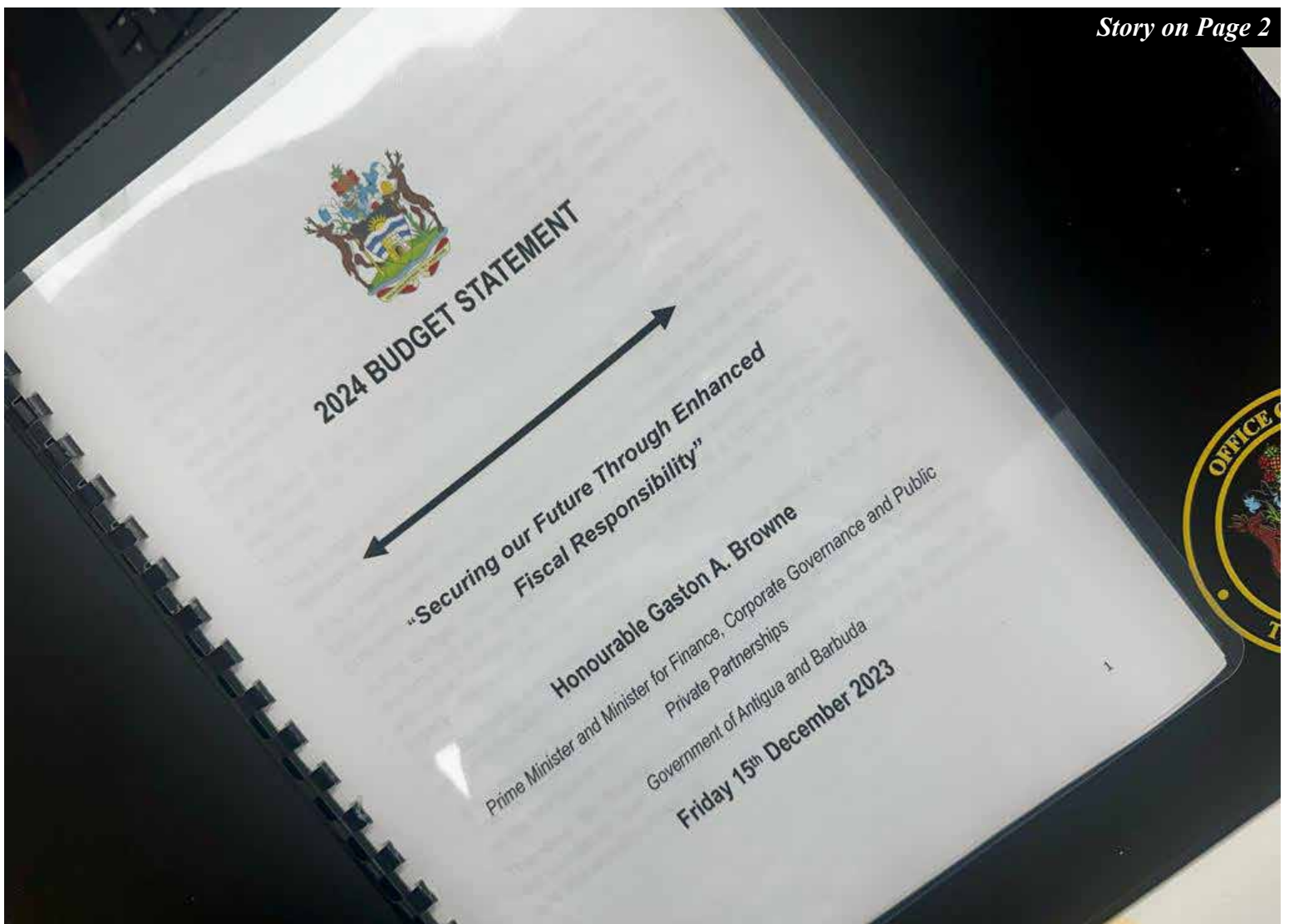


BUDGET DAY IN ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

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PM Gaston Browne to present Budget 2024

The nation will be glued to televisions, radios and smart phones to hear Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Corporate Governance and Public Private Partnerships, Gaston Browne, deliver the 2024 Budget Statement.

During his presentation, the prime minister is expected to outline the successes and challenges his government experienced over the last year and their aims and objec-

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Prime Minister Gaston Browne

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tives for 2024 in placing the country on a continuing path to economic growth and stability.

While budget presentations in recent times have been void of tax increases, today's statement will be different, as Prime Minister Browne is set to announce "small increases" to at least three taxes and address the nation on the reasons for such decisions.

Already, Mr. Browne has moved to allay the fears of citizens and residents, some of who are concerned they will be negatively impacted by the tax increases.

The head of government has said instead of being fearful, the ac-

tions of his administration should be viewed by citizens and residents as them making "a further contribution to nation building". Assurances have given that the basket of zero-rated items will be unaffected.

Today's budget presentation will contain good news for public sector workers who are expected to learn when they will benefit from the long-awaited increase in wages and salaries.

Thousands of employees are eligible for the nine per cent that will be added to their incomes. The overall total is 14 per cent, five of which was applied to wages and salaries in 2018.

According to reports, the out-

standing nine per cent increase will be given in two tranches. The first will be five per cent and the second will contain the remaining four per cent. The periods during which they will take effect are unknown.

In an Op-Ed earlier this week examining the 2024 budget, Professor C. Justin Robinson, Professor of Corporate Finance and Principal of The University of the West Indies Five Islands Campus wrote, "The Finance Minister faces a delicate and difficult balancing act to repair the public finances from the damage done by the Covid 19 pandemic and the history of primary deficits, while not damaging the economic growth prospects of the economy".

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Minor increases made to three tariffs

At its final meeting for the year yesterday, the Cabinet of Antigua and Barbuda mulled over three draft bills that will be tabled in parliament, ahead of the budget presentation this morning.

The bills, after making their way through both houses of parliament, will result in minor increases that will apply to the Antigua and Barbuda Sales Tax (ABST) from 15 to 17 per cent, along with the Airport Tax and the “Sin Tax”.

The latter tax is levied against alcohol, tobacco and cannabis products and gaming. “Sin Tax” is so named because the use of the items or participation in the activities are considered harmful

to the health and well-being of citizens.

During an appearance on state television last week, Financial Secretary, Rasona Davis-Crump, said the tax was necessary to help fund a heavily subsidised public healthcare system, adding that financial officials have recommended a 10 per cent tax be applied in this instance.

Further details are expected to be revealed by Prime Minister Gaston Browne during his presentation this morning.

The amendment to the “Sin Tax” along with the hike in airport tax and two per cent increase in the ABST are all decisions be-



Rasona Davis-Crump

ing taken by the government to meet a 25 per cent target in its revenue intake.

Both government and financial officials have cautioned that the time to make the necessary adjustments are now, in order to prevent a situation where it will become difficult for

government to meet its financial obligations, which include the payment of wages and salaries to public sector workers, along with improvements to the health sector and road infrastructure programme, among other areas of national development.

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Major wins for destination at Caribbean Travel Awards

Destination Antigua and Barbuda has won three major accolades at the 2024 Caribbean Travel Awards.

The Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority won Caribbean Journal's Caribbean Travel Award for Caribbean Tourist Board of the Year based on their stellar performance in 2023.

The Verandah Antigua and Hammock Cove also took home awards. The Verandah Antigua won Caribbean All-Inclusive Resort of the Year and Hammock Cove won Small All-Inclusive of the Year.

Tourism, Civil Aviation, Transportation and Investment Minister Charles Fernandez, called the wins, "A demonstration of the strong performance of the Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority and the tourism industry teams during the year".

"Brand Antigua and Barbuda has a clear vision that has been developed based on the inputs and feedback of our tourism stakeholders across various sectors. Through partnership and collaboration, we continue to elevate our tourism offerings and experiences, showcasing our talents and the uniqueness of Antigua and Barbuda. To be recognized by our peers in the region is an



honour and I am tremendously proud of the work of our teams."

"Antigua and Barbuda has experienced meteoric growth in tourism over the last few years," said Alexander Britell, editor and publisher of Caribbean Journal. "The twin-island destination's performance in the 10th annual Caribbean Travel Awards is a testament to that success. From a Caribbean-leading culinary movement to its place as a world-class wedding destination, Antigua and Barbuda and the ABTA are a model for the rest of the region."

During 2023, the Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority hosted the inau-

gural Antigua and Barbuda Restaurant Week in May and laid out the red carpet for couples visiting the destination during Antigua and Barbuda Romance Month in June.

"I want to congratulate our entire team for their commitment to working diligently to ensure Antigua and Barbuda sets itself apart from other destinations. Our main priority is to continue increasing airlift growth, producing unique campaigns and marketing initiatives and focusing on sustainability. Winning several of the prestigious awards is a great achievement and highlights the endless dedication we devote towards

promoting the destination and contributing to the success of our island's tourism industry." stated Colin James, CEO of Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority.

The Caribbean Journal's Caribbean Travel Awards celebrates the people and places contributing to the Caribbean's astonishing success — and ensuring that it continues, from the region's best hotels to its top tourism executives to the islands setting themselves apart in fields like food, romance, sustainability and innovation, as selected by Caribbean Journal's editorial team, leading experts on Caribbean travel and tourism.

Remembering James Tanny Rose

Antigua Barbuda Labour Party stalwart James Tanny Rose's funeral was held yesterday at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Government Ministers, the party's faithful, members of the opposition United Progressive Party and residents of the Grays/Green Community were in attendance to pay their final respects to Rose, who passed away in late October at the age of 77 years.



Bulk-waste cleanup in St. Mary's North successful

Community activist Jason Bassue lead a successful bulk-waste cleanup campaign last weekend in several communities within the Saint Mary's North Constituency.

Green Castle, One Love, Jennings and Ebenezer were among the areas included in the cleanup.

Bassue expressed gratification in leading the cleanup campaign, saying, "I felt a

renewed sense of community spirit and a positive atmosphere within the community. I am pleased to state that this bulk-waste project will now be an annual staple on our community calendar".

He expressed appreciation to the National Solid Waste Management Authority and other sponsors for supporting the clean-up campaign.



COP28: Small developing nations left in the shadows of fossil fuel giants

By Sir Ronald Sanders

COP28 in Dubai, presided over by a major oil-producing nation, has ended with a compromise that, depending on one's perspective, either represents a milestone or underscores the persistent inadequacies in confronting the climate crisis.

From the standpoint of small developing countries, grappling with the existing damaging impact and the continuing threats of climate change and global warming, very little cheer emanated from COP28. This includes the areas of the Loss and Damage Fund and climate financing, on which pledges have been made. But that record has been played so many times, it has worn thin.

Insufficient Momentum

While COP28 marked an important agreement explicitly calling for a shift away from fossil fuels, the compromise reached still grants energy-exporting giants like Saudi Arabia substantial leeway to continue drilling. The lack of legally binding rules to curb fossil fuel production raises serious concerns about the acceleration of global warming, posing an increased threat to vulnerable nations, particularly small island states in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and Central American states. These countries are among the greatest victims of the impacts of climate change.

The Harsh Reality of 2023

Despite commitments to triple the installation and use of renewable energy technology by 2030 and cease carbon emissions by 2050, this year, 2023, has already witnessed record-breaking temperatures globally. The slight progress made for small states at COP28 falls significantly short of the necessary measures needed to counteract the escalating impacts of climate change. According to the latest Global Carbon Budget Report, global fossil carbon dioxide emissions this year are set to hit a record high of 36.8 billion tonnes, an increase of 1.1% relative to 2022 levels and 1.4% above pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels.

Colombia: a bright spot

It is noteworthy that Colombia became the first Latin American country as well as the largest fossil fuel producer to endorse the Fossil Fuel non-Proliferation Treaty. The push for a Treaty is spearheaded by a bloc of 10 nation-states from Latin America, the Pacific, the Caribbean. Colombia has led the way, and every encouragement should be given to its government's responsible leadership.

Legacy of Dubai and Concerns for Azerbaijan

While providing a platform for developing countries to voice their concerns, COP28 should not be prematurely celebrated as a significant



Sir Ronald Sanders

advancement. There is a growing apprehension that if fossil fuel interests were prioritized in Dubai, the trend might continue in Azerbaijan, the host of COP29.

This concern is accentuated by the fact that Dubai, as one of the world's ten largest oil producers, hosted an unprecedented number of oil and gas lobbyists – at least 2,456, according to recent reports.

Those lobbyists would certainly have outnumbered all the delegates from every small state that attended the gathering in Dubai, showing the severe disadvantage in which small states are trapped.

Of course, the lobbyists would also have far more

incentivising methods to secure support for their positions than small countries that can only appeal to reason and conscience.

Loopholes in the COP28 Agreement

The compromise at COP28 lacked specific commitments to finance energy transitions in poorer nations. According to the World Bank, a multi-donor trust fund has been announced, mobilizing an initial US\$250 million to help developing nations cut CO₂ and methane emissions generated by the oil and gas industry. However, contributions from major oil companies like Chevron and Exxon Mobil were notably absent.

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Loss and Damage Fund

The final text on the Loss and Damage Fund is critiqued as woefully inadequate, despite the string efforts of small states both to get the Fund made operational, and to secure adequate financing.

Pledges for the fund exceeded US\$700 million, including \$300-400 million from the European Union (EU) collectively, \$100 from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), \$50 million from the UK, \$17.5 million from the US, and \$10 million from Japan. However, pledges are not delivery, and the record shows a history of pledges not being fulfilled. Further, we still do not know the number of countries that would qualify to benefit from the Fund and what conditions would be applied,

Of great concern is that, at least for a 4-year period, the fund will be administered by the World Bank whose reputation for applying onerous conditions

with lengthy periods of assessment does not instil faith that benefits would flow with the urgency they should,

It should be noted that contributions to the Fund represent less than 0.2% of the economic and non-economic losses developing countries face every year from global warming. Therefore, while it is something; it is distressingly insufficient.

Climate Financing

With respect to climate financing, the failure to meet the \$100 billion per year climate finance target and the lack of progress in doubling adaptation finance by 2025 reveal the shortcomings of affluent nations in meeting their commitments. Consequently, developing countries have developed grave mistrust of the rich nations. That mistrust should not be cause for giving up; rather, it is the reason for continuing to speak up and to expose the need and urgency for the plight of the vulnerable not to fall off the table of global consid-

eration until it is too late for any saving actions to be implemented.

Conclusion:

In evaluating the outcome of COP28, some progress was made, but much more needs to be done. Small states, particularly, must remain vigilant against potential dominance by fossil fuel interests in future conferences.

The urgency for meaningful, binding actions to address the existential threat of climate change faced by vulnerable nations is underscored by the escalating temperatures; destructive extreme weather events that wreck livelihoods and national economies; and the persistent shortcomings of the current global response.

(The wrier is Antigua and Barbuda's Ambassador to the United States of America and the Organization of American States. The views expressed are his own. Comments and previous commentaries at: www.sirronaldsanders.com)



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Jonathan Majors: Marvel movie actor awaits verdict in assault case

By Ian Youngs

A New York jury will soon decide if Marvel and Creed III star Jonathan Majors is guilty of assaulting his ex-girlfriend.

Grace Jabbari testified that Mr Majors, who plays Kang the Conqueror in the Marvel films, left her in “substantial” pain after an altercation in March.

The actor’s lawyer dismissed this as “lies” in Thursday’s closing arguments.

Mr Majors could face up to a year in jail if convicted of four misdemeanour assault and harassment charges.

A guilty verdict would also have implications for his Hollywood career, which includes major roles in two forthcoming Marvel films.

The incident began when the couple were in a car in New York in March and Ms Jabbari saw a text message from another woman on Mr Majors’ phone, which said: “Wish I was kissing you right now.”

According to prosecutors, when the 30-year-old British choreographer took the phone, he then grabbed her, twisted her arm behind her back and hit her in the head to get it back.

She said she was left with a fractured finger, bruising, a cut behind her ear and “excruciating”



Jonathan Majors pictured leaving court last week.

pain.

In their closing argument, prosecutors described how the actor “struck a blow” to his partner’s head that left her stunned, the Associated Press reported.

The prosecution also painted the assault as the latest escalation in Mr Majors’ attempts to “exert control” over his girlfriend through physical and emotional violence.

Mr Majors, 34, did not testify. His lawyer has claimed the actor was the victim, however, and that Ms Jabbari assaulted him in a jealous rage after seeing the text message in the car.

The actor’s attorney Priya Chaudhry has maintained that prosecutors

were trying to convict an innocent man based on Ms Jabbari’s false assertions.

Ms Chaudhry noted that Ms Jabbari went to a nightclub after the incident and was seen in video footage using her supposedly injured finger.

“It’s hard to keep your story straight when you’re making it up as you go,” Ms Chaudhry told the jury in her closing statement, the New York Times reported.

Mr Majors stayed in a hotel on the night in question but returned to the couple’s apartment the following morning and found Ms Jabbari unconscious on the floor.

He says he called police out of concern that she had attempted suicide - and his

lawyer told the court that his “fear of what happens when a black man in America calls 911 came true”.

His ex-girlfriend testified that she took two sleeping pills that night because of the pain.

Ms Jabbari had met Mr Majors two years ago on the set of Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania, where she was a movement coach.

After his arrest, Marvel pushed back the release of Avengers: The Kang Dynasty, in which Mr Majors is due to play the lead villain.

Another film, Magazine Dreams, which had been touted as a possible Oscar contender, also had its release postponed following the allegations.

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President Ali says Guyana is not seeking war in talks with Venezuela

By Melissa Wong

The third phase of the meeting in the Guyana–Venezuela peace talks has just concluded which was the face-to-face exchange between Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, Guyana’s President Dr Irfaan Ali and his team in the presence of CARICOM, CELAC, Brazil and UN observers.

In a conference to update the media, President Ali says in that meeting he outlined once again Guyana’s clear position, that “We are a peace abiding country and people...we have no other ambition than to pursue the peaceful co-existence with Venezuela and every country in this region.”

“I made it very clear that Guyana has all the right to exercise its sovereign right within its territorial space to approve of and facilitate any development, any investment, any partnership, any training, any collaboration, any co-operation, the issuing of any license and granting of any concessions within our territorial space and within our sovereign space.”

President Ali says he also made it clear that the controversy must be resolved at the ICJ.

“I made it clear that the process leading to the ICJ is part of the Geneva Agreement and that the Geneva Agreement provides for a UN Secretary-General to determine where the contro-



An image from the ongoing CARICOM/CELAC/Brazil-brokered meeting between President Dr Irfaan Ali and Venezuela’s President Nicolas Maduro in St Vincent and the Grenadines. (Photo via: President Irfaan Ali/Facebook)

versy must be finally determined and it is the UN Secretary-General acting within the confines of the Geneva Agreement who determine that that place is the ICJ.”

President Ali says Guyana agreed with all the regional partners that the priority is peace and that every threat of force or use of force must be denounced and that every party must take responsibility.

“We made it very clear that Guyana is not the aggressor...Guyana is not seeking war but Guyana reserve the right to work with all our partners to ensure the defence of our country.”

He says all of Guyana’s partnerships are based on the defence of its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

He says they move forward with the next phase of the meeting in keeping with the invitation which sought to enable a process of dialogue on consequential issues, not on the issue before the ICJ. The Guyana president says the shape and form of that dialogue in understanding of how we move forward, is the next phase of these meetings.

President Ali notes both parties are committed to ensuring the region remains a zone of peace

“I made it very clear that within the sovereign space of Guyana we will continue to do everything that promotes the development and advancement of our people and all partnerships necessary to ensure the defense

and protection of what is ours in accordance with international law.”

Questioned about a military plane from Venezuela which had printed on its tail when translated says ‘Essequiba is ours’, President Ali held up a bracelet with a map of Guyana stating: “This tells you. I don’t have to think what it means. We know what this means (pointing to the Guyana map). This is Guyana. All of it belongs to all of Guyana. This is the map of Guyana. No narrative, no propaganda, no decree can change this.”

The next phase of the meeting continues with President Ali saying “Let’s see what comes out of the next phase.”

Witnesses, extensive evidence presented against former BVI premier

CMC - Ahead of the start of the drug and money laundering trial against former Premier Andrew Fahie, in January the prosecution has disclosed a list of six persons expected to take the stand.

Fahie, 53, is charged with one count of conspiracy to import a controlled substance, conspiracy to engage in money laundering, and attempted money laundering.

This is in addition to a subsequent charge of interstate and foreign travel in aid of racketeering that was added last year.

Former BVI Ports Authority Managing Director Oleanvine Pickering Maynard heads the prosecution's list and is expected to offer critical testimony against Fahie after she was offered a plea agreement



Former BVI premier, Andrew Fahie.

and a chance at a reduced sentence for her role in the scheme that shook the territory last year.

Maynard admitted in her plea agreement that she introduced a US Drug Enforcement Agency informant posing as a drug cartel member to Fahie and

together they used their authority to facilitate a secret cocaine-smuggling plan.

The former Premier was arrested on April 28, 2022, at the Miami-Opa Locka airport after a sting operation along with his co-accused, Pickering Maynard.

Maynard's son Kadeem Stephan Maynard aka Blacka was arrested on the same day in the US Virgin Islands.

Earlier this year, Kadeem pleaded guilty to a single count of conspiracy to import cocaine and was recently sentenced to 57 months in prison.

Pickering-Maynard will be followed on the witness stand by US Drug Enforcement Administration agents Jossue Dominguez, Shad Aschleman and Brian Witek, along with Jon Adams and William Cortes from the US Customs and Border Protection.

The prosecution also released an extensive list of exhibits to be presented at trial, including recordings and transcripts of phone calls between Fahie and the government's confidential source on various dates in March and April 2022.

The defence team, led by attorney, Theresa Van Vliet, has made repeated attempts to have the name of the informant disclosed ahead of the trial.

Additionally, there are WhatsApp message logs, a handwritten ledger from an April 27, 2022 meeting, call logs for various phone numbers, surveillance videos, a lease document for a property in Miami, and images of Fahie's co-accused.

Fahie remains in confinement at the home of his daughters on a US\$1 million bond ahead of his January 8, 2024 trial.

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Alex Batty: Teen from Oldham missing for six years found in France

A 17-year-old British boy missing for six years has been found in France.

The prosecutors' office in Toulouse told the BBC Alex Batty was now in the care of British officials and could be back in the UK within hours.

He used a motorist's phone to message his grandmother in the UK, saying "I love you, I want to come home".

Alex had been missing since 2017, but was found on Wednesday morning by the motorist who spotted him walking through rain near Toulouse.

The boy disappeared after going on holiday with his mother and grandfather in Spain.

The pair, who do not have parental guardianship of Alex, have not been located but remain wanted in connection with his disappearance.

A police source earlier told BBC News the boy had been taken to a police station by the concerned motorist who had spotted him on a road in the foothills of the Pyrenees early on Wednesday morning.

A delivery driver spotted the boy was spotted walking along a road in the foothills of the Pyrenees in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

"He explained that he had been walking for four days, that he set off from a place in the mountains, though he didn't say where," the driver said.

"I typed his name into the internet and saw that he was being looked for," Fabien Accidini said.

Mr Accidini told local media Alex's plan had been to find a big city with an embassy to find assistance. Instead, Mr Accidini contacted French authorities for help.

Alex used Mr Accidini's Facebook account to contact his grandmother back in the UK.



Alex Batty, centre, disappeared with his mother, Melanie Batty, and grandfather, David Batty.

He wrote: "Hello Grandma, it's me Alex. I'm in France Toulouse. I really hope that you receive this message. I love you, I want to come home."

The British boy said he had been in France for two years, the police source said, adding that he bore a resemblance to the last known picture of Alex.

He had been living in the remote Pyrenean valleys, travelling about from place to place in a kind of itinerant commune.

The area in the foothills of the Pyrenees is known for attracting people in search of alternative lifestyles.

Alex won't say where his mother is or exactly where he had been living in the Pyrenees, the prosecutors' office told the BBC.

His grandmother - and legal guardian - Susan Caruana told The Sun newspaper she had now been in touch with Alex.

"I am so happy. I have spoken to him and he is well," she said. "It is such a shock."

Ms Caruana told the BBC in 2018 that she believed Alex's mother

Melanie Batty and grandfather David Batty had taken him to live with a spiritual community in Morocco.

She said at the time they were seeking an alternative lifestyle and did not want Alex to go to school.

Melanie and David Batty left Greater Manchester with Alex for a pre-agreed week-long holiday to Marbella in Spain on 30 September 2017.

He was last seen at the Port of Malaga on 8 October that year, the day they were expected to return to the UK.

British police were contacted via the UK embassy in Paris.

Greater Manchester Police confirmed it was in touch with French authorities to put "safeguarding measures in place".

"This is a complex and long-running investigation, and we need to make further enquiries as well as putting appropriate safeguarding measures in place," a spokesperson said.

In a statement, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) said: "We are supporting a British national in France and are in contact with local authorities."

EU to open membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova

European leaders have decided to open EU membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant candidate status to Georgia.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky hailed the decision, made at a summit in Brussels, as "a victory" for his country and Europe.

A spokesperson for Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, said that agreement was unanimous.

Hungary has long opposed talks starting with Kyiv, but did not veto the move.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán left the room momentarily in what officials described as a pre-agreed and constructive manner, while the other 26 leaders went ahead with the vote.

He then distanced himself from his colleagues with a video message on Facebook: "EU membership of Ukraine is a bad decision. Hungary does not want to participate in this bad decision, and therefore stayed away from the decision today."

Mr Zelensky was delighted by the EU's announcement: "This is a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe. A victory that motivates, inspires and strengthens," he said on X.

Ukraine and Moldova applied to join the EU after



Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. They were both given candidate status last June, while Georgia was passed over at the time.

Moldovan President Maia Sandu said it was an honour to share the path to EU accession with Ukraine. "We wouldn't be here today without Ukraine's brave resistance against Russia's brutal invasion," she wrote.

Earlier this year, Moldova warned that Russia was seeking to seize power in Chisinau. Ms Sandu said Moldovans were now feeling Europe's "warm embrace" and congratulated her compatriots on what she called "an award for all of society, all those who choose democracy and prosperity".

White House National Security Adviser Jake Sul-

livan welcomed the EU's "historic" move to open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova, calling it a "crucial step toward fulfilling their Euro-Atlantic aspirations".

Talks on joining the European Union can take years, so Thursday's decision will not guarantee Ukraine membership.

People in Ukraine know that the path to full membership is a long one, but this decision in Brussels will be a boost for morale.

EU candidate countries have to pass a series of reforms to adhere to standards ranging from the rule of law to the economy, although the EU's executive has already praised Kyiv for completing more than 90% of the steps taken so far on justice and tackling corruption.

German Chancellor

Olaf Scholz praised his fellow leaders for showing a "strong sign of support", adding that it was clear that both Ukraine and Moldova belonged to "the European family". A diplomat at the summit said it was Mr Scholz's idea for Mr Orbán to leave the room to enable the vote to go through.

This was some much-needed good news for Ukraine, after almost 22 months of Russia's war and a continuing struggle to secure Western military and financial aid.

Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said it was a historic moment and an "important message of hope" for the citizens of Ukraine and Moldova.

Mr Zelensky travelled to the US earlier this week in a vain attempt to persuade the US Congress to

cont'd on pg 16

Sports News



Clubs spent record \$888 million in agent service fees in 2023 - FIFA

ZURICH (Reuters) - Soccer clubs paid a record US \$888.1 million in agent service fees in 2023, an increase of 42.5 percent on the previous year, world governing body FIFA said in its annual "Football Agents in International Transfers" report released on Thursday.

The previous record was in 2019 when worldwide spending on commissions to agents involved in the international transfer of players was US\$654.7 million. The 2022 amount was US\$623.2 million.

English clubs were the biggest spenders by far this year with a total outlay of more than US\$280 million, while 86.6 percent of the worldwide expenditure came from European clubs,



FIFA added.

Saudi Arabian clubs went on a spending spree this year, splashing out almost one billion dollars in the transfer window to lure top players from Europe and they had the second-biggest expenditure on engaging club agents at US\$86 million.

"The number of international transfers with an agent acting on behalf of the player reached a record high in 2023 with a total of 3,353 transfers," FIFA said in its report.

"This corresponds to 15.4 percent of all transfers and represents an increase of 8.4 percent compared to

2022."

In a first for women's soccer, professional clubs spent more than US\$1 million in agent service fees, with the total reaching just under US\$1.4 million.

Agents have been at loggerheads with FIFA after they lost an appeal in July to block new regulations that would cap their transfer commissions and introduce exams to secure a license.

FIFA said it received 19,973 licensing applications this year with 9,207 taking the exam, which 32.6 percent passed.

However, an English FA tribunal set up in June ruled earlier this month that the proposed FIFA regulations are incompatible with British competition law.

cont'd from pg 15

push through \$61bn in military funding, blocked by Republican lawmakers.

Ukraine's counter-offensive against Russia's occupying force has ground to a halt at the start of winter.

Earlier on Thursday, President Vladimir Putin mocked Ukraine and claimed Western support was running out: "Excuse my vulgarity, but everything is being brought in as a freebie. But those freebies could run out at some point."

But President Zelensky will at least now be able to point to this political win as proof that Ukraine is not steadily being abandoned by its partners.

The European Council president

said it was a "very powerful signal... to the people of Ukraine we are on their side".

Many in Kyiv see their fight against Russia's invasion as a defence of European values and they firmly view their future as an active and effective member of the European Union.

Ukraine's 2014 "Revolution of Dignity", toppling its pro-Kremlin president, was rooted in a desire to move away from Russia's political orbit and towards Europe.

President Putin reacted by sending troops into eastern Ukraine and Crimea and then staging a far wider invasion in 2022.

For Georgia too, invaded by Russia in 2008, the EU vote was a "mon-

umental milestone", said pro-EU President Salome Zurbishvili.

Georgia has a broadly pro-EU population, its government has a complex relationship with Moscow and has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia since the war began. Mr Michel said the EU also intended to open negotiations with Bosnia-Herzegovina once it met criteria for membership.

Bosnia was given candidate status a year ago but a progress report last month has listed further steps Sarajevo needs to take on electoral and judicial reforms.

Bosnia has the added issue of the leader of its majority-Serb area, Republika Srpska, threatening to secede.

Australia in control as Warner ton wears down Pakistan

PERTH, Dec 14 (Reuters) - Australia's opener David Warner brushed aside any doubts about his Test match pedigree with a brutal 164-run assault on Pakistan's bowlers as the hosts glided to 346 for five after 84 overs at stumps on day one of the series opener in Perth on Thursday.

The 37-year-old, who intends to retire from Tests after the third and final game in Sydney, combined with Usman Khawaja (41) in a 126-run opening stand to get the hosts off to a strong start after winning the toss.

A delightful upper cut for four in the 43rd over saw Warner bring up a breezy 125-ball hundred, his 26th in Tests, prompting a trademark celebratory leap and a cheeky 'shush' towards the media box.

"It's my job to come out here and score runs, that was from the get-go to put pressure on the Pakistani bowlers," Warner, who had averaged only 32 in Tests since the start of 2020, told Fox Cricket.

"There's going to be criticism but you've got to take that. There's no better way to silence them (than) by putting runs on the board."

The world Test champions got off to a flyer, with spearhead quick Shaheen Afridi's 14-run opening over foreshadowing a punishing session for the visi-



David Warner of Australia celebrates on reaching a century during play on the first day of the first cricket Test between Australia and Pakistan in Perth, Australia, Thursday, Dec. 14, 2023. (AP) tors.

Khawaja, donning a black armband after International Cricket Council rules prohibited him from wearing shoes showing messages of solidarity with Gaza Palestinians, was first to fall after lunch, caught behind by Sarfaraz Ahmed off Afridi, who has taken one for 75.

Departing soon after was Marnus Labuschagne (16), trapped lbw by medium-pacer Faheem Ashraf

(1-65), leading Warner to dial back his attacking approach, highlighted by an outrageous lap shot over fine leg for six.

Warner rode his luck to survive a dropped catch and a mis-stumping to spinner Agha Salman, cashing in on anything in his zone to nail 16 boundaries and four sixes before miscuing debutant quick Aamer Jamal (2-63) to backward square in the 75th over.

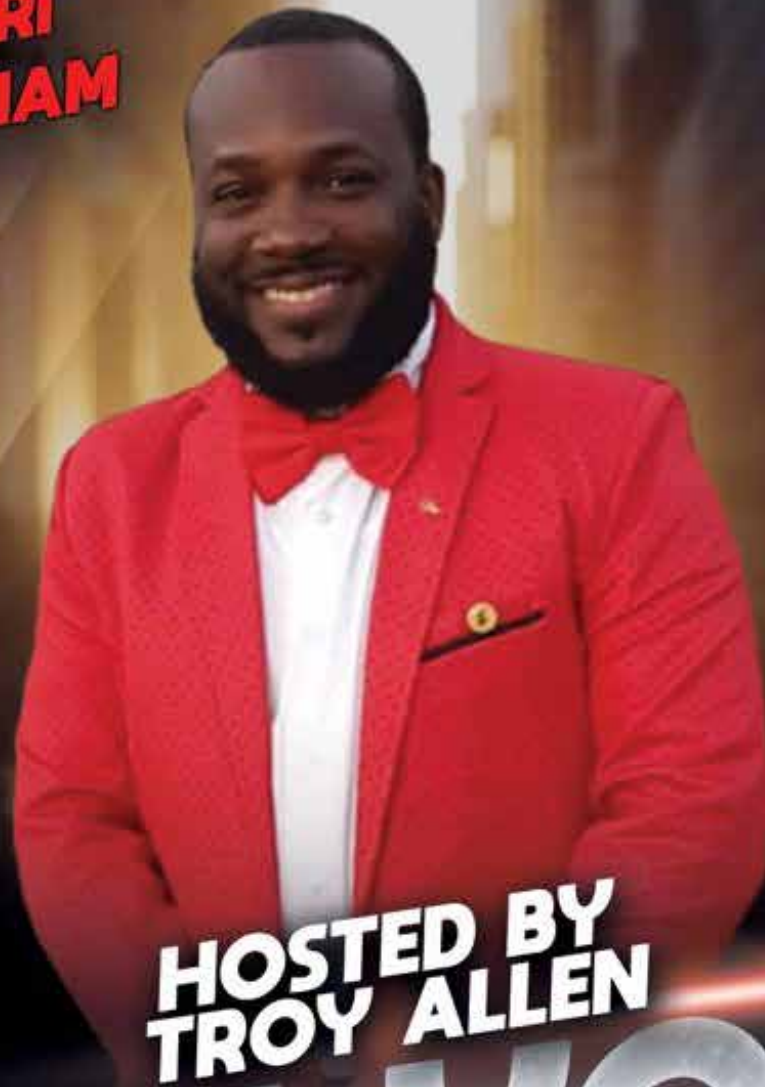
The New South Welsh-

man is now Australia's fifth-highest run scorer in Tests with 8651, having overtaken past greats Matthew Hayden (8625) and Michael Clarke (8643) during the 211-ball vigil.

Pakistan will take heart from their disciplined post-lunch bowling performance and the possibility of restricting Australia to under 400 on day two, when Mitchell Marsh (15 not out) and Alex Carey (14 not out) resume the innings.



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Anthony moves from GNFC Gloucestershire to Woodley United FC

Antiguan Maliko Anthony has secured a move from Generation Next Football Club (GNFC) Gloucestershire in the premier division of the Cheltenham Association Football League (CAFL) to Woodley United FC in the Combined Counties League Division One in the United Kingdom.

Anthony's move came just weeks after he arrived in England to represent GNFC Gloucestershire, which is the only Caribbean-based club in the English football pyramid system.

The president of GNFC, which is based in Antigua, Ricky Santos, who founded GNFC Gloucestershire in 2021, said Anthony's transfer to Woodley United FC encapsulates the vision of starting an affiliate club that is based in the United Kingdom.

Santos said, under the recommendation of GNFC-UK Director of Football, Antoine Thompson, Anthony has now been afforded the opportunity to play in the Combined Counties League Division One, which is four levels above the Cheltenham Association Football League in the English football pyramid system.

"Maliko Anthony played two matches for GNFC Gloucestershire, and our football director, Antoine Thompson, who is also the assistant manager of the academy at Reading FC, saw his talent.

"Based on Thompson's recommendation, Anthony was able to secure a move to Woodley United FC, which is a club that is playing in a division that is four levels above the league that GNFC Gloucestershire is in," Santos said.

"This is a success story for us because that is what GNFC Gloucestershire was created for, because once our players possess the talent to



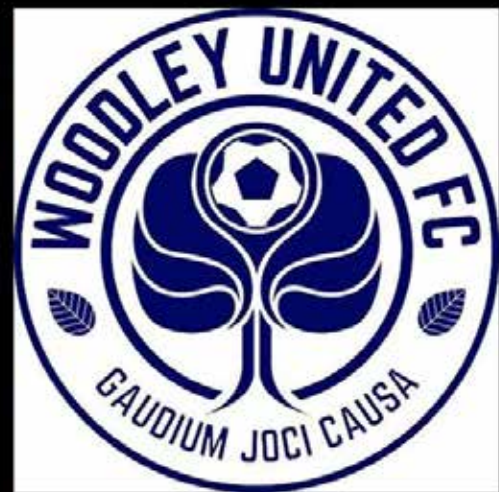
Antiguan Maliko Anthony (GNFC)

move to a higher division, Thompson has a mandate not to hold them back.

"This is an outlet for our players to get the opportunity to move to a higher level so they can continue to improve their development."

The English football league system, also known as the football pyramid, is a series of interconnected leagues for men's association football clubs in England, with five teams from Wales, one from Guernsey, one from Jersey, and one from the Isle of Man also competing.

The system has a hierarchical format with promotion and relegation between leagues at different levels, allowing even the smallest club the theoretical possibility of ultimately



rising to the very top of the system, the English Premier League (EPL).

Below the EPL are levels 2–4, organized by the English Football League, then the National League System from levels 5–10, administered by the Football Association (FA), and thereafter, regional feeder leagues run by relevant county FAs on an ad hoc basis.

The exact number of clubs varies from year to year as clubs join and leave leagues, merge, or fold altogether, but an estimated average of 15 clubs per division implies that more than 7,000 teams of nearly 5,300 clubs are members of a league in the English men's football league system.



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Players of the Earthquakes FC football team. (Photo by Elwin Francis)

Earthquakes return to winning form in second division league

Earthquakes FC returned to winning form in the Antigua and Barbuda Football Association's (ABFA) Second Division League on Wednesday.

Joumol Semper had a double conversion to lead the Earthquakes to a 2-0 victory against Glanvilles at the Glanvilles playing field.

Semper scored in the 35th minute and converted a penalty kick in the 50th minute to give the Earthquakes their second win in three matches.

After losing their first two matches, West Ham picked up their first win of the competition by pulling off a 3-0 victory against JSC Progressors in the second game of a double head-

er at the ABFA Technical Center.

Damian Azille opened the scoring in the 6th minute, Jassiem Braithwaite had an 8th-minute conversion, and Kaliq Mingo scored West Ham's third and final goal in the 17th minute.

It was the third loss in as many matches for JSC Progressors, who remain in the cellar without a point.

Terrence Spencer struck a hat-trick as Golden Grove claimed their first win in two outings by recording a 3-1 victory against the CPTSA Wings in the opening game of the double header at the ABFA Technical Center.

Spencer opened the scoring by converting a penalty kick in the 27th

minute and also scored with conversions in the 45th and 46th minutes.

Jahbarie Lawrence scored the only goal for the Wings in the 42nd minute.

Bethesda/Christian Hill and Urlings battled to a 2-2 draw at the Bethesda playing field.

Goals by Vernon Jeffers in the 30th minute and O'Shale Simon in the 47th minute gave Bethesda a 2-0 lead.

But Raheem Horsford scored in the 61st minute, and Jahmiah Daniel converted a penalty kick in the 62nd minute for Urlings to secure a draw in the encounter.

APUA INET Telecoms retain business football league title

APUA INET Telecoms are back-to-back champions of the Cool and Smooth JOMA Caribbean Ministry of Sports Business League Football Championship.

They retained the title by beating Sandals 1-0 in the final before scores of spectators at the Antigua Recreation Grounds (ARG) on Wednesday night.

Daron James scored the only goal of the match to secure victory for APUA INET Telecoms, which prevailed 5-4 in a penalty shootout against DEWS Pro Builders in the semi-finals at the same venue on Sunday.

DEWS Pro Builders rebounded from their loss in the semi-finals by capturing third place in the competition.

DEWS Pro Builders snatched a 3-2 victory against St. John's Development Corporation in the playoff for third place that preceded the final on Wednesday.

Nyque Watkins, Andrea Nicholas, and Anthony James each had a conversion for DEWS Pro Builders. Donald Francis scored both goals for St. John's Development Corporation,



APUA INET Telecoms celebrate with their trophies after winning the Cool and Smooth JOMA Caribbean Ministry of Sports Business League Football Championship at the Antigua Recreation Grounds on Wednesday, December 13, 2023. (Photo courtesy Ministry of Sports)

which suffered a one-nil loss against Sandals in the semi-finals.

Players from APUA INET Telecoms also dominated the individual awards, which were handed out during a brief presentation ceremony following Wednesday's final.

Rakeem Joseph of APUA Telecoms captured the Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the Tournament Award.

Joseph also won the awards for the top goal scorer, and the best defender.

Telecoms midfielder Ranique James claimed the Most Valuable Player of the Final award. Colin Ralph captured the Coach of the Year Award, and Ira Cochrane claimed the Manager of the Year title for the champions.

Ranique James also secured their Best Midfielder Award, while teammates Anthony Forsythe claimed their Best Goalkeeper Award.

Jashine Lawrence won the MVP Award for third-place winner, DEWS Pro

Builders, while Kayan London claimed the MVP Award for second-place winner, Sandals Grande Antigua.

Awards were also presented to the four group stage winners. Ministry of Agriculture (Group 1), Sandals Grande Antigua (Group 2), St. John's Development Corporation (Group 3), and PBC HC VER (Group 4).

Thirty-two (32) teams, equally divided into four groups of eight, participated in the 2023 business football league competition.