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India to 'encourage greater investments' in crisis-hit SL **PAGE 10**



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QNB first to launch facial payments solution in Qatar

TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK DOHA

QNB Group, one of the largest financial institutions in the Middle East and Africa, has launched a new biometric payment acceptance solution for its merchants in Qatar.

QNB, together with its key partners, will be helping merchants with outlets in Qatar to offer customers the simplicity, convenience, and security of facial biometric payments.

This solution is based on proprietary facial verification technology developed by PopID, provisioned through QNB's acceptance network, and supported by Visa via tokenization.

The technology enables customers to authenticate payments for goods and services through facial verification, without a physical card or mobile phone after initial enrolment. As a one-time sign-up, users will create their profile by taking a selfie of their face using their smartphone, before entering their phone number and card details. The technology then tokenizes the card number and securely links it to the facial biometric template. It only takes a minute or two to set this up and then only a few seconds to make the payment. The merchants will offer the in-store sign-up using a QR capability.

These developments highlight the driving forces behind facial biometric technology



QNB, together with its key partners, will be helping merchants with outlets in Qatar to offer customers the simplicity, convenience, and security of facial biometric payments.

and the wide range of opportunities it is opening up for the future of payment solutions and much more.

QNB Group Retail Banking Senior Executive Vice President Adel Al Malki said, "As the payment landscape evolves, QNB is always at the forefront of this evolution, and constantly willing to be an early adopter of innovative technologies that drive frictionless and enhanced payment experience – putting our customers and merchants experience at the centre of everything we do. Being the 'first in Qatar' in another innovation that augments the already rich range of payment options that includes functionality such as contactless payments, QNB 'MyPOS' (Tap on Phone payment acceptance) and Samsung/Google/Apple pay, to mention a few."

"In America and Japan, we have demonstrated that allowing consumers to link PopPay to loyalty accounts and payment methods substantially increases speed of ordering and check out, drives loyalty engagement, and reduces fraud," said John Miller, CEO of PopID and its parent company, Cali Group. "We are excited to work with Visa and QNB to bring this loyalty and payment platform to businesses and consumers in Qatar," Miller said.

Investment and Trade Court signs deal with CrimsonLogic for lawsuits management

QNA DOHA

THE Investment and Trade Court signed a three-year agreement with Singaporean company CrimsonLogic to develop a system for commercial lawsuits and civil and commercial dispute settlement management.

The agreement aims to provide an integrated electronic system for managing commercial lawsuits and a comprehensive platform for all judicial procedures related to courts and concerned units to ensure and achieve information sharing, data management, dealing with all lawsuit parties through multiple channels, and the facilitation of commercial dispute settlement requirements.

The new system will provide an advanced platform for litigation of commercial lawsuits according to best international judicial practices.

The system will also include the use of artificial intelligence in data analysis, in addition to implementing technically advanced automated processes that ensure high accuracy and quality, facilitate follow-up and

evaluation, and support the decision-making process.

The agreement was signed by President of the Investment and Trade Court Judge Khalid bin Ali Al Obaidly, Vice-President of the Investment and Trade Court Judge Issa bin Ahmad Al Nassr, and undersecretary for shared services Jassim Al-Mohannadi, while Senior Vice President for Europe, Middle East, and Africa Loo Leong Seng signed on behalf of CrimsonLogic company.

This step comes within the framework of the Supreme Judicial Council's endeavour to develop electronic justice systems and keep abreast of legislative updates in the judicial system, which recently witnessed the issuance of the Investment and Trade Court Law, and the Mediation Law in Settlement of Civil and Commercial Disputes 2021.

CrimsonLogic company is one of the leading companies in this field. It is considered a reliable partner globally as they work on the continuous improvement of digital solutions to facilitate its implementation and achieve the desired results.

QSE rises 95 points

OPENING the new trading week on a positive note, the Qatar Stock Exchange (QSE) index gained 94.52 points, or 0.87 percent, to close trading at 10,905.09 points on Sunday.

The volume of shares traded decreased to 143,211,509

from 175,119,233 on Thursday and the value of shares decreased to QR476.498 million from QR669.246 million on Thursday.

The indices of five sectors closed in the green zone and two sectors closed in the red for the day. (QNA)



Qatar Chamber First Vice-Chairman Mohamed bin Ahmed bin Twar Al Kuwari with Thomas Jurgensen, minister counsellor and the new head of the trade and economic affairs section at the delegation of the European Union in Riyadh during a meeting in Doha on Sunday.

QC seeks to enhance trade ties with EU

TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK DOHA

QATAR Chamber First Vice-Chairman Mohamed bin Ahmed bin Twar Al Kuwari on Sunday met with Thomas Jurgensen, minister counsellor and the new head of the trade and economic affairs section at the delegation of the European Union in Riyadh.

During the meeting, both officials discussed means to enhance economic and commercial relations between Qatar and the EU, especially in the private sector, and its role in activating trade and investment exchange.

Speaking at the meeting, Twar praised the close relations between both sides, noting that there are mega Qatari investments in a number of European countries such as France, Germany, and others.

World Cup

● Qatar's success in the World Cup would open new opportunities for growth in various sectors like services, tourism, food security, petrochemicals, and others

● Private sector to play a leading role in the projects that will be implemented beyond the tournament.

Qatar highly welcomes European investments in various economic sectors, especially in areas that localise advanced technologies, he said, adding that there are numerous opportunities for cooperation between Qatari companies and their European counterparts in light of the presence of advanced infrastructure

and attractive economic legislation.

Twar also stressed that Qatar's success in the World Cup would open new opportunities for growth in various sectors like services, tourism, food security, petrochemicals, and others, assuring that the private sector would play a leading role in the projects that will be implemented beyond the tournament.

For his part, Jurgensen said that his visit aims to get acquainted with aspects of cooperation between Qatari and European companies and the most important sectors that attract EU businessmen to invest in Qatar.

He praised Qatar's success in hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022, noting that EU companies are interested to learn more about the investment climate in Qatar.

QFCRA signs MoU with University of Cambridge

TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK DOHA

THE Qatar Financial Centre Regulatory Authority (QFCRA) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Cambridge Judge Business School's Regulatory Genome Project (CJBS-RGP).

The MoU is intended to contribute to the development and promotion of the RGP. The RGP is a collaboration to develop and support an open information structure that will facilitate the comparative analysis of financial regulations across jurisdictions.

It offers an opportunity to reduce fragmentation in the global exchange of regulatory information.

The MoU was officially signed by Dean Mauro Guillen of the Cambridge Judge Business School on behalf of The Chancellor, Master and Scholars of the University of Cambridge and QFCRA Chief Executive Officer Michael G Ryan.

Welcoming the signing of the MoU, Ryan said, "We look forward to the establishment of a working relationship with the RGP and contributing to its ongoing development under this MoU. With the increase in information significant to regulatory requirements, the demand to verify and process data efficiently is unprecedented. We are pleased to collaborate with the RGP on this first of many opportunities."

Commenting on the MoU, Regulatory Genome Project Executive Director Giovanni



Bandi said, "The taxonomies in the Cambridge Regulatory Genome are 'root taxonomies' that categorise obligations to a level that supports the regulatory community with baseline comparative analysis. The input from QFCRA's experts and all other Regulators is fundamental to ensure that these taxonomies remain relevant to a broad range of users worldwide."

Under the MoU, QFCRA and CJBS-RGP aim to enhance the use and usefulness of data in regulating the financial services industry through developing taxonomies and mapping regulatory texts into an open machine-readable data repository.

The QFCRA and CJBS-RGP have entered into this MoU in an effort to establish a formal basis for cooperation. A comprehensive regulatory benchmarking tool developed by CJBS-RGP will make available to the QFCRA regulatory texts from 130 jurisdictions across 11 emerging regulatory themes in the financial services sector to assist the organisation in achieving its policy development objectives.

With the signing of this MoU, the QFCRA demonstrates its commitment to foster innovation for deploying a robust and efficient financial regulatory framework aligned to its Second Strategic Plan (2017-2022).

US media rocked by layoffs amid econ gloom

AGENCIES

FROM CNN to The Washington Post, U.S. media is facing tough times, as a series of outlets have announced layoffs this winter amid fears of an economic downturn.

Vox Media, owner of the Vox and The Verge websites and the landmark New York Magazine and its online platforms, announced Friday that it was letting go 7% of its staff.

The news follows layoffs at CNN, NBC, MSNBC, BuzzFeed and other outlets.

In a Friday staff memo, Vox Media CEO Jim Bankoff announced "the difficult decision to eliminate roughly 7% of our staff roles across departments due to the challenging economic environment impacting our business and industry."

The memo, which was confirmed to AFP by Vox Media, said the affected employees would be notified of being let go within the next 15 minutes. That would mean some 130 out of the group's 1,900 staff.

Meghan McCarron, an award-winning journalist who spent more than nine years at Eater, a food website owned by Vox Media, tweeted Friday she was among those laid off — while 37 weeks pregnant.

"My partner and I are so excited to become parents," McCarron posted. "I can't process the amount of uncertainty we're now facing," she added.

A Vox spokesperson told Agence France-Presse (AFP) they could not comment on specific cases but that employees were offered "competitive severance packages," including extra severance pay for those with "a near-term upcoming parental leave planned."

Journalists who were laid off from other organizations in recent weeks have also taken to Twitter to express anger, dismay, or gratitude to their colleagues while beginning to look for a new job.

"I'll be figuring out my next move. I'm a data reporter, but I also write and produce," tweeted Emily Siegel, who was let go after five years as an investigative reporter at NBC. "I'd love



According to U.S. media, CNN has laid off several hundred workers out of some 4,000 people in recent months.

to keep doing this work. My (direct messages) are open."

'Under pressure'

While the media layoffs were not as dramatic as those rocking tech giants such as Microsoft and Google, which announced Friday it was cutting 12,000 more jobs, they were a consequence of falling advertising revenue amid a gloomy economic climate, said Chris Roush, dean of the School of Communications at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut.

"For many of them, they grew and expanded on the expectation that they would be able to grow their audience or either readers or viewers to a certain level," Roush told AFP. "And that just hasn't happened and is unlikely to happen given what's happening in the economy."

Newsroom employment has seen a steady decline in the United States, falling from

114,000 to 85,000 journalists between 2008 and 2020; according to a 2021 study by the Pew Research Center, local media was hit especially hard.

"Journalism has been under pressure for a long time, and several companies seem to think this is an opportune time to reduce their labor costs — hurting both journalists and journalism," the Writers Guild of America, East said in a statement to AFP.

The union comprises journalists from NBC and MSNBC. According to U.S. media, the two outlets declined an AFP request for comment and bid farewell to some 75 employees.

A similar announcement is dreaded at The Washington Post, where CEO Fred Ryan warned last month that "some positions" will be cut in the following weeks, adding that the layoffs would affect "a single digit percentage of our employee base" of some 2,500 people.

However, hires for other positions can continue, the paper said. The Washington Post Magazine, the paper's Sunday supplement which won two Pulitzer Prizes, was shut down in December as part of what executive editor Sally Buzbee described in a memo as the paper's "global and digital transformation."

And Vice Media CEO Nancy Dubuc announced to her staff Friday that the company is up for sale.

'Steep, secular decline'

According to U.S. media, CNN has laid off several hundred workers out of some 4,000 people in recent months. However, CNN would not confirm those figures to AFP.

The cuts occurred as the company underwent a restructuring following a merger between Warner Media, which includes CNN, HBO Max, and Discovery. The merger resulted

in the creation of the Warner Bros. Discovery mega-conglomerate. Following the merger, CNN's new parent company abruptly pulled the plug on the network's \$100 million streaming service CNN+.

Naveen Sarma, a senior media analyst with S&P Global Rating, noted a "steep, secular decline" of traditional broadcast and cable television in the United States, leading to a dramatic drop in subscriptions to paid TV.

"That's a constant ongoing struggle for all these companies to come in," said Sarma.

Roush of Quinnipiac University says the changes were especially painful for smaller media.

"CNN, Washington Post, those are not going away, but a smaller company, they have bigger issues because they're just smaller and not as well established as a media brand," he said.

Media group says it'll start newspaper in south Oregon

AGENCIES

AN Oregon-based media group has announced it will start a newspaper in a southern Oregon city that saw a long-standing newspaper abruptly close this month.

EO Media Group said Friday it will open a news outlet that serves Medford and Ashland after the closure of the Mail Tribune. Jefferson Public Radio reported.

EO Media Group has 15 publications around the Pacific Northwest, including the Bulletin in Bend, Oregon. The new print and online outlet will be called The Tribune.

Heidi Wright, EO Media Group chief operating officer and publisher, said a newsroom of 14 people will be hired, including seven reporters. The paper will start as online-only.

Eventually a print edition three times a week is planned. Bulletin editor Gerry O'Brien said.

"EO Media Group, being an Oregon-based media group, saw this as a prime opportunity to alleviate what they call the news deserts that are happening around the state. That's why we're going into this with both feet," O'Brien said. "I think you'll see us try to expand into other news deserts, as they say — small town operations that don't have a website or reporters." The newspaper that closed was the largest serving the Rogue Valley. Since it closed, another independent newspaper, the Grants Pass Daily Courier, has also said it will expand into Medford and has hired several former Mail Tribune reporters.

EO Media Group has also been in talks with Ashland-based online news site Ashland.news about sharing content.



This photo taken on January 13, 2023, shows a large inflatable mannequin depicting Japanese contemporary artists Yayoi Kusama decorating the French luxury brand Louis Vuitton flagship store on the Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris.

European luxury sector impatient for Chinese tourists

AGENCIES

THE European luxury sector is welcoming the end of pandemic lockdowns in China, as the return of big-spending Chinese tourists could sustain further growth.

Before the pandemic, Chinese tourists visiting Europe were a significant source of sales for luxury houses.

The Chinese accounted for "a third of luxury purchases in the world, and two-thirds of those purchases were made outside China," said Joelle de Montgolfier, head of the luxury division at management consulting firm Bain and Company.

Their return has led RBC Bank to revise its growth forecast for the sector this year to 11%, from 7% previously.

"China reopening is one of the key 'mega-themes' for the luxury sector in 2023," RBC Bank said in a recent note to clients. After a drop in 2020, the luxury sector surpassed its pre-pandemic sales in 2021.

"The Chinese consumed, but only in China," said Bain's de Montgolfier.

"In 2022, it was much more complicated with unexpected confinements in the country," she added.

Nevertheless, that didn't hold the sector back from making about a 22% jump to 353 billion euros (\$384 billion), according to a November forecast by Bain and Company.

That growth was supported by the wave of post-lockdown U.S. tourists vis-

iting Europe armed with a strong dollar and Korean and Southeast Asian tourists.

Another pleasant surprise was Europeans "who had been ignored for decades... and were more interested in luxury goods than expected," said Erwan Rambourg, a luxury industry insider turned analyst and author of the book "Future Luxe: What's Ahead for the Business of Luxury." With the lifting of travel restrictions in China, "there will be a considerable return of Chinese tourists, but that will be more likely in the second quarter," said Arnaud Cadart, a portfolio manager at asset manager Flornoy.

"The pandemic is still very active in China and will affect many people." Chinese tourists may be needed if the flow of U.S. tourists slows.

"European boutiques need this rebound in Chinese clientele to replace its American clientele, which could buy locally," said Cadart. They also need to readapt to Chinese customers, who tend to travel in groups and will join a large number of U.S. tourists.

"There are already lines in front of the boutiques even without Chinese clients... they need more staff," said de Montgolfier. Otherwise, they risk a "degradation of the experience," of shopping in a luxury boutique.

Another concern: the volume of merchandise that Chinese customers will want to buy is unclear. The sector likes to keep books low and does not discount to ensure exclusivity.

Over 90% of EU, G-7 firms active in Russia despite sanctions

AGENCIES

ONLY 8.5% of EU and G-7 companies have taken steps to exit Russia or suspend their operations in the country, a new report revealed.

According to a report released by Switzerland-based St. Gallen University, despite sanction decisions against Russia, the companies continue their relations with the country as usual.

After Russia started what it called a "special military operation" in its neighbor on Feb. 24, 2022, many sectors and countries announced sanctions or suspensions for trying to exert pressure on the Russian economy. Some firms stopped their operations and deliveries in Russia, while others ended their investments or withdrew from their partnerships in Russia, even in Belarus.

The report said there were 2,405 subsidiaries owned by 1,404 EU and G-7 companies as of April 2022 and only less than 9% of them were closed or sold.

"Confirmed exits by EU and G-7 firms that had equity stakes in Russia account for 6.5% of total profit before tax. As for EU and G-7 firms with active commercial operations in Russia, with available information in the ORBIS database, 8.6% of tangible fixed assets, 8.6% of total assets, 10.4% of operating revenue, and 15.3% of total employees were found," the report stated.

The report also showed that there are more exits by foreign firms headquartered in the U.S. than those based in the EU and Japan; fewer than 18% of U.S. subsidiaries have actually divested.

"Of those EU and G-7 firms remaining in Russia, 19.5% are German, 12.4% are American owned and 7% are Japanese multinational firms," it added.

Major brands

Other data released this week by Brand Finance showed that



People walk on the Red Square in front of the Kremlin during snowfall in downtown Moscow, Russia, Dec. 28, 2022.

Western companies dominated the world's top brands list, and it was seen that several global brands suspended their operations in Russia, mostly in March.

Top global brands, excluding some Chinese firms, have not been active in the Russian market due to its war on Ukraine since the last February. There were 12 U.S. brands among the top 25 brands, followed by China with seven, Germany with three, South Korea, Japan and the U.K. with one.

The world's top brand, Amazon, suspended its Russian operations on March 9, 2022, announcing that it will not be accepting any new customers in Russia and Belarus.

Apple, taking second place in the top brand's list, has also suspended all official sales in Russia as of March 2, 2022, and turned off selected applications and services in the country.

Google, as the third most valuable brand, suspended some services in the country in March 2022, such as the advertising and application market. Then, Russia's communications authority blocked Google's news services in the country, accusing the service of

spreading false information about the war.

The fourth most valuable brand Microsoft suspended new sales in the country on March 4, 2022, but according to Yale University's research, it is continuing to allow existing access in the country.

The fifth brand on the list, Walmart, with no operations in Russia as of 2022 and only some prior investment plans, closed its Moscow office in 2010.

From Samsung to Starbucks, Mercedes to Disney and Shell, other top brands also announced suspensions.

While some brands were still not active in Russia even before the war, GSM firms Verizon and AT&T provided free services for Ukraine.

Chinese brands

Top Chinese brands, from Brand Finance's list, think differently when it comes to Russia. According to Yale's research, China's ICBC bank curtailed Russian access to capital markets. China-based social media platform TikTok suspended operations in Russia, while WeChat has not been implementing any restrictions on Russia.

India to 'encourage greater investments' in crisis-hit SL

Sri Lanka's worst-ever economic crisis is seeing a shortage of foreign currency, inflation and recession

AGENCIES

INDIA has told Sri Lanka it is committed to boosting investment in its debt-ridden neighbour to help pull it from its worst economic crisis in seven decades.

"India will encourage greater investments in the Sri Lankan economy, especially in core areas like energy, tourism and infrastructure," India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar told reporters in Colombo on Friday.

"We count on the government of Sri Lanka to provide a more business-friendly environment to create a powerful pull factor."

The island nation, home to 22 million people, has grappled with challenges over the past year ranging from a shortage of foreign currency to runaway inflation and a steep recession, in its worst such crisis since independence from Britain in 1948.

During his two-day trip starting on Thursday, Jaishankar held talks with his Sri Lankan counterpart, Ali Sabry, on cooperation in infrastructure, connectivity, energy, industry and health services.

The Indian minister also met Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Friday.

During the visit, the neighbours are expected to sign a memorandum of understand-



Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, right, with India's foreign minister S Jaishankar in Colombo.

ing for a renewable power project covering three islands in Sri Lanka's north, two sources at the Ministry of Power said.

Sri Lanka is racing to secure a \$2.9bn bailout package from the International Monetary Fund but requires the backing of China and India, its biggest bilateral lenders, to reach a final agreement with the IMF.

India has told the global lender that it strongly supports Sri Lanka's debt restructuring plan, with Sri Lanka owing about \$1bn to its nearest neighbour.

"We felt strongly that Sri Lanka's creditors should take proactive steps to facilitate its recovery," Jaishankar said.

"India decided not to wait on others but to do what we believe is right. We extended

financial assurances to the IMF to clear the way for Sri Lanka to move forward."

China is Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender and the last remaining major creditor to yet to agree to the plan.

Sri Lanka owed Chinese lenders \$7.4bn, or nearly a fifth of its public external debt, by the end of last year, calculations by the China Africa Research Initiative show.

Convicted Theranos CEO Holmes is a flight risk, says prosecutors

AGENCIES

ELIZABETH Holmes is a flight risk and shouldn't be allowed to stay out of prison while she appeals her 11-year prison sentence for defrauding investors, federal prosecutors said in court documents.

Holmes had a one-way plane ticket to Mexico booked for Jan. 26, 2022, three weeks after being convicted by a jury on four counts of fraud and conspiracy, federal prosecutors said in a motion filed Thursday in federal court in Northern California.

Holmes, who was CEO of Theranos during the company's turbulent 15-year history, was convicted in a scheme that revolved around the company's claims to have developed a medical device that could detect a multitude of diseases and conditions from a few drops of blood. But the technology never worked, and the claims were false.

Holmes booked the 2022 flight without a scheduled return trip and only canceled it after prosecutors contacted Holmes' attorneys about the "unauthorized flight," prosecutors said.

Holmes' attorneys did not immediately respond Friday to email and phone messages from The Associated Press. In a Jan. 23, 2022, email responding to prosecutors' concerns about the planned trip, they said Holmes had booked it before the jury's verdict to attend a wedding in Mexico.

"Given the verdict, she does not plan to take the trip and



One-way ticket to Mexico

Holmes had a one-way plane ticket to Mexico booked for Jan. 26, 2022, three weeks after being convicted by a jury on four counts of fraud and conspiracy, federal prosecutors said in a motion filed Thursday in federal court in Northern California.

therefore did not provide notice, seek permission, or request access to her passport (which the government has) for the trip," wrote Lance Wade, one of Holmes' attorneys.

On November 17, U.S. District Judge Edward Davila sentenced Holmes to more than 11 years in prison. Davila ordered Holmes, who is pregnant, to report to prison on April 27, giving her enough time to give birth to her second child before she is incarcerated. She gave birth to a son shortly before her trial started last year.

Prosecutors did not protest Davila's decision to give Holmes five months of freedom or bring up the fact that they considered her a flight risk.

Holmes is scheduled to return to court on March 17 for a hearing on her request to stay out of prison while she appeals her conviction.

'TurkStream pipeline has serious potential for expansion'

AGENCIES

THE Kremlin has said that the TurkStream gas pipeline is one of the world's biggest gas transport systems and has serious potential for expansion.

"Turkey is currently one of the largest recipients of Russian gas, and we are now connected with Turkey by one of the largest gas pipeline systems, TurkStream, which has serious potential for expansion if necessary," spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters in Moscow.

Peskov's remarks come af-

ter Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier this month floated the idea of exporting more gas via the TurkStream running beneath the Black Sea to Turkey, touting the country as the best route for redirecting gas supplies to the European Union after the Nord Stream pipeline leaks.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo an said both countries would immediately start work on Putin's proposal to turn Turkey into a new supply "hub" and that there would be "no waiting."

The Turkish president said

the Thrace region, bordering Greece and Bulgaria, appeared to be the best spot.

Carrying natural gas from Russia to Turkey and further into Europe, the TurkStream was formally launched in January 2020. The pipeline, which allows Moscow to bypass Ukraine as a transit route to Europe, carries Russian gas to Southern Europe through the Black Sea and Turkey.

It has an annual capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) and consists of two 930-kilometer offshore lines and two separate onshore lines that are

142 kilometers (88.2 miles) and 70 kilometers long.

The first line with a capacity of 15.75 bcm is designated for supplies to Turkey's domestic customers. The downlink to Turkey carries gas to several European countries, including Serbia and Hungary.

Peskov said matters of energy cooperation were controlled at the highest level.

Noting that Putin and Erdo an have both expressed interest in building a gas hub in Turkey, Peskov said the details of the project were being worked out.



Former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes (center) arrives at federal court with her father, Christian Holmes IV (left) and partner, Billy Evans, in San Jose, California in October 2022.

Obnoxiously loud car? A traffic camera might be listening

AGENCIES

AFTER the relative quiet of the pandemic, New York City has come roaring back. Just listen: Jackhammers. Honking cars and trucks. Rumbling subway trains. Sirens. Shouting.

Over the years, there have been numerous efforts to quiet the cacophony. One of the latest: traffic cameras equipped with sound meters capable of identifying souped-up cars and motorbikes emitting an illegal amount of street noise.

At least 71 drivers have gotten tickets so far for violating noise rules during a yearlong pilot program of the system. The city's Department of Environmental Protection now has plans to expand the use of the roadside sound meters.

"Vehicles with illegally modified mufflers and tailpipes that emit extremely loud noise have been a growing problem in recent years," said City Council member Erik Bottcher, who heralded the arrival of the radars to his district to help reduce "obnoxious" noise.

New York City already has one of the most extensive noise ordinances in the country, setting allowable levels for a host of noisemakers, such as jackhammers and vehicles.

A state law known as the Stop Loud and Excessive Exhaust Pollution Act, or the SLEEP Act, that went into effect last spring raised fines for illegal modifications of muf-



Cars drive through Manhattan on Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023, in New York. After the relative quiet of the pandemic, New York City has come roaring back.

flers and exhaust systems.

Because police officers often have other priorities, offenders have gone their merry, noisy way. The new devices record the license plates of offenders, much like how speedsters are nabbed by roadside cameras. Vehicle owners face fines of \$800 for a first noise offense and a penalty of \$2,625 if they ignore a third-offense hearing.

City officials declined to reveal where the radars are currently perched.

A year ago, Paris, one of Europe's noisier cities, installed similar equipment along some streets.

Evidence is clear that noise affects not only hearing but mood and mental health, not to mention possible links

to heightened risks of heart disease and elevated blood pressure.

"You listen to the noise out there, it is nonstop — the horns, the trucks, the sirens," New York City Mayor Eric Adams bemoaned during a recent press conference that blamed an expressway for noise and illness. "Noise pollution makes it hard to sleep and increases the risk of chronic disease." Nearly a decade ago, one of Adams' predecessors, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, launched a war on noise, releasing 45 pages of rules that covered chiming ice cream trucks and how long a canine can continuously yap (five minutes during the wee hours of the night, 10 during most of the day) before its

owner gets in the doghouse.

In 1905, the New York Times had declared the metropolis "a bonfire of sound that is rapidly spreading beyond control of any ordinary extinguisher." The article asked: "Is there any relief possible?" A global pandemic more than a century later answered that question. For a few months in the spring of 2020, the roar of vehicles on city streets stopped as people stayed in their homes.

The silence allowed people to hear birdsong again — though it was often interrupted by wailing ambulance sirens and, at night, bursts of illegal fireworks.

"As quiet as it was during the lockdown, it was a very uncomfortable quiet. It was a

scary quiet because it carried a lot of implications with it," said Juan Pablo Bello, the lead investigator of Sounds of New York City, or SONYC, a New York University endeavor to study urban noise.

Bello and his team initially hoped to collect data on the dissonance of routine urban life but the coronavirus intervened. Instead, they monitored the acoustical rhythms of a city under lockdown.

The number of noise complaints actually grew during the pandemic, but some experts say that was a symptom of homebound people becoming hypersensitive to their uneasy environments.

Complaints over noisy neighbors nearly doubled in the first year of the pandemic. Many other complaints were attributed to cars and motorcycles with modified mufflers.

Still, some people say efforts to quiet loud vehicles go too far. Phillip Franklin, a 30-year-old Bronx car enthusiast, launched an online petition to protest the state's noise law.

"The majority of us live here in New York City, where noise is a part of our daily lives," said his petition, which asserted that quiet vehicles pose dangers to inattentive pedestrians.

"Fixing potholes is a lot more important than going after noisy cars," Franklin said in an interview.

Loud noise, hitting 120 decibels, can cause immediate harm to one's ears, according to the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention. Even prolonged noise above 70 decibels can eventually damage hearing. A roaring motorcycle is about 95 decibels.

Firms specializing in architectural acoustics have multiplied. Designing new buildings or retrofitting old ones with anti-noise technology is now a booming business.

At the Manhattan offices of the environmental engineering firm AKRF, the company has what it calls the "PinDrop" room — suggesting a space so quiet you might hear a pin drop — that has an audio system that simulates the erratic symphony of sounds that the city's denizens must endure.

While architectural drawings might render the use of space, acoustical renderings depict how sound and noise might fill a space.

"So if it's for sleeping, we want you to be able to sleep. If it's for listening, we want you to be able to hear," said AKRF acoustical consultant Nathaniel Fletcher.

Even with sound barriers, tight-fitting windows and noise-dampening insulation, there's only so much that can be done about the racket. Most New Yorkers come to peace with that.

"I think people developed an appreciation for the fact that it's a messy, noisy city," said Bello, the NYU researcher. "We like it to be active, and we like it to be lively. And we like it to be full of jobs and activity, and not this sort of scary, quite unnerving place."

QT Economy & Business



Doreen Hall Vann walks with son Zaiden after tryouts for a club baseball team Saturday, Jan. 21, 2023, in Las Vegas. In 2019 Vann moved from Hawaii to Las Vegas to be closer to her daughter in Seattle.

Native Hawaiians flock to Las Vegas for affordable living

An analysis showed a single person working 40 hours a week would need to earn \$18 an hour to pay for housing and other necessities in Hawaii, but the state minimum wage is currently \$12 an hour

Kona Purdy never wanted to live anywhere but Hawaii. As a Native Hawaiian, he wanted his children to grow up like he did: rooted in their culture, and nourished by the mountains and ocean.

But raising a family in Hawaii meant squeezing nine people into a four-bedroom house — rented with extended family — in Waipahu, a Honolulu suburb. It felt cramped, but the Purdys accepted that this was the price to survive in their homeland.

"We stuffed ourselves into one room," Purdy said of his four-member family's living arrangements.

Their share of the monthly rent was \$2,300. When rent increased, the Purdys realized that they could no longer afford to live in Hawaii.

"I was so busy working, trying to make ends meet," he said. "We never took our kids out to the beach. We didn't go hiking." It's increasingly common for Hawaii residents to be priced out of the Aloha State, where the median price for a single-family home topped \$900,000 during the pandemic. On Oahu, the most populous island and where Honolulu is, the median price is more than \$1 million.

Many residents work in low-wage service jobs, and the financial strain is especially significant for Hawaii's Indigenous people. A state analysis published last year showed that a single person working 40 hours a week would need to earn \$18 an hour to pay for housing and other necessities in Hawaii, but the state minimum wage is currently \$12 an hour.

Many, like the Purdys, have headed to Las Vegas.

According to 2021 population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, the biggest growth of Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander populations was in Clark County, Nevada, which includes Las Vegas, and Sacramento County, California. The biggest decline of Native Hawaiian residents was in Honolulu.

Hawaii residents are spending on average 42.06% of their income on rent, which is the highest of any state, according to a Forbes Home analysis.

California ranks second, but at a much smaller proportion of income going toward rent: 28.47%.

Estimates from the American Community Survey showed that in 2011, there were about 296,400 Native Hawaiians in Hawaii and about 221,600 on the continental U.S. Just a decade later, those numbers flipped. In 2021, there were about 309,800 Native Hawaiians in Hawaii and about 370,000 in other states.

"There's no Hawaii without Hawaiians," said Honolulu City Council Chair Tommy Waters, who is Native Hawaiian. His five siblings have all moved to the continental U.S. "That's just incredibly sad to me, that Hawaiians cannot afford to live in Hawaii." Las Vegas was desirable to the Purdys because it's a popular vacation destination for Hawaii residents, which meant family would likely visit often. Also, the cost of living is significantly lower.

So in 2017, they uprooted their family and moved to Henderson, a Las Vegas suburb in Clark County, where they could afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment for \$1,000 a month.

Far from Hawaii's shores, they felt like "fish out of water," Purdy said.

"So it's real 'eha,'" Purdy said, using the Hawaiian word for painful, "because you do get disconnected from the land, which we're so connected to, being born and raised here." But even though they were nearly 3,000 miles from home, Hawaiian culture was all around them. Thanks to many other transplants, the Las Vegas area is full of restaurants catering to Hawaiian taste and cultural events expressing Hawaiian pride.

There's even a real estate brokerage that helps families relocate from the islands — run by mostly former Hawaii residents.

"You go into any store in any part of the valley and you'll

find someone from Hawaii working there or shopping there," Purdy said.

A three-bedroom home priced at \$300,000 in a Las Vegas suburb would be \$1.2 million in Honolulu, said Terry Nacion, a Native Hawaiian realtor. She left Hawaii for Las Vegas in 2003 because home ownership felt unattainable. "Back home, you either had to have your home passed down to you or you have to work four jobs," she said.

A few months after they moved, about 20 other relatives, including Purdy's mother, uncle and sister Lindsay Villarimo, followed them.

"Over time, it just became exhausting trying to make ends meet," said Villarimo. "It's heart-breaking that's the choice we make. The majority of us, I think we just got priced out of home." When Villarimo and her family decided to move to Nevada, her husband Henry had never even left Hawaii.

Las Vegas' affordability was "liberating," she said. With cheaper rent and groceries, and no state income tax, she could stretch her paycheck further.

"We were just living it up in the dollar store," she said. In Hawaii, that type of store doesn't exist.

For Hawaii residents, the draw to Las Vegas can all be traced back to a downtown hotel that opened in 1975, author Dennis M. Ogawa said.

The hotel originally catered to Californians, but he struggled to get business. Reminded of gambling's popularity in Hawaii, it shifted focus to visitors from the islands. "Aloha Spoken Here" became the hotel's slogan.

In 2019, Doreen Hall decided to move to Las Vegas to be closer to her daughter, who had moved to Seattle for more job opportunities.

On Facebook, she gushed

about how much cheaper everything was, from bread to rent. But she started to worry about staying connected to her culture while living far from home, especially because she uprooted her son, who was then 6 years old, from his Hawaiian language immersion school.

"It's just like when you give birth and you cut your umbilical cord. For us Native Hawaiians, our 'piko' is the source of life," Hall said, using the Hawaiian word for navel or umbilical cord. "When we move off island ... we are disconnected because we're not on our land anymore." But in her new home, she found she had more time and less stress.

"I was so busy back home trying to make a living," she said. "When I moved to Vegas, it really put a pause in my life and I could see things a lot clearer." That allowed her to get involved in the Las Vegas Hawaiian Civic Club, where she now teaches Hawaiian.

"We have our people, our home, our community is thriving," she said.

In Las Vegas, Purdy's children began to learn hula and the family enjoyed "hoolaulea," cultural festivals that were bigger than celebrations back in Hawaii.

But in August 2021, exactly four years after leaving Hawaii, the Purdys moved back home.

Purdy said that his wife wanted to take care of her mother, who began showing signs of dementia. Their daughter also got accepted to Kamehameha Schools, a highly selective and relatively affordable private school system that gives admissions preference to students with Hawaiian ancestry.

The family moved to Kapolei, a Honolulu suburb not far from where they once lived, to share a five-bedroom house with their extended family. Now that the Purdys have three children, they rent two of the bedrooms.

Purdy is trying to find time to take his kids to hula lessons. Since moving back, the family has only been to the beach once.

"It's a grind, it's hard, it's really expensive," he said. "But I also feel like we're exactly where we're supposed to be right now."

Gyms that survived pandemic steadily get back in shape

AGENCIES

ONE day in January, a once-regular customer at Fuel Training Studio in Newburyport, Massachusetts, stopped in to take a "shred" class. She hadn't stepped foot in the gym since before the pandemic.

The customer told owners Julie Bokat and Jeanne Carter that she had been working out at home alone in her basement but had slowly become less motivated and sometimes exercised in pajamas without breaking a sweat.

"I was getting bored of what I was doing, so here I am," Bokat quoted her as saying. She's heard similar comments from customers who've returned after more than two years of working out in a basement or a converted home office.

During the "dark days" of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, Bokat and Carter moved equipment outdoors to hold classes in parking lots and a greenhouse they built for the winter. They also held classes online, but attendance still plummeted by 70%. They weren't certain the business would survive.

They weren't alone. Gyms and fitness studios were among the hardest hit businesses during the pandemic, hammered by lockdowns and then limits on the number of people they could allow in for classes and workouts. Unlike bars, restaurants and live venues, there was no industry-specific federal aid given to health clubs. Twenty-five percent of U.S. health clubs and studios have closed permanently since the pandemic began, according to the National Health & Fitness Alliance, an industry group.

For gyms that made it through the worst, signs of stability are afoot. Foot traffic in fitness studios is still down about 3% from 2019 so far in January, but up 40% compared with 2021, according to data from Placer.ai, which tracks retail foot traffic.

At Fuel Training, the greenhouse is gone, as are the parking lot spin classes. Attendance is still down about 35% from 2019, but Bokat and Carter say more people are coming in every day. The gym-goers say they miss the sense of community a gym can provide.

"I feel pretty positive that man, if we sustained our community during like the darkest of days, it can only go up from there, and it has," Bokat said.

Many gyms and fitness studios had to quickly diversify their offerings in order to attract customers during the pandemic — and some say those changes worked so well, they're permanent.

Guy Codio, who owns the NYC Personal Training Gym in New York, went from nine to four trainers during the pandemic and had to pivot to online training sessions. In 2021, he moved to a different space with lower rent and started renting out space to others in the health and wellness industry including physi-

cal therapists and massage therapists.

"Everybody was worried during COVID, so we just need to downgrade a little bit," he said. "We had to change the model in order for us to succeed — almost take a step back, to take another step forward." Now, he's back to six trainers, but plans to keep the new business model renting out space to hedge his bets in case of another downturn.

In his new space, Codio limits people on the floor to 10 or 12 so customers feel more comfortable COVID-wise. But most customers he sees are "over COVID," and not as worried about getting sick as they used to be, he says.

"If a person is feeling worried there are measures we take, we do have masks or we have them in during different hours when there's less amount of people," he said.

For Jessica Benham of Lumos Yoga & Barre in Philadelphia, some pandemic changes have led to a boom in business. Not only is she back to pre-pandemic attendance levels, she recently opened a second location.

Demand returned to normal in the summer of 2022, Benham said. She raised the price for a drop-in class by \$5 to \$25 to offset higher costs for employee wages and cleaning supplies, but says that hasn't deterred customers.

Benham credits two pandemic changes with helping demand recover: outdoor classes and limited class size. She started outdoor classes from April through October during the pandemic in a nearby community garden out of necessity, but now has no plans to stop them.

"People just love being outside, especially when it's really nice out in the spring, even in the summer when it's hot," she said.

Classes are still capped at 12, down from 18 pre-pandemic. She offsets the decrease by offering more classes in her two studios.

"I think it just gives everyone a little bit more space like, you know, just having a couple extra inches between mats, people really appreciate that." When the pandemic first hit, Vincent Miceli, owner of Body Blueprint Gym in Pelham, N.Y., expected that 30% of his clients wouldn't come back. He underestimated.

Miceli thinks about 30% of his members left Pelham, a bedroom community near New York City, and moved elsewhere. Another 30% changed their habits and stopped working out altogether.

Now, he's seeing slow growth, similar to pre-pandemic levels, of about 5% month over month as working out at home loses its luster. He's still down about 35% client-wise from where he was in February 2020. Most of the new customers are people who haven't worked out before, he said.

"That gives us a whole new kind of lifeblood of the business," he said.



Fuel Training Studio owners Julie Bokat (left) and Jeanne Carter watch a fitness class inside their gym