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Amir bestows prestigious Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order on India PM Modi



Amiri Diwan photo
His Highness the Amir presents visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the prestigious Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order.



PM Diwan photo
Official talks between Kuwait and India.

Modi dedicates honor to enduring friendship

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (KUNA): His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace on Sunday His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with his accompanying delegation, currently paying an official visit to the country.

The Kuwaiti and Indian sides discussed bilateral relations between the two friendly countries, peoples, means of boosting these ties in various spheres, expanding cooperation, key issues of common concern, latest developments on the regional and international arenas.

Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister



Amiri Diwan photo
His Highness the Crown Prince hosts a luncheon in honor of the Prime Minister of the Republic of India on the occasion of his official visit to the country.

of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah and senior State officials attended the audience.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Sunday decorated the visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra

Modi with the prestigious Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order, in appreciation for his role in bolstering further the good ties between the Republic of India and the State of Kuwait.

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Kuwait, India hold official talks; ink pacts

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (KUNA): His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah held official talks with visiting Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on Sunday.

Distinguished and deep-rooted bilateral ties, in addition to avenues of cooperation to serve both friendly countries' best interests, were discussed.

Both sides, according to a government statement, renewed commitment to develop cooperation in information technology, energy technology, healthcare, AI and space.

A MoU on defense cooperation was signed after the talks, along with an executive program between the country's Public Authority for Sports and the Indian Ministry for Youth Affairs and Sports for 2025-2028.

Both sides also inked a cultural exchange program for 2025-2029 and a framework agreement to form an alliance for solar power. All documents were signed by Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah A-Yahya and his Indian counterpart Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

The talks were attended by a host of



Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Yahya with External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar after signing the agreement.

Kuwaiti cabinet members and senior officials, in addition to the Indian delegation accompanying Premier Modi.

Prime Minister Modi concluded his two-day official visit on Sunday.

He was seen off at Kuwait International Airport by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister's

Diwan Chief Abdulaziz Al-Dakheel, Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya, Advisor at His Highness the Prime Minister's Diwan and Chief of the Mission of Honor Sheikh Dr. Basel Humoud Al-Sabah, Assistant Foreign Minister for Asia Affairs Ambassador Sameeh Hayat and Kuwaiti Ambassador to India Meshal Al-Shemali.

Health category reports 4.20 pct boost

Food, clothing push Kuwait inflation to 2.36%

By Marwa Al-Bahrawi
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Central Statistics Bureau (CSB) has revealed a 2.36 percent annual increase in the local inflation index for November.

According to the CSB data, the general Consumer Price Index (CPI) reached 134.6 in November; reflecting a 0.15 percent rise compared to October. This increase was driven by higher prices across several key categories, particularly in food and beverage

es, clothing and footwear, home furnishings, maintenance equipment, health, education, and various goods and services. On the other hand, transportation costs witnessed a 1.89 percent decrease compared to the same period last year.

The food and beverage index rose by 4.66 percent year-on-year and by 0.59 percent compared to October. The cigarettes and tobacco index also witnessed a slight annual increase of 0.15 percent. The clothing and footwear category experienced a notable 5.54 percent rise year-on-year, with a 0.42 percent

monthly increase. The housing services index grew by 0.57 percent annually, while the home furnishings index climbed by 4.05 percent year-on-year and 0.21 percent month-on-month.

In the health category, inflation increased by 4.20 percent and the communications group had 0.88 percent rise both annually and monthly. The entertainment and culture index rose by 2.42 percent year-on-year, with a 0.15 percent monthly increase.

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KUNA photo

The Kuwaiti Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chargé d'Affaires of the Lebanese Embassy, Lebanese Consul, and Deputy Head of Mission gather for a group photo before takeoff.

Kuwait sends 31-ton aid load to Lebanon on seventh flight

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (KUNA): Seventh Kuwaiti relief planeload departed Sunday heading to Lebanese Rafic Hariri International Airport, carrying onboard 31 tons of humanitarian aid as part of Lebanese embassy campaign launched in Kuwait in coordination with various state bodies.

Lebanese Charge de Affairs Ahmad Arafat told KUNA prior to takeoff that Kuwait is at the forefront of countries hurrying to aid afflicted nations across the globe.

He appreciated the designation of the seventh planeload of the air bridge to Lebanon's Rafic Hariri International Airport, extending his appreciation to Kuwait's leadership and official entities.

Arafat spoke of the Lebanese' people dire need of assistance in current times as droves of people are displaced and the situation remains unstable, adding that the needs have been identified by the Lebanese health ministry.

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NewsWatch

KUWAIT CITY: The First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah departed on Sunday, along with an accompanying delegation, to Saudi Arabia on an official visit to the sisterly Kingdom.

He was seen off at Kuwait International Airport by the Saudi Ambassador to the State of Kuwait, Prince Sultan bin Saad Al-Saoud, and security officers. (KUNA)

KUWAIT CITY: The Kuwait Army declared on Sunday that the navy would carry out with live ammunition a drill within the sea shooting range on Monday and Tuesday (from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m.).

The shooting range stretches for 16.5 nautical miles east of Ras Al-Jalaia to Garo Island, with six nautical miles east of Ras Al-Zor all the way to Umm Al-Maradem Island.

The military urged sea goers to refrain from approaching the exercise zone during the declared drill timetable. (KUNA)



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9 Morad Yousuf Behbehani Group honors its employees at End-of-Year Annual Celebration

KOC to increase transformation rate in oil fields to smart digitalization by 95%

By Najeh Bilal

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: According to informed sources, the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) is planning to increase the rate of transformation in oil fields to smart digitalization to reach

more than 95 percent within the next three years. This goal is part of a strategy to integrate all oil wells into the digital system in the future. The shift to smart digital transformation is expected to significantly reduce the final cost of producing a barrel of oil.

They explained that KOC recently

implemented new technological techniques to accelerate exploration, improve production processes, and reduce the environmental impact, particularly through the use of smart nano-max technology.

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KUNA photo

Chief of Kuwait's National Guard receives Egyptian Ambassador.

KNG Chief praises Kuwait-Egypt ties

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (KUNA): Chief of Kuwait's National Guard Sheikh Mubarak Humoud Al-Jaber Al-Sabah commended the longstanding historical relations between Kuwait and Egypt during a meeting with Egyptian Ambassador Osama Shaltout on Sunday.

The National Guard released a statement indicating that Sheikh Mubarak received Ambassador Shaltout at his office in the General Presidency of the National Guard. During the meeting, the Egyptian diplomat congratulated Sheikh Mubarak

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Prayer Timings

Fajr	05:13	Asr	14:36
Sunrise ..	06:38	Maghrib ..	16:54
Zohr	11:46	Isha	18:16

Local

Expected weather for next 24 hrs:

By Day: Mild with light to moderate northwesterly wind to light variable wind, speed of 08-32 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

By Night: Cold with light vari-

able wind, with speed of 06-22 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

Station	Max Exp	Min Rec
Kuwait City	17	09
Kuwait Airport	19	09
Abdaly	17	08

Bubyan	19	06
Jahra	18	08
Failaka Island	19	11
Salmiyah	18	11
Ahmadi	17	04
Jal Aliyah	16	08
Nuwaisib	20	08

Kuwait Prime Minister receives Indian counterpart and his delegation



PM Narendra Modi meets the First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah receives the Indian counterpart Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



PM Narendra Modi meets the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sherida Al-Mousherji.

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (KUNA): His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah received on Sunday at Bayan Palace the visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his accompanying delegation.

An official reception was held for the guest who

greeted senior officials namely the First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sherida Al-Mousherji, the head of the prime minister's diwan Abdulaziz Dekheel Al-Dekheel, the adviser at

the prime minister's diwan and the head of the honorary mission Sheikh Dr. Basel Humoud Al-Sabah.

Additionally, the Indian prime minister exchanged pleasantries with the undersecretary of financial and administrative affairs at the prime minister's diwan Sheikh Khaled Mohammad Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, the

assistant foreign minister for Asia affairs Ambassador Samih Johar Hayat, the State of Kuwait Ambassador to India Meshal Mustafa Al-Shemali, senior commanders of the army, the police, the national guards and the fire forces, as well as other ranking State officials.

MoE adds new courses, degrees to meet demand of labor market

KU nods secondment of academic staff

By Abdulrahman Al-Shammari
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Dr. Nader Al-Jalal has issued a decision to add a group of new academic programs and degrees to the list of higher education institutions recommended by the National Authority for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance in the United States of America.

This decision was issued in response to the demands of both local and global labor markets and for supporting modern specializations that align with scientific and technological advancements.

The newly added specializations and programs include:

1. Urban Planning at Tufts University, which cover a range of specializations such as:
 - Environmental Policy and Planning
 - Environmental Economics and Urban Planning
 - Environmental Engineering and Environmental

Policy

- Transportation Planning
- Water Management
- 2. Artificial Intelligence at Oregon State University
- 3. PhD and Master's programs in Education and Music, including:
 - Decision Sciences at Indiana University - Bloomington
 - Educational Leadership and Education Policy & Leadership at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
 - Statistics, Measurements & Evaluation in Education at the University of Missouri - Columbia
 - Data Science at Columbia University - New York
 - Music at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
 - Educational Leadership & Administration at the University of St. Thomas - Minnesota

This decision is part of an ongoing effort to enhance higher education outcomes in Kuwait, ensure the quality of education and provide students with greater opportunities for academic excellence and meaningful contributions to the country's development.

Meanwhile, the Kuwait University Council,

during its meeting chaired by the Acting Director of the university Dr. Osama Al-Saeed, approved a proposal submitted by several colleges regarding the renewal of the full secondment of a number of academic staff members to the Ministry of Higher Education and other official bodies for a period of one year.

The acting Secretary-General and the official spokesperson of Kuwait University Dr. Mishari Al-Aifan revealed that the council has approved the following secondments, effective from February 1, 2025, unless stated otherwise:

- Dr. Mishari Obaid Al-Hajri as Head of the Cultural Office in Dubai, United Arab Emirates
- Dr. Nayef Nazal Al-Shammari as Cultural Attaché in Washington, United States
- Dr. Hessa Hamad Al-Ajjan as Cultural Attaché in London, United Kingdom
- Dr. Abeer Abdulkareem Sharhan as Cultural Attaché in Canberra, Australia
- Dr. Fawaz Ali Abdulmalik as Head of the Cultural Office in Los Angeles, USA
- Dr. Fahima Abdul Hamid Al-Awadhi as Head of the Cultural Office in Dublin, Ireland
- Dr. Bandar Majeed Al-Mutairi as Cultural Attaché in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, starting from March 1, 2025.

Other Voices

Welcome Prime Minister Modi

(Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi – Professor of Political Science at the College of Social Sciences in Kuwait University. She is also a Workshop Director at Gulf Research Meeting organized by the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge.)

Not that the Prime Minister level visit from India to Kuwait comes after a long gap of 43 years is important; the timing of PM (Narendra) Modi's visit is of utmost significance as it comes in the backdrop of the rapid development in the Gulf region and the impact it may leave on the global scenario.

Kuwait is heading the strong GCC bloc and a country of great importance in the present global scenario and as such the visit of Indian Prime Minister is sure to give the region a kindle of hope and a chance for peace.

Prime Minister Modi's current visit to Kuwait is also certain to add a new chapter in the bilateral relations as both the countries have shared a common agenda of international peace and stability and have championed the cause at all the fora.

It is certain that both the leadership will view these developments to evolve a roadmap to defuse tension in the region.

Ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took over the leadership of India in 2014 he has proactively taken keen interest in shaping new protocol on foreign relations.

One of the major directions he steered India's foreign policy to ensure that Gulf region becomes an active extended neighborhood.

Kuwait is the last of the GCC nation that the Prime Minister is travelling after having covered all the five nations of the GCC earlier.

One significant change that is evident ever since Modi took over the leadership in 2014 is that the Gulf region has

become strategic partner as an extended neighborhood and becoming a foreign and security policy priority for India.

In fact, in one of his visits to Kuwait, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had clearly stated that his country is looking more on the region with whom we share close history and relation than looking beyond it.

Given this statement it was clear that relations with the Gulf which ranged from energy, trade and expatriate manpower has entered multi-layer exchanges. It has now evolved into a new framework that includes political relations and investment defence and security cooperation.

India's priorities not only include enhancing investment to boost economic growth but also addressing security concerns and enhancing its regional presence and influence.

From Prime Minister Modi 2015 visit to UAE and now to Kuwait, Modi has evolved a new strategy by giving all his visits a personal touch that transcends the contours of earlier diplomatic talks that relied more on conventional wisdom. That he goes on motor drive with the ruler of UAE, clearly amplify the relationship grow more on personal approach.

India has a large stake in the stability of the GCC nations where not only over 9 million Indian expatriates live and work but also that the GCC block remains India's largest trading partner.

During Covid 19 Phase One it was at Modi's personal directive that India rushed a team of doctors and paramedics to help and assist Kuwait during the pandemic and later rushing millions of vaccines.

Kuwait duly reciprocated by rushing medical oxygen tankers, medicines, and other equipment when India was battling Covid Phase Two.

It is these personal touches of Indian Prime Minister that go beyond the realm of traditional diplomacy.

The present visit to Kuwait is itself very significant as it will chart a new agenda between India and Kuwait besides the GCC with whom India had shared centuries old relationship and gave a new definition to extended neighborhood hitherto unexplored.



Dr. Al-Mekaimi

Other Voices

A legacy of strengthened Armenia-Kuwait relations

By Nasser Al-Hajeri

As Ambassador Sarmen Baghdasarian concludes his six-year tenure as the Armenian Ambassador to Kuwait, we reflect on his impactful legacy that has significantly strengthened the bond between Armenia and Kuwait. Ambassador Baghdasarian's time in Kuwait has been marked by an extraordinary dedication to fostering mutual understanding, advancing cooperation, and bridging opportunities for collaboration between the two nations.

One of his major achievements was deepening political dialogue, helping the two countries find common ground on critical global issues. Under his leadership, collaboration in the tourism sector flourished, including the introduction of direct seasonal flights between Armenia and Kuwait, a historic first that not only boosted tourism but also encouraged cultural exchange between the two nations.

Ambassador Baghdasarian also spearheaded efforts in broadening the scope of economic collaboration, creating platforms for partnerships between specialized companies from both countries. His role in facilitating successful investments

has left a lasting mark on economic relations, opening doors for future cooperation.

Notably, his work extended into humanitarian efforts. Ambassador Baghdasarian played a key role in fostering unprecedented cooperation between the Kuwaiti Red Crescent Society and the Armenian Red Cross, resulting in a relief campaign to support over 1,500 forcibly displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh. This initiative, among others, showcased his commitment to addressing global humanitarian challenges.

Additionally, the Ambassador's dedication to cultural diplomacy was evident through numerous events that showcased Armenian art and culture in Kuwait. With the involvement of the National Council of Arts, Culture, and Literature and various Armenian cultural associations, these initiatives highlighted the rich heritage of Armenia, bringing the two peoples closer together.

Furthermore, his efforts extended into technological collaboration, with a delegation from Armenia's Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises visiting Kuwait in 2023 to explore potential partnerships in the high-tech sector.

As Ambassador Baghdasarian departs, he leaves behind a legacy of strengthened ties, enhanced cooperation, and a lasting friendship between Armenia and Kuwait. His work has set the foundation for continued collaboration, ensuring that the relationship between the two nations will continue to thrive in the years to come.



Baghdasarian

Kuwait's Catholic Church congrats HH Amir on 1st 'versary of assuming rule

By Najeh Bilal

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Catholic Church in Kuwait extended its heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on the first anniversary of His Highness assuming power in the country.

Father Sulaiman Haifawe said a year of achievements has passed, marked by wise leadership and a sound vision that has helped strengthen national unity, as well as promote stability and development in Kuwait.

He affirmed that churches in Kuwait enjoy freedom of worship, and everyone, regardless of nationality, experiences stability, which confirms that Kuwait is a country of tolerance, love, high human values, and mutual cooperation among all.

Father Haifawe said, "As the Christmas holiday approaches on December 25, the message of love brought by Jesus Christ is meant for all people on Earth, urging us to live together in unity, brotherly love, and mutual respect."

He concluded by praying to God Almighty to grant His Highness the Amir continued success and good health to continue his blessed leadership journey, and to ensure the security and prosperity of Kuwait under His Highness's wise guidance.

KPC awards tender for closed work units to Midas Company

By Najeh Bilal

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Higher Purchasing Committee for Tenders at Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) and its subsidiaries has awarded the tender for the supply of closed work units with sliding doors to Midas International General Trading and Contracting Company at a value of KD 49,040.

The committee also announced the rejection of the bid submitted by Al-Daw Engineering General Trading and Contracting Company -- priced at KD 35,580 -- due to non-compliance with the terms and specifications.

never discriminating against any class in favor of another.

His Highness has taken several great steps to preserve the national identity and safeguard citizens' rights. He addressed many challenges with his firmness and wisdom to steer the nation in the right direction.

Dr. Al-Bahwa praised His Highness the Amir as a true embodiment of wisdom and strength, and expressed deep appreciation for the love the people have for him, which is evident in his humility displayed in various situations, reflecting his genuine affection for his people and his respect for everyone.

Meanwhile, Director of Farwaniya Hospital Dr. Ali Al-Mutairi extended his heartfelt congratulations to His Highness the Amir, reaffirming his loyalty and commitment to follow His Highness's wise leadership, which has proven to be the cornerstone of stability and comprehensive development for the beloved country.

He stressed that the first year of His Highness's reign has been marked by several achievements that have enhanced Kuwait's position both internally and externally.

Dr. Al-Mutairi praised His Highness as an example of steadfast leadership, wisdom, and hard work in fulfilling the aspirations of the Kuwaiti people.

He concluded by praying to God Almighty for continued success and guidance for His Highness, for the benefit of Kuwait and its citizens.

In addition, Consultant Ophthalmologist Dr. Yousef Al-Dhafiri extended his warmest congratulations and sincere felicitations to His Highness the Amir on the occasion of the first anniversary of his wise leadership.

He said, "The first year of His Highness's reign has been a model of wise management and unwavering national commitment in guiding the country towards a true renaissance that aligns with the visions and aspirations of the beloved Kuwaiti people."

MoH senior officials congratulate HH the Amir on first anniversary of assuming power

By Marwa Al-Bahrawi

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: A number of senior officials from the Ministry of Health extended their heartfelt congratulations to His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on the occasion of the first anniversary of His Highness assuming the reins of power in the country.

They affirmed that it has been a year marked by goodness, generosity, wisdom, and strength, and they prayed to God Almighty to grant His Highness continued success in all endeavors that

benefit Kuwait and its people.

In this regard, Director of the Health Promotion Department at the ministry Dr. Abeer Al-Bahwa offered her warm congratulations to His Highness the Amir on this special occasion, and described the past year as a year of wisdom and strength.

In a press statement, she said, "It has been a year of determination, fatherly leadership, and compassion. His Highness is a leader in every sense of the word. He is a seasoned politician who has brought all the people together under his care. He shares in the suffering of the oppressed and has always opened his doors to everyone,



Restoring Failaka isle could revive history, pull tourists

"ANYONE who passes by the late Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Bridge, may God have mercy on him, will see several artificial islands built under the wall of the bridge," columnist **Mohammad Salem Al-Balhan** wrote for **Al-Qabas** daily.

"The artificial islands built alongside the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Bridge, complete with paved roads, recreational spaces and coastal facilities for boats and yachts, stand as a testament to Kuwait's ambitious developmental projects.

"However, despite the substantial financial investment, these islands remain abandoned and unused. The reasons for their neglect remain a mystery, raising questions about the country's approach to utilizing such potential assets.

"The discussion surrounding these islands coincides with renewed interest in revitalizing Failaka Island, a site rich in history and cultural significance. Reports indicate that the government is preparing geographical plans to develop the island, potentially transforming it into a hub for recreation and tourism.

"This effort could mirror successful projects in other Gulf states, turning Failaka into a symbol of national pride and a destination for locals and tourists alike.

"Failaka Island's historical significance is profound. In the 1980s, a Greek delegation, led by the Vice President of the Republic and several ministers, visited Kuwait and explored the island.

"Upon their return to Athens, they praised the longstanding relationship between Greece and Kuwait. The Greek officials noted that Failaka's ancient Greek antiquities reflect the deep historical ties between the two nations.

"They highlighted the island's strategic geographical location, which once made it a pivotal point along major trade routes in the Gulf.

"According to the delegation, the name 'Failaka' is derived from the ancient Greek word 'Foulothia,' meaning 'beautiful view.' This etymology underscores the island's natural appeal, with its favorable climate and coasts ideal for sea vessels if the necessary ports were constructed.

"Recent news suggests the government is planning to establish the infrastructure necessary to make Failaka Island a premier destination for tourism and entertainment.

"However, there is growing concern that such initiatives must not falter like the underutilized artificial islands of the Sheikh Jaber Causeway or the historic land of Kazma, which, despite its ties to the renowned leader Khalid bin Al-Walid, has suffered from neglect.

"Failaka Island holds the potential to be a beacon of culture, history and leisure for Kuwait and the Gulf region. If managed well, it could host a variety of attractions, fostering tourism while preserving its archaeological and historical treasures.

"Ensuring the success of this project requires careful planning, investment and a commitment to long-term development.

"This is a critical moment for Kuwait to capitalize on its rich heritage and geographic advantages. By transforming Failaka into a vibrant cultural and recreational hub, the nation can celebrate its history while paving the way for a prosperous future."

Also:

"At the outset, I extend my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad on the occasion of the first anniversary of his leadership. His Highness has steered the ship of Kuwait with wisdom and skill," columnist Tareq Hamada wrote for **Al-Anba** daily.

"I pray to the Almighty to bless him with protection and guidance, making him a source of pride for our loyal people and may prosperity flourish under his auspicious reign.

"Over the years, the Ministry of Interior has made significant efforts to curb the phenomenon of reckless driving. Despite these efforts, the issue persisted.

"Reflecting on my tenure as Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior for Public Security Affairs and as the Director of Capital Security, I recall organizing campaigns where we often observed young individuals engaging in such dangerous behaviors. These actions not only endangered themselves but also posed grave risks to road users.

"When questioned, these youths often described their actions as hobbies or emulations of relatives in their forties, convinced that interventions or mediations would minimize any consequences they faced.

"This perception exacerbated the problem, leading us to believe it was an unsolvable issue.

"Under the directives of the First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior, Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef, the ministry has recently implemented unprecedented measures.

"These include impounding the vehicles of reckless drivers, referring offenders to the central prison, prosecuting them criminally and even publicizing their names through media and the ministry's official accounts.



Al-Balhan

represent a strategic approach that, God willing, will permanently eradicate this phenomenon in the near future.

"In addressing such dangerous behaviors, the media plays a crucial role as a deterrent. Publishing the names of violators and sharing footage of their vehicles being impounded serves as an effective preventive measure.

"Personally, I trust that the Ministry of Interior has taken the necessary steps to put an end to reckless driving. May God protect Kuwait from all harm.

"I extend my gratitude to the General Directorate of Public Relations and Security Media for responding to my suggestion to launch comprehensive awareness campaigns across traditional media, social media platforms and the ministry's official accounts.

"These campaigns should precede the enforcement of the new traffic law, providing ample time to inform the public. It is essential that these campaigns be conducted in multiple languages to ensure the message reaches everyone, emphasizing that traffic law violations could result in hefty fines and even imprisonment."

"Syria has a long history of patriotic figures, and the internal situation has begun to improve. To date, there have been no disputes over power among the military factions. The interim government is functioning effectively, and the living conditions of the people have improved to some extent. The government has promised to raise wages, and the exchange rate of the Syrian pound has strengthened against the dollar. The Central Bank is working on removing the banknotes bearing the image of Bashar al-Assad and plans to issue new currency. With these measures, Syria is on a path toward economic recovery," columnist **Ahmad Al-Dawas** wrote for **Al-Seyassah** daily.

"Syria holds great potential due to its proximity to and similarities with the southern European region. It has a relatively small population, a large land area, and a coastline, making it ideal for agriculture. The country also boasts a skilled workforce, and the Arab people are known for their kindness and hospitality. These factors, combined with Syria's rich cultural heritage, could attract tourists from Europe and beyond, generating significant revenues for the economy.

"Political events, however, are interconnected, like a chain reaction where one event leads to another, much like falling dominoes. Unfortunately, when there are casualties and cities are destroyed, the cost is paid for future generations. These developments have raised concerns among the people of the region, particularly in Iraq and Iran.

"In Iraq, voices have emerged expressing opposition to Iran's policies. Iraqi writer Ibrahim al-Zubaidi said in brief, "We, the sons of the Iraqi generation of the 50s, 60s and beyond, have witnessed the fall of militias that once seemed invincible. Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed, and the bravest of militants discarded their weapons and military uniforms and disappeared from sight. The religious parties and their Iran-aligned militias have since achieved complete control over the state's institutions, security, military, and intelligence. But their fate now lies in the hands of the Iraqis particularly those who have been wronged, whose sanctities were violated, whose homes and businesses were seized, and whose fathers or relatives disappeared. They will not act any differently than their Syrian brothers did in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and, finally Damascus. It seems the ruling regime in Iran, whether it likes it or not, has finally faced one of two options: either to resist and fall due to an external force or an internal upheaval, or face both challenges simultaneously."

"We have repeatedly stated that Iran has missed many opportunities over the past 40 years, and we have advised its political leadership that it would be better to open a new chapter in relations with the Arab world, and encourage investments from the Gulf, Europe, and the United States to develop sectors like tourism, agriculture, and industry. This would create millions of job opportunities for Iranians, raise their standard of living, and enable Iran to achieve significant development, and it may even compete with European countries in tourism and attracting investment.

"However, Iran chose a medieval approach, intervening in the affairs of Arab countries, which led to its decline and worsened conditions for its people. Today, power is defined by economic strength, not political influence, as evidenced by the progress of South Korea and the stagnation of North Korea.

"We are not surprised that the world honors the individual who stirred the stagnant waters and brought stability to the region. Perhaps, in the future, the world will even praise him, and it would not surprise us if he were awarded the Nobel Prize. You know exactly who I mean."

"— Compiled by PFX Fernanades / Mahmoud Attiyeh



Fire-fighters spraying foam and water on the fire.

KFF photo

Huge material loss in warehouse fire

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Fire broke out in a warehouse building in Jahra that contained construction materials, including paints, wood, and a blacksmith workshop. No casualties were reported.

According to a press release issued by Kuwait Fire Force (KFF), when the Control Room of KFF received information about the warehouse on fire, firefighters from Jahra, Jahra Crafts, Mishref, Sulaibikhat, and

Istiqlal fire stations rushed to the location and extinguished the fire before it spread further. The firefighting operation was supervised by the KFF Chief Major General Talal Mohammad Al-Roumi, with the on-site leadership of the Deputy Chief of the Firefighting Sector Brigadier General Ahmad Haif Hamoud.

Investigations are ongoing to determine the cause of the fire.

Docs erase smart fingerprint app, citing privacy concerns

Reassurance sought on safety of MoH program

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 21: Several doctors have uninstalled the smart fingerprint application, which the Ministry of Health began implementing on an experimental basis from December 4 to January 4, in preparation for its official launch on January 5, reports **Al-Jarida** daily quoting informed sources.

They revealed that many doctors removed the application from their phones during the current trial period, citing concerns about privacy violations.

The sources expressed concerns about the application's continuous tracking and monitoring of doctors outside of official working hours on a 24/7 basis.

They raised questions about whether the Ministry of Health might face challenges in implementing the fingerprint system, given the concerns of doctors who have chosen to delete

the program.

The sources affirmed the need for the ministry to reassure doctors and all employees about the safety of the program, and offer guarantees that their privacy will not be compromised.

They urged the ministry to launch awareness campaigns and initiatives that clearly explain the program and its mechanisms, and ensure doctors and all technical and administrative staff feel confident about its security and privacy protections.

The sources questioned whether the Ministry of Health had fully considered the unique nature of doctors' work, particularly their need to attend meetings outside of official working hours. These may include participation in higher committees for treatment abroad, meetings with external entities, or other health-care-related gatherings outside their regular workplaces. This raises concerns about how the smart fingerprint system will be applied in such cases.

They highlighted concerns among some doc-

tors regarding the security and safety of storing their private information and data, as doctors' files contain sensitive details, including their personal information, vacation records, salaries, and other confidential data.

The sources raised questions about the origin of the program, whether it was developed internally by the ministry's Information Systems Department or purchased from an external provider.

They also questioned the necessity of requiring doctors and employees to take repeated photographs, stressing that this step seems redundant since they already provide a fingerprint scan, sometimes multiple times.

It is worth noting that the Ministry of Health has introduced the smart fingerprint system for all employees, including doctors, nurses, administrators, pharmacists, engineers, and other workers. The trial phase is part of the ministry's digital transformation strategy, aimed at improving efficiency and in line with the highest standards of governance.

Video clip leads to arrest of drifters at wedding

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Traffic and Operations Sector has apprehended four individuals who appeared in a video, which went viral on social media, driving recklessly and dangerously outside a wedding hall in Shaab and endangering both their lives and the lives of others, reports **Al-Anba** daily.

According to a press statement issued by the Ministry of Interior, these individuals have been arrested and transferred to the Central Prison in accordance with the directives of the First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef.

Following a thorough investigation by the Security Control Department, in coordination with the Hawally Rescue Police Department, the reckless individuals seen in the viral video were arrested. Their vehicles were impounded, and the necessary legal actions were taken. A case was registered under No. 62/2024 for

"causing an accident that damaged state property" and another under No. 63/2024 for "causing an accident that damaged state property and caused injury by mistake." The individuals were subsequently referred to the Central Prison.

The Ministry of Interior affirmed its commitment to strictly enforce the law against violators who endanger their lives and the lives of others.

It urged everyone to adhere to traffic laws for ensuring the safety of lives and properties, stressing that the safety of citizens and residents remains a top priority.

"I swear I will kill you": The investigator at Maidan Hawally and Shaab Police Stations has ordered to summon a Gulf national, whose age is unknown, in connection with a case involving "severe beating, public threats, and intentional destruction", reports **Al-Anba** daily.

A 44-year-old Kuwaiti woman had filed the case, stating that she had been beaten and threatened by a Gulf national.

She explained that the accused had knocked on the door of her apartment in Hawally, Block 7, and when she refused, he broke the lock of the door and managed to enter. He then beat her with an iron rod made from a clothes hanger and threatened her by saying, "I swear to God I will finish you off and throw you from the second floor... I swear to God I will kill you."

Two rob sponsor: Based on the order of the investigator at Shamiya Police Station, two domestic workers, aged 23 and 24, were placed on the arrest lists for stealing a gold and diamond bracelet and fleeing to an unknown destination, reports **Al-Anba** daily.

According to security sources, a 1964-born Kuwaiti woman reported

the theft at Shamiya Police Station, explaining that the two workers had been allowed into her bedroom for cleaning, and they stole the bracelet. A theft case has been registered.

Cannot pay car rent: A 1974-born Kuwaiti woman has confessed to not returning a rented vehicle and failing to pay the outstanding rent due to severe financial difficulties. She stated that she intends to pay the full rent amount once her circumstances improve. The vehicle has since been seized from her, and a case has been registered, reports **Al-Anba** daily.

A company that rents and sells used cars had filed a complaint at Maidan Hawally Police Station, accusing the woman of renting a vehicle four months ago and refusing to return it or settle the rent. The case has been forwarded for investigation, and the defendant was summoned for questioning.

Liquor destroyed

15 kg drugs, 10,000 pills seized from 19 persons

By Munif Nayef

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff and Agencies

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Drug Control General Department (DCGD), under the leadership of Brigadier General Mohammad Qabazard, has continued its successful operations against drug and alcohol traffickers. In recent raids, 19 individuals of different nationalities were arrested, and 15 kilograms of narcotics and 10,000 narcotic pills were seized from their possession.

According to the Security Media Department of the Ministry of Interior, the operation also resulted in the confiscation of 30 bottles of liquor and four unlicensed firearms. The suspects, along with the seized items, have been referred to the Drugs and Alcohol Prosecution for legal action.

DCGD has affirmed its commitment to continue exerting efforts to target and arrest anyone involved in the trafficking or distribution of illegal substances.

According to security sources, the department has increased its vigilance and surveillance, particularly as authorities anticipate a surge in the illegal trade of narcotics and alcohol typically witnessed during the period of the New Year celebrations.

Liquor cache destroyed: Based on ministerial resolution No. 2361/2024 issued by the First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Saud Al-Sabah, which calls for the reconstitution of a committee to destroy liquor seized in misdemeanor cases with final judgments, the Ministry of Interior announced the destruction of 6,828 bottles of imported liquor on Thursday, Dec 19, reports **Al-Seyassah** daily.

Director General of the General Department of Investigations Major General Dr. Faisal Al-Mekrad assigned the head and members of the Alcohol Destruction Committee for this operation, which was carried out in collaboration with the Kuwait Municipality, the Drugs Control General Department, the General Department of Supply and Provision, the General Department of Rescue Police, and the General Department of Security Relations and Media. The liquor bottles had been seized as part of case No. 24/2023 involving drug misdemeanors.



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Polish envoy stresses commitment to strengthen bilateral ties with Kuwait

Ambassador Cholewa outlines future goals



KUNA photo

Minister of Youth Al-Mutairi welcomes the visiting UAE Minister of Sports.

Minister Al-Mutairi receives UAE, Oman sports ministers

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (KUNA): Minister of Information and Culture, Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Chairman of the Organizing Committee of Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji 26) Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi received on Saturday the visiting UAE Minister of Sports Dr. Ahmad Al-Flasi who arrived in the country to attend the tournament inauguration.

Minister Al-Mutairi in a statement welcomed the visiting minister whose presence in the country mirrored the brotherly relations and distinguished cooperation between the two brotherly states.

The Gulf tournament launched more than a century ago has played a major role in bolstering the bonds among the GCC countries' youth, Minister Al-Mutairi said.

Minister of Information and Culture, Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Chairman of the Organizing Committee of Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji 26) Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi received on Saturday the visiting Omani Minister of Sports and Youth Ziyad bin Haitham bin Tareq Al-Saeed who arrived in the country to attend the tournament inauguration.

By Fares Al-Abdan
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Ambassador Michal Cholewa, the new head of mission at the Polish Embassy in Kuwait, described the relationship between Kuwait and Poland as excellent and historic, as the diplomatic ties have been in place for over 60 years.

In a meeting with representatives from local media, Ambassador Cholewa recalled his country's active participation in the liberation of Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion.

He expressed his commitment to further strengthening the friendly relations between Poland and Kuwait. Ambassador Cholewa stated that he aims to encourage high-level political dialogue, as well as enhance trade, investment, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.

He expressed his happiness about the fact that Poland has increasingly become a popular and distinctive travel destination for Kuwaitis traveling to Europe in recent years.

Ambassador Cholewa indicated that the total volume of trade between Poland and Kuwait reached \$430 million in 2023.

He highlighted the presence of several Kuwaiti in-

vestments in Poland, and expressed his intention to further increase these investments during his tenure in Kuwait.

Ambassador Cholewa explained that Poland is home to a number of prominent agricultural and food experts. This month, the embassy participated as a gold sponsor in the Kuwait International Agriculture and Food Exhibition. The event served as an opportunity to enhance trade cooperation with Kuwait and the Gulf region in the agricultural and food sectors, with the embassy presenting several Polish companies at the exhibition.



Cholewa

He said, "Poland is a food-secure country and one of the largest food producers in Europe. It is a stable trading partner, known for its high food quality. Poland supports Kuwait's strategy to diversify its sources of food and agricultural imports."

The ambassador also praised Kuwait's pioneering and distinguished role in resolving crises and establishing peace.

He highlighted that Poland shares several common values with Kuwait, including a strong commitment to respecting international law, adding that Poland actively participates in international operations and

maintains naval forces in Bahrain for contributing to regional stability.

Ambassador Cholewa expressed hope that the military cooperation agreement signed between the two countries in September 2023 will create opportunities to further support and enhance bilateral cooperation, particularly in the area of military training.

He said thousands of Kuwaiti tourists visit Poland every year, following the launch of a direct flight route between Kuwait and Krakow, which played a major role in increasing tourist numbers.

The ambassador expressed optimism about expanding direct flight options between the two countries to include more Polish cities.

In response to a question about his perspective on regional events, Ambassador Cholewa affirmed that respect for international law is a cornerstone of his country's foreign policy, adding that he anticipates high-level mutual official visits between the two countries in 2025.

He revealed that Poland will assume the presidency of the European Union in January 2025, and Kuwait will take on the presidency of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which he believes will provide an excellent opportunity to further strengthen cooperation and foster more meetings between the two countries.

Regarding academic cooperation between the two countries, Ambassador Cholewa affirmed that Poland has a high-quality education system known for its efficiency, and is welcoming to Kuwaiti students who wish to study at its universities.

MoSA dissolves 13 violating civil society groups

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Following a presentation by the Minister of Social Affairs, Family, and Childhood Affairs Dr. Amthal Al-Huwailah to the Council of Ministers yesterday, the Council approved the dissolution and liquidation of several public benefit associations, after it was determined that these associations had failed to comply with the legal regulations governing their operations, reports Al-Jarida daily quoting informed sources from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

They explained that a ministerial decision will soon be issued to dissolve a total of 13 associations, ranging from professional, cultural, and social sectors, and liquidate their assets, because these associations have not been benefiting society or achieving their stated objectives.

These organizations had been repeatedly warned by the ministry to rectify their situations and avoid violations. However, there was no significant response or corrective action from them. As a result, the ministry took action to dissolve these associations, following their review by the Committee for Publicity, Evaluation, and Dissolution of Public Benefit Associations and

Charities. The committee examined their bylaws and approved the decision. The Civil Society Administration submitted a memorandum with the names of these associations to Minister Al-Huwailah, who is now taking the necessary legal steps to dissolve them and liquidate their funds.

These associations violated article 27 of law No. 24/1962, which governs clubs and public benefit associations. They have not carried out any activities or provided meaningful services to the community for years. They also failed to submit their estimated budgets or financial reports for the past years and had their bank accounts closed long ago. Some associations have not even used the designated automated correspondence system to connect with the ministry, further highlighting their ineffectiveness and lack of seriousness.

The sources said, "The funds deposited in these associations' accounts will be transferred to the ministry following their liquidation. The ministry will then determine the appropriate recipient for these funds, in accordance with Article 25 of the model bylaws. The ministry is committed to enforcing the law against associations that fail to serve the public and provide tangible benefits to society."

Kuwait's top philanthropists recognized

18th edition of Al-Baghli Award honors Obedient Child of 2024

By Fares Al-Abdan

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: "Today, we celebrate the winners of the 18th Al-Baghli Award for the Obedient Child for the year 2024, which highlights the importance of the role of individuals and institutions of civil society in promoting sustainable development," says the Minister of Social Affairs, Family, and Childhood Affairs Dr. Amthal Al-Huwailah.

She affirmed that the award ceremony symbolizes loyalty and gratitude, and aims to honor a group of Kuwaiti philanthropists who have made valuable contributions to serving their nation and reinforcing Kuwait's position as a beacon of humanity.

The minister made these remarks during the closing ceremony of the 18th edition of the Al-Baghli Award for the Obedient Child, held yesterday at Al-Baraka Hall in the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Farwaniya. The event was organized by the Ibrahim Taher Al-Baghli Foundation for the Obedient Child Award.

Dr. Al-Huwailah stated that the Ibrahim Taher Al-Baghli Foundation represents a distinguished model of community partnership.

She said, "The foundation was established based on our deep-rooted Arab and Islamic values, with the aim of honoring parents and caring for the elderly, to whom the state dedicates considerable attention, as part of the wise leadership's efforts to ensure they live with dignity.

Volunteer work in Kuwait embodies the spirit of social solidarity, a core aspect of the Kuwaiti character. Social values are a crucial foundation for achieving sustainable development. Through this fruitful collaboration between the ministry and the Al-Baghli Foundation, we aim to harness these values to provide quality services and innovative programs that contribute to improving the lives of members of society, particularly the elderly.

In line with our responsibility at the Ministry of Social Affairs, we have been keen about supporting the Al-Baghli Obedient Child Award since its inception in 2007. Over the past 18 years, this award has played a key role in raising community awareness about the importance of honoring parents and caring for the elderly. This reflects our dedication to developing programs and initiatives that meet the aspirations of our society.



Al-Seyassah photo
Minister of Social Affairs during her patronage of the conclusion of the 'Al-Baghli Award'.

I extend my deepest gratitude and appreciation to the political leadership for its generous care and ongoing support for the elderly. We remain steadfast in our commitment to working toward the realization of its noble aspirations."

In his speech, the Vice President of the Ibrahim Taher Al-Baghli Foundation Raed Ibrahim Al-Baghli, representing his father Ibrahim Taher Al-Baghli, expressed his honor in sponsoring the Al-Baghli Obedient Child Award, which is a key project of the Ibrahim Taher Al-Baghli Foundation.

He stressed that the award aims to promote the virtue of filial piety within society, which aligns with one of the foundation's core goals - to establish social security and boost the positive upbringing of children.

Al-Baghli said, "Thus, we have embraced our moral and societal responsibility by supporting all the activities and events of the award since its inception in 2007, up until its 18th edition in 2024".

He indicated that the enthusiasm and engagement of both individuals and civil society institutions in the award's activities reflect the societal awareness of the importance of honoring parents and caring for the elderly.

Al-Baghli stressed that the foundation is committed to ensuring a dignified life for the elderly and promoting filial piety across the nation, in coordination with various individuals, civil society organizations, and entities in the governmental, charitable, and private sectors.



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Director General of Mubarak Al-Kabeer Educational District, Nada Al-Mutairi, with the region's officials and school principals.

Mubarak Al-Kabeer Educational District strengthens policies on social media use

By Abdulrahman Al-Shimmari

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Nada Al-Mutairi, Director General of the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Educational District, chaired a significant meeting yesterday with district officials and school principals from various educational levels.

The meeting addressed vital educational, administrative and teaching directives, focusing on improving interactions with students and their parents, as well as tackling challenges within the educational environment.

Al-Mutairi emphasized the need to address inappropriate practices by some staff members, who have been using students

and school facilities for social media content.

She made it clear that such actions are unacceptable and that legal consequences will follow for those responsible, noting that measures have already been taken against violators.

The Director General also outlined a field plan for district officials to visit examination committees at the intermediate and secondary levels.

The purpose of these visits is to monitor exam progress and ensure a conducive environment for students. She further stressed the importance of enhancing electronic communication between the region, schools and the ministry to improve work efficiency and speed.

LOCAL

KU introduces new Data Science and Artificial Intelligence program

By Abdulrahman Al-Shammari
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Acting Dean of the College of Life Sciences at Kuwait University Dr. Nawaf Al-Hajri has announced the launching of the new Data Science and Artificial Intelligence (AI) program, set to admit students in the 2025/2026 academic year.

Al-Hajri clarified that this will be the only program at Kuwait University dedicated to artificial intelligence. He said the establishment of this program is supported by the Kuwait University administration, and aligns with both global and local trends towards digital transformation in modern technology. "It also reflects the growing importance of data science and AI, aimed at preparing a skilled workforce equipped

with the analytical and technical expertise needed to enhance decision-making processes," he added.

He pointed out that the program will play a key role in advancing Kuwait's Vision 2035, which seeks to build a knowledge-based, technology-driven economy. "By fostering expertise in AI and data analysis, the program will contribute significantly to the development of crucial sectors across the country," he explained.

He also stressed that the new program is a critical step in reinforcing Kuwait University's position as a leading educational institution. "It will provide distinguished academic offerings that meet the evolving demands of both the local and international job markets," he concluded.

PAHW awards tenders for 6,455 new homes in affordable housing project

Initiative gains momentum in Salmi

By Mohammed Al-Enezi
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Public Authority for Housing Welfare (PAHW) revealed that it has floated four tenders to construct and complete 6,455 houses as part of the affordable housing project in Salmi, which will serve as an alternative to Sulaibiya and Taima.

PAHW explained in a report that the total val-

ue of the project, which includes the construction, completion, maintenance of homes, public buildings, and asphalt surface layer works, amounts to KD 529 million.

Bids for the first tender, which is for the construction, completion, and maintenance of 1,985 houses, was submitted by seven companies. It was awarded to the company with the second-lowest bid of KD 163 million.

The second tender, which is for the construction of 1,608 houses, received bids from ten companies and was awarded to the lowest bid of KD 108.6 million.

The third tender, which is for constructing,

completing, and maintaining 1,700 homes, was submitted by eight companies and was awarded to the company with the lowest bid of KD 144.9 million.

The fourth tender, which is for the construction of 1,162 homes, also received bids from eight companies and it was awarded to the lowest bid of KD 112.1 million.

According to informed sources, the infrastructure projects for the affordable housing tenders have been completed, particularly after PAHW awarded the first two tenders earlier this August, which will complete 3,345 houses within the project.

KM extends deadline for 'flagpole' tender

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Kuwait Municipality has announced the extension of the closing date for tender No. 13/2024/2025, related to the supply, installation

and maintenance of flagpoles and their accessories, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

The new closing date is set for Jan 27. The preliminary meeting

for the tender will be held at 10:00 am on January 7 at the Decoration and Flag Raising Works Control Building in the Shuwaikh Industrial Area.

KIB announces monthly draw winners of 'Win with KIB Rewards' campaign

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Kuwait International Bank (KIB) has announced the draw winners of its 'Win with KIB Rewards' campaign for the month of November. Running monthly until the end of the year, the campaign aims to reward customers who use KIB's Banking App to open an Al Dirwaza account, issue a Multicurrency prepaid card, or open a deposit investment of any kind. The seventh batch of winners who won 3,000 reward points each are Abdullah Murtadha Alsafar, Hassan Mazhar Moutlaq, Feras Saad Khalifah Alsulaiman, Ahmad Habeeb Mohammad AbedAli, and Yusouf Haidar Hamed Groof.

In this regard, Nawaf Al-Kharyef, Assistant General Manager of the Retail Banking Department at KIB, said: "We would like to congratulate the seventh group of winners under this campaign, which marks an opportunity to reward our customers for their loyalty. We will continue to provide innovative banking solutions that meet their aspirations and fulfill all their needs, enhancing their overall banking experience and lifestyle, in line with our 'Bank for Life' slogan." He added: "At KIB, we remain committed to adopting a comprehensive strategy aimed at providing the best banking benefits, particularly with regard to the KIB Rewards Program, in addition to encouraging all customer



KIB's Nawaf Al-Kharyef

segments to use our digital platforms to complete their financial transactions with utmost convenience and ease."

Customers can qualify for and participate in the draws by using the KIB Banking App to open an AlDirwaza account, issue a Multicurrency prepaid card, or open a deposit investment of any kind. Winners can redeem their reward points on KIB's rewards online market platform, which features an extensive list of participating outlets,

including electronics services, retail products, and e-vouchers, and much more.

In addition to this and numerous other campaigns, KIB offers a wide variety of products with unparalleled benefits. Those who open an Al Dirwaza account can enjoy weekly and monthly draws, with one chance to enter the draw for every KD 1 deposited, culminating in a Mega Draw. The Multicurrency prepaid card offers a great deal of flexibility, allowing customers to use six currencies simultaneously and choose from a total of 12 currencies. Additionally, deposits starting from KD 1,000 are given competitive profit rates.

The Bank encourages its customers to stay informed about the campaign's latest developments and news, as well as to learn more about the KIB Rewards Program, by following its social media accounts and visiting its website.

It is worth mentioning that KIB spares no effort in launching initiatives and campaigns that reward its customers, while continuously striving to enhance the quality of its banking products and services. The Bank aims to elevate its banking experience by complementing digital financial solutions with attractive rewards, maintaining its leading position as a reliable partner in the market.

Continued from Page 1

KNG Chief

on his recent appointment as Chief of the National Guard and for gaining the confidence of Kuwait's political leadership.

Sheikh Mubarak expressed his gratitude to Ambassador Shaltout for the congratulatory message, underscoring the importance of the bilateral relationship between the two nations.

This meeting highlights the ongoing diplomatic engagement between Kuwait and Egypt, reflecting the strong ties that continue to characterize their relationship.

KOC to

This technology plays a major role in oil extraction, as KOC has collaborated with the West Kuwait Field Development Group, the Innovation and Technology Group, and the Research and Technology Team for Subsurface Facilities. Together, they have applied this technology in injection operations to improve performance and boost production.

They stated that the use of this technology plays a major role in improving the soil, as it gives very high production at a lower cost. The introduction of this technology into the company's operations is a groundbreaking development, as it works to improve injection in reservoirs with low permeability and high production of associated water.

The sources affirmed that the oil fields in northern Kuwait contain vast reserves of heavy oil, and efforts are underway to extract it.

They explained that KOC's adoption of modern technologies is in line with the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation's 2040 strategy. The company is moving forward with various initiatives to rely on petroleum materials that meet global environmental standards, especially as most markets importing oil from Kuwait prioritize clean and eco-friendly petroleum products.

Food, clothing

The education index increased by 0.79 percent, while the restaurants and hotels category had a 2.05 percent rise. The miscellaneous goods and services group experienced a substantial 5.54 percent annual increase.

Excluding food and beverages, the overall inflation rate in Kuwait rose by 1.87 percent annually and by 0.08 percent month-on-month. If housing services are excluded, inflation increased by 3.23 percent annually and 0.21 percent compared to October.

The main price hikes are attributed to the food and beverage category due to higher costs in key subcategories such as grains and bread, meat and poultry, fish and seafood, dairy, cheese and eggs, oils and fats, fresh fruits, vegetables, sugar and beverages.

Meanwhile, cigarettes and tobacco prices remained stable. The rise in the clothing and footwear group was primarily due to increased prices in both clothing and footwear items. The housing services index remained steady, but the home furnishings and maintenance equipment group saw price hikes, particularly in home appliances and tools and equipment for home and garden maintenance.

The increase in the communications group was driven by higher prices for telephone and fax equipment, while the rise in the entertainment and culture group was linked to higher prices for audio and video equipment; as well as books, newspapers and stationery.

Kuwait sends

The planeload consists of medical equipment, medication as well as essential items for infants and mothers, he clarified.

The Lebanese diplomat hailed Kuwaiti action in providing assistance to his home country saying it is but an extension its long lasting humanitarian efforts.

Amir bestows

The honoring ceremony was held at Bayan Palace this morning.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal exchanged pleasantries with the Indian Prime Minister during the honoring ceremony, stating, "This is our highest medal and you have earned it."

We have maintained bonds with the Republic of India for hundreds of years."

The Indian premier replied, "Your Highness this is an honoring for 1.4 billion Indians and I dedicate this great medal to the old friendship between the two countries."

Also on Sunday, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace on Sunday His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah also received at Bayan Palace on Sunday His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his accompanying delegation, currently on an official visit to the country.

The Kuwaiti and Indian sides discussed the relations between the State of Kuwait and the Republic of India, means of promoting these ties, key issues on the regional and international arenas.

Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah and senior State officials attended the session.

On behalf of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah on Sunday held a luncheon at Bayan Palace, honoring the visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his official delegation.

Major road repairs begin in Al-Qasr & Jahra Governorate

By Mohammed Ghanem
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Minister of Public Works Dr. Noura Al-Mashaan has announced the commencement of extensive road repair and maintenance in the Al-Qasr area of Jahra Governorate, as part of the new radical maintenance contracts for highways and internal roads.

Dr. Al-Mashaan stated that work teams from the Ministry will oversee the maintenance process, which will prioritize the most affected areas first, followed by less damaged roads, ensuring close supervision, oversight, and regular follow-ups.

She emphasized the Ministry's commitment to adhering to approved technical specifications and timelines to ensure the maintenance work is completed with the highest quality and efficiency.

Dr. Al-Mashaan also expressed her gratitude for the support and guidance of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishaal Al-Ahmad, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmed Al-Abdullah.

Fahd Al-Mutairi, the supervisor of the second scope contract for Jahra Governorate, shared that the current maintenance work includes cleaning the rain and sewage networks in preparation for asphalt repair.

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Kuwait Fund For Arab Economic Development

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Important Dates & Address:

Pre-Qualification Document Amount	500 000 CFA
Pre-Qualification Opening date	24 December 2024
Pre-Qualification Submission date & Time	22 January 2025, 12 00
Pre-Qualification Opening date & Time	22 January 2024, 13 00
Name & Address of the Offices	Dr. Fatima A. A. Haggag, Project Coordination National Cancer Control Programme, BP 440 Rondpoint Hamama Quartier Ndjari, Ministry of Public Health and National Solidarity, Republic of Chad, Phone: +235 66 66 65 98, Email: fatimahaggag@pnlcc.org

Bidders Requirements :

- Minimum average annual construction turnover of US\$ Ten Million USD (\$10,000,000/-) calculated as total certified payments received for contracts in progress and/or completed within the last Five (5) years
- Experience under construction contracts in the role of prime contractor, JV member, sub-contractor, or management contractor for at least the last Ten (10) years
- At least Two (2) similar Contracts executed as a prime contractor, joint venture member, management contractor or sub-contractor with values of each project of USD 10,000,000.
- Experiences in construction and equipping medical & non-medical equipment's of 100 plus Beds regionally and internationally, maintenance of hospital buildings, construction of more than 10,000 m2 buildings, engaging in DB contracts in the last ten (10) years.

Al Dirwaza Account

The Biggest Number of Winners in Kuwait



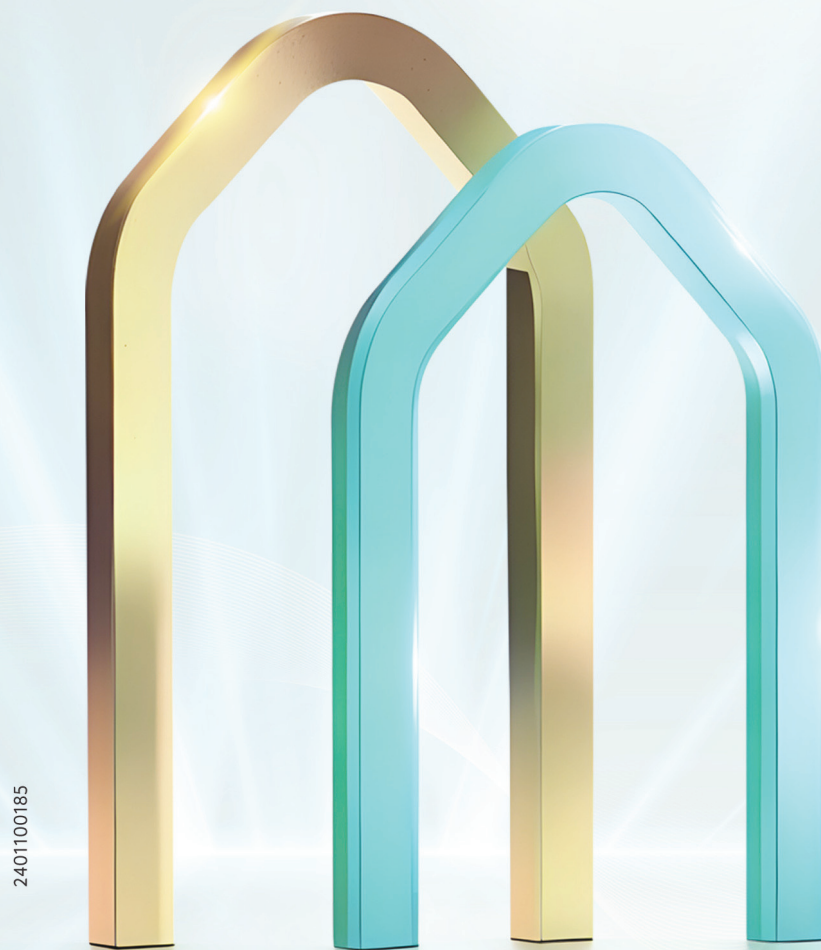
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Saudi doctor under investigation; five killed and over 200 injured

German authorities received warning on Christmas Market attack suspect



People outside Magdeburg Cathedral follow a memorial service for victims of Friday's Christmas Market attack, where a car drove into a crowd, in Magdeburg, Germany, Saturday, Dec. 21, 2024. (AP)

MAGDEBURG, Germany, Dec 22, (AP): More details emerged Sunday about those killed when a man drove a car at speed through a Christmas market in Germany, while mourners continued to place flowers and other tributes at the site of the attack.

Police in Magdeburg, the central city where the attack took place on Friday evening, said that the victims were four women ranging in age from 45 to 75, as well as a 9-year-old boy they had spoken of a day earlier.

Authorities said 200 people were injured, including 41 in serious condition. They were being treated in multiple hospitals in Magdeburg, which is about 130 kilometers (80 miles) west of Berlin, and beyond.

Authorities have identified the suspect in the Magdeburg attack as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency.

The suspect was on Saturday evening brought before a judge, who behind closed doors ordered that he be kept in custody pending a possible indictment.

Police haven't publicly named the suspect, but several German news outlets identified him as Taleb A., withholding his last name in line with privacy laws, and reported that he was a specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy.

Describing himself as a former Muslim, the suspect appears to have been an active user of the social media platform X, shar-

ing dozens of tweets and retweets daily focusing on anti-Islam themes, criticizing the religion and congratulating Muslims who had left the faith.

He also accused German authorities of failing to do enough to combat what he referred to as the "Islamification of Europe."

The horror triggered by yet another act of mass violence in Germany make it likely that migration will remain a key issue as German heads toward an early election on Feb. 23.

The far-right Alternative for Germany party had already been polling strongly amid a societal backlash against the large numbers of refugees and migrants who have arrived in Germany over the past decade.

Right-wing figures from across Europe have criticized German authorities for having allowed high levels of migration in the past and for what they see as security failures now.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who is known for a strong anti-migration position going back years, used the attack in Germany to lash out at the European Union's migration policies.

At an annual press conference in Budapest on Saturday, Orban insisted that "there is no doubt that there is a link between the changed world in Western Europe, the migration that flows there, especially illegal migration and terrorist acts."

Orban vowed to "fight back" against the EU migration policies "because Brussels wants Magdeburg to happen to Hungary, too."

Lawmakers approve temporary funding plan

Biden signs bill to avoid shutdown, secures disaster aid and farm relief

WASHINGTON, Dec 22, (AP): President Joe Biden signed a bill into law Saturday that averts a government shutdown, bringing a final close to days of upheaval after Congress approved a temporary funding plan just past the deadline and refused President-elect Donald Trump's core debt demands in the package.

The deal funds the government at current levels through March 14 and provides \$100 billion in disaster aid and \$10 billion in agricultural assistance to farmers.

"This agreement represents a compromise, which means neither side got everything it wanted," Biden said in a statement, adding that "it ensures the government can continue to operate at full capacity. That's good news for the American people."

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., had insisted lawmakers would "meet our obligations" and not allow federal operations to close. But the outcome at the end of a tumultuous week was uncertain after Trump had insisted the deal include an increase in the government's borrowing limit. If not, he had said, then let the closures "start now."

Johnson's revised plan was approved 366-34, and it was passed by the Senate by a 85-11 vote after midnight. By then, the White House said it had ceased shutdown preparations.

"There will be no government shutdown," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

Johnson, who had spoken to Trump after the House vote, said the compromise was "a good outcome for the country" and that the president-elect "was certainly happy about this outcome, as well."

The final product was the third attempt from Johnson, the beleaguered speaker, to achieve one of the basic requirements of the federal government - keeping it open. The difficulties raised questions about whether Johnson will be able to keep his job, in the face of angry Republican colleagues, and work alongside Trump and his billionaire ally Elon Musk, who was calling the legislative plays from afar.

The House is scheduled to elect the next speaker on Jan. 3, 2025, when the new Congress convenes. Republicans will have an exceedingly narrow majority, 220-215, leaving Johnson little margin for error as he tries to win the speaker's gavel.

One House Republican, Rep. Andy Harris of Maryland, criticized Republicans for the deficit spending in the bill and said he was now "undecided" about the GOP leadership. Others are signaling unhappiness with Johnson as well.

Yet Trump's last-minute debt limit demand was almost an impossible ask, and Johnson had almost no choice but to work around that pressure. The speaker knew there wouldn't be enough support within the slim Republican majority alone to pass any funding package because many Republican



President Joe Biden speaks during a Hanukkah reception in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP)

deficit hawks prefer to cut the federal government and would not allow more debt.

Instead, the Republicans, who will have full control of the White House, House and Senate in the new year, with big plans for tax cuts and other priorities, are showing they must routinely rely on Democrats for the votes needed to keep up with the routine operations of government.

The federal debt stands at roughly \$36 trillion, and the spike in inflation after the coronavirus pandemic has pushed up the government's borrowing costs such that debt service next year will exceed spending on national security. The last time lawmakers raised the debt limit was June 2023. Rather than raise the limit by a dollar amount, lawmakers suspended the debt limit through Jan. 1, 2025.

There is no need to raise that limit right now because the Treasury Department can begin using what it calls "extraordinary measures" to ensure that America does not default on its debts. Some estimate these accounting maneuvers could push the default deadline to the summer of 2025. But that's

what Trump wanted to avoid because an increase would be needed while he was president. GOP leaders said the debt ceiling would be debated as part of tax and border packages in the new year. Republicans made a so-called handshake agreement to raise the debt limit at that time while also cutting \$2.5 trillion in spending over 10 years.

It was essentially the same deal that flopped Thursday night - minus Trump's debt demand. But it's far smaller than the original deal Johnson struck with Democratic and Republican leaders - a 1,500-page bill that Trump and Musk rejected, forcing him to start over. It was stuffed with a long list of other bills - including much-derided pay raises for lawmakers - but also other measures with broad bipartisan support that now have a tougher path to becoming law.

Trump, who has not yet been sworn into office, is showing the power but also the limits of his sway with Congress, as he intervenes and orchestrates affairs from Mar-a-Lago alongside Musk, who is heading up the new Department of Government Efficiency.

America

'Apprentice' producer Burnett tapped as special envoy to UK

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla., Dec 22, (Agencies): **Mark Burnett**, the power producer who helped reintroduce Donald Trump to a national television audience with "The Apprentice," is being tapped by the president-elect as special envoy to the United Kingdom in his upcoming administration.

"With a distinguished career in television production and business, Mark brings a unique blend of diplomatic acumen and international recognition to this important role," Trump announced Saturday.

Burnett, who was born in London, helped produce hits like "Survivor" and "The Voice," but is perhaps best known for teaming up with Trump for "The Apprentice," which first aired on NBC in 2004. Trump had been well-known in real estate and pop culture circles for decades. But the show helped again make him a household name - though Trump severed ties with NBC in 2015, the same year he launched his first White House run.

The selection of Burnett continues Trump's trend of filling out his incoming administration with people who have high-profile backgrounds in television or politics, or both - including his choice to be defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, a former co-host of "Fox & Friends Weekend," and ex-television doctor and unsuccessful Senate candidate in Pennsylvania, Mehmet Oz.



Burnett

Top-ranking NYPD officer resigns: The highest-ranking uniformed officer in the New York Police Department has resigned amid allegations he demanded sex from a subordinate in exchange for opportunities to earn extra pay.

Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch accepted Chief of Department Jeffrey Maddrey's resignation Friday night, effective immediately, according to a department statement Saturday.

Chief of Patrol John Chell will take over as interim chief of department, and Philip Rivera will assume Chell's duties as the head of the patrol division, the NYPD said.

Late Saturday, Tisch replaced the head of the internal affairs bureau, which investigates alleged police misconduct, saying in a statement that the unit "must always be dedicated to preserving integrity and rooting out corruption in all its forms." She appointed Edward Thompson as interim chief after Miguel Iglesias was relieved of his command.

Fleeing pickup driver killed: A pickup truck driver fleeing police careened through the doors of a JCPenney store in Texas and continued through a busy mall, injuring five people before he was fatally shot by officers, authorities said.

The truck crashed into the department store in Killeen, about 68 miles (109 kilometers) north of the state capital Austin, around 5:30 p.m. Saturday and continued into the building, striking people as it went, Sgt. Bryan Washko of the Texas Department of Public Safety said in an evening news briefing.

Emergency medical services transported four victims from the mall to area hospitals and another traveled to a hospital separately. They ranged in age from 6 to 75 years old and their conditions were not immediately known, he said.

Man beheaded 1-year-old son: A man has been arrested on suspicion of beheading his 1-year-old son, Northern California authorities said.

The Sacramento County Sheriff's Office said in a statement Friday that deputies responding to an early morning family disturbance call found a woman outside a home who told deputies that her husband Andrey Demskiy, 28, assaulted her and her mother.

Deputies forced their way into the house in northern Sacramento County when they learned Demskiy was inside with the boy. As they took him into custody, they found a "severed child's head" in the bedroom where Demskiy was detained.

Detectives said Demskiy used a knife to behead his son after his wife and mother-in-law left the house, according to the statement. He was in custody and ineligible for bail, and was scheduled to appear in court Tuesday.

The sheriff's department and the county public defenders office did not respond to emails seeking information on whether Demskiy had an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

Alaska hit by 5.7 magnitude quake: An earthquake with a magnitude of 5.7 jolted 113 km S of Akhiok, Alaska at 1144 GMT on Sunday, the U.S. Geological Survey said.

The epicenter, with a depth of 22.3 km, was initially determined to be at 55.93 degrees north latitude and 153.97 degrees west longitude.

14 prison workers fired: New York's governor has ordered more than a dozen prison staffers to be fired over the fatal beating of an inmate earlier this month.

Gov. Kathy Hochul said in a statement Saturday that she has directed the state's corrections department commissioner to begin the process of terminating 14 workers involved in the fatal attack at the Marcy Correctional Facility.

Robert Brooks died on Dec. 10 after an encounter with officers the day earlier at the prison located in Oneida County.

Hochul's office didn't elaborate on the circumstances leading up to the death but said her decision comes after an internal review. "The vast majority of correction officers do extraordinary work under difficult circumstances, and we are all grateful for their service," the Democrat said in a statement. "But we have no tolerance for individuals who cross the line, break the law and engage in unnecessary violence or targeted abuse."

The corrections department on Saturday provided a list of 13 employees, including correctional officers, sergeants and a nurse, who have been suspended without pay as well as another correctional officer who has resigned.

But the agency declined to provide more details about the incident other than to say that Brooks was pronounced dead at a hospital in Utica in the early morning hours on Dec. 10.

Europe

Iceland's new gov't takes office: Iceland's new government, headed by Prime Minister **Kristrun Frostadottir** of the Social Democratic Alliance (SDA), officially took office on Saturday.



Frostadottir

Besides the SDA, the three-party coalition also includes the Liberal Reform Party (LRP), and the People's Party (PP). According to a government press release, the Social Democrats and the LRP each hold four ministerial portfolios, while the PP has taken three.

Frostadottir, born in 1988, is the country's youngest prime minister. She was elected to parliament in 2021 and became the SDA leader the following year.

The new cabinet convened its first formal meeting on Saturday afternoon at presidential residence Bessastadir, with President Halla Tomasdottir in attendance. (Xinhua)

Russia's missing An-2 plane found: The missing An-2 light aircraft, which disappeared in Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula on Thursday, has been found with all three people aboard alive, local authorities said on Sunday.

All three individuals on board, including two crew members and one passenger, have been evacuated by a Mi-8 helicopter from Kamchatka rescue teams and are being transported to Milkovskaya District Hospital, where their health conditions will be assessed, said the regional office of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations. (Xinhua)

Afghans rescued off Greek island: Greece's coast guard said Saturday it was searching for survivors or victims of a speedboat capsizing a day earlier involving migrants off the eastern Greek island of Rhodes.

The capsizing, the result of the boat's maneuvering to evade a patrol vessel according to authorities, left eight confirmed dead.

A total of 18 migrants - 12 men, three women and three minors - all Afghan nationals, were rescued, the coast guard said Saturday. The dead were also from Afghanistan, it said. Some migrants remained hospitalized, with one in critical condition, authorities said. (AP)

Prague commemorates shooting victims: A benefit concert, memorial service and mass were held Saturday in Prague to commemorate the victims of the shooting tragedy at Charles University's Faculty of Arts one year ago.

Czech President Petr Pavel, along with the victims' families and survivors, attended the benefit concert in the afternoon at the Church of the Holy Saviour in central Prague. (Xinhua)

Vatican advances beatification process for late Belgium's king

ROME, Dec 22, (AP): The Vatican has taken the first main step to implement **Pope Francis'** wish that Belgium's late king be beatified for having abdicated for a day rather than approve legislation to legalize abortion.

The Holy See's saint-making office on Dec. 17 established a historical commission, made up of experts in Belgian history and archives, to begin investigating the life and virtues of King Baudouin, the Vatican said in a communique Saturday.

Francis surprised and even enraged some Belgians when, during his September visit to Brussels, he prayed at Baudouin's tomb, denounced Belgium's abortion laws as "homicidal" and announced he wanted to beatify the late king.

Doubling down on the issue during his in-flight press conference en route home, Francis called doctors who perform abortions "hitmen."

In the days after, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo called Francis' comments "totally unacceptable," and summoned the Vatican's ambassador to Belgium to complain.

"That a foreign head of state makes such a statement about democratic decision-making in our country is absolutely unacceptable," De Croo said during question time in Parliament, according to Belgian media. "We have no lessons to learn about how our parliamentarians democratically approve laws. Fortunately, the time when the church dictated the law in our country is long behind us."

Francis has strongly backed the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion and long equated it to murder or "hiring a hitman to solve a problem." But his strong comments about abortion in Belgium only served to inflame an already troubled visit, given the Belgian church's wretched legacy of clergy sexual abuse.

Baudouin became king after the abdication of his father, King Leopold. He abdicated for a day in 1990 rather than give his assent to a parliament-approved bill legalizing abortion. He died in 1993.

While praying at his tomb alongside Belgium's current monarchs, Francis praised Baudouin's courage and urged Belgians today to look to his example in rejecting a new legislative proposal to extend the legal limit for an abortion from 12 weeks to 18 weeks after conception.

The Vatican's saint-making process usually takes years, decades or even centuries and typically begins



Pope Francis waves as he arrives to lead the holy mass, at the King Baudouin stadium in Brussels, Belgium, Sunday, Sept. 29, 2024. (AP)

when the local church ascertains an enduring reputation for sanctity among the faithful by a particular candidate.

An investigation into the life and virtues of the candidate follows, during which historians collect documentation and interview acquaintances and experts. If historians determine the candidate has lived a heroic life of Christian virtue, he or she can be declared venerable. The Vatican must then ascertain a miracle attributed to the candidate's intercession for beatification, and a second miracle for the person to be declared a saint.

Martyrs are exempt from the miracle for beatification, and popes can bypass the process altogether and declare saints, as Francis has done on several occasions. The convening of a historical commission suggests that church historians at the very least will conduct the research into Baudouin's life. But the Vatican communique noted that the cause wasn't originating as it normally would with the local Belgian church. Rather, the Holy See's secretariat of state directed the Vatican's saint-making office to open the process, suggesting Francis may be seeking to keep close tabs on the process and see it through quickly.

INTERNATIONAL



Fishermen arrange their nets after returning from fishing on the coast of the Arabian Sea, against the backdrop of Chinese fishing nets, or lift nets, in Kochi, India, Sunday, Dec. 22, 2024. (AP)

13 dead in stampedes during Nigeria Christmas gatherings

ABUJA, Dec 22, (AP): At least 13 people, including four children, were killed in two separate stampedes in Nigeria as large crowds gathered to collect food and clothing items distributed at annual Christmas events, the police said Saturday.

The two accidents came days after another such stampede in Africa's most populous country, amid a growing trend by local organizations, churches and individuals to organize charity events ahead of Christmas, as the country struggles with the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

Ten people were killed in the first stampede in the early hours at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Maitama, an upmarket part of the capital, Abuja, police spokesman Josephine Adeh said in a statement, adding that more than 1,000 people have been evacuated from the church.

There was a crowd surge at one of the church gates, as dozens tried to enter the premises at around 4 a.m., hours before the gift items were to be shared, witnesses said, pointing out that some had been waiting since the previous night.

"The way they were rushing to enter, some people were falling and some of them were old," Loveth Inyang, a witness. Inyang

said he managed to rescue one baby as his mother struggled in the surge.

Three people died in a similar crush later in the southeastern Anambra state's Okija town at a charity event organized by a philanthropist, the state police said.

"The event had not even started when the rush began," police spokesman Tochukwu Ikenga said. There could be more deaths recorded as officers investigate the incident, he said.

Viral footage that appeared to be from the Abuja scene showed lifeless bodies lying on the ground as people shouted for help. Some of the injured have been treated and discharged while others continue to receive medical care, police said.

The church canceled the charity event with bags of rice and clothing items still arranged within the premises.

As the church held a marriage ceremony after the crowd was evacuated, the agony and sadness remained palpable even as families and friends gathered for wedding pictures.

Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu expressed his sympathy with the victims' families and asked states and relevant authorities to enforce strict crowd control measures.

Taiwan lawmakers clash after one party breaks into legislature to occupy speaker's chair

China says US 'playing with fire' after latest military aid for Taiwan

BEIJING, Dec 22, (AP): The Chinese government protested Sunday the latest American announcements of military sales and assistance to Taiwan, warning the United States that it is "playing with fire."

U.S. President Joe Biden authorized Saturday the provision of up to \$571 million in Defense Department material and services and in military education and training for Taiwan. Separately, the Defense Department said Friday that \$295 million in military sales had been approved.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry statement urged the U.S. to stop arming Taiwan and stop what it called "dangerous moves that undermine peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."

Taiwan is a democratic island of 23 million people that the Chinese government claims as its territory and says must come under its control. U.S. military sales and assistance aim to help Taiwan defend itself and deter China from launching an attack.

The \$571 million in military assistance comes on top of Biden's authorization of \$567 million for the same purposes in late September. The military sales include \$265 million for about 300 tactical radio systems and



In this image made from video by Taiwan's EBC, lawmakers from the Democratic Progressive Party use chairs to block the entrance as members of the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang try to break into the Legislature in Taipei, Taiwan on Friday, Dec. 20, 2024. (AP)

\$30 million for 16 gun mounts.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry welcomed the approval of the two sales, saying in a social media post on X that it reaffirmed the U.S. government's "commitment to our defense."

In other news, lawmakers clashed in Taiwan's legislature Friday when members of the president's political party who had broken into the building overnight to occupy the speaker's chair tussled with members of another

major party who forced their way in to evict them.

Some lawmakers were injured in the clash, according to Taiwan media reports, though it wasn't clear how seriously.

At issue were three bills that the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang, was trying to push through, including one that critics say would paralyze the Constitutional Court.

The legislature approved two of the bills - one on the court that requires at least 10 justices to be present to make a ruling and another that would stiffen the requirements for voter petitions to recall elected officials. The court currently has only eight justices, with seven vacancies.

Debate on the third bill, which would redistribute tax revenues by giving a larger share to local governments, continued into the night.

Lawmakers from the Democratic Progressive Party, which said the bills threaten Taiwan's democratic system, removed windows to get into the building Thursday night and take over the speaker's area, piling up walls of chairs to block access, Taiwan's Central News Agency said.

Photos and videos of the morning

clash showed chaotic scenes with Nationalist members trying to remove or push their way through the barriers of chairs or clamber over a ledge in front of the speaker's area. Lawmakers from the other side shoved them and the chairs back and squirted or flung mineral water at them from plastic bottles.

The Nationalists, wearing matching white windbreakers, eventually took control of the area, allowing the speaker, Han Kuo-yu, to take his position.

The Democratic Progressive Party, known as the DPP, was attempting to block any votes on the bills. Neither they nor the Nationalists, known as the KMT, won a majority in the last legislative election. The KMT, which took slightly more seats, has teamed up with a minor party to take control of the legislature and is jostling for power with Taiwan's president, Lai Ching-te, who is from the DPP.

A DPP leader said in a social media video Thursday night that the party's actions were extreme but that it had no other options, the Central News Agency reported. Negotiations on the bills have failed to resolve differences between the parties.

Thousands of DPP supporters pro-

tested outside the legislature on Thursday night and Friday.

One protester, Stevie Kuo, said the KMT and its partner want to paralyze the court, drain the central government's finances and make it more difficult to recall elected officials.

"I think these three things will considerably harm Taiwan," the postgraduate student said. "The people do not want this to happen."

Lawmakers in Taiwan have brawled in the past. In 2020, they threw pig guts at each other over a government decision to lift a ban on the import of U.S. beef.

Also:

BEIJING: A Chinese mainland spokesperson on Friday expressed condolences for the victims of a fire in the city of Taichung in central Taiwan.

Zhu Fenglian, a spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, made the remarks while also extending sincere sympathy to the families of the victims and those who were injured in the incident.

A large fire broke out on Thursday afternoon at an incomplete warehouse in Taichung, killing nine and injuring eight.

Lat/Am

Brazil bus crash kills 37: A crash between a passenger bus and a truck early Saturday killed 37 people on a highway in Minas Gerais, a state in southeastern Brazil, officials said.

The Minas Gerais fire department, which responded to the scene, said 13 others were taken to hospitals near the city of Teófilo Otoni. The bus had reportedly departed from Sao Paulo and was carrying 45 passengers.

Authorities said Saturday afternoon that all victims had been removed from the site and an investigation would determine the cause of the accident. Witnesses told rescue



Zema

A car with three passengers also collided with the bus, but all three survived.

Gov. **Romeu Zema** wrote on X that he ordered "full mobilization" of the Minas Gerais government to assist the victims.

"We are working to ensure that families of the victims are supported to face this tragedy in the most humane way possible, especially as it comes just before Christmas," Zema said. In 2024, more than 10,000 people died in traffic accidents in Brazil, according to the Ministry of Transportation. (AP)

Kichwa tribe wins court battle:

An Indigenous community in the Peruvian Amazon is celebrating a legal victory in the latest stage of its attempt to take back claimed ancestral rainforests.

The Puerto Franco community of the Kichwa tribe say their territory was stolen to form the Cordillera Azul National Park in 2001. Companies such as Shell and TotalEnergies spent tens of millions of dollars on carbon credits in the park to counter emissions from their fossil fuel operations. The Kichwas got next to nothing and were left in hunger, despite a 2022 Associated Press investigation finding that it was almost certainly their ancestral territory, by the terms of a convention Peru signed decades ago.

The community celebrated a dramatic legal victory last year, when provincial Judge Simona del So-

corro Torres Sánchez ruled that creating the park without their consent had violated their rights. Authorities were ordered to grant them legal ownership and proceeds from the carbon credit sales.

But that was quickly overturned by an appeals court in a move that some legal experts called questionable. (AP)

Politician, prosecutors meet:

Venezuela's attorney general said Friday an opposition politician met with prosecutors after leaving the Argentine diplomatic compound in the capital, Caracas, where he had sheltered for nine months to avoid arrest.

Attorney General Tarek William Saab said in a statement that Fernando Martínez "voluntarily presented himself" before authorities and gave a statement after leaving the diplomatic facility Thursday. Saab added that Martínez "decided to collaborate actively" with the prosecution.

Martínez was one of the six members of Venezuela's political opposition whom the government of Argentine President Javier Milei allowed into the ambassador's residence in March, when authorities loyal to the ruling party issued warrants for their arrest, accusing them of promoting acts of violence to destabilize the country.

Two people familiar with the situation at the facility confirmed to The Associated Press that Martínez was home Thursday night after leaving the ambassador's residence. The people spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. (AP)

Mexico prison riot claims 7:

Seven inmates were killed in a prison riot in southern Mexico, when inmates resisting transfers to other jails fought police with guns and knives, authorities said.

Four police officers and six other inmates were injured in the riot in the city of Villahermosa, the capital of the Gulf coast state of Tabasco.

State police chief Víctor Hugo Chávez said late Thursday that officers were met by gunfire early in the day when they entered the prison to transfer two dangerous inmates to a federal penitentiary.

One of the inmates with a gun held out for about three hours, protected by 20 fellow prisoners.

Chávez did not specify if police opened fire on the group, but said: "Authorities have to act to defend their own lives, too."

Fires also broke out in the prison during the riot, and crowds of angry, desperate relatives gathered outside the prison, demanding information about family members locked up inside. (AP)



Teapan Klathale sits on her house in Moken village at Surin Islands in Phang Nga Province, Thailand, on a rainy Thursday, Dec. 12, 2024. (AP)

Once sustained by water ... Thailand's sea nomads fight to protect vanishing culture

SURIN ISLANDS, Thailand, Dec 22, (AP): When Hook was a child, he started his days by jumping off the boat that his family lived on and into the ocean. By age 3, he could already swim and dive in shallow waters. His home was a kabang, a boat, that his family sailed in Thailand's southern waters. The ocean was his backyard.

Now Hook, whose full name is Surayan Klathale, lives on land like the rest of his community, a people known as the Moken.

The community, indigenous people from Thailand and Myanmar, came to worldwide attention for its members' understanding of waves when the Indian Ocean tsunami struck in December 2004, killing more than 200,000 people. The few tourists who happened to be on the islands inhabited by the Moken survived because locals knew, when they saw the water recede, that people needed to get to higher ground.

Today, this once free-sailing people has been grounded by powerful forces of change.

The Moken are one of the various

tribal groups and indigenous communities not formally recognized by the Thai government. For years, activists from these communities have pushed for formal recognition with a bill that would help them hold on to traditions.

But as recently as October, the latest draft of this proposed bill, called the Protection and Promotion of Ethnic Groups' Way of Life, was tabled by Parliament. The bill would legally guarantee these communities' basic rights, such as health care, education and land, as well as government support to preserve their ethnic identities.

For the Moken, the kabang and their way of living on the ocean are something they hope the law could help preserve. The wooden boat, with a distinctive curve that juts out from its bow and a pavilion set in the middle, is central to the Moken's identity. "It's like a lifetime of a person, of a family," Hook said. "In the past, we lived and died on that boat."

Today, though, almost no one lives on a boat. Narumon Arunotai, an associate professor at Chulalongkorn Uni-

versity in Bangkok who has worked with the Moken and other indigenous communities for decades, said the shift toward permanent dwelling on land had already started more than 40 years ago.

It was a gradual shift, driven both by stricter border controls as well as the inability to get the wood necessary to build the kabangs. Further, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 destroyed many of the boats. Other communities known as sea nomads have also changed to dwelling on land.

The Moken are scattered across an archipelago of some 800 islands off the coast of Myanmar and Thailand. In the days when they lived on boats, Moken stayed on land only during the monsoon season, which started around May. They'd stay on land until the winds shifted, usually around December, and then return to the sea. For food, they fished and foraged.

Many of the older generation were born on boats and sailed regularly amongst the islands.

"We could move freely without hav-

ing to worry about the Myanmar government or the Thai government," said Tawan Klathale. Hook's older brother, who was born on a boat and is better known by his nickname Ngui. All Moken in Thailand use the surname Klathale, given to the community by one of Thailand's former queens.

Freedoms began to constrict, and by the time he and Hook were teenagers, they no longer lived on a boat full-time. Moken started settling in the Surin Islands, off the Thai coast, where they had always stayed seasonally. Some came from Myanmar to Thailand, looking for jobs and safety from pirates.

The Surin Islands meanwhile had become a national park in Thailand in 1981, meaning the trees were now protected by law.

To make a kabang, one needs a good strong tree, at least 1 meter (3 feet) wide and 10 meters (33 feet) tall. The trunk must be straight and be free of defects. Over the course of months, men would hollow out the trunk and carve it into a boat's hull, while also using fire to make the wood pliable.

Change Closing pts

SAUDI
EGYPT

Change Closing pts

TASI
EGX

Business

Navigating economic divergence

Global markets reflect mixed signals in growth and policy

By National Bank of Kuwait

Market Commentary

In the week ending on the 22nd of December, global markets witnessed major developments, as economic data continues to shape the economic outlook. In the U.S., inflation, as measured by core PCE, increased by 0.1% month-over-month and 2.8% year-over-year in November, maintaining stable inflation expectations. Personal spending rose 0.4%, while disposable income grew 0.3%. The U.S. dollar showed resilience, reaching near 108.54 on the DXY, supported by a hawkish cut by the Federal Reserve and strong economic growth as GDP rose 3.1%. Treasury yields rose, with the 10Y yield climbing past 4.5%. Equities sold off, as the S&P 500 fell 3.0%, the Nasdaq dropped 3.6%. In Europe, the ECB confirmed a 0.25% rate cut as inflation fears abated, with the euro reaching a low of \$1.034. While in the UK, the Bank of England has decided to keep policy rates unchanged at 4.75% as inflation is proving to be persistent at 2.6% y/y. Meanwhile, Japan's yen depreciated to 157.9 against the US dollar after dovish central bank commentary. Commodities saw contrasting moves, with gold reaching around \$2,600 per ounce, while Brent crude slipped to \$72 per barrel, weighed by demand concerns. Global markets continue to react to central bank recalibrations, reflecting cautious optimism tempered by persistent economic challenges.

United States & Canada

US Private Sector Expands at the Fastest Pace Since 2022, Led by a Services Surge

The S&P Global Flash US Composite PMI rose to 56.6 in December 2024, up from 54.9 in November, marking the strongest private sector growth since March 2022. The services sector surged to 58.5 (highest since October 2021), while manufacturing fell further to 48.3 (a three-month low). The increase was driven by strengthening demand, with new orders rising at their fastest pace since April 2022 and employment growing for the first time in five months. Inflationary pressures eased overall, despite rising input costs in manufacturing. Business optimism reached a two-and-a-half year high, supported by positive expectations under the incoming Trump administration.

Retail Sales Beats Expectations, While Core Sales Growth Remains Subdued

US retail sales rose by 0.7% month-over-month, surpassing the forecasted 0.6%. October's figure was also revised

upward to 0.5%. However, core sales, excluding automotive and gas, grew only 0.2%, consistent with October but below predictions. Industrial production fell by 0.1%, marking a third consecutive decline but improving on the previous month's 0.4% drop. Manufacturing showed a modest recovery, rising 0.2% after a 0.7% contraction in October.

Federal Reserve Cuts Rates by 25 bps, Signals Slower Pace of Easing in 2025

The Federal Reserve reduced its benchmark interest rate by 25 bps to a range of 4.25-4.5%, marking the third consecutive cut in its current cycle. However, the FOMC signalled a slower pace of easing next year, with policymakers projecting only two quarter-point rate cuts for 2025 instead of the three previously expected by some economists. Inflation estimates were revised higher, reflecting increased concerns about price stability, whilst Fed officials' neutral rate estimate rose to 3%. Chair Jerome Powell highlighted that the policy stance is now "significantly less restrictive", allowing for cautious adjustments as inflation trends remain "sideways" and labour market risks had "diminished".

US Economy Records 3.1% Growth in Q3, Marking Strongest Expansion in 2024

The US economy grew at an annualized rate of 3.1% in Q3 2024, up from the second estimate of 2.8% and exceeding Q2's 3% growth, marking the strongest expansion this year. Personal spending rose 3.7%, the fastest since Q1 2023, driven by a 5.6% increase in goods consumption and strong service spending (2.8%). Fixed investment grew 2.1%, with equipment investment surging 10.8%, while structures (-5%) and residential investment (-4.3%) declined. Government spending increased 5.1%, and net trade contributed less negatively, with exports and imports revised higher at 9.6% and 10.7% respectively.

Consumer Spending Gains Momentum Amid Stable Inflation Growth in November

Personal consumption expenditures (PCE) rose by 0.4% in November 2024, supported by a 0.7% increase in goods spending, driven by robust demand for motor vehicles and recreational products. Services spending grew modestly by 0.1%, with health-care and recreation services leading the gains. The PCE price index increased by 0.1% month-over-month, maintaining a steady annual rate of 2.4%. Core PCE, excluding food and energy, also rose by 0.1% month-over-month and 2.8% year-over-year. Personal income and disposable income both increased

Key Highlights

- US Dollar Index Surges to 108.54, While Major Currencies Depreciated.
- US GDP at 3.1% in Q3 of 2024.
- US PCE Index at 2.4% y/y, Core PCE Index at 2.8%.
- UK CPI Rises to 2.6%, Bank of England Holds Rates at 4.75%.
- Bank of Japan Holds Rates Unchanged at 0.25%.
- China 1- and 5-year Prime Loan Rate Unchanged at 3.1% and 3.6% Respectively.

by 0.3%, signaling resilience in consumer activity amid stable inflationary pressures.

The US Dollar index closed the week at 107.82.

Canada CPI Eases to 1.9%, While Markets Anticipate Further Policy Adjustments in January

Canada's inflation eased to 1.9% year-on-year in November, less than the expected 2%. Core inflation remained flat at 0.0% month-on-month, down from 0.4% previously. This marks further progress toward the central bank's target rate, supporting its current stance on monetary easing. Where markets are currently pricing 52% probability of a cut in their upcoming meeting in January.

The USD/CAD pair closed the week at 1.4368

Europe

Eurozone PMI Shows Mixed Signals as Manufacturing Slumps Further

The HCOB Flash Eurozone PMI for December 2024 reported a composite output index of 49.5, below the neutral 50 mark but slightly higher than November's 48.3. Manufacturing PMI fell to 44.5, marking a 32-month low, driven by sharp declines in Germany and France. In contrast, the services PMI rose to 51.4, a two-month high, indicating modest growth in services activity, particularly in parts of Southern Europe. Persistent drops in new orders and export demand remain key challenges, with Germany and France's weakness overshadowing stronger performances from other Eurozone countries.

Lagarde Signals Clear Path for ECB Rate Cuts as Inflation Eases

In a speech delivered in Vilnius,

ECB President Christine Lagarde reaffirmed the bank's commitment to further rate cuts, provided economic data continues to align with projections. Lagarde emphasized that inflation, which stood at around 2.3% in November, is steadily converging toward the ECB's 2% target. Recent monetary policy adjustments have already included four rate cuts this year, with the ECB's deposit rate currently at 3%. The ECB's deliberate shift in language, removing the term "sufficiently restrictive," has signalled a pivot to a more accommodative stance. As the ECB aims to lower rates gradually to a neutral level of 1.75%-2.5% to support the Eurozone economy while addressing structural challenges and ensuring price stability.

The EUR/USD currency pair closed the week at 1.0429.

United Kingdom

UK Manufacturing PMI Hits 11-Month Low, Amid Export and Demand Weakness

The S&P Global Flash UK Manufacturing PMI fell to 47.3 in December 2024, down from 48 in November, marking the sharpest contraction in 11 months. Production declined for the second consecutive month, and new orders saw a steep drop due to customer destocking and weaker demand from European clients, leading to the fastest fall in export sales since October 2023. Backlogs decreased, while purchasing prices rose at the fastest pace since January 2023.

UK Employment Sees Mixed Trends Amid Payroll Volatility

The UK's payroll data for November 2024 showed a decline of 35,000 employees, a 0.1% drop from the previ-

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	Low	High	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.0496	1.0341	1.0534	1.0429	1.0220	1.0530	1.0472
GBP	1.2609	1.2471	1.2728	1.2569	1.2330	1.2660	1.2563
JPY	153.61	153.14	157.92	156.41	154.75	159.40	154.70
CHF	0.8924	0.8897	0.9021	0.8930	0.8830	0.9160	0.8839

ous month, while rising 76,000 (0.3%) compared to the same period last year. Total payroll employees stood at 30.4 million. Employment rates for those aged 16 to 64 remained steady at 74.9% for August to October, while unemployment climbed slightly to 4.3%. Job vacancies continued their downward trend, decreasing by 31,000 to 818,000, marking the 29th consecutive quarterly drop. Earnings growth held strong, with total pay rising 5.2% annually, translating to a 2.2% increase in real terms after inflation adjustments.

Retail Sales in the UK Show Modest Recovery in November 2024

Retail sales volumes in Great Britain rose by 0.2% in November 2024, marking the first monthly increase since August. The growth was driven by higher sales in supermarkets and non-food stores, particularly household goods, which rebounded by 7.9%. However, clothing sales fell for the second consecutive month, dropping 2.6%, reaching their lowest levels since January 2022. Online retailing continued to decline, with spending values down by 4.3%, the largest drop since March 2022. Overall, sales volumes remain 1.6% below pre-pandemic levels from February 2020.

UK CPI Rises to 2.6% in November 2024

The UK's Consumer Prices Index (CPI) increased by 2.6% in the year to November 2024, up from 2.3% in October. The rise was driven by upward contributions from transport and recreation, offsetting slight declines in sectors like restaurants and hotels. Core CPI, excluding volatile items such as energy and food, climbed to 3.5%, reflecting persistent inflationary pressures. While inflation remains well below its October 2022 peak of 11.1%, these figures highlight sustained price growth across key sectors.

Bank of England Holds Rates at 4.75%

The Bank of England held its benchmark interest rate steady at 4.75% in December 2024, aligning with market expectations. While inflation and wage growth remain high, raising concerns about persistent inflation, three policymakers advocated for a 25bps rate cut to 4.5% due to weak demand and a softening labor market. The central bank emphasized a cautious approach to easing monetary policy, maintaining a restrictive stance until inflation risks align with the 2% target. Future decisions will be made on a meeting-by-meeting basis.

The GBP/USD currency pair closed the week at 1.2569.

Asia-Pacific

Bank of Japan Maintains Policy

Rate, Projects Gradual Inflation Growth

The Bank of Japan (BOJ), in an 8-1 majority decision, announced it will maintain the uncollateralized overnight call rate at around 0.25% as the economy shows moderate recovery. While private consumption and business investment continue to improve, inflation has been rising steadily, with core CPI (excluding fresh food) hovering at 2.0-2.5%. The BOJ expects underlying inflation to gradually align with its 2% target as wage growth and spending accelerate in a "virtuous cycle." Despite this optimism, risks remain due to global economic uncertainties and volatile commodity prices. Following its comprehensive review of monetary policy, the BOJ reaffirmed its commitment to sustainable price stability and accommodative financial conditions.

The USD/JPY currency pair closed the week at 156.41.

China Holds Loan Prime Rates Steady in Efforts to Boost Economic Activity

China's one-year loan prime rate (LPR) remained unchanged at 3.1% in December 2024, while the five-year LPR, used for mortgage pricing, held at 3.6%. Despite the unchanged rates this month, the LPR has seen cuts totaling 35 and 60 basis points for the one-year and five-year rates, respectively, over the year. Analysts believe the current reduced rates will ease financial burdens on businesses and households, stimulating investment, boosting purchasing power, and supporting economic recovery.

The USD/CNY currency pair closed the week at 7.2961.

New Zealand Enters Recession as GDP Contracts Sharply

New Zealand has officially entered a recession after its GDP shrank by 1.0% in the third quarter, following a revised 1.1% contraction in the second quarter. The downturn, described as the sharpest two-quarter decline since 1991, surpassed market expectations of a 0.2% drop. The Reserve Bank of New Zealand has already slashed interest rates by 125 basis points this year, with markets anticipating further cuts, including a potential 50-basis-point reduction in February. Weakness in manufacturing, utilities, and construction, coupled with declining household and government spending, has intensified economic pressures.

The NZD/USD currency pair closed the week at 0.5651.

Kuwait

Kuwaiti Dinar USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30805.

Kuwaiti banking sector reports growth in profits for first nine months of 2024

5 traditional banks achieved 52.8% of total net profits for the sector

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Kuwaiti banking sector, comprising nine banks, has seen a positive performance in net profits for the first nine months of 2024, reflecting a growth of 4.6 percent compared to the same period in 2023, reports Al-Jarida daily.

The sector's net profits, after deducting taxes and minority rights, amounted to approximately 1.245 billion dinars, marking an increase of 54.8 million dinars over last year's 1.191 billion dinars.

However, the third quarter of 2024 saw a decline in profits, with banks collectively reporting profits of about 399.6 million dinars, a decrease of 35.1 million dinars (down 8.1 percent) from the second quarter.

Compared to the first quarter, profits also decreased by 11.4 million dinars (down 2.8 percent), when the total was 411 million dinars.

Seven out of the nine banks in the sector recorded profit growth, while two saw a decline. The total value of provisions set aside by the banks during the

first nine months of 2024 amounted to 169.3 million dinars, a slight decrease of 1.7 percent from 172.2 million dinars in the same period of 2023.

Despite the challenges posed by local and global economic conditions, the overall performance of the sector remained positive.

Breaking down the profits, the five traditional banks achieved 657.9 million dinars, representing 52.8 percent of total net profits for the sector, with a growth of 1.7 percent compared to the same period last year. Islamic banks, on the other hand, contributed 587.5 million dinars, accounting for 47.2 percent of total profits, with a notable increase of 8.1 percent.

The banking sector's price-to-earnings (P/E) ratio stood at 15.5 times, slightly up from 15.4 times in the previous year. The return on total assets for the sector was steady at 1.4 percent, while the return on equity decreased marginally to 11.9 percent from 12.0 percent in the previous year.

Among the banks, Kuwait Finance House (KFH) reported the highest profits, totaling 482.9 million dinars (earning 29.62 fils per share), making up 38.8 percent of the sector's total profits. This represents a 4.6 percent growth compared to 2023.

The National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) followed closely with profits of 457 million dinars (earning 53 fils per share), accounting for 36.7 percent of total profits and growing by 6.0 percent compared to the previous year.

Together, KFH and NBK contributed to 75.5 percent of the total profits in the banking sector, underscoring the significant economies of scale enjoyed by larger banking institutions.

The remaining seven banks collectively shared 24.5 percent of the sector's profits, with the Commercial Bank of Kuwait holding the largest share at 7.1 percent and Warba Bank contributing the smallest at 1.2 percent.

Notably, Kuwait International Bank reported the highest relative increase in profits, surging by 138.1 percent, while Gulf Bank saw the largest relative decrease at -25.3 percent, followed by the Commercial Bank at -10.7 percent.

These figures suggest that the Kuwaiti banking sector continues to thrive, albeit with some variation in individual bank performance, as larger institutions continue to dominate the sector's profits.

Saudi, UAE, Egypt, Morocco & Algeria held roughly 78% of overall new commitments

'Dhamaan': \$121 billion worth of trade, investment and finance insurance operations in Arab countries during 2023

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Arab Investment & Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (Dhamaan) announced that the value of outstanding insurance commitments for investment, finance and exports destined to the Arab region rose by 7% to roughly \$260 billion by the end of 2023, making up around 8% of the global total. These commitments included 83% for credit insurance of exports destined to the region, 8% for political risk insurance (worth \$22 billion), and 9% for other cross-border insurance commitments.

In a press release on the occasion of issuing the third quarterly bulletin "Dhamaan Al-Istithmar" for 2024, Dhamaan stated that the global trade and investment environment in 2023 encountered many challenges and risks that represented promising opportunities for the insurance industry against political and trade risks, coinciding with the continued geopolitical tensions in the world and in the Arab region. Therefore, new commitments to

insure investment, finance and exports destined to Arab countries increased by 17% in 2023 to exceed \$121 billion, so that the insured imports reached 9% of the total Arab merchandise imports during the same year.

In the context of Dhamaan's endeavor to study, follow up and monitor the evolution of the trade, investment and finance insurance sector globally and regionally in cooperation with Berne Union, the data of the sector's performance in the Arab region revealed several facts, most notably the following:

- Arab countries' share rose to 4% of new global commitments to insure trade, investment and finance in the world during 2023.
- The credit insurance of exports destined to the Arab countries in various terms continued to have the largest share of new commitments with 88%, while insurance against political risk represented 4%, and other cross-border commitments made up 9%.
- New insurance commitments were

geographically concentrated in five Arab countries, which held about 78% of the total, led by Saudi Arabia (28%), followed by the UAE (23%), Egypt (13%), Morocco (9%), and Algeria (5%). Public export credit insurance agencies continued to hold the largest share of total new commitments in the Arab region in 2023 with a share of more than 62%, while private insurance agencies accounted for about 38% of the total.

■ Three main sectors, namely infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing, accounted for about 78% of new commitments to insure export credit directed to the region in the medium and long term and to insure against political risks during 2023.

■ Claims paid for insurance commitments in the Arab region rose by 48% to \$713 million in 2023, with recoveries hiking by 23% to \$457 million. The majority of claims paid for long-term insurance commitments were concentrated in energy and infrastructure sec-

tors with a share of more than 76%.

In light of the continued challenges resulting from the escalation of geopolitical tensions in several regions around the world, Dhamaan seeks to enhance its comprehensive capabilities to address existing and potential political and economic challenges in the region, and is keen on strengthening its alliances with key regional and international players in the industry, led by Berne Union and Aman Union, and all stakeholders in the region and the world, the press release emphasized.

Based in Kuwait, the Arab Investment & Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (Dhamaan) was established in 1974 as a multilateral institution that comprises all Arab countries and four joint Arab financial institutions. It provides specialized insurance services against credit and political risks with a view to facilitating the inflow of foreign direct investments into Arab countries and promoting Arab exports and imports.

Major economies concerned about growth

Kuwait's monetary policy diverges from Fed rate cuts

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: In its weekly report, Al-Shall Consulting Company discussed the recent decision by the US Federal Reserve to lower its key interest rate by a quarter of a percentage point, bringing it to a range of 4.25 percent to 4.50 percent, reports Al-Jarida daily.

This move aligns with expectations from most analysts and is consistent with the policies of major central banks worldwide, except for Japan, which maintains a unique stance.

The report highlighted that concerns about economic growth are now prevalent across major economies, although the Federal Reserve's decision remains perplexing, especially considering the approaching change in the US administration and the potential for rising trade tensions.

The report suggests that with the new US administration set to take office on January 20, 2025 and the looming threat of high tariffs on trading partners such as China, the focus may soon shift from stimulating economic growth to addressing inflation concerns.

This, the report argues, could prompt the Federal Reserve to adopt a more cautious approach to further interest rate cuts in 2025, anticipating the dual risks posed by trade wars and inflationary pressures.

In contrast, the Central Bank of Kuwait has notably diverged from the US Federal Reserve's policy since March 2022. Following a series of 11 interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve, which saw the US dollar's basic interest rate rise from 0.00 percent to 5.25 percent, Kuwait's Central Bank

has made a more measured approach, increasing its discount rate just nine times by a total of 2.75 percent.

The report also noted that while the Federal Reserve shifted its focus from inflation control to growth, leading to a series of interest rate cuts starting in September 2024, Kuwait has remained cautious in adjusting its rates, ensuring that the Kuwaiti dinar's exchange rate remains stable.

Despite the US Federal Reserve's recent rate cuts, which have been mirrored by the central banks of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Kuwait has maintained a more flexible stance.

Last Thursday, the Gulf central banks followed suit with similar quarter-point reductions, bringing the total reduction in rates to one percentage point for most countries, while Qatar experienced a slightly higher decrease of 1.15 percent.

However, the report forecasts that the pace of future rate cuts may slow, with the expectation that interest rates will remain stable for most of 2025 due to concerns surrounding the US economy. Kuwait's monetary policy has remained distinct, with the Central Bank choosing to maintain the discount rate on the Kuwaiti dinar at 4.0 percent.

This decision, which narrows the gap between Kuwaiti and US dollar interest rates by 0.25 percent, strengthens the localization of the dinar and ensures its stability in a complex global economic landscape.

The report concludes that this approach aligns with the country's broader economic objectives and contributes to the continued strength of the Kuwaiti dinar.

Boursa Kuwait ends trading with mixed performance

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (KUNA): Boursa Kuwait concluded Sunday's trading session with a slight overall gain, as the general index rose by 12.34 points or 0.17 percent to close at 7,291.04 points. The trading activity saw a total of 288.4 million shares change hands through 14,740 transactions, with a total value of KD 60.3 million (approximately USD 183.9 million).

The market performance was mixed across different segments:

■ The premier market index showed the strongest performance, increasing by 18.43 points or 0.24 percent to reach 7,817.93 points. This segment

saw 87.7 million shares traded through 5,248 transactions, valued at KD 29.7 million (USD 90.5 million).

■ The main market index, however, declined by 8.40 points or 0.13 percent, closing at 6,631.47 points. Trading in this segment involved 200.6 million shares through 9,492 transactions, with a value of KD 30.6 million (USD 93.3 million).

■ The Main 50 index also experienced a decrease, falling by 17.18 points or 0.26 percent to 6,467.27 points. This segment saw 110.3 million shares traded through 5,127 transactions, worth KD 21.27 million (approximately USD 64.8 million).

Monetary easing expected to slow in 2025

Kuwait's debt policies: A model for economic stability in the GCC

By KAMCO Invest

Bond yields in the US showed consistent gains over the last two weeks amid one of the longest running rallies recently after a shift in expectation for rate cuts by the US Fed for 2025. The market is pricing in relatively lower probabilities of cuts in 2025 with some even showing that the US may skip cuts next year. In his statement, the US Fed chair said that the focus would be back on taming inflation and the next year could see two cuts. This comes after the US Fed delivered a 100 bps cut in 2024, in line with market expectations over the last few months. The forecast for 2025, however, has undergone significant changes with consensus showing a 100 bps cuts back in September-2024 to almost no cuts in some economist forecasts. The change came especially after the recent US elections and the announced policies of the new government that include tariffs and tax cuts that will have significant implications for the fiscal performance, economic growth, corporate profits as well as inflation. There is also uncertainty about economic growth in the US that has remained resilient this year with steady performance in the labor market despite higher interest rates. Meanwhile, there is an increasing undercurrent of a decline in demand for US instruments from specific countries and a change in composition of lenders. Recent data has shown that China and Japan have sold more than USD 110 Bn worth of US treasury bonds and have instead replaced them with gold, at least in the case of China. This is one of the reasons for the run up in gold prices this year. Some sizeable money managers have also announced that they would reduce exposure to long term US bonds fearing higher expected deficits in the US and increasing debt that reached USD 36 Trillion. As a result, yield on 10 year bonds have shown consistent rise. Economies in the GCC will not remain unaffected from the expected activity in the global fixed income instruments space. However, the relatively lower levels of government borrowings coupled with healthy credit profile and a war chest in the form of sovereign wealth funds would help to offset much of the negative impact. This would also make the scenario in favor of the GCC economies when compared to other emerging market economies globally that are facing massive interest payment burden on the USD 29 trillion of debt borrowed over the last decade.

Inflation and interest rate hikes
The declining trend in inflation took a break, mainly in the US, after data for the past two months showed higher inflation. That said, the market was anyway pricing in higher inflation, especially for November-2024, mainly led by the release of recent economic data. The cut in interest rate in the December-2024 meeting was also almost confirmed with the release of other economic data points in the US. On the other hand, treasury yields have surged recently due to a combination of factors including reemerging fear of inflation with resilient economy as seen from the recent data on retail sales in the US coupled with weak economic trends in most of the other developed economies, especially in Europe. Also, the US economy has shown much more resilience than what the economists were expecting with stronger-than-expected

data. After the recent statement by the US Fed Chairman, yield on 10-year treasury bonds in the US witnessed consistent gains over the last two weeks and reached over 4.5%, the highest level since late May-2024. The gain in yields have been almost 40 bps over the last two weeks after the release of the inflation figures and the rate cut announcement. This will increase the challenges that the new treasury secretary in the US will face. He will have a massive task of handing this debt pile and has already announced steps to reduce halving the deficit to 3% of the GDP by 2028 via spending restraints, deregulation and cheaper energy. In Europe, the strategy was much more clearer and the rate path was relatively more predictable this year. The economic weakness in Europe made rate cuts relatively more aggressive than the US, giving a runup in bond prices in the region. The ECB reduced its deposit facility rate by 100 bps this year from 4.0% during June-2024 to 3.0% in its last meeting in December-2024. The rate cuts highlighted weak trends in the economy and challenges faced by a number of major economies in the region. As a result, the spread between 10-year German bonds and the comparable US notes rose to the widest level in the last five years. In Asia, China also witnessed a bond rally prompting the central bank to warn investors that the rally may be overdone and to pay close attention to risks and interest rates. The rally came after the yield on 10-year sovereign bonds declined to a fresh record low this week to 1.71% from over 2% in November-2024. The decline came after the release of disappointing data on retail sales while house prices registered another drop during November-2024. Meanwhile, in the GCC, economic growth was revised lower for 2024 after the OPEC+ decision to extend the oil production cuts until next year and follow a much more gradual path to restore output from the group. However, non-oil growth in the region resilient with a strong project pipeline, partially offsetting the decline from the oil sector. Crude oil prices have remained range-bound recently around the USD 70/b mark reflecting ample supply from the US offsetting any expected growth in demand. Inflation in the region remained under control as a result of proactive policies of the regional governments and mostly trended lower over the last few month. The trend in interest rates in the GCC was almost in line with that by the US Fed. Most GCC central banks lowered in line with the Fed decision while Kuwait, which has its currency pegged to a basket of currencies, implemented a 25 bps cut vs. 100 bps cuts by other central banks in the region.

Bond/Sukuk Maturities
GCC governments are expected to see elevated levels of maturities over the next five years, especially for bond issuances during the pandemic years. According to data from Bloomberg, GCC sovereign maturities stands at USD 232.3 Bn over the next five years (2025-2029), whereas corporate maturities stand at slightly higher USD 235.0 Bn. Both bond and sukuk maturities are expected to remain elevated starting from 2025 until 2029 and then gradually taper for the rest of the tenor. The higher maturities during the next five years reflects a number of short-term (less than 5-year maturity) issuances in 2020 and 2021 as governments raised funds to

plug-in deficits during the pandemic. A majority of these maturities are denominated in USD at 60.0% followed by local currency issuances in SAR and QAR at 17.3% and 6.6%, respectively. In addition, due to the credit rating profile of the GCC governments, a majority of these maturities are in the high investment grade or A rated instruments. In terms of type of instruments, conventional bonds dominate with USD 287.3 Bn in maturities over the next five years, whereas sukuk maturities are expected to be at USD 180.0 Bn. In terms of conventional bond maturities, corporate maturities stood at USD 148.8 Bn, surpassing government bond maturities at USD 138.5 Bn. In the sukuk market, government sukuk stood at USD 93.9 Bn vs. corporate sukuk maturities at USD 86.1 Bn. At the country level, Saudi Arabia continues to see the biggest maturities during 2025-2029. The Kingdom is expected to see maturities of USD 168.0 Bn until 2029 followed by UAE and Qatari issuers at USD 153.2 Bn and USD 79.5 Bn, respectively. However, bulk of the maturities in Saudi Arabia are for bonds/sukuk issued by the government at USD 110.2 Bn while in the case of UAE, the lion's share of maturities are for instruments issued by corporates at USD 120.0 Bn. Kuwait has the smallest maturities in five years at USD 15.1 Bn due to lack of government issuances. In terms of sector maturities, Banks and other Financial Services sector have USD 169.9 Bn in maturities in the next five years, accounting for around 72.3% of the total corporate maturities and 36.4% of the total maturities in the GCC until 2029. The Energy sector was next with maturities of USD 25.3 Bn or 10.8% of GCC corporate maturities until 2029 followed by Utilities and Materials at USD 13.1 Bn and USD 9.1 Bn, respectively. Banks in UAE have the biggest maturities over the next five years at USD 69.3 Bn followed by Qatari banks with maturities of USD 25.9 Bn.

Banks in UAE and Qatar accounted for 40.5% of total corporate maturities in the GCC and 20.4% of total bond/sukuk maturities over the next five years in the GCC. Integrated Oil was the next key sector with the third biggest corporate maturities over the next five years with maturities at USD 12.8 Bn mainly concentrated in Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Real Estate maturities are concentrated mainly in the UAE and Saudi Arabia at USD 7.2 Bn and USD 3.8 Bn, respectively, until 2029.

Issuances reached a record level in 2024. Aggregate issuances of bonds and sukuk since the start of 2024 until mid-December-2024 stood at USD 182.7 Bn as compared to USD 116.2 Bn during full year 2023, resulting in an increase of USD 66.5 Bn or 57.3%. The increase was mainly led by higher corporate issuances that went up from USD 71.0 Bn in 2023 to over USD 100 Bn to reach USD 105.4 Bn in 2024, an increase of 48.5%. Government issuances showed a bigger percentage growth of 71.1% or USD 32.1 Bn to reach USD 77.3 Bn so far this year as compared to USD 45.2 Bn in 2023. In terms of type of issuances, both bond and sukuk issuances witnessed growth during the year. Aggregate GCC bond issues went up by 69.7% or USD 42.2 Bn to reach USD 102.7 Bn as compared to USD 60.5 Bn in 2023. Sukuk issuances also witnessed a healthy growth during the year to reach USD 80.0 Bn so far this year as compared to USD

55.7 Bn in issuances during full year 2023. At the country level, there was a broad-based growth in issuances across the countries in the GCC during 2024 as compared to last year. Saudi Arabian issuers reported the biggest absolute growth in fixed income instruments this year with an increase of USD 26.1 Bn or 45.0% to reach USD 84.0 Bn in issuances as compared to USD 57.9 Bn last year. The Kingdom was also the biggest issuer this year dethroning UAE from the top position as of last year. UAE-based issuers also reported a growth of USD 17.8 Bn or 41.3% with aggregate bonds and sukuk issuances reaching USD 61.0 Bn in 2024. The structure of maturities saw perpetual instruments seeing growth in 2024 after seeing a steep decline in 2023. According to data from Bloomberg, aggregate issuances of perpetual instruments more than doubled this year to USD 10.7 Bn as compared to USD 4.2 Bn in 2023. Saudi-based issuers were the biggest in this space with issuances of USD 7.8 Bn in perpetual instruments followed by Kuwait with issuances of USD 1.1 Bn.

The issuance of green issuances continued during 2024 but reached a three-year low level during 2024. According to data from Bloomberg, aggregate issuance of green instruments reached USD 7.6 Bn this year as compared to USD 17.3 Bn in 2023. UAE was once again leading in terms of issuance of green instruments at USD 3.2 Bn this year followed by Qatar with issuances of USD 2.8 Bn this year.

Outlook - Fed vs. GCC rate moves
The future of rate cuts remains clouded mainly led by the incoming government in the US and the drastic change in policies that are expected to be implemented in the near term. This would have far-reaching implications on the government's fiscal position, jobs market, financial markets, corporate profits and international relations. Measures that are already announced include a cut in taxes that would increase budget deficits and the increase in tariffs against a target list of countries that would have an offsetting impact on budgets. The underlying threat is that these policies would result in higher inflation in the US and thus result in higher for longer rates. As a result, economists are forecasting 10-year yields to range between 5% and as high as 6% in some cases depending on the impact of the aforementioned factors.

The recent statement from the US Fed indicated two cuts in 2025 with fed funds rate expected to go below the 4% mark (midpoint of the rate). However, consensus estimates based on futures prices shows factoring in a 40 bps cuts in 2025 with probabilities of below 40% for cuts in the next eight meetings. On the other hand, the ECB is expected to be much more aggressive in cutting rates, mainly reflecting the economic scenario in the region as well as its success in taming inflation to the target mark of 2.0%. For the GCC, we have forecasted rates based on US Fed rate cuts. As a result, most central banks in the GCC would slash rates in line with the US Fed due to the pegged currencies. However, Kuwait has its currency pegged to a basket of currencies. As such, we've forecasted a 50 bps cut by the Kuwait Central Bank in its discount rate. It is pertinent to note that Kuwait has reduced its discount rate by 25 bps this year as against 100 bps cuts implemented by other GCC central banks.

Celebrating its greatest asset

Morad Yousuf Behbehani Group honors its employees at End-of-Year Annual Celebration

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: In a vibrant celebration held at the Cricket Stadium in Boulevard, Salmiya, Morad Yousuf Behbehani Group honored their exceptional employees in recognition of their dedication and contributions throughout the year.

The event embodied the Group's strong commitment to being a people-oriented organization, emphasizing the importance of its employees as the driving force behind its success. Over 800 employees and their families attended the gathering, which featured an array of exciting activities including team-building activities, quizzes and challenges with prizes, children's entertainment, and more.

Welcoming the attendees, Mr. Abdulmohsen Behbehani, Group Director, expressed his gratitude for the employees' hard work and commitment. He remarked, "Our employees are the heart of our organization, and it is their passion, dedication, and teamwork that have brought us to where we are today."

Speaking during the event, Mr. Elie Debs, HR Manager, stated: "This annual gathering is more than just a celebration; it's a token of appreciation from management to employees for their unwavering commitment to our values and ethics. It also provides an opportunity to connect with each other beyond the workplace and foster a sense of camaraderie and gratitude."



The ceremony also recognized long-serving employees who have dedicated 15 years or more to the company, honoring their loyalty, perseverance, and tireless efforts in contributing to the organization's growth.

Morad Yousuf Behbehani Group reiterated their commitment to hosting similar events annually, showcasing their steadfast appreciation for their people. This celebration is a testament to the Group's belief that its employees are its greatest asset, reinforcing its reputation as a company that places people at the core of its values and vision.



Top and above: photos from the event

Retailer filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in early Sept

Big Lots conducts going-out-of-business sales after sale of company falls through

NEW YORK, Dec 22, (AP): Discount chain Big Lots is conducting going-out-of-business sales at its remaining locations after a sale of the company didn't materialize.

The Columbus, Ohio-based retailer, which sells furniture, home decor and other items, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in early September and said private equity firm Nexus Capital Management LP had agreed to acquire "substantially all of the company's assets." But on Thursday the chain said it didn't anticipate completing the purchase agreement. It said it continues to work toward completing an alternative transaction with Nexus or another party.

Big Lots said its goal would be to complete a sale by early January. According to the company's website, discounts of up to 50% were being offered on the entire assortment goods and it announced all stores were closing.

"We all have worked extremely hard and have taken every step to complete a going concern

sale," said Bruce Thorn, Big Lots' president and CEO, said in a statement. "While we remain hopeful that we can close an alternative going concern transaction, in order to protect the value of the Big Lots estate, we have made the difficult decision to begin the GOB process."

Big Lots said it is continuing to serve customers in-store and online, and will provide updates as available.

Big Lots has said that high inflation and interest rates have hurt its business as consumers have pulled back on their home and seasonal product purchases, two categories the chain depends on for a significant part of its revenue. The company has also struggled with increased competition from the likes of Walmart and warehouse clubs like Walmart's Sam's Clubs and Costco, which have all sharpened their pricing and merchandise.

At the end of 2023, Big Lots operated nearly 1,400 stores in 48 states. A more recent store count wasn't immediately available.



A shopper leaves the Big Lots store on Dec. 4, 2012 in Berlin, Vt. (AP)

Other Voices

From local to global: How MENA startups can conquer the world

By Rashit Makhat

Director and co-founder, Scalo Technologies (tech venture company based in Dubai)

In today's fast-paced tech world, building a startup that not only thrives but excels in global markets takes more than just a groundbreaking idea.

Visionaries like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Reed Hastings didn't just create successful startups, they built empires.

Their success stories share a common thread: relentless innovation, a deep focus on customer needs, and a bold approach to taking risks. These qualities turned Tesla, Amazon, and Netflix into the industry giants they are today.

For ambitious tech founders in the MENA region, adopting these strategies can provide a powerful blueprint to fuel growth, attract investment, and make a lasting impact.

Today's leading entrepreneurs are more than just business owners; they are visionaries who use their ingenuity to solve complex problems, foster innovation, create jobs and shape economic progress.

And by creating products and solutions that address society's evolving needs, such as AI-powered healthcare and education tools, they can help bridge gaps in critical areas and improve quality of life on a global scale.

The MENA region is a dynamic hub for tech startups which secured \$258 million through 46 deals in November. The UAE led the way with \$146 million raised across 11 transactions, followed by Saudi Arabia with \$94 million through 23 deals.

This trend is particularly promising for founders, as it shows that investors are still willing to support innovative ideas with the potential for growth, even amid economic uncertainties.

There are no shortcuts to success. In their rush to thrive, founders often make common mistakes, overspending, burning through cash, neglecting research, ignoring target market definition, skipping a solid business plan, and hiring too fast.

Scaling a tech business is more than just increasing revenue and resources. It's about earning more than you spend, growing quickly, and reinvesting profits. Many startups fail by simply increasing both revenue and resources at the same rate, a costly exercise that slows growth.

To succeed, founders must understand the scaling process, develop a solid strategy, and stay ahead of tech trends.

In today's age of relentless innovation, technology is transforming business at a breathtaking pace. Every new tech founder faces a similar landscape: one filled with incredible promise but fraught with complexity.

Success requires more than disruptive thinking; it demands strategic planning, adaptability, and a keen ability to navigate unique challenges. Staying up-to-date with the latest technology is crucial. Investing in new tools and systems can give a competitive edge, attracting investors and customers.

This is tough for businesses with limited resources, but partnering with accelerators, research institutions, and tech communities can be the solution. Building a culture of continuous learning among employees can also help the team stay agile and



Rashit Makhat

adapt to new tech trends.

With minimal funds, it's crucial to focus on key areas like product development, customer acquisition, and marketing to build a strong foundation. Regular budget reviews ensure efficient spending, attracting investors and promoting sustainable growth.

According to global consultants Bain & Company, nearly 75% of tech companies struggle to find the right talent. A Harvard Business Review survey found that only 13% of employers can consistently attract and retain top tech expertise.

To find the right people and hold on to them, tech startups can start by creating a strong company culture emphasizing growth, innovation, and collaboration. Offering equity or stock options and investing in employee development are tactics that can pay off handsomely.

The MENA market is constantly changing due to political, economic, and social factors. This affects how consumers behave and what they want.

Tech companies need to be flexible and understand market trends to adapt their strategies. They should monitor industry developments, consumer demands, and competitors to stay ahead.

It's also important to have a plan for unexpected events like economic downturns or regulatory changes. Being proactive and adaptable helps companies navigate challenges and enter global markets successfully.

Competition is tough. To differentiate themselves, startups should focus on specific areas where they can be unique. By understanding their competitors and adapting their products, they can become leaders in their field.

As the regional startup ecosystem matures, competition for market share and investor attention intensifies. For founders, the ability to stand out often hinges on specialization and differentiation.

By focusing on niche markets or unique customer segments, they can create tailored offerings that resonate with specific audiences, building a loyal customer base and strengthening their market position. Here are some key steps to help guide them on their way:

Know your market deeply: Don't just know your customers - understand their habits, values, and spending limits. Use this knowledge to send out messages that make sense to them, and keeps them engaged.

Set clear, small goals: Break your big vision into smaller, achievable goals. Track your progress regularly and use these milestones to stay motivated and focused.

Be passionate about your mission: Love what you do. This shows in your work, attracting others to support and believe in your business.

Push through challenges: Every startup hits rough patches. Use setbacks to rethink strategies and stay flexible. Instead of quitting, ask how you can adapt to make it work.

Business Plus



Regular updates crucial in maintaining secure online shopping experience

How to avoid the latest generation of scams this holiday season



People window shop in Bryant Park's Winter Village, Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024, New York. (AP)

The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.

By **Shaila Rana**, Purdue University and **Nelly Mulleaneux**, Purdue University

Imagine this: Two days before your family holiday party, you get a text about an online order you placed a week ago, saying the package is at your door. It comes with a photo - of someone else's door. When you click the attached link, it takes you to the online store, where you enter your username and password. Somehow that doesn't work, even though you answered your security questions. Frustrated, you call customer service. They tell you not to worry since your package is still on the way. You receive your package a day later and forget all about the earlier hassle. In the end, it was just a mistake.

You are unaware of the terrifying thing happening in the background. You've fallen for a classic

package-delivery scam, and a form of "smishing," or SMS phishing. And you're not alone. One in three Americans have fallen victim to cybercrime, according to a 2023 poll. That's up from 1 in 4 in 2018. As cybersecurity researchers, we want to spread the word to help people protect themselves.

Old-fashioned threats haven't disappeared - identity thieves still steal wallets, dumpster dive for personal information and skim cards at ATMs - but the internet has made scamming easier than ever.

Digital threats include phishing attacks that use fake emails and websites, data breaches at major companies, malware that steals your information, and unsecured Wi-Fi networks in public places.

Generative AI - which refers to artificial intelligence that generates text, images and other things - has improved dramatically over the past few years. That's been great for scammers trying to make a buck during the holiday season.

Consider online shopping. In some cases, scammers craft deepfake videos of fake testimonials from satisfied "customers" to trick

unsuspecting shoppers. Scam victims can encounter these videos on cloned versions of legitimate sites, social media platforms, messaging apps and forums.

Scammers also generate AI-cloned voices of social media influencers appearing to endorse counterfeit products and create convincing but fraudulent shopping websites populated with AI-generated product photos and reviews. Some scammers use AI to impersonate legitimate brands through personalized phishing emails and fake customer service interactions. Since AI-generated content can appear remarkably authentic, it's become harder for consumers to distinguish legitimate online stores from sophisticated scam operations.

But it doesn't stop there. "Family emergency scams" exploit people's emotional vulnerability through deepfake technology. Scammers use AI to clone the voices of family members, especially children, and then make panic-inducing calls to relatives where they claim to be in serious trouble and need immediate financial help.

Some scammers combine voice deepfakes with AI-generated video clips showing the "loved one" in apparent distress. These manufactured emergency scenarios often involve hospital bills, bail money or ransom demands that must be paid immediately. The scammer may also use AI to impersonate authority figures like doctors, police officers and lawyers to add credibility to the scheme.

Since the voice sounds authentic and the emotional manipulation is intense, even cautious people can be caught off guard and make rushed decisions.

Protecting yourself against scams requires a multilayered defense strategy.

When shopping, verify retailers through official websites by checking the URL carefully - it should start with the letters "HTTPS" - and closely examining the site design and its content. Since fake websites often provide fake contact information, checking the "Contact Us" section can be a good idea. Before making purchases from unfamiliar sites, cross-reference the business on legitimate review platforms and verify their physical

address. It's essential to keep all software updated, including your operating system, browser, apps and antivirus software. Updates often include security patches that fix vulnerabilities hackers could exploit.

For more information on the importance of software updates and how to manage them, check out resources like StaySafeOnline or your device manufacturer's official website. Regular updates are a crucial step in maintaining a secure online shopping experience.

Make sure you only provide necessary information for purchases - remember, no one needs your Social Security number to sell you a sweater. And keeping an eye on your bank statements will help you catch any unauthorized activity early. It may seem like another chore, and it probably is, but this is the reality of our digital world.

To protect against family emergency scams, establish family verification codes, or a safe word, or security questions that only real family members would know. If you do get a distressed call from loved ones, remain calm and take time to verify the situation by contacting family members directly through known and trusted phone numbers. Educate your relatives about these scams and encourage them to never send money without first confirming the emergency with other family members or authorities through verified channels.

If you discover that your identity has been stolen, time is critical. Your first steps should be to immediately contact your banks and credit card companies, place a fraud alert with the credit bureaus, and file a report with the Federal Trade Commission and your local police.

In the following days, you'll need to change all passwords, review your credit reports, consider a credit freeze, and document everything. While this process can be overwhelming - and extremely cumbersome - taking quick action can significantly limit the damage.

Staying informed about AI scam tactics through reputable cybersecurity resources is essential. Reporting suspected scams to relevant authorities not only protects you, but it also helps safeguard others. A key takeaway is that staying vigilant is critical to defending against these threats.

Awareness helps communities push back against digital threats. More importantly, it's key to understand how today's scams aren't like yesteryear's.

Recognizing the signs of scams can provide stronger defense during this holiday season. And as you develop your threat identification techniques, don't forget to share with your family and friends.

Who knows? You could save someone from becoming a victim. (AP)

Increased access to highly capable language models large and small can be a mixed blessing

Language AIs in 2024: Size, guardrails and steps toward AI agents

The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.

By **John Licato**, University of South Florida

Research the intersection of artificial intelligence, natural language processing and human reasoning as the director of the Advancing Human and Machine Reasoning lab at the University of South Florida. I am also commercializing this research in an AI startup that provides a vulnerability scanner for language models.

From my vantage point, I observed significant developments in the field of AI language models in 2024, both in research and the industry.

Perhaps the most exciting of these are the capabilities of smaller language models, support for addressing AI hallucination, and frameworks for developing AI agents.

At the heart of commercially available generative AI products like ChatGPT are large language models, or LLMs, which are trained on vast amounts of text and produce convincing humanlike language.

There is an iterative interaction between large language models and

smaller language models, which seems to have accelerated in 2024.

First, organizations with the most computational resources experiment with and train increasingly larger and more powerful language models. Those yield new large language model capabilities, benchmarks, training sets and training or prompting tricks. In turn, those are used to make smaller language models - in the range of 3 billion parameters or less - which can be run on more affordable computer setups, require less energy and memory to train, and can be fine-tuned with less data.

No surprise, then, that developers have released a host of powerful smaller language models - although the definition of small keeps changing: Phi-3 and Phi-4 from Microsoft, Llama-3.2 1B and 3B, and Qwen2-VL-2B are just a few examples.

These smaller language models can be specialized for more specific tasks, such as rapidly summarizing a set of comments or fact-checking text against a specific reference. They can work with their larger cousins to produce increasingly powerful hybrid systems.

Increased access to highly capable language models large and small can be a mixed blessing. As there were many consequential elections around the world in 2024, the temptation for the misuse of language models was high.

Language models can give malicious users the ability to generate social media posts and deceptively influence public opinion. There was a great deal of concern about this

threat in 2024, given that it was an election year in many countries.

And indeed, a robocall faking President Joe Biden's voice asked New Hampshire Democratic primary voters to stay home. OpenAI had to intervene to disrupt over 20 operations and deceptive networks that tried to use its models for deceptive campaigns. Fake videos and memes were created and shared with the help of AI tools.

Despite the anxiety surrounding AI disinformation, it is not yet clear what effect these efforts actually had on public opinion and the U.S. election. Nevertheless, U.S. states passed a large amount of legislation in 2024 governing the use of AI in elections and campaigns.

Google started including AI overviews in its search results, yielding some results that were hilariously and obviously wrong - unless you enjoy glue in your pizza. However, other results may have been dangerously wrong, such as when it suggested mixing bleach and vinegar to clean your clothes.

Large language models, as they are most commonly implemented, are prone to hallucinations. This means that they can state things that are false or misleading, often with confident language. Even though I and others continually beat the drum about this, 2024 still saw many organizations learning about the dangers of AI hallucination the hard way.

Despite significant testing, a chatbot playing the role of a Catholic priest advocated for baptism via Gatorade. A chatbot advising on

New York City laws and regulations incorrectly said it was "legal for an employer to fire a worker who complains about sexual harassment, doesn't disclose a pregnancy or refuses to cut their dreadlocks." And OpenAI's speech-capable model forgot whose turn it was to speak and responded to a human in her own voice.

Fortunately, 2024 also saw new ways to mitigate and live with AI hallucinations. Companies and researchers are developing tools for making sure AI systems follow given rules pre-deployment, as well as environments to evaluate them. So-called guardrail frameworks inspect large language model inputs and outputs in real time, albeit often by using another layer of large language models.

And the conversation on AI regulation accelerated, causing the big players in the large language model space to update their policies on responsibly scaling and harnessing AI.

But although researchers are continually finding ways to reduce hallucinations, in 2024, research convincingly showed that AI hallucinations are always going to exist in some form. It may be a fundamental feature of what happens when an entity has finite computational and information resources. After all, even human beings are known to confidently misremember and state falsehoods from time to time.

Large language models, particularly those powered by variants of the transformer architecture, are still driving the most significant ad-

vances in AI. For example, developers are using large language models to not only create chatbots, but to serve as the basis of AI agents. The term "agentic AI" shot to prominence in 2024, with some pundits even calling it the third wave of AI.

To understand what an AI agent is, think of a chatbot expanded in two ways: First, give it access to tools that provide the ability to take actions. This might be the ability to query an external search engine, book a flight or use a calculator. Second, give it increased autonomy, or the ability to make more decisions on its own.

For example, a travel AI chatbot might be able to perform a search of flights based on what information you give it, but a tool-equipped travel agent might plan out an entire trip itinerary, including finding events, booking reservations and adding them to your calendar.

In 2024, new frameworks for developing AI agents emerged. Just to name a few, LangGraph, CrewAI, PhiData and AutoGen/Magentic-One were released or improved in 2024.

Companies are just beginning to adopt AI agents. Frameworks for developing AI agents are new and rapidly evolving. Furthermore, security, privacy and hallucination risks are still a concern.

But global market analysts forecast this to change: 82% of organizations surveyed plan to use agents within 1-3 years, and 25% of all companies currently using generative AI are likely to adopt AI agents in 2025. (AP)

‘Old-fashioned threats haven't disappeared - identity thieves still steal wallets, dumpster dive for personal information and skim cards at ATMs - but the internet has made scamming easier than ever’

‘At the heart of commercially available generative AI products like ChatGPT are large language models, or LLMs, which are trained on vast amounts of text and produce convincing humanlike language’

Actress's legal complaint alleges smear campaign

Blake Lively accuses Justin Baldoni of harassment

LOS ANGELES, Dec 22, (AP): Blake Lively has accused her "It Ends With Us" director and co-star Justin Baldoni of sexual harassment on the set of the movie and a subsequent effort to "destroy" her reputation in a legal complaint.

The complaint obtained by The Associated Press, which The New York Times reported was filed Friday with the California Civil Rights Department, precedes a lawsuit. It names Baldoni, the studio behind the romantic drama "It Ends With Us" and Baldoni's publicists among the defendants.

In the complaint, Lively accuses Baldoni and the studio of embarking on a "multi-tiered plan" to damage her reputation following a meeting in which she and her husband Ryan Reynolds addressed "repeated sexual harassment and other disturbing behavior" by Baldoni and a producer on the movie.

The plan, the complaint said, included a proposal to plant theories on online message boards, engineer a social media campaign and place news stories critical of Lively.

Baldoni enlisted publicists and crisis managers in a "sophisticated, coordinated, and well-financed retaliation plan" meant to "bury" and "destroy" Lively if she went public with her on-set concerns, the complaint alleges.

"To safeguard against the risk of Ms. Lively ever revealing the truth about Mr. Baldoni, the BaldoniWayfarer team created, planted, amplified, and boosted content designed to eviscerate Ms. Lively's credibility," the complaint states. "They engaged in the same techniques to bolster Mr. Baldoni's credibility and suppress any negative content about him."

The complaint also says Baldoni "abruptly pivoted away from" the movie's marketing plan and "used domestic violence

'survivor content' to protect his public image."

Bryan Freedman, an attorney representing Baldoni, Wayfarer Studios and its representatives, called the claims "completely false, outrageous and intentionally salacious."

He pushed back against Lively's allegations of a coordinated campaign, saying the studio "proactively" hired a crisis manager "due to the multiple demands and threats made by Ms. Lively during production."

Freedman also said Lively threatened to not appear on set and not promote the film "if her demands were not met."

Those demands were not specified in the statement, but Lively's complaint lists 30 demands that she said Baldoni and others agreed to after their tense sit-down over her hostile work environment concerns.

Among them: "no more showing of nude videos or images of women" to Lively and others on set and no more discussions about pornography.

She also said Baldoni should not ask her trainer about her weight without her consent, should not press her about her religious beliefs and should make "no further mention of her dead father."

An intimacy coordinator was also required to be on set whenever Lively shared a scene with Baldoni and he was barred from entering her trailer or the make-up trailer while she was undressed.

The demands also stipulated that there would be "no more improvising of kissing" scenes or adding of sex scenes to the film outside of the ones in the script Lively approved when she signed on.



Blake Lively poses for photographers upon arrival at the UK Gala Screening for the film 'It Ends With Us' on Aug. 8, 2024 in London. (AP)

Local performers

Airports use music to 'calm' travelers

SEATAC, Washington, Dec 22, (AP): Background music is no longer an afterthought at many airports, which are hiring local musicians and carefully curating playlists to help lighten travelers' moods.

London's Heathrow Airport built a stage to showcase emerging British performers for the first time this summer. The program was so successful the airport hopes to bring it back in 2025. Nashville International Airport has five stages that host more than 800 performances per year, from country musicians to jazz combos. In the Dominican Republic, Punta Cana International Airport greets passengers with live merengue music.

Tiffany Idiart and her two nieces were delighted to hear musicians during a recent layover at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

"I like it. There's a lot of people here and they can all hear it," said Grace Idiart, 9. "If their flight got delayed or something like that, they could have had a hard day. And so the music could have made them feel better."

Airports are also carefully curating their recorded playlists. Detroit Metro Airport plays Motown hits in a tunnel connecting its terminals. Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas has a playlist of local artists compiled by an area radio station. Singapore's Changi Airport commissioned a special piano accompaniment for its giant digital waterfall.

Music isn't a new phenomenon in airport terminals. Brian Eno's "Music for Airports," an album released in 1978, helped define the ambient music genre. It's minimalist and designed to calm.

But Barry McPhillips, the head of international creative for Mood Media, which provides music for airports and other public spaces, said technology is enabling background music to be less generic and more tailored to specific places or times of day.

Mood Media - formerly known as Muzak - develops playlists to appeal to business travelers or families depending on who's in the airport at any given time. It might program calmer music in the security line but something more energizing in the duty-free store.

"We see it as a soundscape," McPhillips said. "We design for all of these moments."

Volume

There's a science to Mood Music's decisions on volume, tempo, even whether to play a song in a major key versus a minor one, he added.

"How do we want to affect their mood at that moment?" McPhillips said. "It's not just like, 'Here's a load of songs.' It's a load of songs for that 10-minute segment, and then we move to the next 10 minutes."

At the same time, many airports are going low-tech, hiring local musicians to serenade travelers and give them a sense of the place they're passing through.

Chicago's O'Hare and Midway airports have more than 100 live performances each year. Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport began a live music program five years ago and now has two stages featuring local artists.

Tami Kuiken, the manager of airport music in Seattle, said the Seattle-Tacoma airport launched its live music program about a decade ago after a city commissioner heard live music at the airport in Austin, Texas.

"The idea was like, 'Man, why doesn't Seattle have music? We're a music city too,'" Kuiken said.

At first, the airport created a playlist featuring emerging artists along with famous ones like Pearl Jam. Then it decided to try live musicians for a 12-week trial. It was so successful that the airport now features live musicians daily and is building new performance spaces.

"People's anxiety levels are very high when they're traveling," Kuiken said. "The feedback that we started getting was that once they got through the checkpoint and they were greeted with music, all of a sudden their anxiety and stress levels dropped."

The programs also benefit musicians, who get paid to perform and gain wider exposure. When Colorado Springs Airport announced a live music program in March, more than 150 musicians applied. It now hosts two two-hour performances each week.

David James, a singer and guitarist who plays at Seattle's airport about once a week, said waking up in time for a daytime gig took some adjustment. But he's gained new fans from all over the world.

"I get really sweet responses from people all the time, saying, 'That was so soothing to be able to just sit and listen to music in between flights,'" James said. "So it feels like it's especially therapeutic for people."

Country stars like Blake Shelton and Keith Urban have come through Nashville's airport and interacted with local musicians, said Stacey Nickens, the airport's vice president of corporate communications and marketing. Shelton even gave one his guitar.

Otto Stuparitz, a musicologist and lecturer at the University of Amsterdam who has studied airport music, said airports should think carefully about their selections. Music that's meant to be actively listened to - like live music or catchy pop songs - can be very distracting in an already chaotic environment, he said. He has noticed some airports - especially in Europe -- turning off piped melodies altogether.

But McPhillips said big spaces like airports can feel cold and unwelcoming without background music.

"A well-crafted audio strategy is one that people aren't particularly cognizant of," he said. "They just know they're having a good time and that it's appropriate."

Film



This image released by A24 shows Guy Pearce in a scene from 'The Brutalist.' (AP)

Postwar epic defies Hollywood conventions

Corbet and 'The Brutalist' go for broke

NEW YORK, Dec 22, (AP): Brady Corbet's "The Brutalist" emerged less like a new film worth checking out than a movie colossus to behold.

Corbet's visionary three-and-a-half-hour postwar American epic, shot in VistaVision, has taken on the imposing aura of its architect protagonist's style. Little about it is tailored to today's more prescribed movie world. It even has an intermission. And yet "The Brutalist" isn't just one of the most acclaimed films of the year, it's edged perilously close to the mainstream.

For Corbet, the 36-year-old director, it's a surprising turn of events. His 215-minute movie, he thought, was surely destined for cult-movie status.

"It's a great reminder that anything can be mainstreamed," Corbet says. "That gives me real hope for the future of the medium. Six months ago, the powers that be, many people were telling me that the film is un-distributable."

Corbet, sitting in the offices of A24, which acquired his film out of the Venice Film Festival, smiles. "I was definitely not so popular with people as recently as August."

Yet since its arrival at Venice in September, "The Brutalist" has emerged as a major Oscar contender. Last week, it was nominated for seven Golden Globes. Numerous critics groups have named it the best film of the year.

But Corbet and "The Brutalist" are aiming higher than awards-season success. "The Brutalist" is a grand bid to bring some visionary bravado back to movies. Corbet, who was an actor in films by Michael Haneke, Olivier Assayas and Lars von Trier before committing to directing, believes film is stuck in a stasis. In a movie world ruled by safe bets and streaming imperatives, "The Brutalist" dares to go for broke.

"I struggle a lot with movies from the last 20, 30 years," says Corbet, who has some of the candid swagger of earlier American auteurs. "There's many exceptions. But there aren't as many as there should be. I just feel that they're perfunctory - narratively perfunctory, stylistically. There are no big swings."

"The Brutalist," written by Corbet and his partner, the filmmaker Mona Fastvold, operatically unfolds the fictional story of László Tóth (Adrien Brody), a Hungarian architect who, having survived Nazi concentration camps, emigrates to Pennsylvania. He's scrapping by in a working class life when his renovation of a library for a wealthy industrialist, Harrison Lee Van Buren (Guy Pearce), propels him back into architecture. Van Buren becomes László's benefactor, commissioning him to build a sprawling institute.

Their relationship, as patron and artist, grows increasingly tense and disturbed. "The Brutalist" evolves as a grim character study and sweeping psychodrama about the rapaciousness of American capitalism.

It's also a pointed critique of Hollywood. For Corbet and Fastvold, some of the movie's central dynamic came out of their previous film, "Vox Lux," which starred Natalie Port-

man as a pop star whose fame is born out of a school shooting. The swelling ranks of financiers, Corbet says, made him miserable.

"Our experience on 'Vox' was really, really difficult for a variety of reasons. It was much more inside the Hollywood process and that's partially just because it was shot inside the States," says Corbet. "After I made that film, I was like: I'm never working in the United States again. I was just being harassed by the powers that be daily. I remember at one point having a driver drive me around the block so that no one could be in my ear while I was at the monitor."

Resurrect

Fastvold and Corbet, who live in New York with their 10-year-old daughter, shot "The Brutalist" in Hungary. If the movie is a self-conscious stab at resurrecting some of the visionary spirit of American moviemaking, it's also a commentary on some of the forces that constrict it today.

"This is the closest we will ever get to making a film about making movies," says Fastvold. "We didn't have a Van Buren but we certainly had our fill of complicated relationships with the people who hold the purse strings."

She adds: "In the complicated relationship between the patron and the artist, there's this sense of: I have ownership of the project because I'm paying for it and I almost have ownership of you."

Making "The Brutalist" wasn't a piece of cake, either. It took some seven years in total. When Corbet, behind sunglasses, reflected on that struggle at the movie's Venice press conference, his voice quivered with emotion. Remarkably, it was accomplished with a budget less than \$10 million - considerably less than the film's scope would

suggest.

"The film was certainly designed to be outsized and imposing," Corbet says. "We knew the film would be long. We knew it was a big object. We also felt it had to be. The form and the content needed to be lock step with each other. The appeal of Brutalism is its commitment to both minimalism and maximalism, and all of my films are playing with that dynamic. I like those extremes."

When Fastvold and Corbet sat down to write, they resolved not to be constrained by any self-imposed limitations. They wrote big. The couple, both of whom grew up with relatives who were architects, were fascinated by the connections of Brutalism, which favors raw concrete, and the war.

"Some of these things wouldn't exist unless they had gone through the trauma experienced during the war," says Fastvold. "There's an honesty in Brutalism. Instead of covering up how the building is constructed, this is showing things the way they are. That felt connected to how you handle or process trauma, by exposing it."

For Brody, the role had obvious echoes with arguably his most defining performance. In Roman Polanski's 2002 "The Pianist," Brody also played a Jewish artist warped by WWII.

"The research and the immersion needed to portray someone who lived through the horrors of World War II left me with an understanding that clearly lingered and exists within me," Brody says.

The actor grants that László is in some sense a stand-in for Corbet.

"Oh definitely. I find that filmmakers often need to exorcise their circumstances," says Brody. "Brady is very open and unguarded as he references his own journey and hardships along the way. It's very relatable. I understand them."

Asked why he thinks moviemaking has grown less adventurous, Corbet describes systematic failure. It's not only business limitations, he says, it's a lack of boldness.

"I find this sort of faux humility to be exactly that," Corbet says. "You made a movie. You raised millions of dollars. You assembled a crew of 250. Stop apologizing for it."

He cites the movies of an earlier generation of filmmakers - Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Larisa Shepitko, Chantal Akerman - as films "that really demand to be wrestled with - films that announce themselves."

"What's funny is that I think this conservatism has been really damaging for box office as well," Corbet says. "Audiences are so savvy that they recognize formulas being re-hashed over and over again. And I would say arthouse cinema has become as algorithmic as Marvel and DC Studios."

Corbet already sounds delighted that his next project - a '70s-set horror Western - will further test whatever popularity has come his way thanks to "The Brutalist."



Filmmaker Brady Corbet appears at The Gotham Film Awards in New York on Dec. 2, 2024. (AP)

Now caretaker of his dad's work

Sean Ono Lennon innovates dad's legacy



Singer John Lennon appears during a press conference at the Hotel Americana on May 13, 1968, in New York. (AP)



Yoko Ono, wife of the late John Lennon, (left), and their son Sean Lennon arrive at the 56th annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles on Jan. 26, 2014. (AP)

NEW YORK, Dec 22, (AP) — Only recently given stewardship over his late father's work, Sean Ono Lennon is on a remarkable run.

The only child of John Lennon and Yoko Ono won an Academy Award this year for a short film based on his parents' 1971 song "Happy Christmas (War is Over)" and, a few months later, was nominated for his first-ever Grammy, for producing a box set on the album "Mind Games," originally released in 1973.

"It feels overwhelming and surreal," said Lennon, who also recently shared a Webby Award with his mother for Ono's interactive art project "Wish Tree."

For Lennon, who was 5 when the former Beatle was murdered in 1980, the work is a way to connect with his father. It's more than a preservation mission: On "Mind Games," he takes artistic license, pulling apart the recordings of John Lennon's music to create something entirely new.

Lennon was inspired, in part, by another Beatle offspring, Dhani Harrison, who helped repack his own father's "All Things Must Pass." Dhani Harrison is also behind this fall's reissue of his dad's "Living in the Material World," but that experience is nothing like what Lennon did with "Mind Games."

Besides the music, the innovative box is modeled after one of his mother's art pieces and filled with art reproductions, hidden music, video, messages and puzzles, some only visible through an ultraviolet light that is included — "mind games," remember? The deluxe box retails for \$1,350, but there are less expensive options.

Lennon, 49, knew his father was a musician before he died; the boy tagged along to the studio for some "Double Fantasy" sessions. But truly understanding his impact came later, like when he'd hear fans singing his father's music outside their New York apartment on the Oct. 9 birthday they shared. "It was pretty clear to me that wasn't happening with my friends," he said.

His father's music played constantly around the house, and learning to play those songs launched his own journey to become a musician.

"I think I would have rebelled more against my dad's — and my mom's — music if I had grown up with my dad in the house and I had been angry at him or rebelled against him," he told The Associated Press. "Because he wasn't around, I've always really cherished the music as sort of a living part of him."

He inherited the job of keeping his father's music alive for new generations when his mom, now 91, retired.

Connect

In liner notes for "Mind Games," Lennon explains that "the only meaningful way that I can show my love to him" is to work hard on his music and keep it in the culture's consciousness. That's poignant, and maybe a little sad. Does Lennon really have to prove to anyone that he loves his father?

"What else can I do in this Earth to express my love and reverence for my father than to do an incredibly meticulous job of taking care of his music?" he said. "I can't actually think of anything else, other than taking care of my mother, which I try to do as well."

That reverence for his elders came from his mother, he believes. When his Japanese grandparents came over to the U.S. "it was like the president was visiting," he recalled.

Only after he began the "Mind Games" project did Lennon learn that the album wasn't particularly well-regarded when it was released. He found an interview where even John Lennon considered it a transition from a period of political activism to being a musician again. The title song was its only hit.

That attitude lingers, judging by an online site called "Brutally Honest Rock Album Reviews." In an unsigned review, the author said the "Mind

Games" reissue defines overkill. "You can now own and forever cherish six different versions of songs that were unmemorable at best and a complete waste of time at worst."

That only motivated Lennon to work harder, and led to a bold artistic decision. Part of the reason the album didn't really connect was because it wasn't promoted well or supported by concerts, he said. But he also described the original album mix as thin and not doing justice to the music.

Using the original recordings, he constructed new versions of the songs, sometimes emphasizing different instruments. He sought a warmer, more direct sound reminiscent of Lennon's "Plastic Ono Band" album — most visibly on "Aismasmen (I'm Sorry)," one of a handful of compositions reflecting marital turmoil that presaged Lennon's notorious "lost weekend" separation from Ono.

Different versions of the title cut also show Sean's approach. There's the original "Mind Games," with a distinctive chiming sound that drives the melody. That's stripped away in a new mix where a reggae guitar lick becomes audible. An organ-dominated instrumental sounds like a church hymn. There are other outtakes, some with alternate lyrics and one with a snippet of "Make Love, Not War," a song fragment dating back to the Beatles that the author repurposed.

He didn't have a trove of unheard material to mine, other than Lennon's demo of "I'm the Greatest," a song he gave to Beatle mate Ringo Starr.

In some of the new versions, Sean goes beyond remixing or revealing outtakes to imposing his own artistic vision over his father's.

"There are some people who feel that it's taking liberties, and I guess it technically is," Lennon said. "The way I look at it is, if I'm going to do the best job I can, the only way I can do that is to follow my heart and make it sound the best that it can sound. If that means maybe turning down an instrument a lot in a certain section because I don't think it's helping, then I'm going to do that."

Rock revival

'Crowes' revisit Grammy glory

NEW YORK, Dec 22, (AP) — The first time Chris and Rich Robinson were at the Grammy Awards, it was 1991. The New York Giants had won the Super Bowl, and the US was in the midst of the Gulf War.

The siblings behind the band The Black Crowes had just released their debut album "Shake Your Money Maker" and were nominees for best new artist. They didn't have high hopes. Sure enough, Mariah Carey would take the crown.

"I don't remember ever like getting too worked up about it," singer-songwriter Chris Robinson recalls. "Of course, Mariah Carey is going to get that. Are they going to give it to these dirtbag kids from Atlanta who just came to the party really to get thrown out?"

Fast forward more than three decades and the Black Crowes have been invited back to the party, earning their second career Grammy nod this year for best rock album alongside the Rolling Stones.

"Literally just to be nominated is an amazing thing. And to be nominated next to the Rolling Stones makes it even better," says Rich Robinson, the songwriter and guitarist.

The Black Crowes' rollicking "Happiness Bastards" is up for best rock album against "Romance" by Fontaines D.C., "Saviors" by Green Day, "TANGK" by IDLES, "Dark Matter" from Pearl Jam, "Hackney Diamonds" by the Stones and "No Name" from Jack White.

"To be in a place where it's all clicking and it all feels right, that's the real special feeling," says Chris Robinson. "I think it reinforces our commitment and where we're going."

"Happiness Bastards" is a 10-track romping tour of rock, from the Southern boogie of "Rats and Clowns" to the stuttering stomp of "Cross Your Fingers" and the airy cool of "Wilted Rose." There's blues harmonica, some glam rock, '70s harmonies and fun AC/DC-like riffs.

"It's funky and it's rockin' and it's kind of a little bit salty here and there. But ultimately, I think it's very interesting," says Chris Robinson. "It's just integrated with everything that we've done and where we're going."

The band last released a studio album in 2009, and the volatile Robinson brothers needed a decade apart before they regrouped in 2019. In 2022, they released an EP with covers of David Bowie, the Rolling Stones, the Temptations, T. Rex, Little Feat and Rod Stewart. Now they're in the same Grammy category as the Stones.

Critics have welcomed the brothers back, with Paste magazine calling the new album "a respectable collection of blues rockers that showcase the brothers' strengths" and Rolling Stone describing it as "fun, energetic and, unmistakably not-crusty."

Some cynics thought the reunion was simply a cash grab, an attempt to monetize fans of the band yearning for the '90s and a good-time rock concert. The strong album and Grammy love refutes that argument.

"Well, we did it and we've been successful. And all these years later we wrote these new songs and, boom, here we are," says Chris Robinson. "The validation of that is really unique to us."



Rich Robinson, (left), and his brother Chris Robinson of The Black Crowes pose for a portrait in Los Angeles on Monday, Dec. 9. (AP)

Music



Kehlani performs at All Points East festival on Aug. 18, 2023, in London. (AP)

'Crash' explores new sounds, personal growth

Kehlani's risks lead to Grammy nods

LOS ANGELES, Dec 22, (AP) — While recording "Crash," Kehlani faced a career-defining decision: Stick with the familiar R&B sound that helped build the singer's name, or risk it all to showcase their full artistic range.

For Kehlani, who uses she/they pronouns, choosing the latter was a gamble, but trusting their instincts paid off in the long run. Their fourth studio album became a catalyst to earning three Grammy nods, a massive world tour and proving that their versatility should never be in question.

"I was taking a risk, because I'm one of those artists that have been around long enough for people to pigeonhole me into a sound," said Kehlani, who first realized she was being cornered musically after releasing the single "Butterfly" from their 2019 mixtape "While We Wait." Though she loved the track, calling it a "really pretty song," she felt a growing need to break out of the box and evolve their sound.

Kehlani pushed genre boundaries on "Crash," blending elements of R&B, rock, dance floor, rap and country. Their bold experimentation earned three Grammy nominations: best R&B progressive album for "Crash," R&B song through the viral sensation track "After Hours" and best melodic rap performance for "Kehlani."

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Kehlani discussed crediting the dance community for "After Hours" going viral, how their pro-Palestinian stance impacted them personally, their Christmas song with GloRilla, and how embracing a rock star persona for "Crash" challenged their health but unlocked a creative breakthrough for the album.

Kehlani's music mirrors their mental state. While recording "Crash," she fully embraced a rock star lifestyle, staying up all night and drinking alcohol. It certainly wasn't conducive for their health, but at times, this led to some intense, manic bursts of "expression and understanding," which defined the album.

"That's what I think had to come out of me in order for 'Crash' to come out of me in that way," said Kehlani, who noted that all the "chaos" delivered on the album wasn't always negative. She recorded songs in different Airbnb locations

including from a house in San Diego, where she could surf every day; found their grunge sound while going out in Harlem; and exuded their confidence while she laid down tracks on vacation in the Dominican Republic.

"It was a rock star album made in a very rock star process," said Kehlani, whose approach was completely different than their 2022 release "Blue Water Road," where she was focused more on meditation, leaving them in a spiritually grounded space.

These days, Kehlani has found middle ground through isolation and a healthier lifestyle. She now works out like a "ninja warrior," hitting the gym multiple times a day, doing yoga and hiking up mountains and incorporating healthier eating habits.

That helped Kehlani create the mixtape "While We Wait 2," which released a couple months after "Crash." It took only two weeks to record their latest mixtape inside their backyard house while wearing pajamas.

Journey

"The music I make will always reflect exactly where I'm at in my mental health journey," she said.

Kehlani credits the massive success of "After Hours" to the dance community on social media, thanks to Darius Hickman, who was behind the infectious dance challenge.

The singer said musicians owe gratitude to dancers like Hickman, whose video post earlier this year garnered more than 3.3 million views on TikTok. The post showed Hickman dancing to the intro of "After Hours."

"Dancers are like the new DJs," she said. "They are breaking songs."

Kehlani often shows their gratitude to the many who looped "After Hours" into their dance videos. She tagged Hickman on their own social media, accepting the dance challenge.

"It just feels good and it brings people together," she said. "So when I noticed that it was actually doing it in real time, I was like, 'OK, it's beyond me now.' I really owe it to the dancers really."

Kehlani dabbled in Christmas music nearly a decade ago with a few low-key SoundCloud tracks. But this year, she's giving the holidays a

bold new twist by collaborating with rapper GloRilla on "Xmas Time," which flips the script on traditional carols.

"I never imagined I'd be on a trap Christmas song," said Kehlani, who noted that she didn't think twice when GloRilla's team reached out about teaming up on the festive, bass-thumping track that released last week.

"I'm such a fan of GloRilla in any shape, way or form," she said. "She could've said she was making an Easter song and I would've been like 'Fantastic. Girl, let's do it.'"

Despite warnings to protect their career, Kehlani used their music and platform to boldly support Palestinians, marching alongside thousands at a pro-Palestinian rally in Los Angeles last year.

The singer inspired followers to rally behind the cause, but the weight of activism took a quiet toll on their mental health and livelihood.

"The hardest part of it for me was I had to maintain my sanity," said Kehlani, who this year released the "Next 2 U" music video. (The video opens with a poem by a Palestinian American writer, and Kehlani performs in front of a Palestinian flag.) Kehlani said she struggled with keeping tabs on the war in Gaza and watching friends struggle with depression because of them "bearing witness to a genocide."

"In a whole new scope of 'Wow, my safety, my livelihood, my career, how I take care of myself, how I take care of my family, how I feed my child,' All of this is endangered," she said. "For a while, I felt like I was alone. ... I had community leaders. I had activists. But I didn't have another person in my world that I could be like 'What happens when you get threatened at this rate?' Everything could crash and burn because you're just being a person."

Still, Kehlani stands firm in their beliefs, hoping to inspire others — including fellow artists and entertainers — to speak out fearlessly.

"If the Grammy nominations validate anything, I hope people see that we shouldn't be scared to speak about anything that (could be) threatening to our careers," she said. "I still went on a tour. ... post speaking up for Palestine. If all of us had stuck together, who knows what kind of further change could happen."

Variety

RIO DE JANEIRO: Santa Claus has arrived in Rio de Janeiro — under water.

Starting on Saturday, he'll be spotted at AquaRio Marine Aquarium swimming with sharks during their daily fish feeding sessions as part of the city's Christmas festivities.

Nine-year-old Guilherme Martins Matos said he'd seen Santa — or at least an impersonator — at the mall. That was cool, he said, but this was better.

"Imagine him under water feeding the fish? It's even cooler," Guilherme told The Associated Press.

This version of Santa Claus is Felipe Luna, 39, a senior animal handler at AquaRio. What began as a joke among staff has become an annual tradition.

Dressed as Santa, Luna dives into the aquarium's 924,602-gallon tank to feed marine animals, including sharks. "For the kids, seeing Santa Claus under water is already incredible. And Santa feeding a shark by hand? That's unforgettable," Luna said.

The Santa Claus dive runs daily at AquaRio through Dec. 25 at 1:30 p.m. (AP)

NEW YORK: Neil Cavuto, a business journalist at Fox News Channel whose weekday afternoon news show frequently annoyed President-elect Donald Trump and his supporters, left the network after 28 years following a final show on Thursday.

A workhorse who had been with Fox since its inception in 1996, Cavuto also hosted programs at Fox's sister, the Fox Business Network, and was not considered one of the stable of opinion hosts.

His final show briskly moved through a succession of news stories, including the potential for a government funding deal, stock market fluctuations and a strike by Amazon workers. He addressed his exit at the end, thanking Fox for his years on the network but saying that "I'm not leaving journalism. I'm just leaving here."

"I got to do what I love here — report the news, not shout the news, not blast the news," he said, adding that his goal was to "tell truth to power and fairness to all. That's me."

He thanked viewers, while noting the ones who wrote to suggest he do things "that I think were anatomically impossible to do." (AP)

LONDON: Thousands of tourists, pagans, druids and people simply yearning for the promise of spring marked the dawn of the shortest day of the year Saturday at the ancient Stonehenge monument.

Revelers cheered and beat drums as the sun rose at 8:09 a.m. (0809 GMT) over the giant standing stones on the winter solstice — the shortest day and the longest night in the Northern Hemisphere. No one could see the sun through the low winter cloud, but that did not deter a flurry of drumming, chanting and singing as dawn broke.

There will be less than eight hours of daylight in England on Saturday — but after that, the days get longer until the summer solstice in June.

The solstices are the only occasions when visitors can go right up to the stones at Stonehenge, and thousands are willing to rise before dawn to soak up the atmosphere.

"This is all about renewal, rebirth, we're entering into the new year, and it's also a good time to acknowledge what's taking place in the year that's been," said civil servant Chris Smith, 31. "There's such a vibe. I mean, if you look around, you've got everybody here, there's such an energy in the space." (AP)



Cavuto



KUNA photo

Kuwait's Polio Reference Laboratory ensures accuracy in results.

Kuwait ensures adherence to global diagnostic standards

Kuwait's polio lab earns 100% efficiency rating

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: In a landmark achievement underscoring Kuwait's dedication to public health excellence, the Polio Reference Laboratory at the Ministry of Health has received a 100 percent efficiency rating for 2024 in partial polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests -- part of an evaluation supervised by the World Health Organization (WHO), reports Al-Jarida daily.

The Ministry highlighted this milestone in a statement, emphasizing the laboratory's adherence to the latest international diagnostic standards.

This ensures highly accurate and credible results, reinforcing Kuwait's role in combating polio and advancing global health initiatives.

Dr. Sarah Al-Qabandi, Head of the Public Health Laboratories Department, expressed pride in the laboratory team's scientific and technical excellence. She also commended their ability to integrate cutting-edge scientific developments effectively, solidifying the laboratory's vital role in global polio eradication efforts.

The Polio Reference Laboratory plays a crucial role in confirming cases, tracking virus

spread through environmental and human sample analysis and providing essential data on virus strains to guide international vaccination and control strategies.

Dr. Al-Qabandi extended her gratitude to the laboratory team and the Public Health Sector, calling this achievement a motivating force to pursue further successes.

She reaffirmed Kuwait's commitment to supporting international efforts to eradicate polio, ensuring the health and safety of future generations.

Last legacy move

Biden commits to 60% emission cuts by 2035

WASHINGTON, Dec 22, (AP): President Joe Biden is pledging to cut US greenhouse gas emissions by more than 60% by 2035 as he fights to ensure his legacy on slowing global warming, even as President-elect Donald Trump vows to undo much of Biden's climate work when he takes office next month.

Biden said the new goal - which supersedes a previous plan to cut carbon emissions at least in half by 2030 - keeps the United States on track to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions economy-wide by 2050. The US is making a formal submission of the new target, known as a Nationally Determined Contribution, to the United Nations under terms of the 2015 Paris climate agreement, Biden said Thursday.



Biden

The new goal calls for reducing net emissions by 61% to 66% below 2005 levels in 2035.

"I'm proud that my administration is carrying out the boldest climate agenda in American history," Biden said in a videotaped statement.

"We're doing it by setting ambitious goals" such as deploying 30 gigawatts of offshore wind and conserving at least 30% of US lands and waters by 2030, Biden said. His administration also has set strict new standards to cut air pollution from cars, trucks and power plants and signed into law the most significant investments in climate and clean energy in U.S. history, he said.

Action

The action by the Democratic president comes just over a month before he is set to leave office. Trump has already promised to unleash a series of executive actions that will seek to undo most or all of Biden's climate agenda as the Republican president-elect pushes for "energy dominance" around the globe.

Trump no longer dismisses climate change as a "hoax" but has pledged to dismantle what he calls Democrats' "green new scam" in favor of boosting production of fossil fuels such as oil, natural gas and coal, the main causes of climate change. Trump is expected to withdraw the United States from the Paris climate accord, as he did during his first term, and will likely move to repeal parts of the landmark Inflation Reduction Act, especially subsidies that benefit electric vehicles and offshore wind.

Biden aides tried to downplay the impact of Trump's return to the White House, insisting that states and local governments can continue to lead on clean energy.

"American climate leadership is determined by so much more than whoever sits in the Oval Office," said John Podesta, Biden's senior adviser for international climate policy.

Climate leadership "happens on the ground in our cities and states, from Phoenix to Pittsburgh, from Boise to Baltimore," Podesta told reporters Wednesday. "And I believe that with this new 2035 target as their North Star, leaders across America can show the world that we are still in this fight for a better future."

Support

The US Climate Alliance, a bipartisan coalition of governors that support climate action, applauded the new target and pledged to work toward it, with or without help from the White House.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, the alliance's co-chair, said climate-conscious governors "will carry the torch forward" after Biden leaves office. Hochul, a Democrat, said governors will use the new U.S. goal to "keep America on track toward a cleaner, safer future."

"By continuing to stamp out climate pollution together, we're safeguarding public health, protecting the environment, growing the economy and creating good jobs across the U.S.," said New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, another alliance co-chair.

Biden, in his remarks, called the new goal "ambitious" and said it would lead to thousands of well-paying jobs, more affordable energy, cleaner air, cleaner water and a healthier environment for all Americans.

"It is also creating real momentum because we're unleashing American ingenuity and innovation. And together, we will turn this existential threat into a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform our nation" for decades to come, Biden said. "I know we can do this."

The proposal would require sustained changes across the economy, from power generation to transportation, buildings, agriculture and industry, including significant increases in renewable energy such as wind and solar power and steep cuts in emissions from fossil fuels such as oil and coal.

The U.S. pledge includes methane reductions of at least 35% from 2005 levels by 2035, Biden said. Cutting methane emissions is among the fastest ways to reduce near-term warming and is crucial to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Virus spreads to dairy cows and humans

Bird flu emergency in US sparks fresh concerns about the virus

CALIFORNIA, Dec 22, (AP): California officials have declared a state of emergency over the spread of bird flu, which is tearing through dairy cows in that state and causing sporadic illnesses in people in the US.

That raises new questions about the virus, which has spread for years in wild birds, commercial poultry and many mammal species.

The virus, also known as Type A H5N1, was detected for the first time in US dairy cattle in March. Since then, bird flu has been confirmed in at least 866 herds in 16 states.

More than 60 people in eight states have been infected, with mostly mild illnesses, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One person in Louisiana has been hospitalized with the nation's first known severe illness caused by the virus, health officials said this week.

Here's what you need to know.

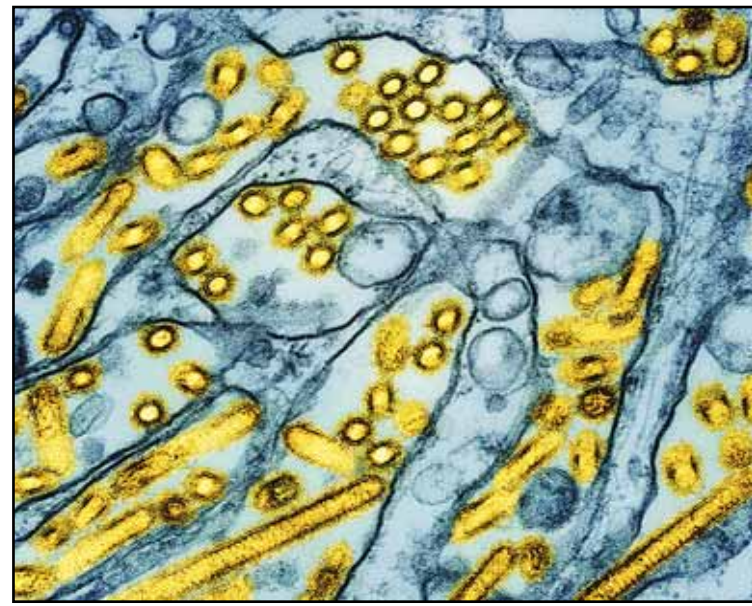
Gov. Gavin Newsom said he declared the state of emergency to better position state staff and supplies to respond to the outbreak.

California has been looking for bird flu in large milk tanks during processing. And they have found the virus in at least 650 herds, representing about three-quarters of all affected U.S. dairy herds.

The virus was recently detected in Southern California dairy farms after being found in the state's Central Valley since August.

"This proclamation is a targeted action to ensure government agencies have the resources and flexibility they need to respond quickly to this outbreak," Newsom said in a statement.

Officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stressed again this week that the virus poses



This colorized electron microscope image released by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases on March 26, 2024, shows avian influenza A H5N1 virus particles (yellow), grown in Madin-Darby Canine Kidney (MDCK) epithelial cells (blue). (AP)

low risk to the general public.

Importantly, there are no reports of person-to-person transmission and no signs that the virus has changed to spread more easily among humans.

In general, flu experts agreed with that assessment, saying it's too soon to tell what trajectory the outbreak could take.

"The entirely unsatisfactory answer is going to be: I don't think we know yet," said Richard Webby, an influenza expert at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

But virus experts are wary because flu viruses are constantly mutating and small genetic changes could change

the outlook.

This week, health officials confirmed the first known case of severe illness in the U.S. All the previous U.S. cases - there have been about 60 - were generally mild.

The patient in Louisiana, who is older than 65 and had underlying medical problems, is in critical condition. Few details have been released, but officials said the person developed severe respiratory symptoms after exposure to a backyard flock of sick birds.

That makes it the first confirmed U.S. infection tied to backyard birds, the CDC said.

Dozens dead as test results awaited

Congo battles deadly mystery illness

KINSHASA, Dec 22, (Xinhua): The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is grappling with a deadly illness of unknown origin that has claimed dozens of lives in a province, prompting investigations and heightened alertness as test results are awaited.

"This is, therefore, influenza, which has been formally identified," Patrick Muyaya, spokesperson for the DRC government, announced at a national television broadcast late Friday as he read the minutes of the Council of Ministers meeting chaired by President Felix Tshisekedi in Kinshasa, the country's capital, earlier that day.

During the meeting, Public Health Minister Roger Kamba said that since October, 592 cases of the illness have been recorded in the Panzi health zone

of the southwestern Kwango province. Symptoms exhibited by patients are "similar to the flu," according to Kamba, who noted that the outbreak coincides with the seasonal flu period, which peaks in December.

Laboratory analysis revealed a 28 percent prevalence of the influenza virus, Muyaya said, noting a "significant presence" of human rhinovirus and SARS-CoV-2 in the samples, which accounted for the respiratory infections identified.

The Ministry of Public Health has not yet provided further clarification. However, the government declared a "high alert" earlier this month in response to the alarming situation.

Meanwhile, the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) has highlighted two work-

ing hypotheses regarding the illness, which has so far caused 37 deaths in health facilities, primarily among children under five.

Investigators are also examining whether an additional 44 community-reported deaths are linked to the outbreak, which has a case-fatality rate of 62 percent, according to the Africa CDC.

Ngashi Ngongo, chief of staff at Africa CDC, said during a Thursday press briefing that the first hypothesis suggests a combination of severe malaria, malnutrition, and a viral infection, while the second points to a viral infection co-occurring with malaria and malnutrition. Ngongo added that an adult patient presenting with hemorrhagic fever symptoms had died, with their sample sent to Kinshasa for further analysis.

Health alert

Measles cases on rise in Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, Dec 22, (Xinhua): Cambodia's Ministry of Health (MoH) on Saturday warned of a significant resurgence of measles as at least 375 cases had been detected in 2024.

Measles is a viral disease that is highly contagious and spreads rapidly through respiratory tract, coughing or sneezing, the MoH said in a statement, adding that it can cause serious illness, blindness, brain damage, and death, especially among malnourished young children.

"The Ministry of Health notices that the number of measles cases has been steadily increasing, especially in some schools and provinces along the border," the statement said. "From January to December 2024, Cambodia has confirmed a total of 375 positive cases of measles in 17 provinces."

Its symptoms usually appear 10-14 days after exposure to the virus and include a high fever, cough, runny nose, red and watery eyes, and small white spots inside the cheeks, the statement said, adding that red rash that appears seven to 18 days after exposure usually on the face and upper neck, and then spreads to the hands and feet.

"If your children have symptoms such as a high fever, cough, runny nose, and red rash, please take them to consult with doctors at your nearest health center or hospital," the statement said.

The MoH also called on parents to bring their children aged nine to 59 months to receive a measles-rubella vaccine for free at all health centers in order to protect them against this viral disease.

Cambodia declared measles-free in March 2015, but the first case of the disease reemerged seven months later.

Flesh-eating ulcer: Health authorities in Australia's second-most populous state have issued a warning over the spread of a flesh-eating ulcer.

The Department of Health in Victoria on Friday said that cases of Buruli ulcer are spreading across the state, including in inner Melbourne.

Buruli ulcer is a bacterial infection that researchers believe is spread from possums to humans by mosquitoes. Cases initially present as a painless lump or wound that can slowly develop into a destructive ulcer.

If left untreated, the flesh-eating ulcer can lead to permanent disfigurement and long-term disability.

The Department of Health's warning said that the highest risk of infection occurs during warmer months but that it can take four to five months for an ulcer to develop.

As of Dec. 17, there had been 344 confirmed Buruli ulcer infections in Victoria in 2024, the department said, compared to 362 at the same time in 2023, 338 in 2022, 286 in 2021 and 217 in 2020.

"Everyone is susceptible to infection. The disease can occur at any age, but Buruli ulcer notifications are highest in people aged 60 years and above in Victoria," the health alert said.

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Orlando ties largest comeback in franchise history

LA Lakers sweep 2-game set against Sacramento

SACRAMENTO, Calif., Dec 22, (AP): LeBron James had 32 points and the Los Angeles Lakers beat the Sacramento Kings 103-99 to sweep a two-game set on Saturday.

Trailing 101-99 with 12 seconds left, the Kings had a chance to tie after Anthony Davis missed two free throws but squandered the opportunity after they couldn't secure the rebound. Austin Reaves was fouled and made both free throws to put the game away.

Reaves finished with 16 points, and Davis had 10 points and 15 rebounds as the Lakers completed the sweep after beating the Kings 113-100 on Thursday.

Magic 121, Heat 114

In Orlando, Cole Anthony scored 27 of his 35 points in the second half and Orlando tied their largest comeback in franchise history to beat Miami after trailing by 25 points.

The Magic also trailed by 22 entering the fourth quarter before outscoring the Heat 37-8. Their 25-point comeback ties a mark set on Nov. 8, 1989 against the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Grizzlies 128, Hawks 112

In Atlanta, Desmond Bane scored 23 points and Memphis, without star player Ja Morant, beat skidding Atlanta.

Scotty Pippen Jr. added 22 points and nine assists. Morant, who injured his back in the Grizzlies' Dec. 19 win over Golden State, was ruled out with low back soreness before Saturday night's game.

De'Andre Hunter led Atlanta with 26 points and Jalen Johnson added 13 points and 11 rebounds.

Jazz 105, Nets 94

In New York, Lauri Markkanen scored 21 points, Collin Sexton and Svi Mykhailiuk each had 18 points, and Utah beat Brooklyn.

The Jazz, who at 7-20 have one of the worst records in the NBA, have now won consecutive games for the first time this season. They beat the Pistons 126-119 on Thursday.

Both victories have come on the road, where they improved to 5-20.

Cavaliers 126, 76ers 99

In Cleveland, Darius Garland scored 26 points and Evan Mobley had 22 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists, sending NBA-leading Cleveland to a victory over Philadelphia.

Donovan Mitchell had 19 points and Georges Niang added 13 points off the bench for Cleveland, which is 25-4 for the top record in the league.



Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James (23), forward Rui Hachimura (28) and Sacramento Kings center Isaac Jones go up for a rebound during the second half of an NBA basketball game in Sacramento, Calif. (AP)

Celtics 123, Bulls 98

In Chicago, Jayson Tatum scored a season-high 43 points, grabbed 16 rebounds and dished out 10 assists for his third career triple-double and Boston beat Chicago.

Kristaps Porzingis scored 22 points and Jaylen Brown added 19 to help the Celtics rebound from a 117-108 loss to the Bulls in Boston on Thursday night.

Tatum, the five-time All-Star, scored 18 points in the third quarter as Boston used a 19-8 run to open a 93-77 lead heading into the fourth.

Bucks 112, Wizards 101

In Milwaukee, Bobby Portis replaced Giannis Antetokounmpo in the starting lineup and scored a season-high 34 points, leading Milwaukee to a victory over Washington.

Undefeated Usyk defends heavyweight belt with unanimous decision over Fury

Dubois demands rematch

RIYADH, Dec 22, (AP): Oleksandr Usyk remained undefeated when he successfully defended his undisputed heavyweight belt with a unanimous decision over Tyson Fury in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Judges Gerardo Martinez, Patrick Morley and Ignacio Robles had identical scorecards favoring Usyk, 116-112.

Usyk landed 179-of-423 (42%) punches thrown, while Fury (34-2-1, 24 KOs) landed just 144 of the 509 punches he threw, a 28% clip.

Asked if he agreed with judges scores, Usyk implied that it's not his place to question, only to box.

The highly anticipated rematch from a May bout where Fury suffered his first loss lived up to the hype from when the boxers entered the arena.

Per a report on ESPN, Usyk's team requested the Middle East Professional Boxing Commission during Friday's rules meeting to mandate that Fury trim his beard ahead of their unified heavyweight championship rematch.

He had a beard as burly as Santa Claus less than a week before Christmas, but the 36-year-old sauntered in unshaven and donning a bright red Christmas-themed robe with Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" accompanying his walk to the ring.

After Fury opened the fight with a rather quick pace and controlled the first two rounds, Usyk responded in the third and fourth rounds by working the body while slipping in occasional power combinations to the head.

Fury landed several big shots in the fifth round, but Usyk's left hand was the story in the sixth, staggering his bigger and taller opponent twice.

In the second half of the fight, it became apparent that carrying the extra weight was wearing Fury down, as the



Boxers Britain's Tyson Fury, left, and Ukraine's Oleksandr Usyk compete during their WBA, WBO, and WBC heavyweight title fight in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (AP)

pace began to catch up to him while Usyk's calm and patient approach favored him. Usyk's ability to get inside, strike quick and damage Fury with stinging combinations was the difference.

Feeling the pressure, a spirited Fury came out swinging in the 10th, bullying Usyk throughout the round. Usyk held him off at times with a steady jab, while an uppercut from Fury scored late.

Usyk's speed came to life in the 11th, again, landing blistering combinations to Fury's head to keep him at bay.

The two traded flurries of punches in the final round, Fury hoping to make one final impression on the judges

while Usyk was looking for an exclamation point.

Turki Alalshikh, the chairman of Saudi Arabia's General Entertainment Authority, announced on X (formerly Twitter) earlier in the week that an experimental AI judge would also return results. The innovative virtual system has Usyk winning, 118-112.

Fury is now 5-1 in rematches.

Only three belts were on the line this time after the IBF stripped Usyk for not facing its mandatory challenger, Daniel Dubois.

Dubois interrupted Usyk's postfight interview, snatched the microphone and demanded a rematch from their fight on Aug. 26, 2023. Usyk won by knockout in the ninth round.

"I want my revenge Usyk," Dubois said. "Well done tonight, but I want my revenge."

Usyk obliged by telling the powers that be in attendance, "Your Excellency, make me fight with Daniel. Thank you so much."

In other action on the card: Serhii Bohachuk defeated Ismael Davis with a sixth-round TKO.

Johnny Fisher defeated Dave Allen with a split decision (95-94, 93-96, 95-94).

Lee McGregor defeated Isaac Lowe via unanimous decision (96-92, 97-91, 97-91).

Peter McGrail outpointed Rhys Edwards with a unanimous decision (96-95, 96-94, 96-94).

Wirtz, Schick star in rout of Freiburg 5-1

Leverkusen keep pressure on Bayern

BERLIN, Dec 22, (AP): Florian Wirtz starred and Patrik Schick scored four goals as Bayer Leverkusen routed Freiburg 5-1 to keep the pressure on Bundesliga leader Bayern Munich over the winter break.

Wirtz, who has yet to extend his Leverkusen contract, set up a hat trick for Schick and scored his seventh league goal of the season.

Leverkusen dominated but needed patience before Schick broke the deadlock with a chip over the goalkeeper right before the break.

Wirtz, who'd played Schick through, score after the break when he displayed brilliant close control to elude a defender before firing the ball inside the near post from a narrow angle.

Vincenzo Grifo pulled one back four minutes later, but Wirtz floated in a precise cross for Schick to head Leverkusen's third in the 67th, then laid the ball back for Schick to fire Leverkusen's fourth in the 74th.

"For a striker, it's a dream to have this player behind you," Schick said of Wirtz.

Schick scored again with a header to a corner three minutes later - the only goal that didn't involve Wirtz.

Leverkusen stayed four points behind Bayern after its eighth straight win across all competitions.

Leverkusen resumes its league defense at Borussia Dortmund on Jan. 10, while Bayern visits Borussia Mönchengladbach on Jan. 11.

Brazilian goalkeeper Kauã Santos endured a game to forget as his Eintracht Frankfurt was shocked by 10-man Mainz 3-1.

Frankfurt had 34 shots at goal compared to nine by the visitor, which played with a man less from the 21st after captain Nadiem Amiri was sent off for catching Ellyes Skhiri's right ankle with his studs.

Santos had already conceded an unfortunate own goal. The 'keeper played out a short pass to Skhiri, who was immediately under pressure from two Mainz players. Skhiri sent the ball looping back



Leverkusen's Patrik Schick celebrates after scoring his side's third goal during the German Bundesliga soccer match between Bayer 04 Leverkusen and SC Freiburg in Leverkusen, Germany. (AP)

toward Santos, who deflected it onto the crossbar, from where it rebounded back off Santos' arm and in.

Mainz's Paul Nebel then scored with a deflected shot for 2-0, and Santos was at fault again when a botched pass invited another Mainz attack. Nebel grabbed his second goal in the 58th.

Rasmus Kristensen, who struck the crossbar in the first half, scored Frankfurt's consolation in the 75th.

"We were already there for Kauã as a team on the field," Frankfurt defender Robin Koch said of Santos' bad day. "He's a young player, these things happen. But he's a good guy, he'll come out of it and the same will help him with his development."

Regular goalkeeper Kevin Trapp and reserve Jens Grahle were out with illness.

Johannes Eggestein fired promoted St. Pauli to a 1-0 win at Stuttgart, last season's runner-up. Stuttgart had won its last four games across all competitions.

Union Berlin's winless run stretched to nine games across all competitions as Bo Svensson's team slumped to a 4-1 defeat at Werder Bremen.

Holstein Kiel ended its five-game losing run by routing Augsburg 5-1, and Borussia Mönchengladbach won at Hoffenheim 2-1.

Japan & Netherlands win golds as Chinese B-Boy achieves first-ever medal at Worlds

CHENGDU, Dec 22, (Xinhua): The 2024 WDSF World Breaking Championships concluded on Saturday, with Japan's Isshin Hishikawa (B-Boy Issin) and the Netherlands' India Dewi Sardjoe (B-Girl India) winning gold medals. China's Wang Ruimiao (B-Boy Monkey Z) made history by earning the country's first-ever World Championships medal in the men's competition.



Sardjoe

In the women's final, B-Girl India, who had placed fourth at the Paris Olympics, won gold with a 2-1 victory over Olympic bronze medalist Liu Qingyi (B-Girl 671) of China. Olympic silver medalist Dominika Banevic (B-Girl Nicka) from Lithuania took the bronze.

B-Girl 671, who had taken silver at the 2022 World Championships, expressed no regrets despite missing out on gold

again. "I tried some new expressions that I'm not used to. Although I may not have performed perfectly at first, it was a challenge and an opportunity for growth," she said.

On the men's side, B-Boy Issin triumphed with a 2-1 win over compatriot Shigeyuki Nakarai (B-Boy Shigekix). B-Boy Monkey Z fought hard to secure bronze, marking China's first medal in the competition, beating country's previous best achieved by Qi Xiangyu (B-Boy Lithe-ing), who had placed fourth at the 2023 World Breaking Championships.

"I never expected to take the bronze," B-Boy Monkey Z said afterwards. "My initial goal was to make it to the top eight. It wasn't until I held the bronze medal that I could hardly believe it, but the pressure I had built up during the preparation finally released." This Championships, the first since breakdancing's Olympic debut in Paris this summer, drew over 180 athletes from 31 countries and regions, with men's and women's champions and runners-up earning direct entry to the 2025 World Games.

Zheng withdraws from Cup: Olympic gold medalist Zheng Qinwen has announced she will not play at the United Cup mixed-teams tournament starting later this month, opting instead to focus on preparations for the 2025 season's first Grand Slam.

In a breakthrough season for the 22-year-old, Zheng made the Australian Open final in January - where she lost to Aryna Sabalenka - before clinching gold at the Paris Olympics and finished runner-up at the WTA Finals to end the year ranked at No. 5. She was due to represent China at the United Cup starting Dec. 27, but shared her decision to withdraw on social media on Sunday.

"After the long season that 2024 was for me, I need a few extra weeks of rest, recovery, and good training to get ready for the new season," she said. "I had such a fantastic time at the United Cup in January of this year, and therefore will miss the event greatly. (AP)

Odermatt becomes Switzerland's most successful male skier with another win

LA VILLA, Italy, Dec 22, (AP): Marco Odermatt is back to his imperious best.

Odermatt followed up his first win in Val Gardena in Saturday's downhill by winning a World Cup giant slalom on Sunday as he continued to dominate the Gran Risa to become Switzerland's most successful male skier.

It was Odermatt's 41st World Cup victory, putting the three-time defending overall champion one above Pirmin Zurbriggen for wins for the Swiss men's team. Vreni Schneider holds the overall record for her country with 55.

"This is crazy now," Odermatt said. "To be here the best Swiss alpine skier ever ... Pirmin Zurbriggen is the biggest legend we have in Swiss skiing history so this is a very special moment." Odermatt was third fastest in a tricky first run in Alta Badia but was much more aggressive in the second to make it back-to-back GS wins after a difficult start to the season.

"I think every run is different down here," Odermatt said. "Today, in the morning it was very difficult with the changing conditions and insane run. I felt better already after the inspection. I saw that on the ground is better, so I knew I can ski my plan, I can attack, it's less dangerous."

Odermatt beat Léo Anguenot by 0.85 seconds. The Frenchman also had a strong second run to rise from ninth to clinch his first World Cup podium finish. Anguenot had never placed inside the top 10 before.

Alexander Steen Olsen was third, 0.88 behind Odermatt and just ahead of first-run leader Filip Zubcic.

Olympic champion Odermatt has now won five of the past six GS races on the Gran Risa. Only Lucas Pinheiro Braathen has interrupted that streak.

However, Odermatt had appeared uncharacteristically beatable in his favorite discipline this year. Odermatt won the first nine of 10 giant slalom races last season on his way to a third straight crystal globe in the discipline

as well as a third straight overall title.

But the Swiss standout then failed to finish the final event in March and the first two races of the new season before finally picking up his first GS points with a win in Val d'Isère last weekend.

The Gran Risa is already one of the toughest courses on the circuit and it was made even more difficult by flat light, while there were also plenty of ruts and bumps on the course - although that was improved between the first and second run.



Switzerland's Marco Odermatt, center, winner of an alpine ski, men's World Cup giant slalom, celebrates with second-placed France's Leo Anguenot, left, and third-placed Norway's Alexander Steen Olsen, in Alta Badia, Italy. (AP)

Best of the Rest

Parry wins Mauritius Open: English golfer John Parry overcame a five-stroke deficit in the final round to win the Mauritius Open on Sunday and claim his second title on the European tour, 14 years after his first.

Parry made seven birdies and an eagle to shoot 8-under 64 early in the round and set the clubhouse target at 14-under 274. Third-round co-leader Dylan Naidoo (71) and Christo Lamprecht (65), who are both from South Africa, tied for second place two shots back.

Another South African, Jovan Rebula, shot 70 and was alone in fourth on 11 under. Parry's last top-tier victory came at the Vivendi Cup in 2010, though he won three times on the second-tier European Challenge Tour this calendar year. (AP)

□ □ □



Tomooh Sports Club members pose for a group photo after the event.

Tomooh Sports Club marks Khaleeji Zain 26 opening in style

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: In celebration of the opening of the Khaleeji Zain 26, the Tomooh Sports Club for People with Intellectual Disabilities organized a special event to engage its members — including athletes, their families, and the club's administrative and technical staff — in the festivities. The event,

held the day before yesterday, featured a live viewing of the matches, aiming to promote social integration through shared experiences.

The viewing hall saw an impressive turnout of athletes with intellectual disabilities, who enthusiastically participated in the dazzling opening

ceremony.

The club's administrative and technical staff, along with professionals and advocates in the field of disability care and rehabilitation, also attended to watch the Kuwait vs. Oman match and other scheduled tournament games.

Tomooh Sports Club is dedicated to hosting such events to ensure athletes can enjoy major sporting occasions in an interactive and inclusive environment. To mark the championship, the club recently released video welcoming guests to the Gulf sports celebration.

International Shooting Champ'ship concludes with strong performances from local shooters

Khaled Al-Ajmi claims gold

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The International Sporting Federation Championship concluded recently at the Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex, under the patronage of Mr. Jean-Francois Balincas, President of the International Sporting Federation. The event, held over three days from December 19-21, featured the participation of shooters from the Kuwait Shooting Sports Club and was graced by the presence of Eng. Duaij Al-Otaibi, President of the Kuwaiti and Arab Shooting Federations.

Eng. Al-Otaibi, an Honorary Member of the International Sporting Shooting Federation (FITASC), along with Obaid Al-Osaimi, Secretary General of the Kuwaiti and Arab Shooting Federations, presented



Winners celebrate on the podium.

awards to the top shooters.

In his speech, Eng. Al-Otaibi commended the exceptional performance of Kuwait's sporting shooters and acknowledged the support of the Public Authority for Sports, as well as the efforts of volunteers and referees who

contributed to the success of the championship.

He also expressed gratitude to Jean-Francois Balincas for his continued friendship and support for Kuwaiti shooting.

The championship results were as follows:

First place: Khaled Al-Ajmi

Second place: Hamoud Al-Sinan

Third place: Fahd Al-Mutairi

This event marked another successful chapter in promoting and celebrating the sport of shooting in Kuwait.

UAE, Afif top market value rankings

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The total market value of all players participating in the "Khaleeji Zain 26" stands at approximately 120.1 million euros, according to the "Transfer Market" website.

Eight teams are competing in the tournament: UAE, Kuwait (host country), Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, Yemen, and Oman.

The UAE team holds the highest market value among the participating teams, valued at 37.30 million euros, followed by Saudi Arabia at 27.10 million euros.

Qatar ranks third with a market value of 19.58 million euros, while Iraq, the defending champions, occupies fourth place with 10.95 million euros.

Bahrain comes fifth with a market value of 9.83 million euros, while Oman ranks sixth with 9.43 million euros.

The market value of the Kuwaiti national team, the host team, is 4 million euros, placing it seventh in the rankings, ahead of Yemen, which is ranked eighth with a market value of just 2 million euros.

Ranking of Teams by Market Value in the Khaleeji Zain 26:

UAE – 37.30 million euros
Saudi Arabia – 27.10 million euros
Qatar – 19.58 million euros
Iraq – 10.95 million euros
Bahrain – 9.83 million euros
Oman – 9.43 million euros
Kuwait – 4 million euros
Yemen – 2 million euros
Akram Afif Tops as the Most Valuable Player:

On the individual level, Qatari star Akram Afif leads the player rankings with the highest market value at 7.50 million euros, according to "Transfer Market." UAE striker Fabio Lima follows in second with a market value of 7 million euros, while Saudi Arabia's Firas Al-Brikan is third with 5 million euros.

Saudi Arabia's Saud Abdulhamid and Roma player also share fourth place with a market value of 4 million euros, ahead of Qatar's striker Almoez Ali, whose market value is 3.50 million euros. Yemeni players Radwan Al-Habishi and Tariq Shehab hold the lowest spots on the list, each with a market value of just 25,000 euros.



Players congratulate Akram Afif after scoring the opening goal.

Napoli withstands a late siege from Genoa

Dybala gets Roma back on track in Serie A

ROME, Dec 22. (AP): Paulo Dybala scored twice and set up another goal to get Roma back on track in Serie A with a comfortable 5-0 win over Parma.

The Argentine playmaker scored an early penalty and pounced on a rebound from Alexis Saelemaekers' initial shot early in the second half to steer Roma to just its fifth league win of the season.

Saelemaekers scored with a volley after Dybala's opener, and Leandro Paredes added another penalty in the 74th, awarded after Saelemaekers was shouldered off the ball.

Dybala set up Artem Dovbyk to complete the scoring late.

Roma looked to have finally clicked under Claudio Ranieri, the team's third coach of the season, when it managed back-to-back wins over Lecce and Sporting Braga in the league and Europa League. But it lost last weekend at promoted Como 2-0.

Mario Balotelli almost scored his first goal back in Serie A while Napoli withstood a late siege from Genoa to hold on for a 2-1 win. Balotelli returned to Serie A after more than four years in October and has made six appearances totalling just 57 minutes.

The 34-year-old was sent on with seven minutes remaining against Napoli and almost had an immediate impact as Andrea Pinamonti's glancing header clipped Balotelli's knee but goalkeeper Alex Meret managed to push it off the post. It was one of several decisive saves by Meret in the



Genoa's Morten Frendrup, left, fights for the ball with Napoli's Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa during the Serie A soccer match between Genoa and Napoli at the Luigi Ferraris Stadium in Genoa, Italy. (AP)

second half as Genoa came out fighting after going into the break two goals down following headers from Frank Anguissa and Amir Rrahmani.

Pinamonti got Genoa back into it six minutes into the second half with a fine finish into the bottom right corner but the home side went on to suffer its

first defeat since hiring Patrick Vieira as coach last month.

It was also Genoa's first match since coming under the ownership of Romanian businessman Dan Şucu.

The loss left Genoa 13th in Serie A but only two points above the relegation zone. Lazio rebounded from a dismal 6-0 thrashing at home to Inter Milan by winning at lowly Lecce 2-1 but it was far from convincing despite Lecce playing the entire second half with 10 men.

Lecce's chances of getting something from the match appeared to evaporate on the stroke of halftime.

Taty Castellanos' first shot was parried brilliantly by Wladimiro Falcone and his follow-up was cleared off the line by the hand of Lecce defender Frédéric Guilbert, who was shown a straight red card.

Castellanos fired the resulting penalty into the bottom left corner.

Tete Morente volleyed Lecce level five minutes after the break and it seemed as if the 10 men were going to hold out for a point but substitute Adam Marusic - who had only just come off the bench - scored the winner three minutes from time.

Best of the Rest

Estudiantes lift title: Estudiantes secured Argentina's Champions Trophy with an emphatic 3-0 victory over Velez Sarsfield.

Tomas Marchiori scored an early own goal before Alexis Manyoma and Guido Carrillo netted either side of halftime as Estudiantes clinched the title for the first time. "Finals have a different vibe because they are games that you have to win," Estudiantes midfielder Santiago Ascacibar told reporters after the match at Estadio Unico in Santiago del Estero. "Thankfully we were up to the task and now we can celebrate. We deserve it," he added.

Estudiantes earned a berth in the title decider by winning Argentina's Professional League Cup in May, while Velez booked a place after clinching the 2024 Primera Division title last week. (Xinhua)

Former Brazil captain Thiago Silva said Saturday that he has not yet considered retirement, despite acknowledging that he is nearing the end of his career. The 40-year-old Fluminense defender admitted that the final months of 2024 had been "challenging" but expressed hope for a brighter 2025.

"It hasn't been an easy period but thankfully everything in the end has worked out," Silva told reporters. "Now, we need to plan well for next season to avoid repeating the mistakes we made this year." Fluminense endured a disappointing 2024 season, finishing just four points above Brazil's top-flight relegation zone. (Xinhua)

4 players arrested: Four River Plate women's players were arrested by Sao Paulo police and accused of making a racial slur. Sao Paulo's public security secretariat told The Associated Press on Saturday.

On Friday, a Brazil Ladies Cup soccer semifinal between Argentina's River Plate and Brazilian team Grêmio was stopped in the first half after River Plate's Candela Diaz was accused of making monkey gestures to a ball boy, according to broadcast footage and local media reports.

Diaz was detained along with teammates Juana Cangaro, Milagros Naiquen Diaz, and Camila Ayelen Duarte, the players' lawyer, Thais Sankari, told The AP. They remained in custody on Saturday. (AP)



Kuwaiti fans cheer on the national team during the opening match between Kuwait and Oman.

Sports

AFC president lauds HH Amir support for Khaleeji Zain 26

Kuwait opening draw not a negative result: Pizzi

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22, (Agencies): Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, president of the Asian Football Confederation and First Deputy of FIFA President, praised the generous sponsorship of the Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 26) by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

In a statement following his attendance at the tournament's opening at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium, Sheikh Salman described His Highness the Amir's sponsorship as an honor for the Gulf sports family and a testament to His Highness's dedication to the growth of sports in general, and football in particular.

Sheikh Salman also emphasized the significant role of the Gulf Cup in enhancing the skills of teams from the GCC countries, helping them to compete effectively at both regional and continental levels.

Mishaal Al-Subaie, the tournament director, congratulated everyone on the launch of the Gulf Zain 26, noting that the event's opening was met with great enthusiasm. He also assured that the tournament would continue to be organized with precision, ensuring ease of movement for fans and smooth



AFC chairman Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al-Khalifa.

operations.

Kuwait's national team coach, Juan Antonio Pizzi, acknowledged that while the Blues started strongly against Oman, they couldn't secure victory, with the match ending in a 1-1 draw. Pizzi noted that the forced substitutions, due to injuries, had an impact on the team's performance, specifically citing Reda Hani and Youssef Nasser. Despite the draw, Pizzi praised the fans for their tremendous support in the opening match and hoped it would continue through the upcoming matches against UAE and Qatar. Pizzi stated that the draw was not a negative result against the strong Omani team.

Oman's coach, Rashid Jaber, attributed the draw to the nature of opening matches, especially against the home team. He admitted that his side struggled with focus in the first half, but also acknowledged that it could not capitalize on their advantage in



Players go for the ball during Qatar and UAE match.

the second half. Jaber expressed confidence in his team's ability to progress in the tournament and focused on the next match against Qatar with the goal of qualifying for the semifinals.

Qatar's coach, Luis Garcia, expressed satisfaction with his team's performance in their 1-1 draw against the UAE. While he had hoped for a win, he was pleased with the tactical execution in the first half, which saw Qatar take the lead. Despite coming close to scoring a second goal, Garcia admitted that luck wasn't on their side. He also mentioned that the team would work to address the issues identified in their opening match as they prepared for the upcoming encounter with Oman.

UAE coach Paulo Bento felt his team deserved more than a 1-1 draw against Qatar. He noted that the level of the Qatari team was different from their previous encounters in the World Cup qualifiers, and praised their tactical philosophy. Bento acknowledged that his team could have won after dominating the match for extended periods but cited a defensive error leading to the Qatari goal. Despite the draw, Bento expressed satisfaction with the team's performance, especially as they gained control of the midfield in the second half. He also recognized that opening matches are always difficult, but was pleased with how his players performed overall.



Kuwait and Oman players vie for the ball during the opening match of Khaleeji Zain 26.

Super sub Sørloth strikes again

Atletico stuns Barca in stoppage time to snatch lead

MADRID, Dec 22, (AP): Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone ran down the touchline in joy while Barcelona players sunk to the turf in dismay.

Super sub Alexander Sørloth struck again deep in stoppage time to hand Atletico a 2-1 comeback win at Barcelona and ensure Atletico will spend La Liga's short winter break on top of the table.

Atletico's 12th straight win in all competitions lifted it three points above Barcelona.

Barcelona has only two wins in its last nine games.

Simeone, coaching Atletico since 2011, celebrated winning at Barcelona for the first time.

"We finally did it," Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak said. "We are playing well, we started poorly but we knew our chances would come. And in the last minute Sørloth came through. Thanks to him we finally won here. He is the striker we needed."

It was a much more impressive performance from Barcelona, which dominated for long periods and took a deserved lead in the 30th minute.

Pedri started and ended the move, playing a one-two with Gavi, and firing an angled shot into the bottom right corner.

Raphinha almost doubled Barcelona's lead in stunning fashion in the 57th when he lobbed the goalkeeper

but the ball came off the crossbar. Robert Lewandowski got to the rebound but sent it onto the head of Axel Witsel, who needed treatment.

Barcelona was made to rue its missed opportunities when Atletico levelled just three minutes later, partly thanks to a defensive blunder.

Barcelona midfielder Marc Casadó tried to clear Julián Álvarez's cross but

passed it straight to Rodrigo De Paul, who fired into the bottom right corner. Casadó put his hands to his head and dropped to his knees in dismay.

Worse was to come for Barcelona as, in the sixth minute of stoppage time, Nahuel Molina made a fantastic run to latch onto a through ball and cross in for Sørloth to fire into the back of the net.



Atletico Madrid's Julian Alvarez, right, duels for the ball with Barcelona's Marc Casado, center, and Barcelona's Alejandro Balde during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Barcelona and Atletico Madrid at the Lluís Companys Olympic Stadium in Barcelona, Spain. (AP)



Grand Prix riders on the podium.

Al-Kharafi triumphs in second round of Kuwait Equestrian Federation League

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: Kuwait Club rider Ali Al-Kharafi was crowned champion of the second round of the Kuwait Equestrian Federation League Championship, held at Messilla Equestrian Club.

Al-Kharafi secured the victory by completing the differentiation round at a height of 140 cm in the fastest time of 36.30 seconds, outperforming competitors Nick Channing, Yara Al-Hunaidi, Fawaz Al-Rashed, and Abdullah Al-Awadhi. The Federation's technical director, Walid Al-Jassem, presented the awards to the winners.

The referees' committee led by international referee Nadar Al-Mustafa, included riders Raghad Al-Dubos and Itbisam Al-Arouri. Michel Esmalon designed the course, with assistance from Muhammad Al-Saeed, while Dr. Yahya Al-Hadban and Badr Al-Haifi served as field referees.

It is worth noting that Al-Kharafi did not compete in the first round of the league, as he was in Saudi Arabia for an international competition.

Bashar Abdullah, Director General of the Public Authority for Sports, praised the growing popularity of equestrian sports, noting the increasing attendance at competitions across all age groups. He remarked, "The Equestrian Federation's work is always distinguished, smooth, and effective. The team, led by passionate individuals like Yousef Al-Sabah, Ghazi Al-Jarawi, Raghad Al-Dubos, Ali Al-Kharafi, and Abdulrahman Al-Fuzai, is committed to serving sports."

Abdullah also extended his congratulations to the Board of Directors of the Equestrian Federation for their unanimous election and the trust placed in them to lead Kuwaiti equestrian sports for the next four years.

Kuwait handball team heads to Tunisia for key training camp before World Cup

By Khaled Al-Enezi

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Kuwait handball team has departed Croatia and is heading to Tunisia for the second phase of its external training camp. This camp is a crucial part of its preparation for the 29th Handball World Cup, which will take place from January 14 to February 2 across Croatia, Denmark, and Norway. Kuwait will compete in Group 3 alongside Qatar, Austria, and France.

During its Tunisian camp, Kuwait will play two friendly matches against the host team to further prepare for the tournament.

The team has successfully completed the first phase of their external camp in Croatia under the guidance of Algerian coach Said Hijazi.

Faisal Saywan, the technical director of the national teams, shared that the first stage of preparation met the expectations of both the administrative and technical staff. The camp saw significant progress in both defensive and offensive performance. Saywan explained, "In the first phase, we focused on muscle strengthening exercises to help prevent injuries ahead of the World Cup."

He also emphasized that the technical staff, led by Hijazi, worked to



Kuwait completes its external camp in Tunisia.

implement key tactical elements in the Kuwait camp. Now, the focus shifts to applying these strategies in real match scenarios during the friendly matches in Tunisia.

Regarding the team's prospects in the World Cup, Saywan expressed confidence, noting that the "Blues" have a group of dedicated and responsible players. He added, "We aim to deliver performances worthy of Kuwait's handball legacy. The third group features strong international teams, and we will fight hard in the preliminary round."

Chelsea held by Everton

United loses at home to Bournemouth again

LONDON, Dec 22, (AP): Manchester United was beaten 3-0 at home by Bournemouth for the second straight season in the Premier League to continue Ruben Amorim's turbulent start at Old Trafford, while title-chasing Chelsea was held to a 0-0 draw at Everton on Sunday.

The optimism that might have been generated by a last-gasp 2-1 derby win at Manchester City last weekend has disappeared for United, which lost 4-3 at Tottenham in the English League Cup quarterfinals on Thursday before being handed a defeat to Bournemouth by the same score as 12 months ago.

Dean Huijsen, Justin Kluivert and Antoine Semenyo scored for the visitors from the south coast as they climbed to fifth place in the standings, dropping Man City - the beleaguered defending champion - to seventh place after 16 games.

Since drawing Amorim's first match in charge - at Ipswich on Nov. 24 - United has won four and lost four in all competitions under the Portuguese coach, who left out Marcus Rashford for the third straight match. United sits in 13th place and will be in the bottom half of standings at Christmas for the first time since the 1989-90 season.

Chelsea could have climbed above

Liverpool into first place - for a couple of hours at least - with a win at Everton.

However, a 0-0 draw ended the team's eight-match winning run in all competitions and meant Liverpool could push four points clear by beating Tottenham later Sunday.

Nicolas Jackson headed against the post for Chelsea in the first half.

Everton also held Arsenal 0-0 last weekend and faces Man City next.

Vitor Pereira got off to a great start as Wolverhampton manager, with his new team beating Leicester 3-0 in his first match in charge.

Pereira took charge on Thursday as the replacement for Gary O'Neil and immediately ended Wolves' four-game losing run as Gonçalo Guedes, Rodrigo Gomes and Matheus Cunha scored first-half goals at King Power Stadium.

It handed Leicester manager Ruud van Nistelrooy a second straight big loss early in his reign, after a 4-0 defeat at Newcastle last weekend.

Another recently hired Premier League manager, Ivan Juric, began life at Southampton with a 0-0 draw at Fulham.

Juric wasn't in charge of the team because he doesn't have a work permit. He was sitting in the stands for the match instead.