

'Sonic 3' zips to top of N. America box office

LOS ANGELES: (news desk) Paramount's new action comedy "Sonic the Hedgehog 3" sped to the top of the North American box office this weekend, outdoing predictions with an estimated take of \$62 million, one of the best December openings in years, industry watchers said on Sunday.

The latest sequel about the blue-maned supersonic creature — based on the popular Sega video game — rode positive reviews and strong audience scores to what analyst David A. Gross called "an excellent opening" for the hybrid animation/live action genre.

He predicted it would "far out-earn Sonic #2," which finished 2022 with \$405 million worldwide. Jim Carrey plays mad scientist Dr. Ivo Robotnik, while Ben Schwartz (Sonic) and Keanu Reeves (Shadow) top the voice cast.

Disney's new animated musical drama "Mufasa: The Lion King," a prequel to "The Lion King," placed second at \$35 million for the Friday-through-Sunday period, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported. That was far below predictions of around \$50 million, especially for a movie that cost an estimated \$300 million to produce and promote, Variety reported. But Gross predicted a "very good run," with school children now enjoying year-end vacations in North America. The film's voice cast includes Aaron Pierre (Mufasa), Seth Rogen, Beyoncé and Donald Glover (AKA Childish Gambino), with songs by Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Wave of attempted arson attacks hits Russia

MOSCOW: (news desk) Russia has seen a wave of attempted arson attacks targeting banks, shopping centres, post offices and government buildings over the last three days, according to media reports.

Around 20 separate cases of individuals trying to set off small explosive devices or launching fireworks into buildings have been recorded since Friday, mostly in Saint Petersburg, Moscow and the surrounding suburbs, according to the state-run TASS news agency and the independent Fontanka site.

Citing an unnamed law enforcement source, TASS reported that the people had been recruited by online fraudsters offering money for the attempted attacks. Footage from surveillance cameras at some of the sites, shared on social media, appeared to show individuals using their mobile phones to film the fires they tried to set off.

Images from the aftermath of one attack showed a destroyed ATM and nearby windows blown out, while another showed a burnt-out police car.

Cash machines of state-run banks, shopping centres, post offices, military enlistment State lender Sberbank reported a 30-per cent increase in attempted arson attacks over the last week, according to the RIA Novosti state news agency citing the bank's press service.

Tens of thousands protest in Serbian capital over fatal train station accident

BELGRADE: (news desk) Tens of thousands protested on Sunday in Serbia's capital Belgrade to demand that leaders take responsibility for the collapse of a train station roof that killed 15 people last month.

For over seven weeks, the Serbian government has been under pressure from nation-wide demonstrations following the deaths in the northern city of Novi Sad, with many protesters accusing authorities of corruption and inadequate oversight.

Sunday's protest, which was organised by university students, started with 15-minutes of silence as tribute to the 15 victims in the incident, with protesters lighting up the square with their phones in the air.

The silence was followed by "half-hour noise" as demonstrators blew whistles and vuvuzelas to deliver a deafening noise. The demonstration occupied Slavija square, a key roundabout, snarling traffic in the city centre.

According to the Ministry of Interior statement, up to 29,000 people attended the protest.

"The state is children's property" and "Protests are exams" read some of the banners of the demonstrators who have demanded that the prime minister and the Novi Sad mayor resign, and that those found responsible be prosecuted.

"The government has to fulfill every demand that students have and that is putting all the accountable people for that tragedy on trial", 24-year-old software engineer Lazar said. Farmers, actors and other citizens from across Serbia have come to support the students. Students and other citizens in the southern city of Nis also marched on Sunday.

"At this moment, supporting these young people is the most important thing", Nenad Radovanovic, a pensioner, said.



A driver operates a train of the Ho Chi Minh City Metro, on Sunday.

Ho Chi Minh City celebrates first metro

Ho Chi Minh City: (news desk) Thousands of selfie-taking Ho Chi Minh City residents crammed into train carriages on Sunday as the traffic-clogged business hub celebrated the opening of its first-ever metro line after years of delays.

Huge queues spilled out of every station along the \$1.7 billion line that runs almost 20 kilometres from the city centre — with women in traditional

"ao dai" dress, soldiers in uniform and couples clutching young children waiting excitedly to board. "I know it (the project) is late, but I still feel so very honoured and proud to be among the first on this metro," said office worker Nguyen Nhu Huyen after snatching a selfie in her jam-packed train car. "Our city is now on par with the other big cities of the world," she said.

It took 17 years for Vietnam's commercial capital to reach this point. The project, funded largely by Japanese government loans, was first approved in 2007 and slated to cost just \$668 million. When construction began in 2012, authorities promised the line would be up and running in just five years.

But as delays mounted, cars and motorbikes multiplied in the city of nine

million people, making the metropolis hugely congested, increasingly polluted and time-consuming to navigate. The metro "meets the growing travel needs of residents and contributes to reducing traffic congestion and environmental pollution", the city's deputy mayor Bui Xuan Cuong said. Cuong admitted authorities had to overcome "countless hurdles" to get the project over the line.

Concern over falling Indian rupee against US dollar

delhi (newsdesk) The Indian rupee has breached the significant psychological barrier of 85 against the US dollar, marking an all-time low amid a confluence of domestic and global pressures. This dubious milestone underscores deeper concerns about the resilience of emerging market currencies, particularly in an era of strong dollar dominance fueled by robust US economic data and a persistently hawkish Federal Reserve. At home, India's

economic landscape has faced notable headwinds. Growth has slowed to its lowest in seven quarters, while a widened merchandise trade deficit has added to the strain. These factors, coupled with outflows from domestic equity markets, paint a challenging picture for policymakers. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has stepped in with interventions to curb volatility, but such measures are largely short-term fixes for structural challenges. Globally,

the dollar's ascent has been unrelenting. Backed by better-than-expected economic growth in the US and falling jobless claims, the greenback has drawn investors seeking safe-haven assets. This dynamic has placed additional pressure on the rupee, as emerging markets face capital outflows and higher borrowing costs. Investors are also eyeing upcoming US inflation data, which could influence the Federal Reserve's next moves. Any further

strengthening of the dollar may keep the rupee under sustained pressure. Yet, this juncture also presents an opportunity to reimagine India's economic strategy. The weakening rupee makes Indian exports more competitive, offering a chance to boost trade and reduce the trade deficit over time. Policymakers could seize this moment to offer incentives to export-oriented industries and streamline processes for global trade, leveraging.



Gaza City: Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Pierbattista Pizzaballa arrives to the Holy Family Church at Al Zaytoun neighbourhood, on Sunday, to hold a mass marking the beginning of the Christmas period in the besieged Palestinian city.

Trump threatens to retake control of Panama Canal

WASHINGTON: (news desk) US President-elect Donald Trump while slamming what he called "unfair fees" for American ships passing through the Panama Canal threatened to demand control of the waterway be returned to Washington. The main users of the passage are the United States, China, Japan and South Korea. However, Trump hinted at China's growing influence around

the canal, a worrying trend for American interests as US businesses depend on the channel to move goods between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. "Our Navy and Commerce have been treated in a very unfair and injudicious way. The fees being charged by Panama are ridiculous," Trump said on Saturday in a post shared on his Truth Social platform. "This complete 'rip-off' of our country

will immediately stop." Under a 1977 deal signed by Democratic President Jimmy Carter, the Panama Canal, which was completed by the United States in 1914, was returned to Panama, though the Central American country took full control in 1999. "It was solely for Panama to manage, not China, or anyone else," Trump said. "We would and will NEVER let it fall into the wrong

hands!" He continued that if Panama could not ensure "the secure, efficient and reliable operation" of the channel, "then we will demand that the Panama Canal be returned to us, in full, and without question." Although he does not officially take office until next month, Trump has nevertheless been flexing his political influence in the waning days of President Joe Biden's administration.

France still awaits new govt

PARIS: (news desk) President Emmanuel Macron and new PM Francois Bayrou kept the country waiting on Sunday over the composition of the fourth government in a year, that must drag France out of political crisis. The 73-year-old centrist, appointed on Dec 13 after the fall of a short-lived conservative-led government, is aiming to name a new government by Christmas. Some observers predict Bayrou will struggle to survive. Macron, who returned Sunday from a visit to cyclone-devastated Mayotte and East Africa, spoke with Bayrou twice on Sunday and scheduled a face-to-face meeting for Sunday evening.

But a member of Macron's team told AFP the cabinet list would not be announced Sunday. The source did not say when the names would be unveiled.

Bayrou, head of the MoDem party which is allied to Macron's party, pressed ahead with consultations over the weekend. "We are making progress," Marc Fesneau of MoDem said in an interview with La Tribune Dimanche. Bayrou's immediate priority is to make sure his government can survive a no-confidence vote and passes a budget for next year. He is hoping to bring in figures from the left, right and centre to protect his government from possible censure. The minority government of Bayrou's predecessor, Michel Barnier, relied on support from Macron's centrist camp and his own conservative Les Republicains party. But the far right and left wing joined forces this month to eject Barnier from office, making him the shortest-lasting prime minister in France's Fifth Republic, which began in 1958.

Weakened Iran could pursue N-weapon: White House

WASHINGTON: (news desk) The Biden administration is concerned that a weakened Iran could build a nuclear weapon, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Sunday, adding that he was briefing president-elect Donald Trump's team on the risk. Iran has suffered setbacks to its regional influence after Israel's assaults on its allies, Palestinian Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah, followed by the fall of Iran-aligned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Israeli strikes on Iranian facilities, including missile factories and air defences, have reduced Tehran's conventional military capabilities, Sullivan told CNN. "It's no wonder there are voices (in Iran) saying, 'Hey, maybe we need to go for a nuclear weapon right now ... Maybe we have to revisit our nuclear doctrine,'" Sullivan said. Iran says its nuclear programme is peaceful, but it has expanded uranium enrichment since Trump, in his 2017-2021 presidential term, pulled out of a deal between Tehran and world powers that put restrictions on Iran's nuclear activity in exchange for sanctions relief.

Saudi embassy in Kabul resumes all services

RIYADH: (news desk) Saudi Arabia on Sunday announced the resumption of activities at its embassy in Kabul, more than three years after withdrawing its diplomats during the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

"Based on the desire of the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to provide all services to the brotherly Afghan people, it has been decided to resume the activities of the mission of the Kingdom in Kabul starting on December 22," the embassy posted on social media site X. The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the level of Saudi representation in Kabul. Riyadh announced on August 15, 2021 that it had withdrawn its diplomats from the Afghan capital because of the "unstable situation" created by the Taliban's return to power. Later in November, Saudi Arabia said it was resuming only consular services in Afghanistan. It also provides humanitarian aid in the country through its KSRelief organisation. Earlier this month, Russia moved a step closer towards recognising the Taliban government in Afghanistan after its parliament okayed a law that would make it possible to remove the Taliban from Moscow's list of banned terrorist organisations.

Amid angry questions, Germany pledges probe into security lapse

BERLIN: (news desk) The German government pledged on Sunday to fully investigate whether there were security lapses before the Christmas market car-ramming attack that killed five people and injured over 200. Political pressure has built on the question of potential missed warnings about Saudi suspect Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, a 50-year-old psychiatrist who had made online death threats and previously had trouble with the law. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser and the heads of Germany's domestic and foreign intelligence services are due to answer questions at parliamentary committee hearings on December 30, a senior lawmaker said. Faeser vowed on Sunday that "no stone will be left unturned" in shedding light on what information had been available to security services ahead of last Friday's bloody attack in the eastern city of Magdeburg. Abdulmohsen has in the past called himself a "Saudi atheist" who helped women flee Gulf countries and charged Germany was doing too little to help them. In online posts, he also strongly criticised Germany for allowing in too many Muslim refugees and backed far-right conspiracy theories about the "Islamisation" of Europe. News magazine Der Spiegel, citing security sources, said the Saudi secret service had warned Germany's spy agency BND a year ago about a tweet in which Abdulmohsen threatened Germany would pay a "price" for how it treated Saudi refugees. Die Welt daily reported, also citing security sources, that German state and federal police had carried out a "risk assessment" on Abdulmohsen last year but concluded that he posed "no specific danger".

No let-up in Gaza cruelty as Israeli strikes kill 28

GAZA STRIP: (news desk) Gaza's civil defence agency said Israeli strikes overnight and early on Sunday killed at least 28 Palestinians, including at one family's home and at a school building. There was no let-up in the violence in the Gaza Strip even as Palestinian groups involved in the fighting said a ceasefire deal was "closer than ever".

Israel has faced growing criticism of its actions during the conflict, including from rights groups accusing it of

"acts of genocide" which the Israeli government strongly denies. Civil agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal said that at least 13 people were killed in an air strike on a house in central Gaza's Deir el-Balah belonging to the Abu Samra family.

Hours after the strike, a photographer saw residents searching through the debris for survivors, while others looked for belongings they could salvage. In a nearby compound, bodies covered in blankets were laid on the floor. Bassal said

that eight people including four children were killed in the attack on the school, which had been repurposed as a shelter for Palestinians displaced by the Israeli aggression. A military statement said that a Hamas "command and control centre... was embedded inside" the school compound in the city's east, adding that it was used "to plan and execute terrorist attacks" against Israeli forces. Images showed the damaged school building where mangled concrete slabs and iron beams lay

strewn amid patches of blood. Bassal said in a statement that an overnight strike killed three people in Rafah, in the south. And a drone strike early on Sunday hit a car in Gaza City, killing four people, the spokesman added. An Israeli foreign ministry spokesman hit back at the pontiff's comments, saying they were "particularly disappointing" and showed "double standards", singling out Israel for criticism. The remarks were "disconnected from the true and factual context of Israel's

fight against jihadist terrorism", the spokesman said. Hospital evacuated Israel ordered the closure and evacuation on Sunday of one of the last hospitals still partly functioning in a besieged area on the northern edge of the Gaza Strip, forcing medics to search for a way to bring hundreds of patients and staff to safety. The head of the Kamal Adwan hospital in Beit Lahiya, Husam Abu Safiya, said that obeying the order to shut down was "next to impossible" because there were

not enough ambulances to get patients out. "We currently have nearly 400 civilians inside the hospital, including babies in the neonatal unit, whose lives depend on oxygen and incubators. We cannot evacuate these patients safely without assistance, equipment, and time," said Abu Safiya. "We are sending this message under heavy bombardment and direct targeting of the fuel tanks, which if hit will cause a large explosion and mass casualties of the civilians inside," he said.