirmed its commitment to supporting employees in adopting a healthier lifestyle and receiving proper, timely healthcare through hosting the month-long Rock Your Habits fitness and nutrition program and launching a dedicated on-site clinic at its head office.

On the mental wellbeing and psycho-

logical reinforcement front, Burgan Bank unveiled its Lean In Circle for Women Empowerment program, which creates a support network for female employees to express and share the unique challenges they face in their professional careers and receive expert mentorship to overcome them. Furthermore, the Bank underscored the importance of fostering an environment of acknowledgment and appreciation by launching its Burgan Beacon (Manarat Burgan) program, which centers on appreciating and rewarding all employees who go the extra mile in their areas of work.

### A force of positive change

In line with its commitment to the highest ESG standards in banking, Burgan Bank remains steadfast in its mission to leave a positive print across its community through sharing knowledge and upholding its promise of developing a socially and environmentally conscious business.

A hallmark of Burgan Bank's community development success continues to be its rigorous efforts to spread valuable market knowledge and insights through the events it sponsors and hosts. Among the most notable events that Burgan took part in during 2024 was the Empower Her seminar to empower women in leadership positions across society. The event gathered a distinguished audience of around 200 participants, including prominent figures in Kuwaiti banking and various sectors, to share valuable market insights and experiences and expand the network of impactful female industry leaders.

Another event of equal importance that Burgan Bank hosted in collaboration with Kameco Invest was the "Investment Conference 2024", which adopted the theme "Global Perspectives: Uncovering Challenges and Opportunities Ahead". The conference discussed crucial topics spanning the global economy, geopolitics, and various asset classes, with the attendance of more than 600 delegates including thought leaders and industry experts, in addition to institutional and high-net-worth investors from Kuwait and the region attended the conference. In addition to its continuous efforts to advance the market through sharing knowledge and market insights, Burgan Bank also highlighted its committed adherence to the ESG metrics for being an environmentally conscious business by minimizing its carbon footprint across many of its operations. These efforts include the Bank's adoption of the DHL GoGreen Plus initiative, which aims to reduce shipment-related carbon emissions by supporting DHL's adoption of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) and choosing the DHL Express greener courier services across its value chain.

The Bank also resumed its efforts to turn its headquarters into a symbol of environmental consciousness by adopting numerous energy-saving and waste-reduction protocols and solutions. Attesting to Burgan's commitment to sustainability, the Bank was awarded the prestigious Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design- LEED v4.1 O+M: EB (Operations and Maintenance - Existing Buildings) Gold Certification by the US Green Building Council (USGBC) for operations and maintenance at its head office building in Kuwait City.

### National talents making international waves

Adding to the recognition received for its efforts in sustainability, Burgan Bank was widely celebrated for its unwavering commitment to excellence across all facets of its operations. This includes receiving the coveted "Quality Recognition Award" for the year 2023 from JP Morgan Chase NA in recognition of its consistently high-quality performance. The award acknowledges the advanced standards maintained by the Bank across the complete range of clients' US dollar funds transfer operations by the management and staff.

In addition, the Bank received three accolades at the Global Private Banker MEA Awards 2024: the "Best Private Bank for Credit" award, the "Best Private Bank for Fixed Income Securities" award, and the "Best Private Bank for High-Net-Worth (HNW) Clients" award – attesting to the Bank's unwavering commitment to excellence and developing competitive products and services, and to its mission to lead with innovation and deliver a differentiated customer experience.

Recognizing the Bank's unmatched commitment to developing its human capital and Kuwait's top calibers, Burgan received the prestigious Brandon Hall Group Human Capital Management (HCM) Gold Award of Excellence in the "Learning and Development" area under the "Best Use of Social/Collaborative Learning" category.

It serves to note that the consolidated financials for Burgan include the results of the Group's operations in Kuwait, as well as its share of results from its subsidiaries, namely: Burgan Bank Turkey, Gulf Bank Algeria, and Tunis International Bank. Through this regional reach, Burgan Bank has one of the largest regional branch networks across Kuwait, Turkey, Algeria, and Tunisia, in addition to a representative office in the United Arab Emirates.





## Business

# Gulf Bank transforming street ads into reusable bags for second year in a row

## Bank advances its commitment to environmental sustainability

**KUWAIT:** As part of its ongoing commitment to environmental sustainability, Gulf Bank is continuing its initiative to repurpose its street advertisements into reusable bags for the second consecutive year, in partnership with Ibrah apparel and textile factory.

Gulf Bank's Chief Marketing Officer Najla Aleisa stated: "Last year, we successfully transformed over 2,300 square meters of our street advertisements into reusable bags. This year, we aim to increase that number to nearly 3,000 square meters, further reinforcing our long-term commitment to sustainability."

She added: "This initiative builds on the project we launched in 2023 in collaboration with several cooperative societies across Kuwait, where we distributed around 100,000 reusable bags. It reflects our dedication to protecting the environment and encouraging a cultural shift toward sustainable alternatives." Aleisa further emphasized Gulf Bank's commitment to supporting young Kuwaiti entrepreneurs, stating: "We partnered with Ibrah for this initiative due to its strong commitment to environmental sustainability and its dedication to supporting underprivileged families— values that closely



align with Gulf Bank's mission."

Reaffirming its commitment to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles, Gulf Bank has introduced its 2030 Sustainability Strategy. This includes the establishment of a Sustainable Finance Framework and a Sustainability Risk Management Framework, along with an internal policy to document its sustainability commitments

and define clear criteria for evaluating eco-friendly initiatives.

Shahad Al-Sabeeh, CEO and Founder of Ibrah, stated: "We are proud to partner with Gulf Bank on this ambitious initiative, repurposing street advertisements into unique products that encourage both customers and the public to use them, while meeting with their tastes and preferences."



**Najla Aleisa:** We aim to convert 3,000 square meters of our advertisements this year and remain committed to the initiative in the long run.

**Shahad Al-Sabeeh:** We are proud to partner with Gulf Bank to create exceptional products that encourage the public to use them, while meeting their tastes and preferences.

Gulf Bank aims to be Kuwait's leading bank, fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace to deliver exceptional customer service while contributing sustainably to the community. Through its extensive branch network and innovative digital services, the Bank empowers customers to conduct banking transactions conveniently and efficiently, ensuring a seamless experience.

In alignment with Kuwait Vision 2035, "New Kuwait," and its commitment to fostering collaborative partnerships, Gulf Bank is dedicated to driving robust sustainability initiatives across environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions. The Bank is committed to implementing strategically selected and diverse sustainability programs both internally and externally.

## Chinese tech leaders hail private sector 'confidence'

**BEIJING:** Chinese tech tycoons lined up to express confidence in the country's embattled private sector following rare talks with President Xi Jinping this week, state media reported Tuesday.

Xi held a meeting with business luminaries including Alibaba's Jack Ma in Beijing on Monday, with state news agency Xinhua reporting the Chinese leader as saying the problems facing private firms were "surmountable". The remarks signaled a potential about-face from Xi, who has strengthened the role of state enterprises in the world's second-largest economy and cracked down on "disorderly" expansion in several industries in recent years.

China is battling slowing economic growth amid a real-estate crisis, persistently low consumption and high youth unemployment.

State media broadcast a procession of business luminaries at the meeting proclaiming their faith in the future of the private economy. "I believe the private sector now has the greatest confidence," Wang Chuanfu, head of electric-vehicle giant BYD, said, according to state broadcaster CCTV. "As long as we have faith, we can run our businesses better and better," he said.

Lei Jun, CEO of consumer tech titan Xiaomi, said the talks "multiplied confidence for us private entrepreneurs", CCTV reported. Beijing has rolled out a slew of policies to create jobs and get people to spend more in order to boost growth, but they have had a limited effect so far.

Xi portrayed private sector challenges as a result of reform and industrial transformation but said they were temporary and "surmountable rather than unsolvable". He urged attendees on Monday to "unify thought and action" around the ruling Communist Party's economic policies. "See the prospects, see the light, and see the future". Ma, the co-founder of Alibaba and one of China's most recognizable businessmen, was pictured applauding Xi as he entered the venue in Beijing. State media did not report any remarks by Ma. State media footage showed that the participants also included Tencent chief Pony Ma and Liang Wenfeng, founder of DeepSeek, the artificial intelligence firm whose chatbot has caused a global stir in recent weeks. — AFP

## Japan pledges to cut emissions 60% by 2030

**TOKYO:** Japan Tuesday pledged to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 60 percent in the next decade from 2013 levels but climate campaigners said the target fell short of what was needed under the Paris Agreement to limit global warming.

Under the Paris accord, each country is supposed to provide a headline figure to the United Nations for cutting heat-trapping emissions by 2035, and a detailed blueprint for how to achieve this.

Japan is heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels as the world's fifth largest single-country emitter of carbon dioxide after China, the United States, India and Russia. On Tuesday Tokyo's environment ministry said the country would slash emissions 60 percent by the 2035 fiscal year.

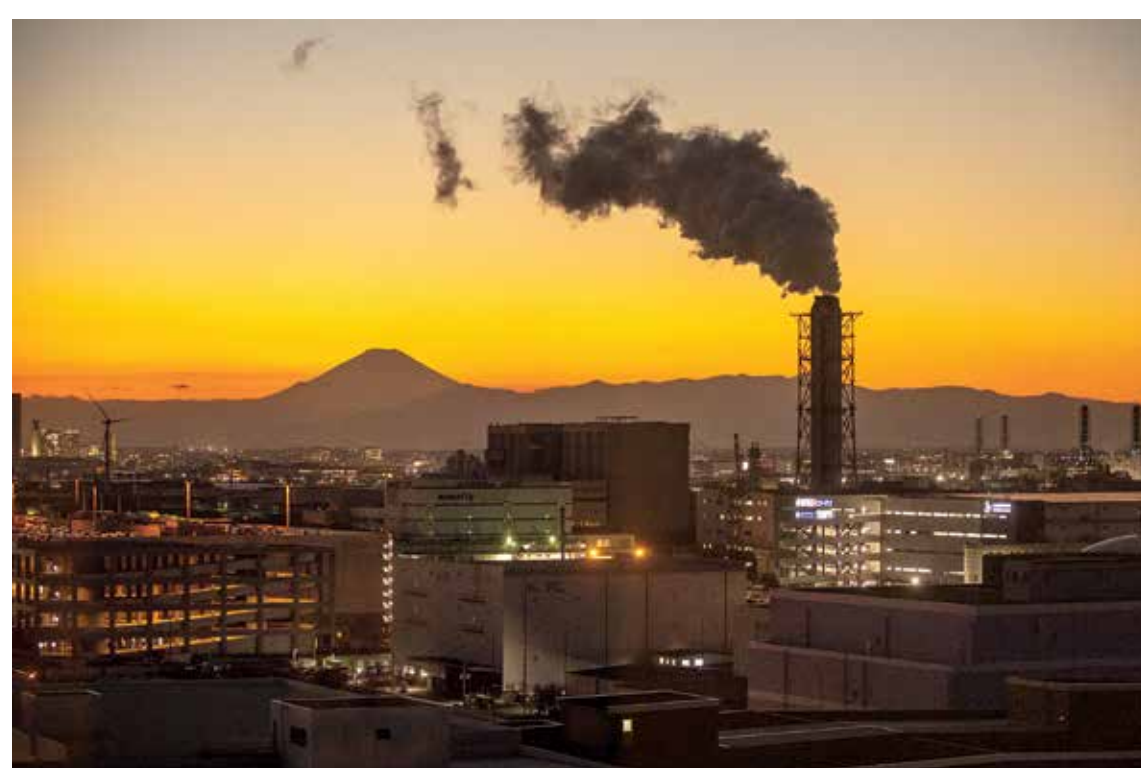
The world's fourth-largest economy also aims to cut emissions by 73 percent by fiscal 2040 as part of its new Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) — a voluntary pledge to be submitted to the UN later on Tuesday. Nearly 200 nations had been required to deliver their fresh climate plans by February 10 but just 10 did so on time, according to a UN database tracking the submissions.

The Japanese ministry said Tuesday that its "ambitious targets (are) aligned with the global 1.5 degree Celsius goal and on a straight pathway towards the achievement of net zero by 2050".

But Masayoshi Iyoda from international environmental group 350.org noted that scientists say an emissions cut of 81 percent by 2035 is needed for Japan to honor its commitments to the 1.5 degree objective. "This is a major failure in Japan's attempt to transition to a future of renewable energy that is fair and just," he told AFP.

Kazuo Suzuki of Greenpeace Japan also said the new target was "far too low", calling for a 78 percent reduction given "our responsibility as an industrially advanced country".

UN climate chief Simon Stiell has called the latest round of national pledges "the most important policy documents of this century". Yet just a handful of major polluters handed in upgraded targets



**KAWASAKI:** A chimney is seen at the Keihin Industrial Zone as Mount Fuji (background left), Japan's highest mountain at 3,776 meters (12,388 feet), looms in the background as viewed from the observation deck of Kawasaki Marien in Kawasaki. — AFP

on time, with China, India and the European Union the biggest names on a lengthy absentee list.

There is no penalty for submitting late targets, which are not legally binding but act as an accountability measure to ensure countries are taking climate change seriously and doing their fair share toward achieving the Paris goals. In 2016, Japan committed to a 26 percent reduction in emissions by 2030. It strengthened this in 2021 to 46 percent by 2030 compared to 2013 levels.

The Japanese government also on Tuesday approved its latest Strategic Energy Plan—which includes an intention to make renewables the country's top power source by 2040.

Nearly 14 years after the Fukushima disaster, Japan also sees a major role for nuclear power to help it meet growing energy demand from AI and microchip factories.

So a previous pledge to "reduce reliance on nuclear power as much as possible" was dropped from the new plan. A draft plan released in De-

cember had said Japan would jointly promote renewable energy and hydrogen fuel with its ally the United States.

But after President Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the Paris Agreement last month, mentions of a US-led clean economy framework were deleted. "We've made certain tweaks" following Trump's announcements, an industry ministry official told reporters Monday.

But "it doesn't mean Japan's broader efforts towards a 'green transformation' will be changed significantly", he said. Nearly 70 percent of Japan's power needs in 2023 were met by power plants burning coal, gas and oil—a figure Tokyo wants to slash to 30-40 percent over the next 15 years.

Almost all these fossil fuels must be imported, at a cost of around \$470 million per day according to Japanese customs. Under the new plans, renewables such as solar and wind are expected to account for 40-50 percent of electricity generation by 2040. — AFP

## Australian central bank cuts rates for first time since 2020

**SYDNEY:** Australia's central bank cut its key interest rate Tuesday for the first time in more than four years, but warned global turmoil could derail further easing. The Reserve Bank of Australia cut the cash rate by 0.25 percentage points to 4.10 percent, the first time it has been lowered since November 2020.

It said inflation had "fallen substantially since the peak in 2022", but that it "remains cautious" about the prospect of further reductions in the future. Notably, the bank pointed to the prospect of "significant" uncertainty abroad. "We cannot declare victory on inflation just yet," bank governor Michele Bullock told reporters.

"There is also a lot of uncertainty around the global outlook at the moment, and the prospect that policy unpredictably could lead to slower growth." Australia's rate cut will come as welcome news for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who must face voters in a general election that is due by May 17 at the latest. The left-leaning Labor government has struggled to convince the public it is capable of tackling stubborn cost-of-living pressures. "We know that it won't fix every challenge we have in our economy or in household budgets, but it will help," Treasurer Jim Chalmers said.

"This is the soft landing that we have been planning for and preparing for, but we can't be complacent about the months and years ahead."



**SYDNEY:** Australia's Reserve Bank Governor, Michele Bullock, speaks during the Monetary Policy Decision media conference in Sydney on February 18, 2025. — AFP

Moody's Analytics economist Harry Murphy Cruise said Australia had "finally joined most of its international peers in cutting interest rates".

"Reading between the lines, don't expect more easing any time soon," he added.

Central banks and stock markets the world over are nervously eyeing the impact of US President Donald Trump's sweeping trade tariff plan. The US Federal Reserve last week warned of a "highly uncertain" economic outlook unsettled by "trade, immigration and regulatory policies".

Like most major central banks, Australia swiftly hiked rates in an effort to tame soaring inflation stoked by COVID-19 and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Inflation has dropped from a peak of 7.8 percent in December 2022 and now sits at 2.4 percent, according to the RBA. Although price pressures have eased, many Australian households remain burdened by the high cost of food, fuel, and housing. — AFP

## Stocks firm as US, Russia hold talks

**LONDON:** Global stock markets held largely steady on Tuesday as top US and Russian diplomats held their first since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The talks, which excluded Europe and Ukraine, ended with Moscow and Washington agreeing to appoint teams to negotiate an end to the Ukraine war.

"Donald Trump continues to be the dominant force for financial markets," said Kathleen Brooks, research director at XTB. "Trump has ripped up the playbook when it comes to dealing with Russia, and the markets are keeping the faith with the US President for now," she added.

In Europe, the main markets were mostly higher, with Frankfurt's DAX index striking another all-time high as elections approach, with investors hoping a ruling coalition better able to act will emerge.

Defence stocks mostly added to gains after having soared the previous day as European leaders held an informal summit to discuss Ukraine and signaled more financial and military support ahead. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said her government would announce plans later Wednesday for a "massive" rearming of Denmark's military due to the growing threat posed by Russia.

Wall Street opened mostly higher as traders came back from a three-day holiday weekend, with the S&P 500 falling just short of hitting a record high. "Fittingly, gains in the mega-cap

stocks, and AI enthusiasm following xAI's release of its Grok 3 model, are among the primary factors for the upside bias," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare. Shares in struggling chipmaker Intel rose more than six percent at the start of trading following reports that rivals Broadcom and TSMC could buy parts of its business. Over in Asia, Hong Kong's stock market soared Tuesday, thanks to a recovery in Chinese tech stocks.

That came after a meeting between President Xi Jinping and China's top business leaders fanned hopes that a long-running crackdown on the private sector is coming to an end. Since taking the helm, Xi has strengthened the role of state enterprises in the world's second-largest economy and waged crackdowns on some areas of the private sector. The drive has hammered some of the country's biggest names in recent years, sending their share prices plummeting.

Monday's gathering provided some much-needed relief to investors and boosted hopes for a sector revival. "This was seen as a strong signal that his crackdown on the tech sector is over and with forthcoming pro-business policies to help revive the economy," said National Australia Bank head of market economics Tapas Strickland.

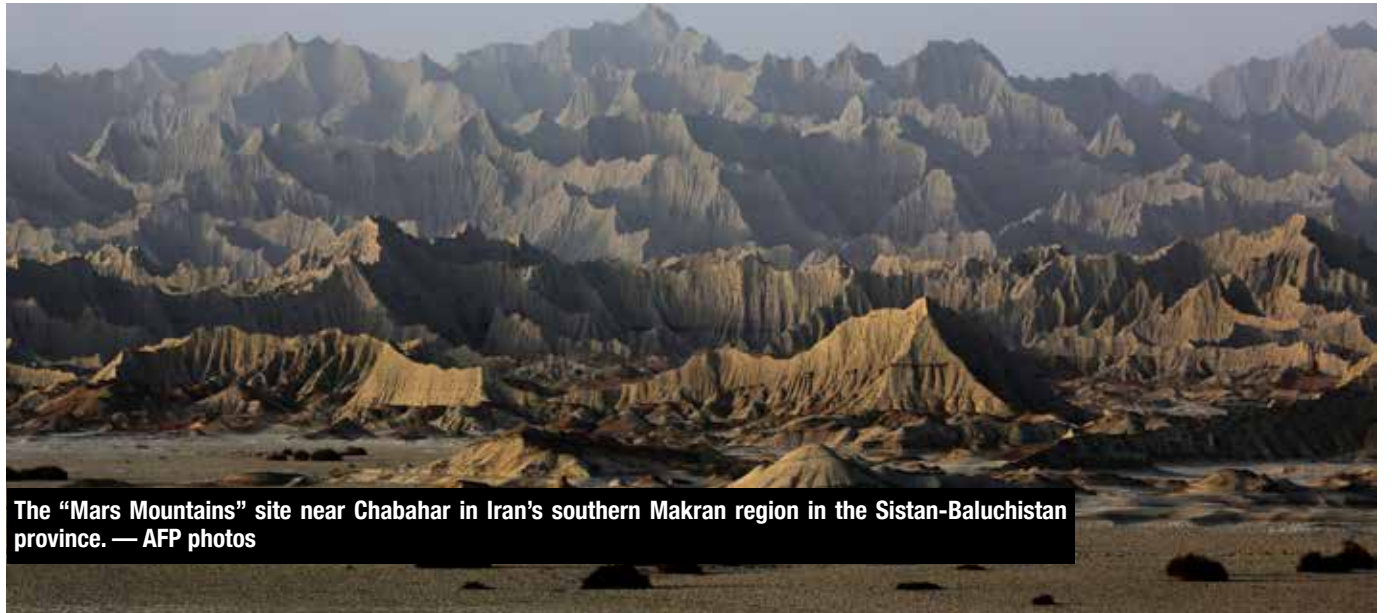
Chinese tech and e-commerce giant Alibaba rose more than two percent. Games developer XD Inc surged more than 10 percent, while Tencent added two percent. Shanghai's stock market fared less well, while Tokyo gained. Sydney fell as the Reserve Bank of Australia announced its first interest rate cut since late 2020 but warned global uncertainties would make it hard for officials to follow up with any more anytime soon. — AFP



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2025



A man walks at the "Mars Mountains" site near Chabahar in Iran's southern Makran region in the Sistan-Baluchistan province.



The "Mars Mountains" site near Chabahar in Iran's southern Makran region in the Sistan-Baluchistan province. — AFP photos

## IRAN MULLS MOVING CAPITAL TO 'LOST PARADISE' ON SOUTHERN COAST

Faced with myriad problems including gridlocked traffic and a sinking earth surface in its current capital, Iran is considering a drastic solution - moving it to an altogether different location on the Gulf of Oman. Though the idea of moving the capital has cropped up on various occasions since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the proposals were repeatedly shelved as unrealistic due to the massive financial and logistical hurdles.

reignited a debate over their necessity, with many highlighting Tehran's historic and strategic significance. Lawmaker Ali Khazaei said that whatever future city is chosen, it must take into consideration Iran's "rich culture". Tehran, designated the capital by Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar in 1786, has served as Iran's political, administrative and cultural hub for over two centuries.

Tehran province is currently home

wrong move because Tehran really represents Iran," said 28-year-old engineer Kamyar Babaei, a resident of the capital. "This city is a symbol of the historic Qajar dynasty... a symbol of modernity, and of urban life," he added. Similarly, urban planning professor Ali Khaksar Rafsanjani noted Tehran's "strategic location".

The city "is safe and appropriate in emergency and war situations", he told the reformist Etemad newspaper, adding that Makran is on the other hand "very vulnerable" as it sits on the Gulf of Oman. Former Tehran mayor Pirouz Hanachi says the capital's problems "can be solved" and only required "investment" and taking measures to develop the city. There was no official estimate for the budget required to tackle Tehran's urban challenges. But in April 2024, then-interior minister Ahmad Vahidi said relocating the capital could require a budget of "around \$100 billion", according to Tehran municipality news website Hamshahri.

### 'Economic hub'

The local ISNA news agency weighed the pros and cons of moving to Makran, saying the region holds "the potential of becoming an important commercial and economic hub". But it also noted that the relocation would add to Iran's already heavy financial burdens, in part the result of decades of international sanctions. Etemad also listed among the advantages of moving to Makran "regional development, access to open water, and reduced vulnerability to earthquakes," as opposed to Tehran which is prone to seismic activity.

But it pointed to the heavy costs and disruption of lives, noting that the move would pose massive logistical challenges. Another outlet, Khabar Online, also pointed to the Makran region's vulnerability to climate change. "Climate changes and a lack of water resources in the Makran region, combined with rising temperatures and declining rainfall, have created very fragile environmental conditions that limit the potential of extensive development," it reported, quoting ecologist Hossein Moradi.

For Banafsheh Keynoush, a fellow at the International Institute for Iranian Studies, the choice of Makran could reflect broader strategic ambitions. "By selecting Makran as possibly the next capital, Iran aims to compete with seaports like Dubai and Gwadar" in neighboring Pakistan, she said in a post on X. She added that it would provide a boost to the nearby coastal city of Chabahar "despite sanctions" and, crucially, "reassert [Iran's] role in the Persian Gulf waterway". — AFP



Fishing boats are moored at a port in Chabahar in Iran's southern Makran region in the Sistan-Baluchistan province.

But reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, who took office in July, has recently revived the idea, citing Tehran's growing challenges. These include traffic snarls, water shortages, resource mismanagement, extreme air pollution, as well as subsidence - the gradual sinking of land mass due to either natural processes or human activity.

In January, government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani said the authorities were studying the possible relocation. "The Makran region is being seriously considered," she said, without specifying a timeline. Makran is a largely undeveloped coastal area on the Gulf of Oman, stretching across Iran's southern, impoverished Sistan-Baluchistan province and part of neighboring Hormozgan province. It has repeatedly been touted as a frontrunner for the move.

"The 'lost paradise' of Makran must be transformed into the future economic hub of Iran and the region," said Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in a Sunday speech. In September, Pezeshkian said "we have no choice but to move the economic and political center of the country to the south and near the sea". Tehran's problems had "only worsened with the continuation of existing policies".

### 'Safe and appropriate'

The revival of relocation plans has

to around 18 million people, as well as a floating population of about two million people who commute there during the daytime, according to governor Mohammad Sadegh Motamedian. The landlocked city sits on a sloping plateau at the foot of the snow-capped Alborz mountain range, blending modern high-rises with historic palaces, bustling bazaars and leafy parks. Makran is meanwhile known for its fishing villages, sandy beaches and ancient history dating back to the time of Alexander the Great.

Still, many oppose the possible relocation. "This would be a completely



Men ride motorcycles at the "Mars Mountains" site near Chabahar in Iran's southern Makran region in the Sistan-Baluchistan province.



Men gather on the beach near Chabahar in Iran's southern Makran region in the Sistan-Baluchistan province.



A Baluch man watches over a child playing on a motorcycle with an Iranian flag visible in the background in Iran's southern Sistan-Baluchistan province.



Baluchi fishermen return from waters near Pakistan at the Makran coast in Iran's southern Sistan-Baluchistan province.



View of Beris port, a busy fishing dock in Makran region and home to unusual rocky beaches in Iran's southern Sistan-Baluchistan province.



This handout natural-color image acquired with MODIS on NASA's Terra satellite shows the Gulf of Oman and the Makran region (center) in southern Iran and southwestern Pakistan, and the Strait of Hormuz (left) and the northern coast of Oman (bottom).



A tourist gazes out over the sea from the top of a dune in a desert landscape near Chabahar in Iran's southern Sistan-Baluchistan province.

## Claudé bronze sculpture goes for \$3 million at France auction



A version of French sculptor Camille Claudé's famous bronze sculpture "L'Age mur" ("The Mature Age") found by chance in an uninhabited flat, in Paris. - AFP

A bronze sculpture by French sculptor Camille Claudé thought to evoke her separation with fellow artist and lover Auguste Rodin was auctioned off in France Sunday for more than \$3 million. Claudé, whose life and tortured love affair with Rodin has inspired several films, destroyed much of her work before her brother confined her to a psychiatric hospital in 1913. The artist sculpted "The Mature Age" after she broke off with Rodin, who was two decades older, seeking to create a name for herself in her own right after years as his assistant.

The sculpture, which exists in several copies, depicts an elderly woman dragging an ageing man away, while a

young woman on her knees implores him. Art historians have seen in "The Implore" a representation of Claudé devastated as Rodin is torn away from her.

Auctioneer Matthieu Semont told AFP he discovered the latest copy by chance in September, by lifting up a dust sheet in a flat near the Eiffel Tower that had been abandoned for around 15 years. He did not say to whom it belonged. Semont said that, from his research into Claudé's life, it seemed Rodin had "never stopped loving her and cried when he discovered 'The Implore' at the foundry".

### Feminist icon

The bronze he found was sold for 3.1

million euros (\$ 3.2 million) at an auction house in the city of Orleans south of Paris, an AFP reporter there said. It had been estimated at 1.5 to 2 million euros. Two other versions of "The Mature Age" are on display at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Camille Claudé Museum outside the capital. A trove of sculptures by Claudé broke records at auction in Paris in 2017, going for \$4.1 million - three times their estimate. The star of the auction, a bronze called "The Abandonment", went for nearly \$1.4 million.

With comparatively few of her works surviving, the first version of her sweeping bronze "The Waltz" sold for \$8 million in 2013. Claudé became a feminist icon as her reputation revived, particu-

larly after an eponymous French biopic with Isabelle Adjani playing her opposite Gerard Depardieu's Rodin, was nominated for two Oscars in 1989. Juliette Binoche played her in a 2013 film about her abandonment in the asylum.

Despite pleas by doctors and friends that she was sane and did not need to be in hospital, Claudé remained confined to the asylum on her family's orders until her death aged 78 in 1943. Feminist critics have never forgiven Rodin for his treatment of Claudé, who contributed to some of his most acclaimed works and who many argue was his equal artistically. - AFP





# End of the road for Kolkata's beloved yellow taxis



A laborer looks into a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi transporting fish at a wholesale market in Kolkata.



A motor mechanic repairs a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi along a roadside in Kolkata.

**K**olkata locals cherish their city's past, which is why many in the one-time Indian capital are mourning a vanishing emblem of its faded grandeur: a hulking and noisy fleet of stately yellow taxis. The snub-nosed Hindustan Ambassador, first rolling off the assembly line in the 1950s with a design that barely changed in the decades since, once ruled India's potholed streets. Nowadays it is rarely spotted outside Kolkata, where it serves as the backbone of the metropolitan cab fleet and a readily recognizable symbol of the eastern city's identity. But numbers are dwindling fast, and a court ruling means those that remain - lumbering but still sturdy - will be forced off the roads entirely in the next three years.

ter Snehasis Chakraborty told AFP that the remainder will be gone by the end of 2027. "The car is strong. Parts and maintenance are cheap and if it breaks down, it's easy to find a mechanic," said Bengal Taxi Association spokesman Sanjeeb Roy. Their disappearance, he added, "represents all that's wrong with India's changing economy".

### Litany of defects

The Hindustan Ambassador was the cornerstone of India's automotive industry for decades from its 1957 debut at a factory on Kolkata's northern outskirts. Modelled on a similarly regal sedan car from Britain's now long-defunct Morris Motors, the car was a triumphant achievement of industry in the first years of India's history as an independent nation. A deluxe model, its windows adorned with lace curtains, was for years the main means of conveyance for government ministers and captains of industry.

But the car's shortcomings also served as a reminder of deep structural problems with the quasi-socialist economic system that prevailed in India at the time. Buyers sat on wait lists for years because pervasive red tape stopped Hindustan Motors from raising production to meet demand, while a near-monopoly on sales left no incentive to maintain quality standards. That gave rise to an oft-repeated joke about the litany of defects found in the average "Amby": the only thing in the car that doesn't make a sound is its horn. Market reforms from the 1980s onwards saw the Ambassador muscled off Indian roads by more modern vehicles, and production was halted entirely in 2014 after years of flatlining demand.

### 'Get with the times'

Kolkata, the headquarters of Hindustan Motors, is the last place where the cars are seen in any great number - a reminder of the tethers binding the city to India's past. Grand public buildings evoke the immense riches that flowed through the city's tree-lined boulevards back when it was the second-largest city in the British Empire, after London.

Nobel laureate poet and polymath Rabindranath Tagore was born and died in Kolkata, where the national anthem he composed was sung for the first time during India's long independence struggle.

The city is also renowned for its thrumming nightlife, with crowded and dimly lit restaurants serving up chicken Kiev alongside the same suite of old-world European staples that have been listed on their menus since the late colonial era.

age at least six years older than other big Indian cities, according to census data.

The city's skewed demographics prompted its pre-eminent novelist Amit Chaudhuri to once quip that while Delhi was for seeking power and Mumbai was for chasing riches, Kolkata was for visiting



Passengers ride in a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi past a tram at an intersection in Kolkata. - AFP photos

"I love my car like my son," Kailash Sahani, who has sat behind the wheel of an Ambassador cab for the past four decades, told AFP. "It's a simple car - no electronics, no frills," the 70-year-old added. "It's unbelievable how much things have changed... The end of these taxi cars also marks our end." Sahani is among thousands of Kolkata cabbies relinquishing their vehicles in line with tough emissions standards introduced in 2009 to ease the city's endemic smog problem. Only around 2,500 Ambassador taxis were still working at the start of this year, down from 7,000 a year earlier, according to Bengal Taxi Association figures.

Another 1,000 will be retired this year, and West Bengal state transport minis-

Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxis parked along a roadside in Kolkata.



A man washes a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi outside a railway station in Kolkata.



Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxis are parked in queues as drivers wait for passengers at the Howrah railway station in Kolkata.

But its importance has shrunk dramatically since that heyday, first with the relocation of India's capital to Delhi in 1911 and then with Mumbai's ascension as the country's most important commercial hub. Many of Kolkata's younger generations have left in search of better opportunities elsewhere, giving it a median

one's parents. "People like me are under pressure to get with the times," retired Kolkata schoolteacher Utpal Basu, 75, told AFP. "Old cars go, new ones come," he added. "But it will break my heart when the city loses another icon." - AFP



A passenger walks past Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxis parked outside a railway station in Kolkata.



Passengers ride in a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi along the Howrah bridge in Kolkata.



Driver of a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi rides past a heritage building in Kolkata.



Passengers ride in Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxis along the Howrah bridge in Kolkata.



Dashboard of a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi decorated with old Indian coins in Kolkata.



Passengers ride a Hindustan Ambassador yellow taxi past a tram along a street in Kolkata.





Pieces of toast are left for the birds on tree branches as part of the annual Welsh Mari Lwyd traditional wassail beside Chepstow Castle on the Welsh/English border. — AFP photos



Morris dancers perform in the streets in the center of Chepstow.

# Tech weary Brits revive apple tree 'wassailing' tradition



A Morris dancer looks on as he performs in the streets in the center of Chepstow.

“Wassail!” yelled the crowd. “Apple Cider for everyone!” In an orchard by a Welsh castle, hundreds of people gathered to wish good health to the apple trees in a centuries-old tradition enjoying a revival. As mulled cider -- a warm drink made from fermented apple juice -- was handed around, a dozen hobby horses swayed eerily to folk music. Made from real horses’ skulls mounted on poles and carried by someone cloaked in a bed sheet, they are bedecked in ribbons with shiny baubles glinting in the eye sockets.

Singing, drinking, banging saucepans and hanging toasted bread on tree branches are all part of wassailing, along with the colorful horses’ heads, which are a Welsh variation. “It’s a celebration of life, nature and the community,” said amateur folk dancer Richard Worrin who helped organize this year’s wassail in the Welsh border town of Chepstow.

The tradition, which has Pagan roots, is a far cry from Worrin’s day job as a murder squad detective. “You need an antidote,” he laughed, stressing participants did not need to be a folklore expert to join in. Wassailing was for everybody, he said, a mid-winter opportunity to get together and have fun. “I just love the feel to it all, lots of drinking, meeting people and having a laugh. Simple as that,” he told AFP.

### ‘Collective heritage’

Traditionally held on Twelfth Night, the Christian festival on the last night of the 12 days of Christmas, wassailing is intended to ward off bad spirits from orchards, ensuring a bountiful crop of



A person dressed as The Mari Lwyd and a participant arrive to take part in the annual Welsh Mari Lwyd traditional wassail.

fruit. In decline for many decades, it has made a comeback in recent years, especially among people tired of living their lives online, some modern-day wassailers told AFP. “Basically, we’re missing the connection to our ancestry and the land itself,” said Kerry Milburn, a 32-year-old IT analyst from Swansea, in Wales. “There’s too much technology today.”

Radiographer Catherine Perry, 46, from Glastonbury in southwestern England, put the revival down to people “craving a deeper connection with nature”. People were also “frightened of AI and multi-billionaires from massive conglomerates”, she said. The word wassail comes from the Old English “waes hael” meaning “be in good health”. This year, over 70 public wassails were listed on the English folklore

website Tradfolk.co “and we’re aware of dozens more happening across the country”, editor James Merryclough told AFP.

“People are rediscovering the joy of shared traditions that connect us with nature, our communities, and our collective heritage,” he said. Wassailing would have once been the highlight of the winter season in cider producing areas of the UK. But as the urban middle classes in the late 19th century began to adopt Christmas, rather than Twelfth Night, as the main festival of the winter season, wassailing and other regional celebrations were gradually swept away. The revival has seen wassailing gain popularity even in urban areas with no history of cider making. Eight wassails were being held right across London in January and February this year.

### ‘Modern twist’

Around 100 people gathered in east-London Hackney, in a small community orchard overlooked by factories and a hulking electricity pylon. Started 14 years ago “it used to be about 20 people every year but it’s grown and grown”, said co-organizer Annie Moreton. “There’s a lot of younger people who are massively concerned about the planet, the climate, they want to connect to green spaces and wellbeing and to be able to do something that isn’t online or in a social media space.”

Marine biologist Cordelia Roberts, 29, said she took part in wassails while living in the southern English city of Portsmouth, but was delighted to find them in the capital too. “I’m a scientist so I really like the nurturing of the Earth, the cycle of life aspect to it,” she said. From small beginnings in 2010, Chepstow’s wassail has grown to become a day-long family-friendly event including dancing by three different “sides” or teams of Morris dancers.

Also included is the Mari Lwyd, the Welsh wassailing ritual involving hobby horses. It used to be carried from house to house by groups of men who would eventually be invited to share food and drink with householders. Dan de la Bedoyere, 47, also an IT worker from Glastonbury, said he was delighted the pagan traditions he “loved to honor” were re-establishing themselves. “The wonderful thing about folk traditions -- if we can revive them and give them a modern twist -- is that they are such fun,” he said.--AFP



A performer dressed as The Mari Lwyd.



Morris dancers perform in the streets in the center of Chepstow.



A Morris dancer looks on as he performs in the streets in the center of Chepstow.



A performer dressed as The Mari Lwyd takes part in the annual Welsh Mari Lwyd traditional wassail.

# Shakira resumes world tour after Lima hospital stay

Colombian pop star Shakira said her concert in Peru Monday will go ahead a day after she called off another performance because of a sudden hospitalization. The singer-songwriter, 48, had gone to the emergency room on Saturday night and was briefly admitted to hospital, prompting her to call off a show Sunday. Shakira wrote on Instagram Monday that the gates to the National Stadium in Lima will open at 4:00 pm

(2100 GMT) for a concert due to kick off at 8:15 pm. The post made no reference to her health.

Events company Masterlive confirmed Monday’s scheduled show will go ahead, and said it would announce a new date soon for the concert that had to be scrapped Sunday. Shakira is on her first world tour in seven years. Named “Las Mujeres ya no Lloran” (Women Don’t Cry Anymore), it kicked

off in Rio de Janeiro just a few days after she received a Grammy for best Latin pop album. The singer dedicated the award to migrants in the United States facing deportation under President Donald Trump.

With more than 90 million records sold worldwide and four Grammy Awards under her belt, among many other prizes, Shakira is one of the most popular Latin artists of all time. She is

set to perform nearly 50 dates in Latin America by the end of June, followed by more concerts in the United States and Canada.--AFP

Colombian singer Shakira performs during the worldwide launch of her ‘Las Mujeres ya no Lloran’ tour at Nilton Santos stadium in Rio de Janeiro on February 11, 2025.--AFP





## Sports

# More than cricket as Pakistan hosts first major tournament in 29 years

## Global event coming back to Pakistan is like another birthday

**KARACHI:** Pakistan will host a first major cricket tournament in almost three decades from Wednesday in a move hailed as a landmark just a few years after the country was off-limits because of security fears.

Staging the Champions Trophy in three cities over the next two-and-a-half weeks will be a huge boost to the South Asian nation's reputation if authorities can pull it off smoothly and safely. "Convincing the world that Pakistan is a safe country and that it is capable of delivering such a global event from an administration point of view took serious hard work and convincing," former Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Ramiz Raja told AFP.

"The world eventually understood our viewpoint," said Raja, under whose tenure the event was awarded in 2021. The build-up has not been without problems after neighbors and arch-rivals India refused to play in Pakistan over long-standing political tensions.

A powerhouse of the sport on and off the pitch, India will instead play their matches in Dubai, but the other seven countries will be based in Pakistan. The country has stepped up security, especially in host cities Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi, even if attacks in major cities are increasingly rare.

Pakistan had been due to host the Champions Trophy, the premier ODI event after the World Cup, in 2008. It was instead staged in South Africa a year later because of a security crisis that spilled over from the war in neighboring Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks.

Pakistan became a no-go zone for international sides in 2009 after Islamist gunmen attacked a bus carrying Sri Lanka's team in Lahore, wounding several players and killing eight policemen and civil-

ians. But since a sweeping military crackdown that started in 2014 and lasted several years, security has vastly improved.

Test cricket returned to Pakistan in 2019 and Australia, England, New Zealand and South Africa later toured the country, helping Pakistan's bid to host the tournament. Those teams will all be in Pakistan for the Champions Trophy.

### 'Terrorism took everything'

For 77-year-old businessman Haji Abdul Razzak, a global event coming back to Pakistan is like another birthday. The last time Pakistan held a major international cricket tournament was as co-hosts, with India and Sri Lanka, in 1996.

Razzak raised the Sri Lankan flag on March 17, 1996 at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore when the islanders defeated Australia to clinch the title. Twenty-nine years later the cricket fanatic will attend the opening match of the Champions Trophy in Karachi on Wednesday between holders Pakistan and New Zealand.

"It is fresh in my mind," a teary-eyed Razzak told AFP. "My country was thriving back then and cricket was on everyone's mind." He added: "Terrorism took everything away from us. I am overjoyed to see a global event coming back to our country and I am feeling like it will be my birthday."

Although militancy is still a threat in Pakistan, the violence is nearly entirely limited to the remote border regions from north to south, far away from the stadiums. With the capital Islamabad placed in lockdown, Pakistan recently hosted a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and a



**KARACHI:** Pakistan's players attend a practice session ahead of their ICC Men's Champions Trophy one-day international (ODI) cricket match against New Zealand at the National Stadium in Karachi on February 17, 2025. — AFP

global meeting on girls' education, raising its profile on the international stage. As a test case for its readiness, Pakistan last week staged a tri-series with New Zealand and South Africa and crowds flocked to the recently renovated stadiums in Lahore and Karachi. Raja, a former Pakistan captain who played in the 1987 World Cup hosted by Pakistan and India, said holding the Champions Trophy

Rohit's Test career already looks over, the skipper having "rested" for the decisive, final Test against Australia. "Hopefully they know when the right time to play is," India's 1983 World Cup-winning captain Kapil Dev said. "When they think it is not, they will call it off." Following the bruising 3-1 Test defeat in Australia, India's board ordered contracted players to play domestic cricket. But both flopped, with Rohit scoring three and 28 in his first and second innings for Mumbai in the Ranji Trophy and Kohli scoring six off 15 balls for Delhi.

If the idea was to help them play their way back into form, it did not work. Despite intense conjecture about their futures India head coach Gautam Gambhir said the two stalwarts will have "massive roles" to play at the Champions Trophy. India, who will play their games in Dubai after refusing to visit neighbors and hosts Pakistan, are favorites to win the title for a third time.

### 'Not confident'

Rohit came into the England ODIs with just 31 runs in three matches in the Australia Test series defeat. He scored two in the first ODI against England before rolling back the years in the second with a 90-ball 119.

Former India batsman Sanjay Manjrekar was

has enormous significance that goes beyond sport.

"This Champions Trophy is a crucial step toward normalizing its standing in the global cricket community," he said. "It's also about national pride and sending a strong message about resilience and determination. It is about youth engagement, cultural promotion and building a global image. "Now the onus is on us to deliver." — AFP

skeptical that Rohit could push on from there. "He wanted a big hundred and he finally got it," Manjrekar told ESPNcricinfo. "Whether he can hit a few more... we will have to wait. I am not confident."

Rohit then got out for one in the final match against England. It was in that match that Kohli finally came good with his 52 - his 73rd half-century in 297 ODIs. Kohli started tentatively before finding his groove in Ahmedabad to finish with seven fours and one six in his 55-ball innings.

No matter what happens at the Champions Trophy, the expectation in India is that Kohli will continue to play Test cricket. Former England batsman Kevin Pietersen warned India against discarding the duo prematurely.

"You can't write these guys off because of the aura they have when they walk out to bat," said Pietersen in his role as a television pundit. Pietersen said that Kohli in particular had earned the right to go out on his own terms.

"The question mark doesn't come down to me, you, the selectors, the coaches, and the other players," he said. "Virat Kohli can only answer the question in terms of how long he wants to continue and how much fight he has to get better and to create those high standards that everybody expects from him." — AFP



**Mohammad Rizwan**

## Rizwan urges Pakistan to enjoy Champions Trophy

**KARACHI:** Pakistan skipper Mohammad Rizwan said on Tuesday the Champions Trophy would be a "historic occasion" for the country, a day before the hosts kick the tournament off against New Zealand.

The Champions Trophy is the first major cricket event hosted by Pakistan in nearly three decades and is regarded as second only to the World Cup in the one-day game. "A global event has come to Pakistan after 29 years so I think the whole nation should enjoy this historic occasion," Rizwan told a news conference on the eve of the tournament, which runs until March 9.

Pakistan had been due to host the tournament in 2008 but was thrown into cricketing isolation by a security crisis as violence spilled over from the long-running war in neighboring Afghanistan. Islamist gunmen then attacked a bus carrying Sri Lanka's team in Lahore the following year, wounding several players and killing eight policemen and civilians.

However, major teams have toured Pakistan in the past five years as security improved, opening the way for the cricket-mad nation to stage the tournament. "Pakistan has suffered enough and for a long time, but we have also won during this phase like the 2017 Champions Trophy and the 2009 Twenty20 World Cup," Rizwan said.

Still, the build-up has not been without problems after neighbors and arch-rivals India refused to play in Pakistan over long-standing political tensions. India will instead play their matches in Dubai. Pakistan's opponents in the tournament opener in Karachi beat them twice this month during a tri-series event that included South Africa.

"There shouldn't be any doubts on our performance," Rizwan said. "We may not have played on our abilities but we all want to win the event for the country and people." Rizwan hoped to have pace bowler Haris Rauf on the pitch after he suffered chest muscle strain in the match against New Zealand in Lahore last week. "Haris bowled 80 per cent yesterday and today he is bowling at his full rhythm and told us that he is not feeling any discomfort, so I hope he is fully fit," Rizwan said. — AFP

## Djokovic calls for overhaul of 'unfair' anti-doping system

**DOHA:** Novak Djokovic on Monday urged tennis authorities to overhaul the sport's anti-doping system, pointing to "inconsistencies" in cases involving top stars Jannik Sinner and Iga Swiatek and those of lower-ranked players.

World number one Sinner agreed to a three-month ban on Saturday, admitting "partial responsibility" for mistakes by his team which led to him twice testing positive for traces of clostebol in March last year. Sinner was facing a potential ban

## Kohli, Rohit near endgame as India chase trophy glory

**DUBAI:** India captain Rohit Sharma and superstar batsman Virat Kohli enter the Champions Trophy this week with intense focus on their dwindling powers and speculation over when they will retire. The 37-year-old Rohit and Kohli, 36, got back among the runs to some degree in India's 3-0 ODI home sweep of England last week.

But both have been mired in long lean patches in Tests and have already retired from T20 cricket following last year's World Cup triumph. Age is clearly catching up with the duo ahead of India's first match of the 50-over Champions Trophy, against Bangladesh on Thursday in Dubai.

Neither player — both mainstays of a formidable India team for more than 15 years — has said what their plans are. But one Indian media report, citing anonymous sources at the cricket board, said opener Rohit had been pressed to make a decision on his future by the time the tournament ends.

## Sinner case 'a million miles from doping'

**LONDON:** Jannik Sinner's three-month ban for a pair of positive drug tests has been defended by the World Anti-Doping Agency after claims the world number one's punishment was too lenient. Sinner's long doping saga came to an end on Saturday after the tennis star agreed to the ban, admitting "partial responsibility" for team mistakes which led to him twice testing positive for traces of clostebol in March last year.

The Italian was facing a potential ban of two years after WADA appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport against his initial exoneration by the International Tennis Integrity Agency. But WADA withdrew its appeal and came to an agreement with Sinner over his three-month ban after accepting the 23-year-old was inadvertently contaminated by his physiotherapist.

Sinner said that the banned substance entered his system when his physio used a spray containing it to treat a cut, then provided massage and sports therapy to the player. The sanction has been questioned and criticized by current and former players including Novak Djokovic.

However, WADA's general counsel

of two years after the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) against his initial exoneration by the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA), announced in August.

In a surprising move, WADA withdrew its appeal and came to an agreement with Sinner to accept a three-month ban. In another high-profile case last year, five-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek accepted a one-month ban after testing positive for the banned heart drug trimetazidine.

"There's a majority of the players that I've talked to in the locker room, not just in the last few days, but also last few months, that are not happy with the way this whole process has been handled," said Djokovic.

"A majority of the players don't feel that it's fair. A majority of the players feel like there is favoritism happening. It seems like, it appears that you can



**Jannik Sinner**

Ross Wenzel believes the sanction level was "in the right place" for what had occurred. "This was a case that was a million miles away from doping," he told BBC Sport on Tuesday.

"The scientific feedback that we received was that this could not be a case of intentional doping, including micro-dosing. "WADA has received messages from those that consider that the sanction was too high and, in some respects, if you have some saying this is unfair on the athlete, and others saying it's not enough, maybe it's an indication that although it's not going to be popular with everyone, maybe it's an indication that it was in the right place. "When we

look at these cases we try to look at them technically, operationally and we don't do it with fear of what the public and the politicians or anyone is going to say."

### 'Favoritism happening'

In another high-profile case last year, five-time Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek accepted a one-month ban after testing positive for the banned heart drug trimetazidine. In contrast, the recently retired Simona Halep, a former world number one, was handed a four-year ban by the ITIA in 2022 after testing positive for the blood-boosting drug roxadustat.

She argued it was the result of a

almost affect the outcome if you are a top player, if you have access to the top lawyers."

In contrast, the recently retired Simona Halep, a former world number one, was handed a four-year ban by the ITIA in 2022 after testing positive for the blood-boosting drug roxadustat. She argued it was the result of a tainted supplement and successfully appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which reduced her suspension to nine months.

"Simona Halep and (Britain's) Tara Moore and some other players that are maybe less known that have been struggling to resolve their cases for years, or have gotten the ban for years," said Djokovic. "There is so much inconsistencies between the cases."

Djokovic, who is returning to action this week at the Qatar Open for the first time since retiring injured from last month's Australian Open semi-finals,

tainted supplement and successfully appealed to CAS, which reduced her suspension to nine months. Speaking at the Qatar Open on Monday, 24-time Grand Slam champion Djokovic said many players were unhappy with the way the cases had been handled.

"There's a majority of the players that I've talked to in the locker room, not just in the last few days, but also last few months, that are not happy with the way this whole process has been handled," the former world number one said. "A majority of the players don't feel that it's fair. A majority of the players feel like there is favoritism happening."

"It seems like, it appears that you can almost affect the outcome if you are a top player, if you have access to the top lawyers." Sinner's suspension runs from February 9 to May 4, leaving him clear to play in the rest of this year's Grand Slams, starting with the French Open.

He has not played competitively since defeating Alexander Zverev in the Australian Open final in January. "Once you've reached an agreement, what you can't do is then say 'oh, but we're going to have this apply from two months in the future for a period of three months,'" Wenzel said.

"I hope that in the next period of the near future that the governing bodies are going to come together, of our tours and the tennis ecosystem, and try to find a more effective way to deal with these processes."

"It's inconsistent, and it appears to be very unfair." "If you are going to treat every case individually or independently, which is what's happening, then there's no consistency, then there is no transparency, and some cases are transparent, some are not," he continued. "The problem is that right now there is a lack of trust generally from the tennis players, both male and female, towards WADA and ITIA, and the whole process." — AFP



Sports

# Bayern coach Kompany hopeful Kane to be fit for Celtic clash

## Celtic coach Brendan Rodgers back England captain to play

MUNICH: Bayern Munich coach Vincent Kompany said he believes Harry Kane will be fit to face Celtic on Tuesday, after the striker missed training ahead of the Champions League game. German media reported Kane picked up a knock in Saturday's hard-fought 0-0 draw at Bayer Leverkusen in the Bundesliga.

Kompany admitted he could not give a definite answer to whether Kane would play, but said a decision would be made on the morning of the game in Munich on Tuesday. "(It's) definitely nothing bad. We've just had very little time to recover and sometimes you need an extra day," Kompany told reporters on Monday.

Bayern were uncharacteristically defensive against Leverkusen, with Kane and other attackers dropping back to help the visitors keep a clean sheet which maintained their eight-point lead at the top of the table.

"We'll see early tomorrow how he feels, but I assume it's nothing too bad — we've just got very little time to refresh and recover," said Kompany. "We'll see tomorrow." Against Leverkusen, Kane needed treatment before half-time after his head collided with Piero Hincapié's shoulder.

Celtic coach Brendan Rodgers on Monday backed the England captain to play. "It doesn't change anything — we need to win the game. If Harry didn't play, that's a big miss for them, but I'm pretty sure there's another world-class player to come in and play." Kane scored in the 2-1 victory at Celtic Park last week in the first leg of the knockout phase play-off tie, and Bayern have not lost at home in the Champions League since April 2021.

Kompany said Celtic were "always dangerous, but so are we. It's a home game, we'll look to make that play to our advantage." Bayern midfielder Jamal Musiala insisted the club had "no excuses" de-



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's German midfielder #42 Jamal Musiala (3rd L) and teammates attend a training session on the eve of the UEFA Champions League Knockout round play-off second Leg match against Celtic on February 17, 2025 in Munich. — AFP

spite the short turnaround after Saturday's top-of-the-table clash.

"None of us want to have excuses. We're using the days to prepare well for the game — then we have to give it our all. We're fresh and will give it everything tomorrow," said Musiala. Rodgers admitted the gap between his club and the European elite had

widened in recent decades, but called on his charges to "embrace" the challenge against the six-time winners. "At this level, you have to play without any fear. There's worse things in life than losing a game of football, so we want to ensure at the end of the game we've given it absolutely everything. "We're not favorites, but anything is possible." — AFP

## Liverpool can handle title tension: Slot

LONDON: Arne Slot insists Liverpool can handle the mounting pressure of the Premier League title race after the leaders were hampered by nerves in their tense win against Wolves. Slot's side head to Aston Villa on Wednesday knowing a victory would move them 10 points clear of second-placed Arsenal in their bid to clinch a record-equalling 20th English title.

But Liverpool, in dynamic form for much of the season, have looked less secure of late and almost blew a two-goal lead in Sunday's 2-1 win over lowly Wolves at Anfield. The Reds had already suffered a costly collapse in the Merseyside derby draw just days earlier when Everton's James Tarkowski scored a stoppage-time equalizer. Liverpool's reserves also crashed out of the FA Cup with an embarrassing fourth-round loss at second-tier Plymouth recently, leading to fears the treble chasers are beginning to



Arne Slot

crack as expectations increase.

Reds left-back Andrew Robertson admitted after the Wolves game that it was natural for the players to be nervous as they get closer to the finish line. But Slot pointed to Liverpool's ability to grind out several wins by a one-goal margin already this season as proof they won't crumble under pressure.

"It is because we are going to the end of the season, not because of us but what people make of it," Slot told reporters on Tuesday. "We have won other games at home or away by one goal when it was also tight. I remember Crystal Palace away when it was tight in the end. "If this happens at the end of the season you guys are going to talk about nerves. "To secure a win in the Premier League, if we are winning 1-0, is going to be a lot of defending and hard work."

Arsenal have added to the concern at Anfield with a 15-match unbeaten run in the league since their last top-flight loss at Newcastle on November 2. Several of Liverpool's players have title race experience after winning the Premier League in 2020 under Slot's predecessor Jurgen Klopp.

Slot has also successfully navigated the anxiety of the final weeks of the season in his Dutch title-winning campaign with Feyenoord. But the Reds boss has mixed feelings about how useful those triumphs will be in helping Liverpool this season. "We lean a lot on the players. They have to show up and bring the performance. We don't present a meeting on how to deal with the pressure, that is not how it works," he said.

"It helps that they are used to playing big games with lots of pressure, but don't make that too big. We must not over-value experience. "It is difficult to take experiences from that time with Feyenoord, different players, different opponents, different league. "And the ones who won the league here in Corona time (during the pandemic) with no fans in the stadium, at one point they were 25 points up, so there was hardly any pressure then." Slot knows Villa have the potential to add to the pressure on Liverpool, but he believes their hard-fought success against Wolves will stand them in good stead. — AFP

## Shenhua thrash Kobe to stay alive in Asian Champions League

SHANGHAI: Shanghai Shenhua thrashed Vissel Kobe 4-2 to keep their Asian Champions League hopes alive on Tuesday as Buriram United and Johor Darul Ta'zim both qualified for the knock-out phase. Shenhua needed to win their final game of the league stage to avoid elimination and they delivered in emphatic style at home to Japanese champions Kobe, who had already clinched their place in the next round.

Brazilian Saulo Mineiro hit a hat-trick and Shinichi Chan also got on the scoresheet as Shenhua provisionally moved into seventh place in the 12-team AFC Champions League Elite East zone table. The top eight clubs advance but city rivals Shanghai Port can leapfrog Shenhua if they win their final league-stage game on Wednesday.

Eighth-place Shandong Taishan of China, currently behind Shenhua only on goal difference but with a game still to play, are also still looking to clinch qualification. Thailand's Buriram United booked their spot despite letting a two-goal lead slip in a 2-2 draw with already qualified South Koreans Gwangju.



SHANGHAI: Vissel Kobe's Haruya Ide (C) is challenged by Shanghai Shenhua's Shinichi Chan (3L) as goalkeeper Bao Yaxiong (2L) reacts during the AFC Champions League football match between Japan's Vissel Kobe and China's Shanghai Shenhua in Shanghai on February 18, 2025. — AFP

Malaysia's Johor also went through with a 5-2 win over South Korea's Pohang Steelers, who were eliminated. Japan's Kawasaki Frontale, who were already assured a place in the knock-out round, beat eliminated Australians Central Coast Mariners 2-0 at home.

Kobe fielded a much-weakened side for their visit to Shanghai and they were punished by a rampant Shenhua. Mineiro opened the scoring with a back-post header in the second minute before Chan doubled the home side's lead in first-half injury time. — AFP

## Man City's fresh faces offer hope of Madrid miracle

MANCHESTER: Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola said his side have just a one percent chance of progress to the Champions League last 16 against Real Madrid on Wednesday but the English champions' new recruits could offer a lifeline. City blew a late 2-1 lead in the first leg of the play-off tie last week at home to lose 3-2 to the holders. That collapse was part of a wider trend this season as Guardiola's ageing squad have struggled to last the pace, particularly when the intensity is turned up on Champions League nights.

As a consequence, City broke with their usual transfer policy to spend big in January, bringing in Omar Marmoush, Abdoukodie Khusanov, Vitor Reis and Nico Gonzalez for fees totalling £170 million (\$214 million).

However, none of them started the first leg against Madrid. Marmoush was the only one to even make an appearance for the final few minutes off the bench, as Gonzalez and Khusanov were unused substitutes and Reis was not registered in City's European squad.

Guardiola may now regret that decision after Marmoush, Gonzalez and Khusanov all played pivotal roles in arguably City's best performance of the season on Saturday when Newcastle were blown away 4-0 at the Etihad.

Marmoush hogged the headlines thanks to his first-half hat-trick, finally offering City another potent scoring threat to compliment Erling Haaland. Khusanov recovered from his nightmare Premier League debut against Chelsea last month when he gave away a goal inside three minutes and could have been sent-off shortly afterwards. This time the Uzbek showed why City paid Lens a reported 40 million euros (£33 million, \$42 million) for his services. The 20-year-old's pace helped sniff out the danger posed by Newcastle's Alexander Isak and could be what the visitors need to combat the threat of Kylian Mbappe, Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo in the Santiago Bernabeu.

Guardiola, though, reserved special praise for the impact of Gonzalez in bringing the City midfield the stability they have lacked since Ballon d'Or winner Rodri suffered a serious knee injury in September. The Barcelona academy graduate seems certain to start on his return to Spain with his manager already hailing the 23-year-old as a "mini Rodri."

### Gonzalez a game changer

"The balance of the team looks much, much better already with Gonzalez in it," said former City defender Micah Richards. "City have got players who can score goals and hurt Real, but he brings some stability behind them, which they will need if they are to manage the game in Madrid. "Do they have more chance of beating Real with him in the starting 11? Without a doubt." Yet, even at their best during the golden years of Guardiola's reign in Manchester, City have often found the might of Madrid too tough a nut to crack in the Champions League.

This is the fourth consecutive season the sides have met, with a 5-1 aggregate rout en route to winning the competition for the first time in 2023 City's only success. Three years ago they seemed to be cruising into the Paris final with a two-goal lead heading into stoppage time of the second leg before Rodrygo's quickfire double sent the tie to extra-time and ultimately Madrid to a 14th European crown.

Last year it was penalties that got the Spanish giants over the line after City dominated the majority of two score draws in the quarter-finals. Guardiola conceded the prospect of his side finding their best again when they need it most is unlikely. "This season the reality is we have been miles, miles away. If you tell me that we would perform like today (against Newcastle) and finish 22nd in the Champions League (table), of course not. We would finish higher," said the former Barcelona boss. — AFP

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I, **Ahleia**, holder of Indian Passport No. V7438999 having permanent address Puthoval Vilaveedu Cherunniyoor, Varkala, Trivandrum, Kerala, India, 695142 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (given name) Ahalya and (surname) Raveendran Nair. (#6639) 19/02/2025

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## Canada down Finland to set up USA ice hockey grudge clash

**NEW YORK:** Canada set up another politically charged ice hockey grudge match against the United States on Monday by beating Finland 5-3 to reach the final of the NHL Four Nations tournament. Two days after suffering a bruising 3-1 loss to the USA in a chaotic clash in Montreal, Canada ensured they would have a chance to avenge that loss against the Americans in Thursday's final in Boston.

Saturday's first meeting between Canada and the US descended into mayhem within seconds of the puck being dropped, with three fistfights breaking out in the first nine seconds. That tumultuous opening came after Canada's home fans had drowned out the US national anthem with a cacophony of boos—reflecting the bitter political tensions between the two neighbors following US President Donald Trump's threat to impose tariffs on Canadian goods.

Trump has also repeatedly called for Canada to become the "51st state" of the United States, and routinely refers to Canada's outgoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as "Governor Trudeau." Canada's players meanwhile said Monday they are relishing the chance of another crack at the Americans after Saturday's ill-tempered tussle.

"The last thing we wanted was to go home today," Canadian center Nathan MacKinnon said. "We'd love to play them (the Americans) again—we feel like we could beat those guys. We plan on playing a little better Thursday."

Team-mate Sam Reinhart echoed MacKinnon's comments. "That's what you want, you want an opportunity to play those guys again. Today that's what we gave ourselves a chance to do," Reinhart said. "We expect the same atmosphere. You try and learn from what went well and what went wrong and hopefully we'll come out on the right side."

### Russell has 'no concerns' over Verstappen row

**LONDON:** George Russell insisted he had "no concerns" about world champion Max Verstappen heading into the new Formula One campaign despite their furious



**BOSTON:** Connor McDavid #97 and Brayden Point #21 of Team Canada are stopped by Kevin Lankinen #32 of Team Finland during the first period in the 4 Nations Face-Off game at TD Garden on February 17, 2025 in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP

Canada needed a win in regulation against the Finns at Boston's TD Garden on Monday to be certain of reaching Thursday's final. That outcome was all but guaranteed after first period goals from Connor McDavid, MacKinnon and Brayden Point fired Canada into an early 3-0 lead.

MacKinnon doubled his tally after scoring in the second period to put Canada 4-0 up. Finland pulled a goal back from Esa Lindell before a quickfire brace from Mikael Granlund made it 4-3 to set up a nervy finale.

But veteran Canada star Sidney Crosby rifled a shot into an empty net in the final minute to give the Canadians a two-goal winning cushion. — AFP

concluding race on December 8, replied: "No, I haven't spoken (to him). I have no concerns about him or his driving—that happened last year and I want to focus on myself. But obviously things got out of line at the end of last year, and I made it pretty clear that I'm not going to take it."

"But now it's 2025 and I'm focused on the job and the job is to win. So I'm not going to change my approach, fighting him, or fighting any other drivers. The goal is the same". Ahead of the new season, Formula One drivers have been told they face race bans or heavy fines for repeated swearing or criticism of the sport's governing body, the FIA. — AFP

### Tarling beats Pogacar at UAE Tour

**PARIS:** British rider Josh Tarling won a 12.2km time trial on stage two of the UAE Tour on Tuesday to snatch the overall lead in the seven-day race, while Tadej Pogacar was third on the day. The powerfully built 21-year-old Ineos rider, who came fourth in the Paris Olympics time trial last year despite a nasty fall, completed the course at an average speed of over 56km/h.

"I missed some big chances last year so I needed this," he said. The route Tuesday suited his 6ft 4in (1.94m) frame as it was flat and featured relatively few corners. He finished 13sec ahead of Swiss rider Steffan Bissegger and 18sec ahead of Tour de France and Giro d'Italia champion Pogacar to take the overall leader's red jersey from Italian sprinter Jonathan Milan.

Milan was one of the riders to set off late and was adversely affected by high winds that picked up near the close of racing. Pogacar said he had anticipated such a turn of events. "It was a good time trial, a first all-out effort of the year and I am happy with both the speed and the legs. It was always going to be tough to compete against Tarling and Bissegger because they really fly on this kind of parcours," he said.

Tarling may struggle on stage three on Wednesday which is a 181km run through the desert from the UAE's most northern city Ras al Khaimah to a hilltop finish at Jebel Jais mountain. With a climb of 20km with a five percent average gradient until it hits seven percent in the last 2km, all eyes will be on Pogacar, who is third in the overall standings just 18 seconds behind Tarling. Bissegger is second, 13sec behind the Briton.

"Tomorrow is a very nice stage for me," said Pogacar. "I have good memories from Jebel Jais and as I always say, it is a day for a sprint between the climbers," the 26-year-old Slovenian said. "There can be surprises, of course, but I am really looking forward to it because it suits me very well." — AFP

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