

2 Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf: A story of love, loyalty to Kuwait



7 Israel announces 'historic' gas contract with Egypt



32 For single Syrian women, search for soul mates comes up empty



16 Russian doping rocks Olympics; Canadians set ice dance record



Duterte accepts Amir's invite, will visit Kuwait next month

Kuwait, Manila to sign labor agreement

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has accepted an invitation by HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah to visit Kuwait, and the state visit will take place "in the first or the second week of March", Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah announced yesterday. The two countries will also sign an agreement to regulate the affairs of Filipino workers in Kuwait, Jarallah added after a meeting with the National Assembly's foreign relations panel to discuss the standoff between the Philippines and Kuwait over alleged mistreatment of workers.



Rodrigo Duterte

"The Philippines president will visit the country after the Amir sent an invitation to the president. The visit will - God willing - take place in the first or second week of March," Jarallah told reporters after the meeting. He said an agreement is currently under review by the two countries to regulate Filipino workers in the country, adding the agreement was proposed by the Philippine authorities. "We have been presented with the draft agreement which will be signed by Kuwait and the Philippines. Concerned authorities (in Kuwait) have reviewed the draft," Jarallah said.

Accordingly, Jarallah said the two countries are on their way to calm the tense situation, "if we have not actually reached that target already through the correct and quiet handling of this problem". Kuwait last week condemned what it called an escalation by the Philippines that threatened bilateral relations after the president and top officials lashed out at Kuwait for allegedly mistreating Filipino workers in the country.

Kuwait has categorically denied the allegations and stressed that the abuse cases were very limited and will be dealt with within the framework of the law. Jarallah said he discussed with the committee the consequences of the standoff and its causes and explained to them the efforts that had been exerted by the foreign ministry.

Continued on Page 11



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Minister of Social Affairs and Labor and Minister of State for Economic Affairs Hind Al-Sabeeh and heads of local charities yesterday. — KUNA

Amir orders grants for orphans, thanks charities

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday ordered giving financial grants to orphans at his personal expense. The Amir made the initiative on the occasion of the 57th anniversary of Kuwait's National Day and the 27th anniversary of Liberation Day. His humanitarian move toward this segment of the society came a day after he ordered the payment of debts of imprisoned citizens and expatriates.

HH the Amir also expressed deep gratitude to Kuwaiti charities for alleviating the hardships of people in need of aid. "I can only say thank you in the name of all your Kuwaiti brethren... you have acted and fulfilled your blessed duties," he said as he hosted Minister of Social Affairs and Labor and Minister of State for Economic Affairs Hind Al-Sabeeh and heads of local charities at Seif Palace. The Amir also praised the associations for taking part in the recently held international conference for the reconstruction of Iraq.

Good and charitable actions are ideal principles instilled in the Kuwaiti people's conscience since olden times and embraced by generations, HH the Amir said, alluding to the multiple initiatives ongoing to relieve the needy and victims of catastrophes in Arab and foreign countries.

Dr Abdullah Al-Maatouq, Chairman of the

International Islamic Charitable Organization and Advisor at the Amiri Diwan, indicated that his colleagues and he came to see the Amir to listen to his guidelines and brief him about aid activities. Jamal Al-Nouri, Chairman of Abdullah Al-Nouri Charity, told HH the Amir that \$37 million out of \$48 million earmarked for Iraq had been disbursed for housing for the displaced, aiding widows and teaching skills to enable the needy to earn money sustainably.

Chairman of Kuwait Relief Society Ahmad Al-Jasser affirmed that the Iraq conference, held on Feb 12-14, constituted an opportunity to shed light on Kuwaiti charitable work. Faisal Al-Zamel, representative of Al-Najat Charity, said he and his colleagues were honored to meet HH the Amir. An identical statement was made by Nabil Al-Oun, General Director of Al-Salam charity. — Agencies

PAM launches new services to protect workers

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Public Authority of Manpower (PAM) yesterday launched online services to protect the rights of workers. "Every governorate has a labor relations department that includes a labor dispute unit, where an employee can submit his complaint. With our new system, we can reduce paperwork and documentation due to increased automation," said Abdullah Al-Merri, Director of the Labor Relations Department at PAM.

The system serves both employers and employees. "We call upon employers and employees to register their phone numbers at PAM to benefit from the system's services. To access general services on the website, the user doesn't need any password. An employee can check if there is an absconding case filed against him. The employee can also check to which labor department he should resort to," said Rabab Al-



KUWAIT: Officials of the Public Authority of Manpower (PAM) hold a press conference at Sheraton Hotel yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Asemi, Director of the IT Department at PAM.

The new service is available in four languages: Arabic, English, French and Urdu. "We aimed to make the system easy for workers to use by themselves without the help of translators. To register, the worker should print out and fill up the declaration and commitment form from the website and take it to the labor department," she said.

Workers have to visit the labor department in person for the first time to register their

phone numbers. "We demand the personal attendance of the employee to verify that the number really belongs to him and is not provided by the employer or his representative. The employee will receive a text message on his phone for any inquiries, complaints or information. Immediately after registering, he will receive an SMS with his username and password, so nobody else can see it except the worker," Asemi explained.

Continued on Page 11

Trump Jr to wine and dine luxury flat buyers in India

NEW DELHI: Dozens of property investors and their families will be treated to dinner with Donald Trump Junior in Delhi this week after snapping up flats in a Trump Towers luxury development on the outskirts of the Indian capital. Trump's local partners have promised dinner with the US president's son to anyone who buys into the development of high-rise apartments boasting floor-to-ceiling windows, state of the art amenities and a "lifestyle concierge".

At 2.5 million rupees (around \$39,000) just for the down payment on the smallest and cheapest flat - that is well beyond most Indians. Nonetheless, the development has already clocked up sales worth nearly \$80 million, according to a statement released yesterday. "Despite the sluggishness of the luxury residential market in Delhi NCR



MUMBAI: In this file photo taken on Aug 12, 2014, US billionaire real estate developer and now US president Donald Trump (left) poses for a photo with managing director of Lodha group Abhishek Lodha (center) and Donald Trump Jr during a news conference. — AFP

(National Capital Region) and in India, the project has smashed all sales records," said the statement.

Around 75 people have already stumped

up and Indian developer Tribeca expects that number to increase to 100 before the promotion deadline expires on Thursday, a staff

Continued on Page 11

Turkey warns Syria over backing YPG; jets pound enclave



SALWAH, Syria: Turkish-backed Syrian rebel fighters fire towards Kurdish forces from the YPG in the Afrin region yesterday. — AFP

AMMAN: Turkey's foreign minister yesterday warned against any intervention by Syrian pro-government forces to support Kurdish militias in northern Syria, saying it would not prevent Ankara from pressing on with its month-old offensive. Mevlut Cavusoglu was reacting to a report from Syrian state news agency SANA saying pro-government forces were expected in the Afrin region to counter the Turkish offensive against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia.

Turkey views the YPG as a terrorist offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), blacklisted by Ankara, the United States and the European Union. "If the regime is entering (Afrin) to oust the PKK, YPG, there is no problem. But if they are entering to protect the YPG, then no one can stop us and Turkish soldiers," Cavusoglu said during a visit to Jordan. "This is true for

Afrin, Manbij and the east of the Euphrates River," Cavusoglu added at a joint news conference in Amman with his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Safadi.

Yesterday, SANA said "popular forces will arrive in Afrin within a few hours to support its people's stand against the Turkish regime's attack on the area and its people", citing its correspondent in Aleppo. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has previously threatened to expand the operation to include the YPG-held town of Manbij and other towns leading to the Iraqi border. The Turkish army, backed by Syrian rebels, has been conducting a ground and air offensive against the region since Jan 20 to drive out the YPG. Cavusoglu said the operation, dubbed "Olive Branch", was aimed at "removing terrorists" from its southern border.

Continued on Page 11

Local

His Highness the Crown Prince: A story of love, loyalty to Kuwait

Sheikh Nawaf credited for outstanding contributions to Kuwait's advancement

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah celebrates today the 12th anniversary of his designation for this position by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. By virtue of this designation under an Amiri Order on February 7, 2006, His Highness the Crown Prince became the closest aide of His Highness the Amir in his efforts to build Kuwait as a modern country and continue its march towards development and prosperity.

After the MPs unanimously approved the nomination, His Highness the Crown Prince was sworn in at the National Assembly and took up his duties on February 20, 2006. His Highness the Crown Prince won the trust of His Highness the Amir, as well as the broad spectrum of the political life and the man in the street due to his personal capabilities that qualified him for this post in keeping with the provisions of the Constitution and the rules of succession of the hereditary Emirate. His popularity stems from his care and great interest in the Kuwaiti people and all issues of public concern.

His Highness the Crown Prince gained the unanimous allegiance of the people who shared him love and felt his personal humanitarian qualities such as mercy, fairness and benevolence. He holds the people of Kuwait in high esteem, puts them at the core of his interests and spares no effort in meeting their aspirations for a bright future.

Outstanding contributions

On the political front, His Highness the Crown Prince offered over the last five decades outstanding contributions to Kuwait's drive to become a modern, advanced and prosperous country. He was nominated by the late Amir Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah as governor of Hawalli on February 21, 1961, and maintained the post until March 19, 1978; during this period, Kuwait gained independence from Britain in June 1961. He served as minister of interior between March 19, 1978 and

February 26, 1988, when he took up the portfolio of defense during the reign of late Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

After Kuwait liberation from the Iraqi invasion, he served as minister of social affairs and labor between April 20, 1991 and October 19, 1992. His Highness Sheikh Nawaf was nominated as deputy chief of the National Guard on October 16, 1994, until July 13, 2003, when he was designated to the portfolio of the interior.

On October 16, 2003, he was nominated as first deputy prime minister and minister of interior and maintained the post until February 7, 2006, when he was designated as Crown Prince. During his tenure as governor of Hawalli, he was able to turn the governorate from a primitive village into a lively business center featured by modern urban planning and economic activities.

Security and stability

As minister of interior, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf managed to preserve the security and stability of the country and address all concerns of the public through introducing the latest security systems and equipment, and building the capacity of the police personnel.

He optimized use of the information technologies in the combat against all forms of crimes and tightening the control over the borders. He laid down a comprehensive strategy for preserving the security on along the land and maritime borders, thus denying access to hostile infiltrators who might tamper with the security and stability of the country.

During his tenure as minister of defense, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf upgraded the army through modern training and provision of the latest weapons. As minister of social affairs and labor following the Iraqi invasion of 1990, he made remarkable humanitarian achievements in caring for the widows and orphans and bereaved elderly people. He also rehabilitated the labor



KUWAIT: In this file photo, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah takes oath before the National Assembly as Crown Prince on February 20, 2006. —KUNA

market through helping the workers resume their jobs after the liberation war.

During the catastrophe of the invasion, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf contributed to security the safe travel of the legitimate authorities to neighboring Saudi Arabia and mobilizing, later on, the military and civilian resources for resistance against the Iraqi occupation forces. When the country was hit by terrorist attacks in January 2005, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf led the war against terrorism until he made sure that all terrorist

cells were thoroughly broken.

On the regional front, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf attached great importance to the security of the Arabian Gulf states. He played an active role in the meetings of interior ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states with a view to joining forces against common threats, notably those relating to terrorism. Born in June 25, 1937, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah has four sons and one daughter. —KUNA

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Sheikh Nasser heaps praise on Crown Prince

KUWAIT: Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah yesterday hailed His Highness the Crown Prince as among the beacons of the country, a man whose contributions to national development are immeasurable.

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is an exemplary leader and the epitome of national pride, the Kuwaiti defense minister said roughly 12 years to the day His Highness the Crown Prince took the oath of office. He went on to say that His Highness the Crown Prince's unbridled love for Kuwait has enabled him to "write historic chapters of success to the history of the country." Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabah recalled His Highness the Crown Prince's tenacity when he served as interior minister, saying he stood in the face of the scourge of terrorism.

He assured that His Highness the Crown Prince would not rest on his laurels, rather, he will continue to stand by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as the nation looks forward to epochs of prosperity and development.

Meanwhile, Minister of Information Mohammad Al-Jabri congratulated His Highness the Crown Prince on the occasion. He assured that the Kuwaiti people will always remember actions taken by His Highness toward Kuwait to maintain peace, security, development, law and sovereignty in every position he held during five decades of serving the country, during which he was one of the most prominent and contemporary figures in building the new Kuwait. "Twelve years ago, the nation's deputies gathered on approving Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad as the new Crown Prince of the State of Kuwait," Minister Jabri said in a statement on this occasion.

Kuwaitis appreciate the experience of His Highness, who gave a living example of the loving, giving and national leader who spares no effort in supporting the aspirations of his people towards a prosperous future, Jabri noted. He concluded, assuring His Highness the Crown Prince was and still a generous, giving and humble leader, wishing him great health, and longevity in serving His Highness the Amir and the Kuwaiti people.

In the meantime, the Minister of Commerce and Industry Khaled Al-Roudhan said that His Highness the Crown Prince's life is full of eternal achievements and works. His Highness the Crown Prince has dedicated all his efforts and time to make accomplishments on par with his deep affection to Kuwait and its people, said

Roudhan, also Minister of State for Youth Affairs.

He is one of the founders of modern Kuwait; those who have helped in establishing the state foundations, contributing to development and construction following the independence (in 1961), Roudhan added.

Sheikh Nawaf is famous for grand and unprecedented accomplishments during his service in various posts: in Hawalli Governorate, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the National Guard, he said. He is merited with characteristics of the distinguished leader, being firm but also compassionate and forgiving.

Aware of his patriotic, noble and humanitarian stances, the Kuwaiti people represented by the MPs declared their allegiance to him as Heir Apparent in 2006. He continues to be an example for giving and modesty, resolutely supporting the people's aspirations toward a prosperous future.

Also, Deputy Commander of Kuwait National Guard (KNG) Sheikh Mishaal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah expressed great pride and appreciation to His Highness the Crown Prince's sincere efforts and achievements since throughout the years.

Sheikh Mishaal Al-Ahmad further stated that His Highness Sheikh Nawaf has the qualities of a distinguished leader who combines firmness and tolerance, and an ability to face challenges with wisdom. He added that His Highness Sheikh Nawaf showed leadership skills in all his posts, including as the governor of Hawalli, interior minister, defense minister, social affairs minister, and at the National Guard, stressing that in each of these posts, he left a clear mark and achievement.

Moreover, KUNA Board Chairman and Director General Sheikh Mubarak Al-Duaij Al-Ibrahim Al-Sabah said that His Highness the Crown Prince is one of the founders of modern Kuwait and contributed in the process of renaissance and construction of the country after independence. His Highness's march that extended for more than five decade replete with achievements that will remain memorable in the history of Kuwait, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Duaij said. His Highness, since the early 1960s, was a model for the distinguished leader who devotes all his efforts and time to achieve success in line with his love for Kuwait and its people, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Duaij said.

His Highness the Crown Prince left clear marks in all positions he worked in, Sheikh Mubarak said, pointing to his success in transforming Hawalli into a large touristic and commercial governorate. He also played a role in developing the Ministry of Interior departments and his efforts in both the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Social Affairs and National Guard. His Highness was keen to promote values and unity of the people of Kuwait, as his attributes contributed in achieving success. —KUNA

Local

Amir praises Commerce Chamber's active role, efforts to host conference

Amir, Crown Prince meet KCCI Chairman, members



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (KCCI) Chairman Ali Al-Ghanem and KCCI board members. —KUNA



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with head of the Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with a Kuwaiti State Audit Bureau-appointed team tasked with monitoring his Diwan's budget.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at Seif Palace Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (KCCI) Chairman Ali Al-Ghanem and KCCI board members. His Highness the Amir praised the active role of the KCCI and the great efforts exerted in the preparation for the Kuwait International Conference for Reconstruction of Iraq (KICRI), and their keenness to make the conference a success by attracting hundreds of major international investment companies to participate in the event.

Ghanem said meanwhile that KCCI stands prepared to work with the government to put in place the outcomes of the recent conference on Iraq's reconstruction in Kuwait. Speaking to reporters following his meeting with His Highness the Amir, Ghanem mentioned in particular Kuwaiti investments in Iraq.

He added that he and KCCI board members had listened to advice from His Highness the Amir in this regard, quoting His Highness the Amir as confirming that the government would work with the private sector to carry out recommended projects in Iraq. He cited KICRI as a clear-cut paradigm of His Highness the Amir and Kuwaiti people's goodwill towards their neighbors.

The KCCI Chairman and board members later met with

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who appreciated the KCCI's role in preparations for the conference, as well as efforts to attract major international investment companies to participate in the event.

Separately, His Highness the Amir received head of the Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt and his accompanying delegation on the occasion of their visit to the country. The reception was attended by Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Ali Jarrah Al-Sabah.

In other news, His Highness the Crown Prince received a Kuwaiti State Audit Bureau-appointed team tasked with monitoring the budget of His Highness the Crown Prince's Diwan. During the encounter, His Highness the Crown Prince commended the State Audit Bureau and its personnel for their efforts to protect public funds, saying the audit body's contributions towards public interest are appreciated. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Faisal Al-Sabah, who heads His Highness the Crown Prince's Diwan, was present at the meeting.

Also yesterday, His Highness the Crown Prince received National Security Apparatus (NSA) Chairman Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah. His Highness the Crown Prince also met with Dr Mohammad Barrak Al-Heifi. —KUNA



Crown Prince meets team auditing Diwan's budget

Defense Minister meets foreign envoys



KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meets with Russian Ambassador to Kuwait Alexey Solomatn. —KUNA

KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah held a meeting yesterday with Russian Ambassador to Kuwait Alexey Solomatn accompanied by Military, Air and Naval Attache Valery Kotogorov, in which they discussed several issues of joint interest. He praised, during the meeting, the level of bilateral relations between the two countries.

Later, Minister Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad received Tunisia's Ambassador to Kuwait Ahmad bin Saghir, discussing issues of joint interest. The discussions also dealt with means of boosting cooperation on issues of common concern. The meetings were attended by Chairman of the Office of the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Major-General Waleed Al-Sardi and Sheikh Hamad Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. —KUNA



Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad meets with Tunisia's Ambassador to Kuwait Ahmad bin Saghir.



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Local

Mother of suspect in maid's death denies son's involvement

'His wife used to bang the maid's head against the wall'

KUWAIT: The family of a Lebanese man in whose apartment the body of a Filipina was found is in shock, claiming: "It is impossible for our son to commit such a crime." The body of Joanna Daniela Demafelis arrived in the Philippines on Friday after it was found in a freezer in the apartment rented by the Lebanese man named Nader and his Syrian wife Mona.

Amid rumors that Interpol has arrested the couple, thought to be in Syria, Al-Rai daily located the family of 40-year-old Nader, who hails from Budai and was raised in Ouzae in southern Beirut. He left his apartment in Kuwait along with his wife 16 months ago. After a court ruling was issued in favor of the owner, police discovered the body of the Filipina maid, who Nader reported absconding two days before he left the country. Murder charges were filed at Maidan Hawally police station after detectives discovered the woman was tortured and suffocated.

Nader's mother was surprised when she was asked whether she knew her only son was arrested. "I don't know...did they really arrest him? My son cannot even kill an ant, and for sure his wife put him into trouble," she said. "How can I save him from this dilemma? Nader is a quiet

and reasonable man, unlike his wife, who I realized was cruel and badly treated the maid when I visited them in Kuwait," she added. "His wife used to bang the maid's head against the wall. I asked her to return the maid to the office if she did not like her, but she did not pay any heed. I left Kuwait because I couldn't stand the lack of mercy in her," Nader's mother claimed.

Philippines television network GMA spoke to a Filipina who said Joanna was kept hungry, physically assaulted and not paid. Nader's mother said she saw her son 10 months ago, adding he was a "lost man." "I didn't know anything about him, until I learned he was in Syria. I went there with a youth who contacted Mona's brother, who denied knowing anything about Nader. I felt he was abducted by them. The youth that was with me said, 'If you are not in touch with Nader, then give me the number of your sister.' I was then told Nader does not want to see his mother. When we insisted, he gave us a number, and we in turn gave it to the police, who called Nader, and he came," his mother said. She said Nader was in a very bad state. "I did not know why... he told me something major had happened but couldn't tell me about it," she said, adding that on top of that, his wife was pregnant.



MANILA: Relatives of Filipina worker Joanna Demafelis, whose body was found inside a freezer in Kuwait, hold banners as they wait for the arrival of Joanna's body from Manila at Iloilo International Airport in Iloilo province, central Philippines, on February 17, 2018. —AFP

In my view

Be kind to your worker

By Talal Al-Ghannam

Local@kuwaittimes.net

Good morning dear and honorable brothers and sisters. In this article I would like to continue commenting on the recent ban by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and its implications on the Philippines, Kuwait and Filipino manpower. So many statements have been uttered from both sides and every side is justifying its own interests. I am not saying that both sides are correct or wrong, but there are some points of argument that need to be tackled. The Philippines has all the right to send or ban its nationals from traveling anywhere, not only in Kuwait.

Philippines is a sovereign country and must be respected as long as the laws and regulations in the other country are respected and adhered to. I am now talking about ties between Kuwait and the Philippines. Filipinos, when they come to Kuwait, have all the right to be respected and welcomed. The contracts signed between the sponsors and the workers must also be honored and any party that breaches the contract must bear the responsibility - either the worker or the sponsor.

Many sponsors of domestic helpers abused such contracts by not paying salaries on time, deducting salaries, mistreating workers and not providing a cell-phone, which is a necessity these days for any person, besides holding the passport, which is a sovereign document and personal possession of the holder. I saw a statement by the Philippines foreign ministry stipulating that passports belonging to Filipinos must be kept at the embassy, and I respect their decision.

On the other hand, if any provision of the contract is breached by any party, the other side has the full right to file a complaint. But those helpless workers cannot do anything because if they go to the police station to report a maltreatment case, they will be kicked out or their sponsors will chase them and file an absconding report or a fabricated theft case. In this case, who is to blame really? There is no offense if the Philippines Embassy stipulates that the passports be kept at the embassy as long as both sides agree and adhere to provisions of the signed contract between the sponsor and the worker.

Kuwait expressed readiness to furnish the Philippines authorities with all needed information on the abuse cases, but it must do more with regards to domestic workers when it comes to payment of salaries, humane treatment, full respect and treatment as a member of the family, not only because it is a stipulation that must be met, but in accordance with Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings be upon him) teachings.

The Prophet (PBUH) never yelled at or abused his workers. A worker who worked for the Prophet (PBUH) for 10 years said the Prophet (PBUH) never told him why you did this and why you didn't do this. Let us take the teachings and actions of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as an example in life and see how things can be bright. There will be justice, harmony and peace if we all adhere to our instructor Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Till the next article...

Non-oil exports at KD 132.7 million

KUWAIT: Kuwait's non-oil exports totaled KD 132.7 million (about \$441 million) in 2017, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry said yesterday. These include KD 77.8 million exported to Arab countries and KD 54.8 million to other countries, the ministry said in a statement. Iraq had the largest share of exports with KD 40.1 million, followed by Jordan at KD 14.1 million, Lebanon at KD 6.2 million and Egypt at KD 5.7 million, it noted. Meanwhile, Algeria came fifth at KD 4.9 million, Tunisia at KD 2.2 million, Morocco at KD 1.55 million, Yemen at KD 1.5, Sudan at KD 914,000 and Palestine at KD 277,600, the ministry added. —KUNA

Finals expected before Ramadan

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Teachers Society Mutee' Al-Ajmi said that he met the Ministry of Education's (MoE) assistant undersecretary for public education affairs Fatima Al-Kandari to discuss rescheduling this year's high school final exams. Ajmi added that it was agreed to hold the exams ahead of schedule in a way that would not affect students' best interests. Following this agreement, the ministry is expected soon to officially announce organizing the finals before the holy month of Ramadan which starts mid-May.

Cigarette prices

Chairman of the Kuwait Union for Consumer Cooperative Societies (KUCCS) Ali Al-Kandari yesterday said the union issued a directive to all co-ops ordering the suspension of any cigarette and tobacco price increases. Kandari added that some supplying companies have been taking advantage of the fact that cigarette prices are not set by the union. He also noted that the union received a letter from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) banning any unjustified price increases without legal proof of any cost price increases. Kandari also stressed that prices are unified in co-ops.

Efforts to remove obstacles in railway's route

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: The Cabinet yesterday asked the roads authority to prepare a full report on the railway project, the Cabinet's Secretary General Abdullah Al-Roudhan said. In a letter he sent to the Minister of Municipality Affairs, Roudhan said that the Cabinet issued a decision on Oct 16, 2017 on having the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR) coordinate with the finance ministry and other relevant bodies on taking all needed measures to remove any obstacles in the railway route as well as the possibility of compensating landowners on this route.

National labor

The Fatwa and Legislation Department won a



KUWAIT: This map shows the proposed routes for Kuwait's planned railway network.

Notably, MoCI had issued a letter urging the union to stop the recent unjustified cigarette price increases.

Medicine practice

Kuwait Medical Association's (KMA) Secretary General Dr Mohammed Al-Qenae announced the completion of the draft of the medicine practice law, adding that the draft law had been discussed in parliament and that the Ministry of Health (MoH) has already started taking measures to pass it. Speaking on the sidelines of a symposium held by KMA on 'Doctors' Legal Responsibility' within the activities of Kuwait Surgeons Syndicate's 5th Conference and the 6th Surgeons Conference, Qenae said a joint committee had been formed to review the law and that the committee recommended merging all related laws.

Qenae said that the symposium discussed doctors' legal responsibility and that KMA had accordingly coordinated with the comprehensive court, which agreed to hold joint workshops by KMA and the Judicial Studies Institute to brief both doctors and judges on the profession of medicine and the law. Qenae added that the symposium opened with a lecture by medicine and law coach Dr Raed Sayyed Hashem, who talked about health-related bills. He added that MP Mohammed Al-Dallal reviewed the steps followed on tackling health-related bills at the parliamentary health affairs committee and stressed that the most important proposals currently being reviewed by the committee include a patients' rights bill and a bill on amending law number 25/1981. Qenae said the symposium also discussed medical errors.

case filed against a local company for not paying the national labor support taxes, said the department manager Chancellor Salah Al-Masad, noting that the court order was the first of its kind and that the same procedures would be followed in all similar cases to help protect public funds. "This tax is a sovereign resource that ought to be protected and prioritized," he underlined. Notably, the comprehensive court sentenced the local catering company to pay a sum of KD 57,716 in taxes plus compensation of KD 10,000.

Overcharging

Hajj affairs manager Mohammad Al-Aleem announced the opening of registration of hajj convoys till Thursday. He also noted the Awqaf Ministry is studying the next season's prices to prevent overcharging, and will exclude any overpriced convoys. Aleem said prices will be set according to the services provided hotels or apartment buildings. Aleem added that the ministry asked Saudi authorities to issue 1,000 hajj visas to bedoons before the season begins. He also warned against using the services of illegal and unlicensed convoys advertising their services on various social media networks.

Efforts to fight Hajj service overcharging

Legalese

Non-compete clause in businesses

By Attorney Fajer Ahmed

A non-compete clause is written in contracts to prevent a person from competing with a business. This is usually included in employment contracts or in partnership agreements. The point of a non-compete clause is that as a company, you want to make sure that all the time you spent training an employee shouldn't ultimately benefit your competitor. It's a protective measure, and I understand why some companies that need someone with a very specific or unique experience would want to lock in their employees and not have them work at competing businesses.

I also understand how this might make it difficult for the worker who might need to leave the job because of some violations or if the work environment is not positive. Today, I will be looking at questions I have received regarding non-compete clauses in employment agreements.

Tech startup

Question: I am starting a business in Kuwait for a tech startup and as partners entering a business, can we have a non-compete clause?

Fajer: Yes, it is legal and actually very common to have a non-compete clause under the articles of association of a company, especially for the partners that are working or managing the company. I would highly recommend such a clause for my clients.

Labor law

Question: Is it legal for an employment contract to include a non-compete clause? I was terminated and am now working for another restaurant. But my boss is accusing me of competing with his business, and wants to file a lawsuit against me. Is this possible?

Fajer: There is no mention of a non-compete clause in the Kuwait labor law, even though it is common to see non-compete clauses being interpreted or explained in labor laws internationally. There have been court verdicts regarding the legalities of non-compete clauses with the verdicts varying depending on the following circumstances, as an example:

1. Location of the competing company - if the competing company is in another governorate than the company that the employee used to work for, then the court may see it as non-competitive, with a different clientele.

2. Nature of the work done - for example, since you are in retail, it would be difficult to stop you from continuing to work in retail, as it is a vast field unlike for example a programmer who might be working on something very specific.

Therefore, answering whether a non-compete clause for an employee is legal or not is a grey area and there is no concrete answer. With that said, my understanding from reading the verdicts is that employees as a general rule should have the freedom to work where they would like to, and this is based on article 41 of Kuwait's constitution: "Every Kuwaiti shall have the right to work and to choose the nature of his occupation. Work is the duty of every citizen. Dignity requires it and public welfare ordains it. The state shall make work available to citizens and shall see to the equity of its conditions."

I hope the above helped. If you have a concern, please email us at info@ftl-legal.com

Cabinet examines Iraq conference's outcome, regrets deadly incidents

Ministers review report on removing housing projects' obstacles



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah (center) chairs the cabinet's meeting yesterday. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The ministers at the weekly regular cabinet session yesterday congratulated Their Highnesses the Amir and the Crown Prince on the National days, admiring His Highness the Amir's pledge to pay prisoners' debts and aid orphans as well as examining outcome of Iraq rebuilding conference. At the external level, they expressed deep sorrow at the deadly shooting spree in Florida, the US, and Sunday's crash of an Iranian passenger plane. The session, held at Seif Palace, was chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

Following the session, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said the ministers extended in the beginning of the meeting their sincere felicitations to Their Highnesses the Amir and the Crown Prince on the 57th anniversary of the National day and the 27th anniversary of Kuwait's Liberation.

The ministers were notified about His Highness the Amir's latest humanitarian initiatives, pledging to pay

debts burdening imprisoned citizens and residents and allocating financial grants for the orphans at his expense. They lauded His Highness for the generous



Ministers congratulate leadership on National days

acts, which depicted the distinguished relationship with his faithful people. They expressed satisfaction at outcome of the recently held international conference for

rebuilding Iraq, namely the donors' pledges to aid the neighboring country with \$30 billion, including \$2 billion to be given by Kuwait, in appreciation for Iraq's sacrifices in fighting terrorism.

Recommendations

They turned to some local matters, examining two recommendations by the legal affairs committee regarding a bill amending some provisions of the Law 71/2013, enacting a legislation for regulating patents in the GCC states and another related to the unified regulations for combating commercial fraud in the GCC countries. The two bills were blessed and referred to His Highness the Amir, pending submission to the parliament.

Moreover, they reviewed a recommendation by the economic affairs committee on honoring offset commitments, whereby the cabinet assigned the Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority to prepare a list of proposed ventures and report back in a month. The ministers were briefed about a recommendation by the

commission about the eighth regular report by the permanent committee for improving the business environment and enhancing competition.

Public service committee's recommendation was also scanned regarding a report by the Public Authority for Housing Welfare on removing obstacles at Saad Al-Abdullah South City. The ministers decided to task the Public Authority for Industry and the Public Authority for Agricultural Resources and Fisheries to rapidly remove these hurdles and report back in two weeks. The ministers were also informed about a recommendation regarding a report by the housing authority about Al-Metlaa housing venture.

Externally, the cabinet expressed deep regret at the shooting incident in Florida where a number of people died or suffered injuries, also condemning this horrific and terrorist act that targeted the innocent. The ministers expressed identical sentiments toward regretful fate of the Iranian plane passengers who perished in the aircraft crash on Sunday, expressing condolences to the friendly people of Iran. — KUNA

Mexican embassy congratulates Kuwait

KUWAIT: Mexican Ambassador to Kuwait Miguel Angel Isidro released the following statement yesterday on the occasion of Kuwait's National Day and Liberation Day anniversaries:

"On behalf of Government and people of Mexico, I would like to extend to His Highness Amir of the State Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah my heartiest congratulations and best wishes on the auspicious occasion of Kuwait's National Day, wishing Your Highness' continued good health and the people of

Kuwait continue to be blessed with peace, prosperity and happiness under Your Highness's leadership.

"I want to congratulate Your Highness on Kuwait's new seat on the United Nations Security Council and for your leadership in promoting unity in the Gulf region. May I again offer congratulations to the State of Kuwait (Leadership, Government and People) on the auspicious occasion of the National Day, and wish you all a happy celebration."



Mexican Ambassador Miguel Angel Isidro

Burgan Bank celebrates Kuwait's National and Liberation Days

KUWAIT: In celebration of Kuwait's annual independence and liberation days' festivities, Burgan Bank will share in the spirit of joy and cultural unity with its esteemed customers through exciting activities. Following the yearly tradition, the festivities carried out

during the month of February are aimed at commemorating alongside its customers an important period in the lives of the Kuwaiti people.

Burgan Bank decorated all of its branches both inside and outside with livery that includes the national flag and respective imagery that depicts the triumphs along with special giveaways for the bank customers. Additionally, customers were greeted by Burgan Bank staff dressed in traditional national day attire throughout the entire month to add to the festive atmosphere.

The bank also launched a competition through its social media channels to reward the best photo-shoot depicting the country's celebration. On this occasion, Burgan Bank extends its best wishes and greetings to the public on Kuwait's nationwide celebrations for the 57th Independence Day and the 27th Liberation day.



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New anti-Brexit party launched

Hat-trick as Pakistan's Imran Khan marries for 3rd time

Page 9

Page 8



NIR AM: Israeli soldiers and their tanks are seen monitoring the area of the southern Israeli kibbutz of Nir Am, near the border with Gaza. —AFP

Israeli warplanes pound Gaza

Palestinian rocket slams into southern Israel

GAZA: Israeli warplanes carried out a fresh round of strikes in the Gaza Strip yesterday after a rocket fired by Palestinians slammed into southern Israel, the army said. The cross-border exchange followed a weekend escalation in violence seen as among the most serious since Israel and the coastal enclave's Hamas rulers fought a war in 2014. The Islamist militant group was quick to say that it did not seek further confrontation. Israeli fighter jets "targeted underground infrastructure in the southern Gaza Strip, in response to the projectile that was launched at Israel earlier," an army statement said.

It did not give further details, but Palestinian security sources said several missiles were fired at farmland east of Rafah in the south of the Gaza Strip. No casualties were reported on either side. Yesterday's strikes

followed fierce exchanges over the weekend after an improvised bomb apparently planted by Palestinian militants exploded Saturday, injuring four Israeli soldiers inspecting the border fence. Israel responded by pounding 18 Hamas facilities in two waves of air strikes on Saturday and Sunday, according to the Israeli military. Israeli ground forces also killed two Palestinian teenagers in the enclave in cross-border fire.



Fighter jets target underground infrastructure

Efforts to 'stop escalation'

But senior Hamas official Mahmoud Zahar said yesterday that his organisation had no wish to see fighting with Israel intensify. "The resistance does not want to waste its energy on this escalation," he told the Hamas-affiliated Al-Risala website. He added that efforts were under way "to stop escalation and a new war", although he did not elaborate. Another source close to Hamas said it was sending messages to Israel through neighbouring Egypt, which frequently mediates between the two sides. The source told AFP that Hamas representatives in Cairo "have officially informed the head of Egyptian intelligence that the movement is not interested in any escalation in Gaza." "The Egyptian authorities must press the (Israeli) occupation government to stop the aggression and ongoing strikes in Gaza," he added.

The European Union said the flareup was of "real concern", describing the deaths of the Palestinian teenagers as "deplorable" and demanding a halt to rocket fire.

"Rocket attacks by militants from Gaza against Israel are unacceptable and need to stop," it said in a statement which acknowledged "Israel's legitimate security concerns." "It is extremely important that the situation does not escalate further and it is crucial that all parties act



GAZA: Palestinians check the site of an Israeli air strike in Gaza City. —AFP

with restraint," it added. Palestinians said two people were wounded in the weekend air strikes. Two of the soldiers were severely wounded in the border blast but their lives were not in danger, the army said. The Popular Resistance Committees, a loose alliance of militants from various Gaza nationalist and Islamist Palestinian groups, claimed responsibility for the explosion and called it a "heroic act".

Founded in September 2000, the alliance took part in the 2006 capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, held cap-

tive until he was freed in a 2011 prisoner exchange. Israeli army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conriscus on Saturday described the committees as a "rogue group" but said that Israel nevertheless held Hamas responsible for attacks from territory under its control. Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman pledged to eradicate those behind the Saturday explosion. "Until we eliminate them, the score remains unsettled," he told Israeli news site Ynet on Sunday. "It will take two days, a week, or two weeks," he said. —AFP

5 women killed in Dagestan church shooting; IS claims responsibility

MOSCOW: Five women were shot dead in an apparent radical Islamist attack on an Orthodox church in the North Caucasus region of Dagestan on Sunday, as the Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the assault. An unidentified gunman fired at worshippers at the church in the town of Kizlyar in the mainly Muslim region, local press reports said. The regional internal affairs ministry said in a statement that the assailant used a hunting rifle, and that four women were killed on the spot, while the attacker was "eliminated".

A fifth woman died of her injuries in hospital, health ministry spokeswoman Zalina Mourtazalievna told TASS news agency. Two Russian police officers were injured in the attack. According to a local official the assailant was a local man in his early twenties, the Interfax news agency reported. The Russian RBK daily quoted an Orthodox priest saying the attacker had opened fire on churchgoers following an afternoon service. "We had finished the mass and were beginning to leave the church. A bearded man ran towards the church shouting 'Allahu Akbar' ('God is greatest') and killed four people," Father Pavel told RBK. "He was carrying a rifle and a knife," he added.

'Soldier of Islam'

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack. "A soldier of Islam, Khalil Daghestani, attacked" a church in the town of Kizlyar in Dagestan, IS said via the Telegram messaging app. "He targeted them with his gun, killing five of them and wounding four others," it added. A spokesman for Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill strongly condemned the attack, branding it a "monstrous crime" aimed at "provoking a confrontation between Orthodox Christians and Muslims" in the North Caucasus. Images published by the local press showed the body of a bearded man dressed in military fatigues who was identified as the assailant.

Next to his corpse lay two of his victims, covered in a white shroud. Dagestan, bordering Chechnya, is one of the poorest and most unstable regions of Russia. Islamist rebels from the region, which lies immediately east of Chechnya, are known to have travelled to Syria to join IS. In 2015, IS declared it had established a "franchise" in the North Caucasus. It has claimed a number of attacks on police in Dagestan in the last couple of years that have involved guns and explosives, as local security forces battle a simmering Islamist insurgency. Sunday's shooting comes exactly one month before the March 18 presidential election that Vladimir Putin is almost guaranteed to win. —AFP

BBC launches Igbo, Yoruba language services in Nigeria

LAGOS: The BBC this week launches its new Igbo and Yoruba services in Nigeria, as part of an expansion in local languages aimed at more in-depth reporting of countries around the world. The digital-only services go live online and on social media yesterday, joining a platform for Pidgin speakers that was launched last year and has attracted widespread interest. All three are among 12 new language services set up across the world with the help of £291 million (\$408 million, 327 million euros) British government funding.

Peter Okwoche, in charge of editorial for the launch, described Yoruba and Igbo as "the two final cogs in the wheel for the new services in West Africa" and said they were much needed. "What we feel is that original journalism in a local language travels even further than in English," he told AFP in an interview. "We're big on the African narrative, the Nigerian narrative. It's time for people to try to tell their own stories."

Ethnic tension

Young Nigerians increasingly live life online, with social media hugely popular in the country, which has about 150 million mobile phone subscriptions among its population of nearly 190 million. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of the population is aged under 24, giving it one of the youngest demographics in the world. Okwoche said they were the corporation's target audience, along with the business-savvy men and women for which the Igbo and Yoruba communities are noted both at home and abroad. "All we ever get to hear from Nigeria these days is Boko Haram in the northeast. As serious as that story is, it's happening in one particular part of the country," he said.

"But there's so much more happening. Here in Lagos, for

instance, there's technology stories, business and young entrepreneurs, the hustle of the street... "We never get to see that." The launch comes at a time of renewed tensions between Nigeria's three main regions, particularly the Igbo-speaking southeast and the Hausa-speaking north. In the southeast, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) group has revived separatist sentiment, half a century after a previous declaration of independence sparked a brutal civil war.

The populist rhetoric of IPOB's leader, former London estate agent Nnamdi Kanu, has led to clashes between his supporters and the military, and propaganda on both sides. His push for a separate republic of Biafra, using its own media, including Kanu's Radio Biafra, has also sparked similar calls from hardline Yoruba nationalists in the southwest. Kanu is currently on trial for treason in the capital, Abuja, but has not been seen since September last year. BBC Igbo will yesterday run an interview with his wife.

'About time'

A heady mix of wildfire rumors and misinformation on social media, plus Nigerians' strong sense of ethnic identity, makes Africa's most populous nation a difficult place to report. Foreign media often have historical baggage to deal with, not least those from Britain, the former colonial power until 1960. In the southeast, it is still not forgotten that London backed Nigeria's federal forces against the fledgling Biafra in the civil war. Okwoche acknowledged the potential pitfalls of such a strong sense of regional identity.

But he said his young team had undergone months of "rigorous BBC training, trying to almost change their mindset", to tell the story without personal emotions. "We're trying to balance our stories... We just have to keep on telling them (that) once your story is embellished, people know and you begin to lose credibility," he added. The BBC has had a Hausa-language service broadcasting to northern Nigeria for 60 years, which has become one of the most successful in the corporation. Okwoche said it was "about time" the country's other regions were catered for, using local, rather than foreign staff. "There's much to applaud in that." —AFP

International

Islamic State kills 27 Iraqi pro-government fighters

IS members, disguised as soldiers, attack Hashed Al-Shaabi unit

BAGHDAD: The Islamic State group killed 27 pro-government fighters in an ambush in Iraq, their paramilitary group said yesterday, underlining the threat still posed by the jihadists despite Baghdad's declaration of victory. IS members, disguised as soldiers, attacked a Hashed Al-Shaabi unit in the Hawija region about 300 kilometres (185 miles) north of Baghdad on Sunday evening, the auxiliary force said in a statement. "The attackers were dressed in military uniforms and during the fighting 27 of our heroes were martyred," added the Hashed, a key partner of the government in the battle against IS.

The paramilitary unit was conducting operations to "arrest terrorists and dismantle sleeping cells" around the city, in the province of Kirkuk. A Hashed official who asked to remain anonymous told AFP the jihadists had set up a checkpoint close to Hawija. They asked the Hashed paramilitaries to stop, get out of their vehicles and stand beside the road, on the pretext of conducting a search. They then shot the Hashed fighters and fled, the official said.

Reinforcements arrived too late to stop the attack. A senior police officer in the province, who also asked not to be named, said most of the bodies had been beheaded. It was the deadliest attack against Hashed fighters since October when pro-government forces retook Hawija, which was the jihadists' last urban bastion in northern Iraq. Iraq in December declared victory against IS after a

years-long battle to retake large swathes of territory the extremists had seized in 2014. But the Hashed says IS has not completely disappeared and that "sleeping cells" have been fighting a guerrilla war against it.

Turkish woman sentenced

Meanwhile, an Iraqi court has sentenced a Turkish woman to death for joining Islamic State, a spokesman for the criminal court in Baghdad said in a statement yesterday. Ten other women of various nationalities were sentenced to life in prison, he said. All the verdicts can be appealed. "The court has issued ten verdicts of life in prison against ten women after convicting them of terrorism, and sentenced to death by hanging another terrorist who holds Turkish citizenship," said Judge Abdul-Sattar al-Birqdar. Thousands of foreigners have been fighting on behalf of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. A German woman was sentenced to

death last month for belonging to the group and a Russian fighter was also sentenced to death in Iraq last year for joining the hardline group. Iraq declared victory in December over Islamic State, which had seized control of nearly a third of the country in 2014. The group has been driven out of all population centres it once controlled on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border, but members have continued to carry out bombings and other attacks in Iraq.—Agencies

"Every time I go home I have to walk by here and see this," said a shaken Concepcion Ramirez, 54. "It was horrific. We'll never be able to forget it."

Leopoldo Garcia, who lives nearby, said the helicopter circled overhead several times. "It was flying very low. Suddenly it started swaying violently and fell like a rock, with the blades right over those poor people. And that's when the screaming started," he said. "That's when people saw it: one person cut in two, another with his insides hanging out, others beheaded by the blades," said another resident, who asked that his name not be used for fear of reprisals from the military. "People were hacked to pieces," their horrified relatives left to try and pick up the severed body parts, he said in a trembling voice.

Unspeakable tragedy

The accident has been gut-wrenching for the military, too. "We came here to help people. That's our job. But instead it just made things worse," said an officer deployed to the zone. Defense Minister Salvador Cienfuegos flew in to meet with families of the victims. "I want to convey our condolences, on behalf of all Mexican soldiers," he said. "The defense ministry completely assumes its responsibility for what happened." But relatives were livid as they buried their dead this weekend. "No apology can fix this," said Eduardo Morales after burying his cousin, 28-year-old Lauro Sanchez. "This accident left orphans and widows. Who's going to take care of those kids whose feet were totally mangled?" he asked in outrage.

Hundreds of residents took part in a large funeral procession on Saturday, carrying the colorful coffins to the local church amid sobs and screams. Forty-year-old Lorenzo Zarate's mother, Maria Margarita Sanchez, was so shattered she could barely speak. "I can't describe my sadness," said the 63-year-old woman, burying her face in her scarf. Virginia Suarez, a family friend, clutched her rosary as a priest in a purple tunic presided over the service. "We're all saying the same thing: how is it possible they died like this when all they wanted was to take shelter from the earthquake?" she said through a white veil.—AFP



Turkish woman sentenced to death for joining IS

Relief turns to horror in Mexico helicopter crash

SANTIAGO JAMILTEPEC: They thought the worst was over. The 7.2-magnitude earthquake that shook Mexico on Friday evening hit right near their hometown, the southern city of Santiago Jamiltepec, but the damage was minor. No one died. People's houses were still standing. In fact, the entire country was breathing a sigh of relief. Unlike previous earthquakes that killed hundreds or thousands of people in Mexico, this one claimed no lives and left minimal destruction. Still, there is always the fear of aftershocks. So a group of residents of Santiago Jamiltepec, a town of 20,000 people in the mountains of Oaxaca state, set up camp in an open field for the night, fearing another quake could bring down their houses.

That is where they were when the Mexican interior minister and Oaxaca governor arrived in a military helicopter to survey the disaster zone. The authorities are still investigating exactly what went wrong. But somehow, the pilot lost control of the UH-60 Black Hawk, keeled over and crashed about 40 meters (130 feet) to the ground. Interior Minister Alfonso Navarrete and Governor Alejandro Murat were unharmed. But the helicopter plunged straight into the crowd on the ground, its rotor blades hacking people to bits. Fourteen people were killed, including a six-month-old baby and a 10-year-old girl. Another 15 were injured, some losing limbs.

'Hacked to pieces'

Two days later, the town is still in shock at the tragedy. Blood stains are still visible on the ground where the mangled wreckage lies, cordoned off by the military. Clothing, chairs and toys still lie in the dirt around the wreckage.

Israel, Egypt seal gas deal

JERUSALEM: Israel has struck an "historic" contract for sales of billions of dollars' worth of natural gas to Egypt, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced yesterday. "This will bring billions of dollars to state coffers," he said in a statement announcing the deal with Egypt, which in 1979 became the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel. The Israeli energy group Delek said the value of the contract was \$15 billion. It said agreements have been signed between Delek and its associate Noble Energy of the United States to supply 64 billion cubic metres (2.26 trillion cubic feet) of gas from Israel's Leviathan and Tamar offshore fields to the Egyptian firm Dolphinus over a 10-year period.

In September 2016, Jordan struck a deal to buy 300 million cubic feet (8.5 million cubic metres) of Israeli gas per day over a 15-year term, in a deal estimated to be worth \$10 billion. Tamar, which began production in 2013, has estimated reserves of up to 238 billion cubic metres (8.4 trillion cubic feet). Leviathan, discovered in 2010 and set to begin production in 2019, is estimated to hold 18.9 trillion cubic feet (535 billion cubic metres) of natural gas, along with 34.1 million barrels of condensate.—AFP



MOSUL: A general view shows destruction in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Iraq received pledges totalling \$30 billion at an international conference for reconstruction of the war-torn country, the host Kuwait announced.—AFP

Sudan frees over 80 political prisoners

KHARTOUM: Sudanese authorities said they would release more than 80 political prisoners from jails in the capital Khartoum, a week after the African country appointed a new security chief. A Reuters reporter said he had seen about 40 prisoners released from the main prison by Sunday evening and that some prominent opposition leaders were still being held there.

A presidential adviser had earlier said in a statement that President Omar Hassan al-Bashir had ordered more than 80 political detainees to be released. All of them were arrested last month after protests about high prices and tough economic conditions that turned violent. Families celebrated in front of the jails on Sunday, with some chanting "freedom, freedom" and singing national songs.

A group of people started a sit-in outside one of the prisons, saying they would not leave until all the political prisoners were freed. The United States in October lifted 20-year-old sanctions on Sudan, prompting calls from the International Monetary Fund for the African country to float its currency among other measures that it said could help its economy recover. Sudan rejected floating the currency but devalued it in January and cut wheat subsidies, sending the pound's value plummeting on the black market and causing a doubling of bread prices that led to January's demonstrations.

The weak black market rate of the pound has also forced authorities to slash the rate at which banks can trade dollars. Sudan's economy has been struggling since the south seceded in 2011, taking with it three-quarters of what had been its oil output. Opposition groups have accused the president of jailing dissidents and censoring the media. Bashir has remained in power for more than a quarter of a century, weathering rebellions, economic crisis and an indictment by the International Criminal Court on suspicion of having orchestrated war crimes in Sudan's Darfur region.—Reuters

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‘Bad guy’ emerges as central player in Western diplomacy

US indictments overshadow Russia’s appearance in Munich

MUNICH: European and US officials divided over US President Donald Trump’s foreign policy found common cause this weekend in decrying what they say is Russia’s covert campaign to undermine Western democracies. But despite the transatlantic show of anger at Russia during the Munich Security Conference, Western officials and diplomats also acknowledged an uncomfortable truth: that Russia is critical to resolving many of the world’s worst conflicts.

From eastern Ukraine to North Korea, Russia’s status as a nuclear power, its military intervention in Syria and its veto on the United Nations Security Council mean any diplomacy must ultimately involve Moscow, officials said. “We can’t find a political solution without Russia,” Norwegian Defence Minister Frank Bakke Jensen told Reuters. “We need to reach a point where we can work to find a political solution, and they must be central to that.” Publicly at least, Russia was the bad guy in Munich, roundly criticised for interfering in the 2016 US presidential campaign after the US indictment of 13 Russians this week, and more broadly for its 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea.

For the West, such unity of purpose marked a change after a year of Trump’s “America First” rhetoric, his inconsistent statements on NATO and the European Union, his decision to pull out of the Paris climate change accord and his move not to certify Iran’s compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal. At the annual Munich event, a rare gathering of European and US security officials that also attracts top Russian diplomats, American policymakers were visibly irritated with Moscow’s public denials of accusations of meddling.

“I am amazed that ... the Russians come, they send

someone, every year to basically refute the facts,” US Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats said of the Russian presence at the event. But behind the scenes, diplomats said there was a different tone, as top officials including NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg met Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in the gold-and-white panelled rooms of the Bayerischer Hof hotel. “There is a diplomatic network that works,” said Russian senator Aleksey Pushkov, citing contacts to resolve the Syrian civil war including Moscow, Ankara, Washington and Tel Aviv. “It’s something that, if used efficiently, can prevent bigger confrontations.”

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel met several times with Lavrov, offering the prospect of easing economic sanctions imposed over Moscow’s role in eastern Ukraine and calling Russia an “indispensable” partner in global efforts to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons. Former US Secretary of State John Kerry, who negotiated the 2015 accord curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions, said the West needed to “compartmentalise” issues with Moscow, so that diplomacy could achieve more.

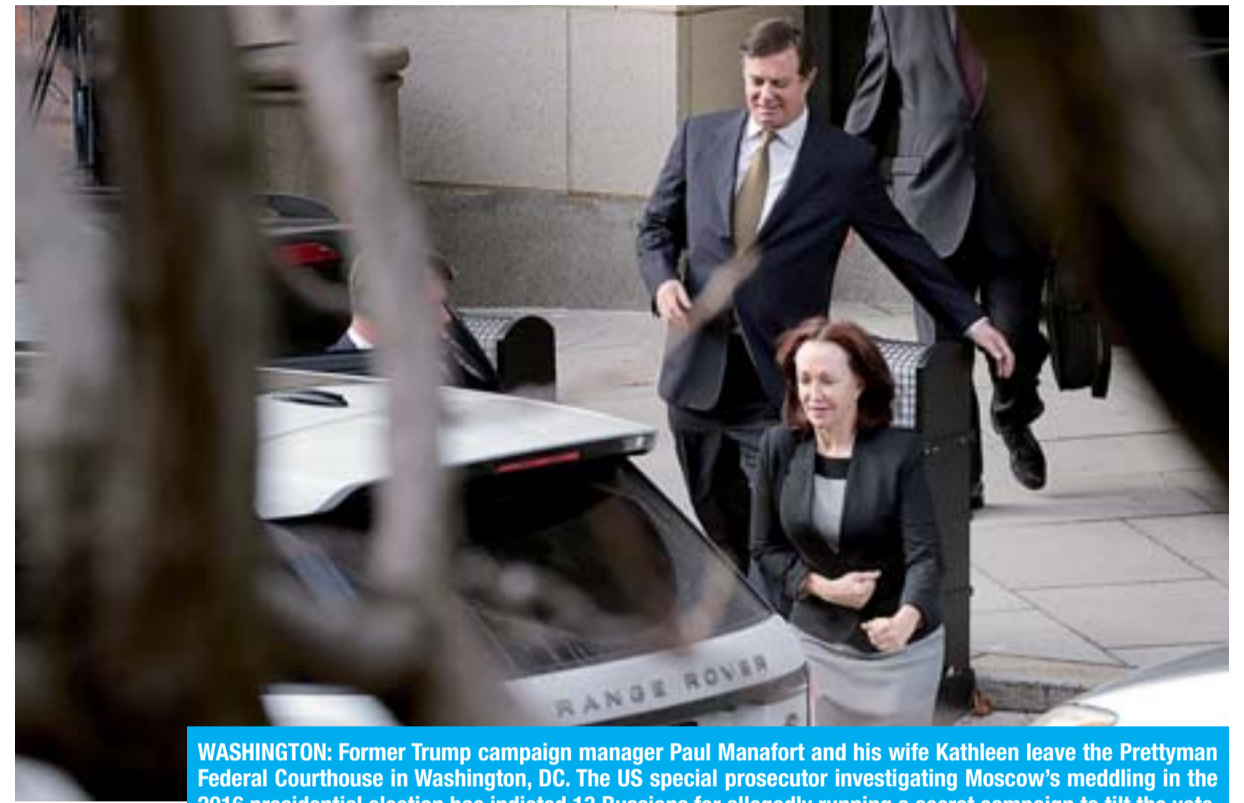
Russia’s role seen as crucial at UN, other diplomacy



‘In Russia’s hands’

Part of the challenge for the West is that international crises have been interlinked. Russia is allied to Israel’s nemesis Iran in Syria while Moscow’s support for separatists in Ukraine draws NATO’s ire. But NATO-ally Turkey is seeking to complete an arms deal to buy Russian air defences. It has struck US-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria with Russia’s blessing. In Asia, US efforts to stop North Korea’s atomic weapons development rest partly on Moscow’s willingness to countenance a US and European call for an oil embargo on Pyongyang, which it has so far rejected.

“A few years ago you could talk about distinct crises,



WASHINGTON: Former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort and his wife Kathleen leave the Prettyman Federal Courthouse in Washington, DC. The US special prosecutor investigating Moscow’s meddling in the 2016 presidential election has indicted 13 Russians for allegedly running a secret campaign to tilt the vote, prompting claims of vindication from President Donald Trump. —AFP

and today, if you’re discussing one, you’re shaking all the others,” Norway’s Jensen said. So as Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu railed against Iran in Munich on Sunday, in New York, British, US and French efforts to condemn Tehran at the United Nations immediately ran into Russian resistance, diplomats said. And in Munich, while US and European officials saw momentum for UN peacekeepers in eastern Ukraine to resolve the four-year-old conflict there, US special envoy Kurt Volker conceded everything rested on Moscow.

“It’s in Russia’s hands,” Volker told a gathering of EU

and US officials, including Sweden’s defence chief, who offered his country’s troops for any such mission. Nine years ago in Munich, then US Vice President Joe Biden promised to “reset” relations with Russia, but few in the West appeared to realise the depth of Russia’s resentment over the break-up of the Soviet Union and NATO’s eastward expansion. Now, with Western economic sanctions in place on Russia over its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its support for rebels in eastern Ukraine, East-West ties are at their lowest since the Cold War, with little chance of an improvement, diplomats said. —Reuters

News in brief

17 killed in Mozambique

MAPUTO: At least 17 people died and several others were injured in Mozambique’s capital yesterday when a 15-metre pile of garbage collapsed due to heavy rain and buried seven houses, officials said. The collapse happened at around 3 am in the impoverished Hulene neighborhood, which is around 10 km from the centre of Maputo. The houses were built illegally and authorities had previously asked the residents to leave, officials said. “Up to now 17 dead bodies were recovered. We fear more might be unaccounted for. So we will keep searching for bodies buried underneath the garbage pile,” a councillor for Ka Mavota Municipal District, Despedida Rita, told reporters. Land pressure in many African cities leads some people to squat on land they do not own as they seek higher wages available in urban centres. —Reuters

Quake shakes SW Mexico

MEXICO CITY: A medium intensity earthquake struck southwestern Mexico yesterday morning, scaring residents already shaken by a powerful quake two days earlier, though there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage. The US Geological Survey said its magnitude was 5.9 and it struck at a depth of 40.2 kilometers, some 32 kilometers northeast of the town of Santa Catarina Mechoacan in Oaxaca state at 0657 GMT. “So far, no impact has been reported,” the country’s Civil Protection agency tweeted. President Enrique Peña Nieto tweeted that the agency was in contact with local authorities. A 7.2-magnitude quake shook the same region on Friday evening. No one was killed by the seismic event but a helicopter carrying politicians to near the epicenter later crashed, killing 14 people on the ground. —AFP

Catalan separatist walks free

MADRID: A Spanish judge yesterday allowed leading Catalan separatist Marta Rovira, who faces charges over her region’s independence bid, to walk free but ordered her to post bail of 60,000 euros (\$75,000), a source close to the case said. Judge Pablo Llarena placed Rovira under judicial control, but stopped short of putting her behind bars for the duration of an ongoing probe into charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds. Rovira is the deputy leader of the leftwing separatist ERC party, whose chief Oriol Junqueras has been in custody since November. Junqueras was jailed after Madrid ousted his government and dissolved the Catalan parliament, following a failed declaration of independence on October 27. —AFP

Mexican presidential race

MEXICO CITY: The campaign for Mexico’s July 1 presidential election began in earnest Sunday as the country’s top parties officially nominated their candidates, with all three front-runners trying to sell a message of change. It is still a wide-open race to succeed President Enrique Peña Nieto, who is deeply unpopular heading into the final stretch of his six-year term in a Mexico beset by endless corruption scandals and record levels of violent crime. The candidate to beat is Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, or AMLO, a fiery leftist who has tried to present a mellower image this time around, and who has taken a growing lead in the polls. In second place is Ricardo Anaya of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), a youthful ex-lawmaker whose bid to campaign as a fresh face has been hurt by allegations of corruption and strong-arming his way to his party’s nomination. —AFP

Oxfam worker ‘paid for sex’, others bullied witness: Inquiry

LONDON: British aid charity Oxfam yesterday released its internal report into a scandal in Haiti that has shattered its reputation, revealing that a former top official admitted to paying for sex and three staff physically threatened a witness. The 2011 report into aid workers deployed to Haiti following the devastating earthquake the previous year, revealed that seven staff were accused of using prostitutes at an Oxfam-funded residence.

Country director Roland Van Hauwermeiren admitted paying for sex and was offered a “phased and dignified exit” of resignation if he cooperated with the inquiry. The report also said three Oxfam employees were involved in “physically threatening and intimidating” a witness who spoke to the investigators. Four staff were fired for gross misconduct and three others, including Van Hauwermeiren, were allowed to quit.

Details of the Haiti scandal surfaced earlier this month and have engulfed Oxfam, drawing widespread condemnation and putting its funding at risk. A senior executive has resigned and the British government has warned it must reform before bidding for any new taxpayer funds. Oxfam has denied trying to cover up the allegations but admitted it could have been more open at the time, saying it was publishing the report “in recognition of the breach of trust that has been caused”. It said it would give a copy to the Haitian government, which has expressed outrage and launched its own inquiry, at a meeting later.

‘Loving relationship’

All names in the report have been

redacted apart from that of Van Hauwermeiren, a 68-year-old Belgian who last week released a letter defending himself after the scandal broke. In it, he claimed he had not visited any brothels, nightclubs or bars in Haiti, despite offers from men and women “who tried to get into my house with all sorts of excuses to demand money, work, or to offer sexual services”. He said he told Oxfam he had “intimate relations” three times at his house with “an honourable, mature woman, who was not an earthquake victim nor a prostitute. And I did not give her any money”.

In an interview with The Times, however, a young Haitian mother claimed she had a relationship with Van Hauwermeiren when she was 16 – legally underage in Haiti. Now 23, Mikelange Gabou said he initially helped her with nappies and other things for her baby, and that they later had a “loving relationship” and he would sometimes give her money. There were other women he invited to his hilltop house, she said. “So it might be that he had sex with them and promised to find them a job, or sometimes he gave money or didn’t give them money.”

Aid sector under scrutiny

Oxfam last week unveiled an action plan to tackle sexual harassment and abuse, including creating a new vetting system for staff, and has urged victims to come forward with any new allegations. Chief executive Mark Goldring on Friday hit out over criticism of the charity, saying it was “out of proportion” to what had happened. But the entire aid sector is facing renewed scrutiny, including how they communicate with each other. A woman who worked alongside Van Hauwermeiren in Liberia said she made a complaint about him in 2004 – many years before the Haiti scandal.

One recommendation in the 2011 report was for better mechanisms to share information with other regions and agencies about behavioural issues. Goldring has been

New anti-Brexit party launched

LONDON: A new anti-Brexit centrist political party holds its official launch in London yesterday, one of several initiatives by pro-European Union campaigners drawing hope from a perceived shift in the British public’s mood. “We aim to reverse Brexit and restore our influential position in Europe, allowing us to focus on what really matters in the UK,” the party, called Renew, said on its website ahead of the launch in central London.

The fledgling political party said it already had more than 300 candidates ready to contest the next general election and was aiming to recruit a total of 650 to stand in every constituency in Britain. The party was founded by former financier Chris Coghlan ahead of last year’s general election. Coghlan stood as an independent candidate in that election, running on an anti-Brexit platform, and came fourth with 1,234 votes in Battersea in south London. The next elections are not due until 2022 but many commentators believe they could come much earlier because of Prime Minister Theresa May’s precarious leadership and feuding inside her Conservative party.

Several campaigns have emerged in recent weeks call-

ing for a re-run of the EU membership referendum and putting pressure on MPs to oppose a Brexit agreement when it comes before parliament as expected this year. One of them, Best for Britain, captured the headlines this month because of a large donation from billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros. Former Labour party politician Andrew Adonis, a member of the House of Lords, has launched his own campaign alongside the youth group “Our Future, Our Choice”.

‘A nation divided’

Several campaigns earlier this year united in a Grassroots Coordinating Group chaired by Labour MP Chuka Umunna, a leading pro-EU political voice. Opinion polls since last year’s general election have shown growing support for staying in the bloc but polling expert John Curtice said last month that it was “not exactly a dramatic change”. Curtice also said that there was “not of lot of evidence in support of the idea that there has been a dramatic increase in support for a second referendum”.

Renew said it aims to address what it called the root causes of the 2016 Brexit referendum in which 52 per cent voted in favour of leaving the EU. “The Brexit referendum was a wake-up call that we are a nation divided, with deep discontent at inequality. “Leaving the EU will only make things worse. We should reconsider Brexit, now we know more,” it said. The party said it would



LONDON: People walk past a high street branch of an Oxfam charity shop in south London. —AFP

called to explain the scandal to British MPs in London on Tuesday alongside senior managers from fellow charity Save the Children. Save the Children is facing its own problems after claims this weekend that one staff member drunkenly harassed a female colleague in 2015, holding her by the

throat. Brendan Cox, the widower of murdered British MP Jo Cox, resigned shortly afterwards. In a statement, he admitted making errors while working at the charity, saying: “I made mistakes and behaved in a way that caused some women hurt and offence”. —AFP



LONDON: (Left to right) Renew Party principals Sandra Khadhouri, James Clarke and James Torrance attend the launch of the ‘Renew’ anti-Brexit political party in London yesterday. —AFP

focus on inequality by increasing the minimum wage, boosting infrastructure outside London and creating more affordable housing. It said it would also “look at better ways to manage immigration” – one of the main issues in the campaign. —AFP

International

US and Thai Marines drink cobra blood in war drills

Marines eat scorpions in jungle survival programme

CHONBURI: US and Thai marines slurped snake blood and ate scorpions in a jungle survival programme yesterday as part of the two nations' annual Cobra Gold war games. Now in its 37th year, Cobra Gold is one of the largest military exercises in Asia, bringing thousands of troops from the United States, Thailand and other countries for 10 days of field training on Thai shores.

Yesterday, several dozen US and Thai marines took part in an annual jungle survival drill on a Thai navy base in Chonburi province, where troops took turns drinking blood from a severed cobra before grilling and eating the snakes. Thai military trainers also taught the group—which included South Korean troops—how to remove venom from scorpions and tarantulas before eating them, find water in jungle vines and identify edible plants.

"The key to survival is knowing what to eat," said Thai Sergeant Major Chaiwat Ladsin, who led the drill that also saw the marines take bites of a raw gecko. "Definitely my first time drinking snake blood... It's not something we do too often in America," US Sergeant Christopher Fiffie told AFP after the training. "I think I'll be able to hold my own out there," he added. "The

biggest take was how exactly they get their water as well as the vegetation that you can eat."

This year's Cobra Gold exercise drew some 6,800 US personnel to the war games—nearly double last year's attendance, in the latest sign of warming relations between the two allies. A 2014 army coup in Thailand tested ties with Washington, which urged a return to democracy and scaled back military aid. But the two

countries have upped their engagement under US President Donald Trump, who has taken a softer stance on human rights issues and even embraced Thai junta chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha in the White House.

The US is also keen to flex its military muscle in Asia amid tensions with North Korea over the pariah state's nuclear missile programme. "The (atten-

dance) numbers are reflective of the US commitment in the region," US embassy spokesman Stephane Castonguay told AFP at the start of the exercise. "The focus of this exercise still remains humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, in addition to community relations projects." Troops from Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea and Singapore also participated in this year's drills.—AFP



CHONBURI: A US marine is fed the blood of a cobra during the Cobra Gold joint military exercise between US and Thai military in the coastal province of Chonburi yesterday. — AFP



Cobra Gold - one of the largest military exercises in Asia

Afghan political crisis deepens as second governor refuses to resign

KABUL: A governor in northern Afghanistan has become the second in the region to defy an order by President Ashraf Ghani to step down, deepening a political crisis facing the US-backed government in Kabul. Abdul Karim Khadam, the governor of northern Samangan province, was sacked along with four other provincial governors last week.

But he followed Atta Mohammad Noor, the heavy-weight governor of neighbouring Balkh province, who refused to leave office after he was also sacked in December. Noor's refusal to step down has turned the so-called "King of the North" into one of Afghanistan's most infamous politicians and a potential contender in presidential elections due in 2019, while underscoring the weakness of Ghani's government.

Khadam's decision to follow suit has deepened the crisis and threatened to further ethnic divisions between Tajiks and the Pashtun-dominated south, which often dominate Afghanistan's politics. An ethnic Turkmen, Khadam belongs to the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e-Islami party, of which Noor is also a member. "The decision is unfair and unjust. It is against the principles. I condemn this decision and don't accept it. I will wait for Jamiat party stance about this," he told reporters late on Sunday.

Jamiat in a statement yesterday said his removal was "unjustified and yet another step toward increasing tension in the country". The dispute comes at a bad time for Ghani's US-backed government, which is facing growing public fury over recent deadly attacks in Kabul and else-



KABUL: An Afghan amputee walks with his prosthetic legs at a hospital run by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for war victims and the disabled in Kabul. —AFP

where in the war-torn country that have laid bare its inability to protect civilians. Ghani, who belongs to the country's largest Pashtun ethnic group, took the presidency in 2014 in a US-brokered power-sharing deal with his rival, Jamiat-backed Abdullah Abdullah, who was named chief executive.

Jamiat has accused Ghani of failing to fulfil the terms of the agreement and has submitted demands to the president's negotiators, including a restructuring of parliament.

Noor has used the ongoing crisis to show off his strength, holding televised rallies and meeting representatives of various ethnic groups and political parties from across the country. But as the talks drag on there are growing fears the crisis could turn violent, sparking calls from the White House and others for a peaceful resolution. Last week, Noor asked his supporters to protest around the country, including in the capital Kabul, at end of this month if negotiations with the government failed.—AFP

Australia politician slammed for gun photo on Facebook

SYDNEY: A conservative Australian politician who posted a photo of himself on Facebook holding a gun in a jibe at environmentalists was reported to police and slammed yesterday as insensitive after a mass US school shooting. George Christensen put up the image on Saturday showing him in a shooting stance with the comment "You gotta ask yourself, do you feel lucky, greenie punks?"

He claimed it was a tongue-in-cheek reference to the "Dirty Harry" film franchise in which a police officer played by Clint Eastwood takes on "people who are conducting illegal activity, such as the greens are". The MP has been critical of environmentalists—sometimes backed by the Greens political party—who have tried to blockade mining projects, including chaining themselves to machinery.

The Facebook post was referred to the Australian Federal Police by the Greens, with their Senator Sarah Hanson-Young saying on Twitter she had received an emailed threat from one of Christensen's supporters. "Frankly, guns are not a joke and particularly in the wake of the massacre in the US only last week, 17 people shot dead, including children," Hanson-Young told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called the post "very inappropriate". It was also widely criticised by politicians from other parties.

Christensen, whose National party is the junior partner in the government's ruling coalition, later deleted it but responded defiantly, saying: "I'm not going to be moralised to by these extreme greens who put the livelihoods, safety and lives of other people at risk." He said the post had nothing to do with the American shooting last week where a 19-year-old killed 17 people at his former high school, claiming instead it was a comment on environmentalists' "illegal activism on mine sites". Australia has tough gun laws that include bans on certain weapons, a minimum age, licences and secure storage, after a mass shooting at the historic Tasmanian colonial convict site of Port Arthur in 1996 where 35 people were killed. The uproar is the latest headache for the ruling Liberal-National coalition, with Turnbull last week publicly criticising Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce for his affair with a younger former staffer who is now pregnant with his child.—AFP

Hat-trick as Pakistan's Imran Khan marries for the third time

ISLAMABAD: Pakistani politician and former playboy cricketer Imran Khan has married a woman described as his spiritual adviser, party officials said, the third wedding for the World Cup champion once touted as Pakistan's most eligible bachelor. Khan, 65, married Bushra Wattoo in a private ceremony attended by relatives and friends in the eastern city of Lahore on Sunday, his Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party announced on Twitter.

Pictures of the ceremony, showing the bride in a full veil, were posted on the account. Khan, once known internationally for his high-profile tabloid romances, cuts a more conservative persona in Pakistan, often carrying prayer beads and nurturing beliefs in living saints. PTI spokesman Fawad Chaudhry told AFP the couple had known one another "for a long time" but declined to provide further details. She has been widely reported to be the politician's spiritual adviser. Khan is loved by millions across the cricket-obsessed nation for winning Pakistan its only World Cup in 1992. His sporting prowess and rugged good looks also brought him international celebrity. He married British socialite



ISLAMABAD: Pakistani cricketer-turned-opposition leader and head of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), Imran Khan speaks during an interview at his home in Islamabad. —AFP

Jemima Khan in 1995 and had two sons with her before their divorce in 2004. The split was attributed to the difficulties she faced in Pakistan, where she was hounded for her family's Jewish ancestry, and to his obsession with politics. He and second wife Reham Khan, host of a local TV talk show and a BBC weather segment, divorced suddenly in October 2015, just ten months after they wed. She had been widely criticised after appearing at public meetings of PTI, with opponents accusing her of seeking to boost her own profile through her husband's fame. Khan, born in Lahore into a com-

fortable family with origins in the Pashtun northwest, was educated at Pakistan's prestigious Aitchison College, at boarding school in England and then at Oxford University.

He became one of the world's greatest ever all-rounders—a fearsome fast bowler and dangerous batsman—whose finest hour came at the 1992 World Cup, where at the age of 39 he led an inexperienced team to the title. Khan's party plans to contest a general election due in Pakistan this year, telling AFP in a recent interview that he believes this is PTI's "biggest chance" at seizing power.—AFP

News in brief

3 Egyptian soldiers killed

CAIRO: Egypt said yesterday three of its soldiers had been killed in the Sinai Peninsula during a wide-ranging operation against the local branch of the Islamic State group. Four "extremists" were also killed, the military said in a statement. It was the first military death toll announced since the army started its campaign on February 9. It says it has killed about 60 jihadists and arrested hundreds of suspects since the operation began. It launched the offensive after Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi gave his army commander a three month deadline in November to quash a jihadist insurgency which has killed hundreds of soldiers and policemen. The ultimatum came after suspected IS gunmen massacred more than 300 worshippers at a mosque in northern Sinai the same month.—AFP

Landmine kills candidate

GUWAHATI: A landmine explosion killed four people, including an election candidate, in India's northeastern state of Meghalaya in an area where four militant groups are seeking independence, police said yesterday. The attack happened on Sunday night in Meghalaya's East Garo Hills district, about 250 km from the state capital, Shillong. The candidate for the Nationalist Congress Party from the Williannagar assembly constituency, Jonathone Sangma, was killed along with his driver and two police. "The vehicle in which Sangma was travelling bore the maximum impact of the explosion. Everyone in the car died on the spot," said Ringrang Momin, a senior state police officer. Police officials said there were four active militant groups in the area demanding secession from India for tens of thousands of Garo tribals living in the state bordering Bangladesh.—Reuters

S Africa airport evacuated

JOHANNESBURG: Johannesburg's OR Tambo airport, Africa's largest, was evacuated yesterday and passengers forced to wait for two hours to return after South African officials identified a suspect bag. Images of the deserted terminal were posted to social media while other photographs showed crowds of passengers waiting on roadways for the all-clear to return inside. The airport's international arrivals hall was evacuated around 0915 GMT after the errant baggage was spotted and airport users were unable to re-enter until after 1115 GMT, airport spokeswoman Leigh Gunkel-Keuler said. "To ensure the safety of passengers and customers in the airport terminal building, people were evacuated from the area," she added in a statement. "The police service has now provided airport management with the assurance that passengers and customers can now return to the airport terminal building."—AFP

Prison rioters free hostages

RIO DE JANEIRO: Prisoners who rioted in an overcrowded Rio de Janeiro prison and took 18 hostages have released all the captives and the facility is under the control of guards, authorities said yesterday. Eight guards and 10 inmates had been taken hostage during the riot that began Sunday afternoon, the Rio state penitentiary administration said in a statement. They were freed early yesterday. There was no word on injuries. The incident was the latest in a string of deadly uprisings in Brazil's prisons, which experience endemic violence and are under the de facto control of powerful drug gangs. Rights groups call prison conditions medieval, with food scarce and cells often so packed that inmates have no space to lie down.—Reuters

'West stoking tensions'

BELGRADE: The West is stoking tensions in the Balkans despite Russia's pacific stance, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was quoted as saying yesterday ahead of a visit to Serbia. Lavrov criticized the West for making Balkan states choose "either you are with the West or with Russia," in an interview with Serbia's Beta news agency. He said the EU tried to get every aspiring member "to harmonize its foreign and defense policies" with that of the bloc, adding that this was "increasing tensions in Europe." Serbia is seeking European Union membership. Moscow supports Belgrade in not recognizing the independence of the former Serbian province of Kosovo, proclaimed a decade ago.—AFP

Analysis

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Lego building foundations in China schools

Danish toymaker Lego is hoping to build a following with Chinese parents by promoting its place in the classroom as well as the toy box. The firm, famous for its brightly colored building blocks, is working with local education departments, state schools and the private education providers to get kids playing with Lego as a way to boost motor skills, creativity and attention spans. The educational push in China goes beyond what Lego does in other markets, in part a nod to the country's disciplined focus on learning but also a reflection of how the market is booming in importance as growth in the United States and Europe slows.

It also taps into the desires of Chinese parents to give their children a competitive edge - even at a young age. Deng Xianyu, 48, has been buying her 8-year-old son Lego blocks since he was 2 and now sends him to Lego classes every weekend. She said she likes that the students learn specific skills such as computing and science as they play. "If it was just putting blocks together, I don't think that would be totally necessary," said Deng Xianyu, 48. "But I think it is great that they do coding (as part of the) classes."

The focus on learning, in a market notorious for its rigid exam-oriented education system and piles of homework, could help Lego in China as business elsewhere softens. In September, Lego said it would lay off 8 percent of its staff and revamp its business after reporting its first sales decline in more than a decade, with weakness especially in the United States and Europe. Its most recent revenue figures, for the first half of 2017, showed a decline of 5 percent to 14.9 billion Danish kroner (\$2.5 billion at the current exchange rate) compared with the same period in 2016.

China's toy market was estimated at about \$9.6 billion last year, growing close to 10 percent against 2016, according to the China Toy and Juvenile Products Association. And the preschool segment of its for-profit education market alone is expected to reach 540 billion yuan (\$85.20 billion) by 2020. In China, Lego competes with the likes of Mattel Inc, Hasbro Inc and local market leader Alpha Group. It opened a local plant in 2016 and last month signed a deal with tech giant Tencent to develop games.

Education with a streak of fun is also an attractive goal for local education bodies and schools as they look to broaden their curriculums. "We see that there's a lot of interest in terms of in the government and interest in educational communities to develop children's creativity, to develop some of the soft skills like global collaboration, problem solving, communication," Lego's chief marketing officer, Julia Goldin, told Reuters in Beijing. "These are, of course, all the skills that they develop through Lego."

Time to play?

The building blocks are especially attractive to younger parents in major cities, who are more receptive to the Western idea of "free play" - especially if it comes with an educational sheen. Kevin Xing, a translator in Beijing, spends 10,000 yuan per year sending his six-year-old son to classes at a Lego training centre. In 2016, the two travelled to Shanghai for a Lego-building competition. "Practically speaking, it's not like piano, taekwondo or English classes - you don't see an immediately tangible impact with Lego right away," said Xing, adding that he was motivated more by his son's enjoyment and long-term development. "So I keep paying for (the classes) anyway," he said.

Lego, via its education arm - which it says is kept separate from its commercial toy business - and major shareholder Lego Foundation work with academic centers such as Beijing's Tsinghua University and other education bodies. China's Ministry of Education and Lego also collaborated on an "innovative talents training program," in which more than 10,000 grade school teachers take part annually. "We are engaging with the government," Jacob Kragh, general manager of Lego in China, told Reuters in an interview in Beijing, adding this was mostly related to "curriculum development and teacher training."

The education business aims to "generate a new and more progressive way of teaching science, technology, engineering, and math" - highly prized subjects in China often studied by the country's political and business elite. That could be of interest to parents who are worried about their children falling behind in a highly competitive school system. "Kids still live in a very rigid system where they are sleep deprived and don't have much time to play," said Yang Dongping, dean of Beijing-based 21st Century Education Research Institute.

Tu Qiaoliu, a primary school teacher in the port city of Ningbo, said her school had created a Lego project with one giant wall and smaller ones for each class. "We chose Lego because teachers believe the toys can help kids grow and develop," she said. Lego China head Kragh said the education business did not actively try to sell Legos to consumers. But parents said there was a clearly pressure to buy if their kids enjoyed the classes. A box of Lego classic blocks with 790 pieces costs 499 yuan (\$78.82) at Lego's official China online store on Alibaba's Tmall, versus \$59.99 at its US online store. "Though kids can play Lego in class, my son still asks me to buy him Lego when he gets back home," said Xing, the parent. "It is quite costly." —Reuters

Cartoon for the Soul



The \$1.8bn bank fraud that went unnoticed

The Punjab National Bank branch in south Mumbai sits just down the road from both the Bombay Stock Exchange and the Reserve Bank of India, at a physical center of one of the world's fastest growing major economies. The branch, clad in a stately colonial edifice, is now also at the heart of a fraud case linked to billionaire jeweler Nirav Modi that has shaken confidence in a state banking sector that accounts for some 70 percent of India's banking assets.

It was here, according to accounts from Punjab National Bank executives and government investigators, that a lone middle-aged manager, later aided by his young subordinate, engineered fraudulent transactions totaling about \$1.8 billion from 2011 to 2017. The bank says it is still investigating how they were able to do so and go undetected for so long. The accounts given by current and former executives who spoke to Reuters suggest an answer as simple as it is alarming: no one was paying attention.

The still unravelling story of how the fraud happened - which includes the alleged misuse of the SWIFT inter-bank messaging system and incomplete ledger entries - points to a breakdown in checks and balances, and standard banking practices, they said. The apparent failure of anyone to notice the largest fraud in Indian banking history until this January reveals a "rot" in the state financial sector that goes beyond one lender, said Santosh Trivedi, who spent nearly four decades at Punjab National Bank before retiring in 2016 as a senior manager of audit and inspection in the New Delhi head office. "Unless this rot is controlled at this stage, to the satisfaction of the international community, it is dangerous for the Indian system," Trivedi said.

Jeweler to the stars

Last month, Punjab National Bank, known as PNB, filed an initial criminal complaint with the country's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) accusing celebrity jeweler Nirav Modi and others of defrauding the bank and causing it a loss of 2.8 billion Indian rupees (more than \$43 million). The allegations against a man whose diamond creations have draped Hollywood stars such as Kate Winslet and Dakota Johnson generated a flurry of coverage across India's TV screens and newspapers. Modi has not publicly commented on the case. He and his family left the country in early January, according to Indian officials, and a call on Sunday to a corporate spokesperson who has handled media for Modi in the past went unanswered. No charges have been filed against him.

But as more details surfaced about what is alleged to have happened at the state-run bank, which was founded in 1894, the stakes have gotten higher. A review of bank and government documents related to the case - and interviews with current and former PNB executives, bank auditors and experts - points to a lack of accountability and standards in the country's public banking system. As of last September, those banks held about 87 percent of the Indian banking system's 9.46 trillion rupees (about \$147 billion) of soured loans that are non-performing, restructured or rolled over.

A preliminary investigation by the nation's tax authority said of the PNB fraud that "the hit Indian banks would take in the end may well exceed" \$3 billion, according to an internal note seen by Reuters. "Yes, there is a problem. We have recognized it," bank Chief Executive Officer Sunil Mehta said during an investor call on Friday. "We are in the process of fixing it up. We'll see wherever the loopholes are there. The people-related risk, we are going to mitigate."

But despite that promise of action, one current senior executive at the bank's headquarters in New Delhi said further problems could not be ruled out. "In Indian banks, we don't work under ideal situation," the executive, who declined to be identified, said during an interview at his office. "We are in the business of risk, you can't say there won't be road accidents."

Fraudulent guarantees

According to court documents filed on Saturday by the CBI, branch deputy manager Gokulnath Shetty issued a series of fraudulent Letters of Undertaking - essentially guarantees sent to other banks so that they would provide loans to a customer, in this case a group of Indian jewelry companies. These letters were sent to overseas branches of banks, thought to be almost all Indian, that would then lend money to the jewelry firms.

Shetty did so using the bank's SWIFT system to log in with passwords that allowed him, and in at least some

instances a more junior official, to serve as both the person who sent messages and as the person who reviewed them for approval, according to court documents and interviews with bank executives. "The involvement and connivance of more staff members and outsiders at this stage cannot be ruled out," said a CBI document submitted to the court in Mumbai.

Shetty is now in custody and he has not publicly responded to the allegations. Calls to a cell phone listed for his wife on court documents were not answered. Asked about the password sharing, the senior Punjab National Bank executive said it was not best practice but in the everyday bustle of Indian banks it happens. "When you are flooded with customers in the morning, with 101 demands, you look for shortcuts," he said. "You do somebody else's work, somebody else does your work. You are not working in an ideal situation." A second senior executive at the bank's headquarters, who also asked that his name not be used, echoed that sentiment.

After entering the transactions on SWIFT, the CBI documents said, Shetty - who worked at the same branch from 2010 to 2017 despite normal bank practices of regular rotations - did not record them on the bank's internal system. Because PNB's internal software system was not linked with SWIFT, employees were expected to manually log SWIFT activity. If that was not done, the transactions

“ We are in the business of risk; you can't say there won't be road accidents ”

did not show up on the bank's books. A SWIFT spokeswoman said in a statement last week that the company does not comment on individual customers.

Altogether, there were at least 150 such fraudulent Letters of Undertaking during a seven-year period, according to a CBI official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. In addition to detaining Shetty and the junior employee, the CBI has arrested a man who it described in court documents as both being "aware about the modus operandi of the entire scams" and serving as a director in "15 to 16 companies of Nirav Modi Group".

An older brother of the man, Hemant Bhatt, said outside a courtroom on Saturday that he was innocent and the allegations were the result of a "media trial". The brother did not give his name. An uncle of the junior bank employee, Manoj Kharat, told a Reuters reporter outside the court that his nephew was "just following orders of superiors" and added "he wasn't aware of what he is doing". All three are to be held in custody until March 3. No charges have so far been laid against them. Police searched the

bank's south Mumbai branch on Sunday and have also questioned five more Punjab National officials, the CBI official said, taking the total number bank staff who have been questioned so far to 11.

Financial hit

A Feb 12 note seen by Reuters, sent from PNB to other banks and marked "confidential", said: "None of the transactions were routed through the CBS system" - the bank's internal network - "thus avoiding early detection of fraudulent activity." The Reserve Bank of India did not respond to a request for comment about whether it had earlier detected any anomalies in Punjab National Bank's operations or whether it would take additional action in auditing banks.

In a statement late on Friday the central bank called the fraud at PNB "a case of operational risk arising on account of delinquent behavior by one or more employees of the bank and failure of internal controls". It also said the central bank "has already undertaken a supervisory assessment of control systems in PNB and will take appropriate supervisory action".

The CBI paperwork says the fraudulent Letters of Undertaking are likely to add up to "the vicinity of" 60 billion rupees, or more than \$930 million. Bank executives say the amount tallied by working back through internal records is \$1.77 billion. With assets of about \$120 billion as of December, according to bank filings, PNB will be able to cover any associated losses, though it is still a huge hit for a bank whose stock market value was only \$6.1 billion before it revealed details of the alleged fraud last week. It has since seen \$1.4 billion wiped off that market capitalization.

The mechanics of how the fraud happened, and what it says about the underlying industry culture, are worrying, said Abizer Diwanji, national leader for financial services in India at accounting firm Ernst & Young. "Checks and balances are there in public banks as well but they are not followed earnestly," said Diwanji, who has tracked India's financial services industry for more than two decades. "This is where the discipline, the culture is not there. I always believe that we don't have the culture to manage risks, even operational risks. PNB is not an outlier in this."

To control such risks, most private sector banks require branches to route SWIFT messages through their central offices, Diwanji said. They also usually integrate their own software systems and SWIFT, meaning that activity such as a Letter of Undertaking being sent would get automatically recorded. Neither is the case at PNB or most state-run banks in India, Diwanji said. Representatives of two of the external audit firms listed on PNB's annual report for the 2016-17 fiscal year said they could not have known what happened. "It was off-books, so auditors will not be in a position to detect it," said Sudesh Punhani, a partner at Chhajed & Doshi. Asked whether the bank's failure to integrate its software system and SWIFT was a cause of concern, Neeraj Golas, a partner at R Devendra Kumar & Associates, also an external auditor of the bank, said: "True, true - we have to really get into it and understand what all these things are." —Reuters



Indian men walk past signage of the state-owned Punjab National Bank (PNB) in Mumbai on Feb 14, 2018. —AFP

News

Saudi Arabia to host first Arab Fashion Week

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia is set to host in March its first ever Arab Fashion Week, the Arab Fashion Council announced yesterday, overturning decades of draconian policies on arts and entertainment. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the powerful heir to the Saudi throne, has been leading a drive to reform the country's dependence on oil, including expanding the private sector and empowering women. The Dubai-based Arab Fashion Council said on its website that fashion week would be held in Riyadh from March 26 to March 31, with a second edition already scheduled for October.

Arab Fashion Week will take place at Riyadh's eco-friendly Apex Centre, a white honeycomb-like venue designed by the late celebrated Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid. In December, the Arab Fashion Council announced the opening of a regional office in Riyadh and named Saudi Princess Noura Bint Faisal Al-Saud as its honorary president.

"The first Arab Fashion Week in Riyadh will be more than a world-class event, it is a catalyst through which we believe the fashion sector will lead other economic sectors such as tourism, hospitality, travel, and trade," Princess Noura said in a statement

on the council's website. Listed as an international fashion week alongside Paris and Milan, the twice-yearly Arab Fashion Week offers exclusively see-now-buy-now collections and pre-collections.

The line-up for the Riyadh event has not been revealed yet and it remains unclear whether it will be limited to modest designs in accordance with the strict dress code observed in Saudi Arabia. The Gulf kingdom, which has some of the world's tightest restrictions on women, requires them to wear, by law, a loose-fitting abaya robe to shroud their bodies in public. Earlier this month, a senior Saudi cleric said Saudi women should not be "forced to wear abayas".

The comment was made by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mutlak, a member of the Council of Scholars - the kingdom's highest religious body. The government has not said whether it will change the law. But Prince Mohammed has introduced over the past months a series of reforms in favor of women. In January, Saudi women were allowed for the first time ever to enter a football stadium to watch a game and the kingdom is also opening several sectors of the workplace to women.

Saudi Arabia has also announced an end to a longstanding ban on women driving, which is to take effect in June. In the past, Arab Fashion Week have been hosted so far exclusively by Gulf fashion capital Dubai and have included runway darlings Marchesa and Tony Ward. Dubai will continue to host its own parallel Arab Fashion Week, with the sixth edition slotted for May 9 to May 12. — AFP

Trump Jr to wine and dine luxury...

Continued from Page 1

member told AFP on condition of anonymity. "The meeting is a token of gratitude to the clients for showing tremendous faith in the upcoming project," said the Tribeca employee.

The 47-storey towers will comprise 250 homes and are expected to be completed by 2023, with prices ranging from 55-110 million rupees (\$850,000-\$1.7 million). Adverts in Indian newspapers yesterday promised prospective buyers their neighbors would include a "renowned industrialist", "art maestro" and "famous Indian cricketer" - although it was not clear whether this was based on the identity of the existing buyers. "Trump is here. Are you invited?" read the full-page advert in yesterday's Times of India.

The development is in the modern satellite city of Gurgaon, where many major companies now have their headquarters. Prospective buyers are promised an adjoin-

ing nine-hole golf course and access to a club that will include an indoor pool, spa and fitness center. India is already the Trump Organization's biggest international market, with developments in four major cities - Mumbai, Pune, Gurgaon and Kolkata. All are being built with local partners, with the Trump Organization giving permission to use its brand and taking a share of the profits. According to media reports, the estimated cost of developing these projects is \$1.5 billion.

The Trump family earned \$3 million in royalties in 2016 from ventures in India, according to a New York Times report. Trump Junior and his brother now head the company after their father stood down when he became president amid concerns over a conflict of interest. Although the US embassy says he is in Delhi on an unofficial visit, Trump Junior is due to speak on Indo-Pacific relations at a business conference on Friday at which Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be the keynote speaker.

The luxury property in Gurgaon is being developed by Indian firms Tribeca and M3M, with construction expected to start towards the end of the year. India's residential property market has struggled in recent years, hit by a glut in urban centers combined with the impact of a 2016 move to tackle tax evasion with a ban on high-value banknotes. — AFP

Duterte accepts Amir's invite...

Continued from Page 1

He said that there were contacts between the two countries to prevent the escalation of the issue through the Philippines ambassador in Kuwait and the Kuwaiti ambassador in Manila. Jarallah said that as a result, the two nations agreed not to use the media to escalate the problem and that they should resort to diplomatic dialogue to resolve it.

After the body of a Filipino was discovered in a freezer in a Kuwait apartment, Duterte arranged free flights for workers wishing to leave - an evacuation that Kuwait said was an unnecessary escalation of a diplomatic rift. The Philippines suspended sending workers to Kuwait in January after reports that abuse by employers had driven several to suicide.

Meanwhile, an official delegation from the Philippine foreign ministry is due to arrive in Kuwait today to hold talks with Kuwaiti officials regarding the standoff, informed sources said. The delegation is expected to discuss the situation of the Filipino workers in general and the proposed labor agreement in particular, and pave the way for the official visit by Duterte to Kuwait.



RIYADH: Saudi women attend the AFC Champions League group stage football match between Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal and UAE's Al Ain at King Saud University Stadium on Feb 13, 2018. — AFP

Turkey warns Syria over backing YPG...

Continued from Page 1

Damascus previously denounced Ankara's "aggression" in Afrin but had never explicitly said it would intervene before yesterday. Syria's Kurds have gradually implemented a self-rule model across much of the country's north, including Afrin, since 2012. Kurdish fighters and government troops have since largely steered clear of each other, though there have been short-lived clashes in the cities of Hasakeh and Qamishli. Last week, YPG chief Sipan Hamo told reporters his forces would have "no problem" with Damascus intervening to help repel Turkey's assault.

A few hours after the SANA report, Erdogan spoke on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin and they discussed the "latest developments in Syria, especially in Afrin and Idlib", a Turkish presidential source said. Turkish media quoted Erdogan as telling Putin that any support from Damascus to the YPG in Afrin "will have consequences" for the regime. The issue of establishing new observation posts in Idlib was discussed, the source said.

Turkey, Russia and regime supporter Iran agreed last year to create "de-escalation" zones in four areas including Idlib, where six observation posts have already been set up by Turkish forces to monitor any fighting. The northwestern province is nearly completely under the control of anti-government forces, predominantly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group led by Al-Qaeda's former Syria affiliate. While Turkey has called for the ouster of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, Russia has provided armed support to the regime and controls the airspace of northern Syria.

Meanwhile, Syrian warplanes hit rebel-held Eastern Ghouta with fresh air strikes yesterday, after regime reinforcements and a salvo of rocket fire on the enclave hinted a ground assault could be imminent. Held by rebels since 2012, Eastern Ghouta is now the last opposition-controlled pocket around Damascus and Assad has dispatched reinforcements there in an apparent bid to retake it.

Talks were under way for the evacuation of a militant faction that has a limited footprint in the enclave and failure to reach a deal soon would likely signal the start of an assault. Regime troops carried out a relentless five-day bombing campaign earlier this month that left around 250 civilians dead in the enclave and hundreds more wounded. Since then, government forces have intermittently bombed Eastern Ghouta towns, including with fresh air strikes yes-

terday morning.

Surveillance planes buzzed overhead before carrying out raids on a pair of Eastern Ghouta towns. AFP's correspondents in the enclave said. Residents walking outside in the nearby town of Hammuriyeh could be seen rushing inside in a panic as soon as they heard the sound of airplanes. Alaa al-Din, a 23-year-old Syrian in Hammuriyeh, said civilians were afraid of a potential government offensive. "Ghouta's fate is unknown. We've got nothing but God's mercy and hiding out in our basements," he told AFP yesterday. "There's no alternative."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said talks have been taking place for the evacuation of HTS, which controls small pockets of Eastern Ghouta. "The collapse of the negotiations will signal the start of an assault," Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Britain-based Observatory, said. According to the Observatory, the regime began dispatching military reinforcements to Eastern Ghouta on Feb 5, the same day it launched a fierce five-day bombing campaign on the region.

The war monitor said yesterday morning's air strikes on Al-Shayfuniyeh left people wounded and caused material damage. Regime troops fired more than 260 rockets on towns across Eastern Ghouta on Sunday, it said. The rockets, as well as artillery fire and some air strikes, killed at least 17 civilians across the enclave on Sunday, according to the Observatory. "In just a few hours, all of Eastern Ghouta was sprayed with rockets," Alaa al-Din recalled.

Eastern Ghouta is held by two main Islamist factions, Jaish al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman, both of which denied being in talks with the regime. The regime is keen to regain control of the area to halt the deadly salvo of rockets and mortars that those factions have fired on Damascus. About half a dozen rockets hit the capital on Sunday night, AFP correspondents said. State news agency SANA reported that one person was killed in the shelling. More than 20 civilians have been killed by rebel fire this month alone in regime-held Damascus.

All was quiet in the capital yesterday but since rumors of an imminent assault on Eastern Ghouta started spreading, residents of neighborhoods that are nearest to the rebel enclave started packing their bags. Jawad Al-Ombros lives with his mother, father and sister in Al-Qassaa, which lies just one kilometre from Jobar, a major flashpoint on the edge of the Ghouta enclave. Shells have rained around his home in recent weeks and the 30-year-old man this weekend started asking about hotel prices in Yaafour, which lies to the west, on the other side of the city. "We're tired of this situation. It seems that there's no solution but a full-blown military one. We've been patient for a long time, and now it's time that we rest," he said. — Agencies

PAM launches new services...

Continued from Page 1

"The portal enables employees in the private sector to print copies of the work contract, work permit and other documents. They can also file complaints in the event of labor disputes and follow up the complaint. The employee can also drop his complaint or case before settling a session to review it. Otherwise, he has to attend the session and inform the investigator that he wishes to drop the case. Through SMS, he will be informed about the status and result of his complaint, in addition to the date of appeal and other information," Asemi said.

The labor relations department receives two kinds of complaints - complaints by workers and employers fil-

ing absconding cases against their employees. "In both cases, the employee has to know what procedures were taken against him or by him. So whenever an absconding case is filed against him, he will be informed via SMS. The department will also inform the embassy about the case filed against their citizen," she added.

The new system allows an employee to take corrective action. "When an absconding case is filed against him, he will receive an SMS, and can appeal within 30 days. If he does so, he has the right to get a waiver and transfer his visa to another employer. After 30 days have passed but before 60 days, he can't get a waiver and can only leave the country. An employer can register an absconding case if an employee is absent for seven days. In the past, the employee wasn't able to defend himself and was deported after 90 days. But now, if he visits the labor department, the case will be paused and he can register his demands. Even after 60 days have passed, the worker is still entitled to all his rights and benefits (even if he cannot get a waiver and has to leave)," concluded Al-Asemi.



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Sports

Bubba Watson's wait ends with third Riviera triumph

Watson finished two strokes in front of Kevin Na, Tony Finau

LOS ANGELES: Bubba Watson fired a two-under-par 69 on Sunday to win an emotional third Genesis Open title, ending a drought that stretched back to his 2016 triumph here at Riviera Country Club.

One-over for the day after three bogeys and two birdies on the front nine, Watson produced three birdies without a bogey coming home for a 12-under-par total of 272. A spectacular hole-out for birdie from a greenside bunker at the 14th gave him sole possession of the lead for good.

"I can't believe it," said Watson, who had slipped to 117th in the world rankings after a forgettable 2016-17 season that included "medical issues" that he prefers not to elaborate on. "There are so many emotions going through my head right now," Watson said as he teared up on the 18th green. "You never know if you're going to play good again, never know if you're going to lift a trophy again."

He admitted that his physical struggles, including significant weight loss, sapped his confidence and even had him considering retirement. "I was close," Watson said. "My wife was not close. My wife basically told me to quit whining and play golf."

Watson finished two strokes in front of Kevin Na and Tony Finau, who both carded 69s for 10-under 274. Watson's 10th PGA Tour victory capped a halcyon week in Hollywood for the two-time Masters champion, who recorded a show with US comedy icon Jay Leno, dropped in on comedian and chat show host

Ellen DeGeneres, took in a taping of TV sitcom "The Big Bang Theory" and played in the NBA All-Star Celebrity Game on Friday night.

"It loosened me up," Watson said of the extra-curricular activities. "I was so focused on other things I didn't have time to focus on where I stood going into this week." He shot to the top of the leaderboard on Saturday with a third-round 65.

A birdie at the par-five first on Sunday looked promising, but three bogeys on the front nine left him trailing at the turn. Na's back-to-back birdies at 10 and 11 saw him move to 11-under, but his bid stalled with a brace of bogeys at 12 and 13.

'NERVOUS AS CAN BE'

Patrick Cantlay, who trailed Watson by one stroke going into the round, also reached 11-under before bogeys at 12 and 13. Cantlay, who was seeking a second title of the season, closed with a 71 to share fourth place with Scott Stallings,

who carded a 68 for 275.

Watson said making two testing seven-footers for par at the 12th and 13th after his birdie at 11 were crucial to his round-more so than the impressive hole-out at 14. "I knew there was a shot," he said. "It doesn't mean I'm going to win, but it means I'm still in the ballgame, putt on 11, putt on 12, putt on 13."

Even after taking a two-shot lead at 14, Watson said, "I was still nervous as can be on every shot". Five-time major-winner Phil Mickelson, chasing a first title since his 2013 British Open triumph, briefly pulled



PACIFIC PALISADES: Bubba Watson plays his shot from the 15th tee during the final round of the Genesis Open at Riviera Country Club on Sunday in Pacific Palisades, California. — AFP

“You never know if you're going to play good again”

within one shot of the lead before settling for a 68 that saw him head a group on 276 that also included Australian Cameron Smith (71) and Canadian Adam Hadwin (66).

On a day when Riviera yielded few low scores, world number one and defending champion Dustin Johnson was unable to mount a charge and finished tied for 16th, eight shots off the lead. — AFP

Dillon wins crash-marred Daytona 500

DAYTONA BEACH: Austin Dillon saw his opportunity and took it to win the 60th running of the Daytona 500 on Sunday at Daytona International Speedway. Never seemingly among the top contenders all day, he got to Aric Almirola's rear bumper on the final lap and bumped by him to put the No. 3 car in Victory Lane at Daytona for the first time since the late Dale Earnhardt did it 20 years ago.

It was an overtime finish totaling 207 laps, seven more than scheduled, as a late wreck made NASCAR re-rack the field for a final sprint to the finish. Dillon races for his grandfather, Richard Childress, who was also Earnhardt's team owner and best friend. Bringing back the No. 3, which hadn't been used since Earnhardt's death at this track in 2001, was finally blessed by Childress three seasons ago.

Now its legacy has been lifted even higher. The race for the lead was intense over the final few scheduled laps, but with two to go, one of Daytona's customary big wrecks shook up the field with Denny Hamlin up front. Daytona is a 2.5-mile D-shaped oval, and as one of only two tracks of that type in NASCAR—the other is 2.66-mile Talladega Superspeedway—the cars run with restrictor plates. That limits the air intake into the engine and serves to slow the cars down and essentially levels the playing field.



DAYTONA BEACH: Austin Dillon, driver of the #3 DOW Chevrolet, celebrates in Victory Lane after winning the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series 60th Annual Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway on Sunday in Daytona Beach, Florida. — AFP

That means cars running close together at 200 mph with no good way to avoid getting caught up in a crash once one starts. NASCAR continues to have two stages in a race before the final finish after deeming it a success last year, and with points towards and in the play-offs on the line, drivers race aggressively near the end of the events.

With the stages being set for the Daytona 500 at Lap 60 and Lap 120 of the scheduled 200-lap event, things got dicey on Lap 59. A wreck involving multiple cars—it's usually called "The Big One"—is a fact of life at Daytona, making it a race of attrition.

Caught up in it on Lap 59 were seven-time champion Jimmie Johnson, Erik Jones, Daniel

Suarez, William Byron, Ty Dillon, Ricky Stenhouse Jr., Ryan Blaney, defending series champion Martin Truex Jr. and Kyle Larson.

Kurt Busch was out front and away from the carnage to win Stage One, but he was caught up in the crash on Lap 198 and taken out of contention. As the laps wound down in Stage Two, another big crash took out Kevin Harvick, Brad Keselowski, Kasey Kahne, Chase Elliott and Danica Patrick among others on Lap 102.

Ryan Blaney was in the lead then and went on to win Stage Two, setting up the frantic finale. Alex Bowman, who took over the No. 88 Chevrolet Camaro from Dale Earnhardt Jr., started on the pole and near the front late when he too crashed on Lap 198. — Reuters

Patrick crashes out as her NASCAR career ends

DAYTONA BEACH: For Danica Patrick, it was a proud but sad ending to her NASCAR career. Stock car racing's most successful female driver fell victim to a multi-car crash at the Daytona 500 on Sunday in what she had already announced would be her final race on the popular American circuit.

"That's the gamble with Daytona," Patrick said of the mid-race crash. "It can go so well and it can go so awful. I'm just sad that it ended that way." Until then, the 35-year-old had been competitive in what was not the fastest car on the track.

"I said earlier today that I feel like the whole thing was picture perfect... but it just wasn't meant to be I guess today," she added. One of the most marketable athletes in North America, Patrick will run one more race before calling it a career, competing in IndyCar's Indianapolis 500 in May.

In 2005, Patrick started and finished fourth as an Indy 500 rookie - at the time a record for a woman driver. She finished



DAYTONA BEACH: Danica Patrick, driver of the #7 GoDaddy Chevrolet, walks from the infield care center after being involved in an on-track incident the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series 60th Annual Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Florida. — AFP

third in 2009, the best result ever at the Brickyard for a woman driver, but has not competed in the event since 2011. Patrick is the only woman to win an IndyCar race and to start from pole at the Daytona 500.

Her popularity has waned in recent years, with Patrick unable to produce the results many expected when she made her much publicised jump from IndyCar to NASCAR in 2012.

However, Patrick said of her journey on the NASCAR circuit: "I am grateful for everything." After a kiss on the grid from

her boyfriend, Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, Patrick went after the season-opening race where she was pole sitter in 2013.

"I am proud," she said of her efforts on Sunday. "We raced the whole race other than a little bit at the end of that first stage when it looked silly with all the cars with tires and no tires. Other than that, we raced it and the car was competitive. That is all you can do." Now it will be on to Indy to wrap up her career. "Still have one more," Patrick said. "It is not a stock car, but still have one more." — Reuters

Gulf Bank launches 2018 FIFA WCup Russia Campaign for Visa Cardholders

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank is pleased to announce the launch of its new promotional campaign, designed for its Visa Credit Card customers and allows them to get a unique chance to win 5 days package for two to watch 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia Semi final match in Moscow. Each package includes flights, accommodation, match tickets, pre-match hospitality, and \$450 Visa pre-paid card.

Gulf Bank will have a draw on 8 April 2018 to select three lucky customers who will win the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia™ Semi-final match package. Visa Credit Card Customers will automatically enter this draw by using their Visa

Credit Card during the campaign period 10 January, 2018 to 31 March, 2018. Customers will get one chance to the draw for every KD 10 spent locally, and three chances for every KD 10 spent abroad on their Visa Credit Card.

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Coleman breaks 60m indoor world record

LOS ANGELES: Rising US star Christian Coleman set a new world indoor record for the 60m on Sunday, blasting to victory in 6.34sec at the US championships in Albuquerque. The 21-year-old exploded out of the blocks with a 0.149 reaction time to cross ahead of Ronnie Baker, who was second in 6.40.

Coleman's time shaved 0.05sec off

the existing world indoor record set by Maurice Greene in Madrid in 1998. It comes after a roller coaster start to the season for Coleman, the world 100m silver medalist.

The American youngster was initially believed to have broken Greene's 60m record at a meeting in Clemson, South Carolina on January 19, where he clocked 6.37sec.

However that time was not ratified because the meeting at which took place was not using electronic starting blocks. Coleman set prodigious times as a college athlete and has been hailed as a potential Olympic champion.

He ran the fastest 100 meters time of 2017 with 9.82sec but in the world final in London he was beaten by Justin Gatlin as Usain Bolt finished third. — AFP

Sports

Team LeBron rallies to beat Team Stephen in All-Star classic

Paul George delivered 16 points for Team LeBron

LOS ANGELES: Team LeBron upstaged Team Stephen 148-145 in the NBA All-Star Game Sunday in a thrilling duel that featured spectacular plays at both ends of the court by the game's premier players. Playing-captain LeBron James finished with 29 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists to lead all scorers in front of a sold out crowd of 17,800 at Staples Center arena.

"It was a great weekend and we capped it off the right way," said Cleveland Cavaliers James, who was also named MVP of the game for the third time in his career. Team LeBron staged a second-half rally and then got the defensive stops they needed in the fourth quarter to win the mid-February classic after trailing by two points at the half.

This year the league decided to go to a new selection format for picking the teams to try and make the game more competitive and it worked. "We wanted to change the narrative of the all-star game being a joke," said Team LeBron's Kevin Durant, who was MVP of the 2014 all-star game. "We wanted to make it a real basketball game."

"Everybody just falls in line when the game tells you to." Last year in New Orleans, the Western Conference outgunned the East 192-182 in a game that lacked intensity and especially the clutch defensive plays that brought the Staples Center crowd to its feet on Sunday. Under the new format, James and Stephen Curry, the top two all-star vote-getters, got to pick their teams from a pool of 22 available players. The first four picks had to come from the list of all-star starters. "You got

to give credit to the new format," said Team Stephen's DeMar DeRozan. "You are playing with guys you normally play against twice a year. That changed it up and gave it a new-found energy."

Golden State Warriors star Durant tallied 19 points and Oklahoma City Thunder forward Paul George delivered 16 points for Team LeBron. Four-time all-star DeRozan, of the Toronto Raptors, and Portland Trail Blazers Damian Lillard each scored 21 points while Karl-Anthony Towns of the Minnesota Timberwolves tallied 17 points and 10 rebounds for Team Stephen. The 33-year-old James, who was playing in his 14th all-star game, scored the eventual winning basket on a finger roll layup with 34 seconds left in the fourth to make it 146-145. James said the initial plan was to get the ball to Russell Westbrook and let him drive to the basket.

“It was a great weekend and we capped it off the right way”

'PLAY THE RIGHT WAY'

"Sometimes you have to improvise when it breaks down," James said. "We were able to do that. That's the beauty of being on the floor with a bunch of all-stars. "It doesn't always work out but

when you have guys with high basketball IQs, and guys that play the game the right way, it works out for the best." After James Harden missed a three-point attempt for Team Stephen, James was able to feed Westbrook for a running layup with 10 seconds left to seal the victory. Curry was guarded closely by his Golden State teammate Durant and James so he passed off to DeRozan who missed on a long attempt from the right corner as the buzzer sounded to end the game.



LOS ANGELES: LeBron James #23 of Team LeBron goes to the basket against Team Stephen during the NBA All-Star Game as a part of 2018 NBA All-Star Weekend at STAPLES Center on Sunday in Los Angeles, California. —AFP

"Once I got the ball and turned and looked to get a shot, I saw LeBron and K.D. try to double team me," Curry said. "I was just trying to make a play and nothing surfaced." Durant said he is going to enjoy having bragging rights over two-time NBA MVP Curry when they see each other later this week at practice. "We

just wanted to get a stop at the end of the game," Durant said. "Everybody knows how deadly Steph is around the three point line, especially me. So I just tried to get a hand up and make him pass."

"For sure that was a great defensive play by myself. I'm patting myself on the back." —AFP

Zain concludes main sponsor of Kuwait Int'l Arabian Horse Festival 2018

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading telecommunications company in Kuwait, concluded its main sponsorship of the Kuwait International Arabian Horse Festival 2018 during the All Nations Cup - Straight Egyptians competition. The event was organized by the Arabian Horse Center - Bait Al Arab under the patronage of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Zain took part in awarding the winners of the All Nations Cup - Straight Egyptians competition, which witnessed the attendance of HH the Amir's representative the Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Ali Al-Jarah Al-Sabah, Chairman of the Arabian Horse Center's Board of Trustees Alaa Al-Roumi, as well as a large number of Arabian horse admirers from the public.

Zain's support to this international competition came in line with the company's belief in the importance of taking part in projects and initiatives that strengthen the valuable Arabian identity and cherished Kuwaiti culture, reflecting the vital role of the private



sector in contributing to the preservation of the heritage, culture and history of Kuwait.

Zain also took part in awarding the winners of the 7th International Championship - Arabian Horse Breeder Award, which was held early February and attracted many purebred Arabian horse owners from inside and outside of Kuwait, as well as a large number of Arabian horse admirers from the public.

Zain stressed its keenness in providing the needed support and encouragement to all activities and initiatives that further pushes the national economic and touristic development wheel. The company is committed to

continuing to support all kinds of national projects that support the national economy and offer innovative ideas that contribute to the further progress of Kuwait.

The Kuwait International Arabian Horse Festival 2018 mainly aims at raising awareness about preserving the breed of the Arabian horse. The Arabian Horse Center - Bait Al Arab is considered an official organizer of horse breeding competitions both on local and international levels, and partners with the Hunting and Equestrian Club and ECAHO (European Conference of Arab Horse Organizations).

Wallaby Hunt avoids conviction in drug scandal

BRISBANE: Wallabies and Queensland Reds star Karmichael Hunt avoided conviction yesterday when a cocaine charge against him was dropped, although he admitted possession of a restricted prescription drug.

Hunt, a former rugby league international who made his Wallabies debut last year, stood down voluntarily from all contractual obligations in December after he was detained in Brisbane during a "random street stop" with another man.

He was originally accused of possessing cocaine but the charge was dropped due to lack of evidence, prosecutors said. Hunt did admit to possessing a Xanax tablet and failing to attend a police station when required a week later. Xanax is a restricted substance in Australia. He was fined Aus\$600 (US\$475) but no conviction was recorded, with his lawyer arguing that it would limit his movements overseas, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported. Lawyer Adam Magill said Hunt had the Xanax tablet to help him sleep.

Outside the Brisbane Magistrates Court, Magill told reporters Hunt was "happy this matter has been resolved, he can move on with his work and we can move forward". The playing future for Hunt, who re-signed with the Reds in November for another two years, remains unclear with Rugby Australia



BRISBANE: File photo taken on June 24, 2017 shows Karmichael Hunt (centre R) of Australia passing the ball during the international rugby match between Australia and Italy at Suncorp Stadium in Brisbane. Wallabies and Queensland Reds star Karmichael Hunt avoided conviction yesterday. — AFP

saying late Monday it had "resumed its investigation in relation to his conduct" as the criminal case had concluded.

The sport's governing body said Hunt would continue his stand-down from all rugby duties until they made a decision about his fate. No time frame was set by Rugby Australia, but Hunt could be penalised by the governing body for bringing the game into

disrepute. It is not the first time Hunt had been in trouble with the law. He was banned for six weeks and fined Aus\$30,000 by the Reds in 2015 after pleading guilty to four charges of cocaine possession. As well as his club fine he was stripped of the Reds' vice-captaincy, and he was also ordered to pay Aus\$2,500 by magistrates on Queensland's Gold Coast. —AFP

Australia's cricketer Blackwell retires

SYDNEY: Australia's most-capped female player and vice-captain Alex Blackwell was hailed as a "tremendous leader" in the women's game after announcing her retirement from international and state cricket yesterday.

Blackwell, 34, made her debut for Australia in a one-day international against England in 2003, and went on to play 251 matches across all three formats for her country. She became just the fourth female Australian to pass 5,000 runs when she batted in the Test, Twenty20 and One-Day arenas, compiling 5,250 runs.

"Alex has been a wonderful servant to Australian cricket, and a tremen-

dous leader both at national and international level, and we congratulate her on an outstanding career that has spanned more than 16 years," Cricket Australia chief executive James Sutherland said in a statement.

Blackwell, who led Australia to victory at the ICC Twenty20 World Cup in the West Indies in 2010, was also a member of Australia's World T20 winning sides in 2012 and 2014 and has two World Cup trophies from 2005 and 2013.

"What I'm most proud of is probably my ability to continue to evolve as a batter, particularly with the introduction of T20 cricket," she told reporters. "Just my constant pursuit of personal excellence and mastery of batting, which continues."

"And I guess what I am also proud of is my part that I've played in an organisation that has really led on issues such as diversity and inclusion and gender equity," Blackwell said she would continue to play for the Sydney Thunder in the women's Big Bash League. —AFP

Black Caps coach Hesson rejects call to scrap T20

WELLINGTON: New Zealand coach Mike Hesson defended international Twenty20 cricket yesterday after his English counterpart called for it to be cut from the sport's crowded calendar. Hesson acknowledged England coach Trevor Bayliss' concerns about burnout among players and staff but said T20 had an important role to play internationally.

"There's always a workload issue, I think that's fair, but there's also a revenue generation issue," he told reporters. "In some countries that's not as big a deal but for New Zealand Cricket, to get 35,000 people to Eden Park is huge for us, huge for the game and huge for the promotion of the game."

Hesson also rejected the notion that T20 internationals were not meaningful fixtures. "Too right they are," he said. "You've got guys that only play T20 and that's their chance to play internationally."

Bayliss sparked the debate after his side failed to qualify for the trans-Tasman T20 series final, despite beating New Zealand by two runs in Hamilton on Sunday. The Australian, who was appointed as England's head coach in all forms of the game in 2015, questioned

the wisdom of retaining the T20 format at the top level, citing the burden on top players and coaches.

Instead, he suggested administrators could ease international fixture congestion by leaving T20 to domestic competitions such as India's IPL and the Australian Big Bash League. "I wouldn't play T20 internationals, I'd just let the franchises play," Bayliss told Sky Sports.

"If we continue putting on so many games there'll be a certain amount of blowout, not just players but coaches as well," Bayliss, who has coached in both the IPL and BBL, said any international T20s should be held in a limited window based around the ICC's T20 World Cup.

"If you want to play a World Cup every four years or whatever it is, maybe six months before you get the international teams and let them play some T20 internationals," he said. England have struggled for form in the T20 tri-series, missing key players in the wake of the Ashes and one-day international series in Australia.

They edged past New Zealand with a two-run victory in Hamilton on Sunday but failed to qualify for tomorrow's final against Australia due to an inferior run rate. The tourists still have a Test and one-day series to come in New Zealand and Bayliss said coaching all three formats on such a marathon tour was challenging.

He said it made sense to split coaching duties between different formats. "If you go to a swimming tournament you've got 1500m specialists and 100m specialists," he said. "I think it's definitely the way it's heading, not just with the players." Bayliss announced last month that he would step down as England coach when his four-year contract ends next year. —AFP

Sports

Barca visit presents Champions League stage Conte craves

Conte needs Champions League nights to remember

LONDON: Barcelona's visit to Chelsea today gives Antonio Conte the perfect opportunity to reaffirm his stature as one of Europe's greatest coaches.

"To play against Barcelona is a great challenge for us," Conte said after easing the pressure on his job with back-to-back home wins over West Brom and Hull in the past week. "We must be excited to play this type of game, especially against this team. I consider Barcelona one of the best teams in the world."

Conte also considers himself one of the best coaches in the world, referring to himself despite a recent 4-1 drubbing at Watford as "a winner." He does so with some justification. In a glittering coaching career, Conte made Juventus title winners again with three consecutive Serie A titles after a five-year drought. He also surpassed expectations by leading an Italy side short on star names to the quarter-finals of Euro 2016, and delivered the Premier League in his debut season at Chelsea. However, a second season slump at the Bridge and his fractious relationship with the club's hierarchy means most believe the Italian won't last at Chelsea beyond the end of the season at the latest.

Whether it is to convince Roman Abramovich and close aid Marina Granovskaia should remain in charge next season or to attract the attention of Europe's other giants who may be looking for a coach come the summer, Conte needs Champions League nights to remember. His two years in the competition at Juventus ended in a 4-0 quarter-final aggregate thrashing from Bayern Munich and an embarrassing group stage exit behind Galatasaray.

CONTE'S MONEY COMPLAINTS

Conte complained then it was impossible for Italian sides to compete at the latter stages of the Champions League. It didn't help his case then that his successor Massimiliano Allegri then led Juve to two Champions League finals in three seasons.

There have been similarities between Conte's final days at Juventus and many of his public outbursts against the Chelsea ownership this season over his lack of input over recruitment and how much is spent.

"I think I'm a bit of a disaster to convince the club to buy the players," Conte said last week. "I have to speak more with the managers who are very, very good to persuade their clubs to spend money and buy top players." Conte may then welcome his meeting with the more softly-spoken Ernesto Valverde this week. In Valverde's eight-month spell in charge, Barca have smashed their

club record transfer fee twice for Ousmane Dembele and Philippe Coutinho. Yet, it is in a very different way that Conte may be able to learn from Valverde as neither Dembele or Coutinho have made much impact on Barca opening up a seven-point La Liga lead and booking their place in the Copa del Rey final.

Instead, Valverde has made the best of what he inherited to turn Barca from the depths of a pre-season crisis into potential treble winners.

Neymar's decision to walk out on the club for a world record 222 million euros to Paris Saint-Germain was a huge loss that Valverde has used as an opportunity to reconstruct a more solid side that maintains the firepower of Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez in attack.

"I think I'm a disaster to convince club to buy the players"



LONDON: Chelsea's Spanish midfielder Pedro (2L) collides with Chelsea's Brazilian midfielder Willian (3L) during a training session at Chelsea's Cobham training facility in Stoke D'Abernon, southwest of London yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League round of 16 football match against Barcelona. — AFP

A change from Barca's traditional 4-3-3 to a 4-4-2 has seen them concede just once in their six Champions League games to date, and 11 times in 24 La Liga outings. Meanwhile, the space left unoccupied by Neymar has unleashed left-back Jordi Alba as an attacking threat. Alba was on target as Barca equalled a club record by avoiding defeat for a 31st straight La

Liga game in a 2-0 win at Eibar on Saturday.

Most of all, Valverde's calm has restored stability to a club that badly needed a steady hand after a tumultuous summer. That may be the lesson Conte and Chelsea can learn from most of all before careering towards another messy divorce at the end of the season. — AFP

Real stage comeback to win eight-goal thriller at Betis

SEVILLE: Cristiano Ronaldo and Sergio Ramos helped Real Madrid mount a stirring second-half comeback to beat Real Betis 5-3 away from home in a thrilling La Liga game on Sunday, demonstrating their awesome power in attack as well as their vulnerabilities.

Marco Asensio headed the Liga champions in front in the 11th minute but Aissa Mandi nodded in an equaliser in the 33rd. Nacho Fernandez then diverted a fumbled save by Keylor Navas into his own net to give ninth-placed Betis the lead in the 37th.

A party atmosphere had gripped the Benito Villamarin stadium but locally-born Real captain Ramos punctured the mood by levelling with a towering header from a corner five minutes into the second half. Gareth Bale spurned two good chances to score and it was left to hot-shot winger Asensio to put Madrid back in front with a strike across goal to complete a blistering counterattack.

Ronaldo looked to have sealed the win with a net-bursting strike from a tight angle shortly after the hour mark. Substitute Sergio Leon pulled a goal back for Betis in the 85th minute to set up a tense finish. However, substitute Karim Benzema pounced in stoppage time for Madrid's 13th goal in three games after their 3-1 win over Paris St Germain in the Champions League on Wednesday and their 5-2 hammering of Real Sociedad last weekend.

Real are fourth in the league standings on 45 points, 17 behind runaway leaders Barcelona although they can climb above Valencia and in to third place if they win at Leganes tomorrow. — AFP

Heynckes brings treble spirit to resurgent Bayern

BERLIN: Bayern Munich host Besiktas in the last 16, first leg of the Champions League riding a 13-match winning streak under Jupp Heynckes, the architect behind the revival of his 2013 treble-winning heroes.

Since Heynckes replaced Carlo Ancelotti as head coach at the start of October, Bayern have won 22 of 23 matches going into today's clash at Munich's Allianz Arena. Bayern were five points adrift of then-leaders Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga when the 72-year-old Heynckes returned for his fourth stint at the club. A 3-0 thrashing at Paris Saint-Germain in late September was Ancelotti's final game before Bayern turned to Heynckes to fix the leaks. It was a gamble. Tending the garden and walking his dog Cando had been Heynckes's main tasks since steering Bayern to a treble of Champions League, Bundesliga and German Cup titles five years ago.

"My wife and my daughter said I should do it," said Heynckes when Bayern came calling again. "My dog also barked twice, so that meant I should do it." Training started an hour earlier, sessions were tougher and discipline was tightened under Heynckes. Thomas Mueller, a player Ancelotti never figured out where best to position, was moved in from the wing and deployed to roam just behind striker Robert Lewandowski.

Javi Martinez was pushed forward from centre-back into defensive midfield, where he played in the 2013 campaign, and the impact was instant.

FINE TUNING

Bayern won 5-0 at Freiburg in Heynckes's first game back. "No one could have known what four years away from football had done to Jupp," said Martinez.

"Now I know: he's stayed the same. He still has his personality - he always knows exactly when to tighten the reins." Bayern were back in business and won their next nine games on the trot. A 2-1 defeat at Borussia Moenchengladbach in November remains their only reverse following Heynckes's return.

They reached the German Cup semi-finals the hard way after winning at RB Leipzig and Borussia Dortmund in the early rounds. Then in December, the humiliating defeat in



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's head coach Jupp Heynckes looks on during a press conference yesterday in Munich, southern Germany, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League round of sixteen first leg football match Bayern Munich vs Besiktas Istanbul. — AFP

Paris was avenged when Bayern beat PSG 3-1 in Munich - although it wasn't enough to prevent them finishing second in their Champions League group.

The Bavarians have also regained their unyielding grip on first place in Germany, with Saturday's 2-1 come-from-behind win at Wolfsburg leaving them 19 points clear at the summit. Resting several stars, Bayern fell behind after eight minutes, but their drive and determination was rewarded as Lewandowski came off the bench to net a last-gasp penalty for his 20th league goal this season. "This will win matches, even if it's not so exciting at the top (of the table), just makes it fun," said Bayern captain Mueller. "This team is simply awesome."

FEEL-GOOD FACTOR

Just like Mueller and Martinez, the other leading protagonists from the great 2012-13 side credit Heynckes for the club's rejuvenation. Robben helped create both goals

at Wolfsburg, whipping in a cross for Sandro Wagner and then winning the penalty which Lewandowski converted. "You could see the turnaround from the first day," said Robben, who scored the winning goal in the 2013 Champions League final. Franck Ribery's recovery from a knee injury has also helped, with the Frenchman on target in wins over Bayer Leverkusen and Mainz since the turn of the year. "We're playing as a team again - with Jupp's return, a good feeling and the faith came flooding back," Ribery said in January. It's not just the holdovers from the previous Heynckes era who have profited.

Colombian playmaker James Rodriguez has blossomed under Heynckes, a fluent Spanish speaker and the man who led Real Madrid to Champions League glory in 1998. "This team won't let up, regardless of what competition it is," Heynckes warned. But whether he is in charge beyond the end of this season remains doubtful, as Heynckes insists he will walk away despite efforts to persuade him to stay. — AFP

Norway's coach hopes Olympic gold ends funding woes

GANGNEUNG: Norway's national coach Sondre Skarli is hoping the country finally ending its long wait for a gold medal in an Olympic speed skating discipline will end years of austerity imposed by a chronic lack of funding.

Once a powerhouse of speed skating alongside the Netherlands, Norway's programmes have fallen on hard times since the Sochi Olympics. But, Skarli is optimistic that Hvard Lorentzen's dramatic gold medal in the men's 500 metres on Monday will change all that.

"Right after Sochi, we lost our main sponsor and we had under half of what we used to have," Skarli told reporters. "We had an extremely low budget the last few years and a really big lack of sponsors. It's been pretty hard being the coach. You want to do something and then you can't because you don't have the money to do it. It's a shame that you have to think about money in sports. It shouldn't be this way."

Lorentzen edged out Cha Min-kyu in a dramatic photo finish at the Gangneung Oval, finishing 0.01 seconds in front of the South Korean skater for gold, with both men ending their runs below the previous Olympic record.

Lorentzen was the first Norwegian to win the 500m title since Finn Helgesen 70 years ago, and his victory marks the first gold for his country in an Olympic speed skating event since Adne Sondral won the 1,500m at the Nagano Games in 1998.

The years without success have led to funds drying up and the overwhelming popularity of cross-country and alpine skiing, in which Norway has won six of its 11 gold medals of the Games in South Korea so far, has not helped either.

"We have an extremely small budget compared to those sports," Skarli added. "Money can't buy you everything. Hard work is, of course, what matters in the end but money helps."

TOP COACHING

The key influence in Lorentzen's win, according to Skarli, was having former world 500m record holder Jeremy Wotherspoon in his corner coaching him. The Canadian began working with Norway in 2016 and has helped Lorentzen develop into a top skater.

"He's a lot faster since I started coaching him but I don't want to say that (he wouldn't have won the gold medal without me)," Wotherspoon said.

"I don't know what would have happened if I wasn't



Sondre Skarli

here but I feel like we started a good relationship together and did a lot of good work together." For Lorentzen himself, returning to the top of the Olympic podium for the first time in 20 years will go a long way towards rekindling Norway's love for the sport.

"The passion for speed skating is in the Norwegian people," he said. "As long as we can deliver good results, I think it could become as popular as cross-country skiing." The 25-year-old will have another shot at doing just that when he races in the 1,000m on Friday. — Reuters



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Bayern Munich v Besiktas	22:45
beIN SPORTS HD 2	
Chelsea v Barcelona	22:45
beIN SPORTS HD 1	

ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Ulsan Hyundai v Kawasaki Frontale	13:00
beIN SPORTS HD 5	
Kashiwa Reysol v Tianjin Quanjian	13:30
beIN SPORTS HD 4	
Kitchee v Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors	15:00
beIN SPORTS HD 5	
Shanghai SIPG v Melbourne Victory	15:00
beIN SPORTS HD 3	
Nasaf Qarshi v AlWasl	16:00
beIN SPORTS HD 2	
AlAin v Al Rayyan	18:10
beIN SPORTS HD 3	
AlSadd v Persepolis	18:30
beIN SPORTS HD 2	
Esteghlal Tehran v Al Hilal	18:30
beIN SPORTS HD 4	

Sports



Five-star Canada, USA set up Olympic hockey showdown

Canadians thrash Olympic Athletes from Russia 5-0

GANGNEUNG: Four-time defending champion Canada and reigning world champion United States advanced to the Pyeongchang Olympic women's hockey final with clinical shutout triumphs yesterday, setting up another showdown for gold between the arch-rivals. The Canadians stretched their Olympic win streak to 24 games and kept alive their drive for five consecutive gold medals by thrashing the Olympic Athletes from Russia 5-0.

"It's kind of exciting, but we're only here for one reason," Canada's Meghan Agosta said. "We just need to carry on the momentum. There's no doubt in my mind we're the better team."

The US women, who haven't won Olympic gold in 20 years, blanked Finland 5-0 to reach Thursday's title game. "It's honestly a dream come true," US forward Hilary Knight said. "It's the world's biggest stage. It's the game you've been dreaming of. You have to keep working and do the things you do well."

Only once in Olympic or world championship history has the final not been contested by the two teams, and when the two meet they are usually chippy and physical affairs. "That kind of intensity is why you love the game and why you want to play it," said Canada coach Laura Schuler. "It's important for our girls to play physical... this is how you want it, best-on-best competition." Count on physical play from both teams if Canada's 2-1 group stage win over the Americans is any indication.

"It's going to be a rough game and everyone is going to give their all," said Canada's Rebecca Johnston. "It should be a great game." Canada needed over-time to beat the Americans in the 2014 Olympic final, but has

since dropped three world finals to the Americans. "We're confident. We'll stick with what has gotten us success the last three years," US forward Jocelyne Lamoureux-Davidson said. "We'll enjoy this. It's what we came here and worked hard for, to put ourselves in position for a gold medal." Canada's Jennifer Wakefield scored 1:50 into the semi-final and Canadian captain Marie-Philip Poulin netted a backhand 3:10 into the second period to make it 2-0. Wakefield struck again 1:59 into the third, Emily Clark followed 31 seconds later and Johnston added the last goal with 5:52 remaining. Shannon Szabados made 14 saves in the shutout.

“ We just need to carry on the momentum ”

'GOLD MEDAL PREPARATION'

Dani Cameranesi scored two goals and goaltender Maddie Rooney made 14 saves in the American triumph. Lamoureux-Davidson, Knight and Gigi Martin also scored as the US women dominated.

"It's spectacular to see our team come out and perform that well because there was a lot of pressure," US coach Robb Stauber said. "This was really a gold medal preparation for us. We had to be ready." One item of concern for the Americans was the hard hit US captain Meghan Duggan inflicted on Finland's Ronja Savolainen, sending her face-first into the boards.

"My head just got hit on the boards. But I'm good," Savolainen said. "I was taking so long my feet were pretty cold." Duggan said she didn't expect an issue regarding a possible ban for the final. "I don't think so," Duggan said. "There wasn't a call on the ice. We kept going." The Americans, who have not won Olympic



GANGNEUNG: Russia's Maria Batalova vies with Canada's Meghan Agosta (2R) in the women's semi-final ice hockey match between Canada and the Olympic Athletes from Russia during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Gangneung Hockey Centre in Gangneung yesterday. — AFP

gold since the first women's tournament in 1998 at Nagano, outshot Canada 45-23 in the loss last week. "We had a lot of point-blank scoring opportunities. We've got to find a way to get those in the net,"

Lamoureux-Davidson said.

"When you put 45 shots on goal you've got to be able to put more than one into the net. We just have to find a way to finish." — AFP

Vonn is downhill favourite, says rival Goggia

PYEONGCHANG: The form book suggests there is little to choose between the world's top two women downhill skiers ahead of tomorrow's Olympic race at the Jeongseon Alpine Centre. But Italian Sofia Goggia believes her rival, 2010 gold medal winner Lindsey Vonn, starts as the woman to beat.

"Maybe she is the favourite, she has so much experience," Goggia said yesterday, before pausing for thought. "No, she is definitely the favourite," she added with a grin. Vonn, 33, won the last time the pair went head-to-head in a World Cup race in Garmisch earlier this month with Goggia finishing second.

Before that though Goggia, the 25-year-old from Bergamo, triumphed over the American in Bad Kleinkirchheim and Cortina d'Ampezzo and the Italian heads the World Cup downhill standings.

There is a fascinating contrast between the two leading contenders. Vonn is often tense and can talk in great detail about course conditions and the necessary technical adjustments required. Goggia seems less interested in 'shop talk' and suggests she doesn't like to over-think things.

While Vonn spent time after her training run on Monday answering questions about abuse she has received on social media because of her views of U.S. President Donald Trump, Goggia was chatting with reporters about how much she enjoyed Czech snowboarder Ester Ledecka's shock win in the women's



PYEONGCHANG: USA's Lindsey Vonn takes part in the Women's Downhill 1st training at the Jeongseon Alpine Center during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang. —AFP

super-G. "I love it when people who say things are guaranteed are shown that it isn't guaranteed," she laughed. For the Italian when it comes to the Olympics, including Wednesday's downhill, the form book counts for little, as does preparation.

"I feel good. Of course I have been better during the season, also physically, but it is not any more a matter of how you feel, how many trainings you do," she said. "It is about how badly you want it at the start gate and how bad you believe it. I am going to give it my best".

Vonn said she would be watching film of Goggia's training runs to see if she could get some ideas for the best line to take, especially in the lower section where others had complained it was hard to maintain speed. But Goggia won't be studying film.

"I haven't seen the video of anyone - I know what I can do, I am going to trust myself," she said. "I think it's not the line, it is how you feel the downhill, how you feel your skis and the set-up. Downhill is about how you connect together and I will try to (bring the) love" she said with a laugh. — Reuters

Medals not the only valuable Olympic memories

GANGNEUNG: Inside the Pyeongchang venues the world's finest winter sports athletes battle it out for medals, but outside the atmosphere is friendlier as athletes and collectors gather to trade the Olympic pins that are made as mementos of each Games.

Every Olympics attracts enthusiasts like Bob Kalmuk from California who travel to watch the sports, meet people and trade the pins which are created by Olympic teams, sponsors and broadcasters.

"I just got caught up in the Olympic fever back in '84 in Los Angeles, it just got me hooked," a shivering Kalmuk said outside the Olympic skating centre in frigid conditions where he has laid out some of his collection of thousands of pins.

"I plan my vacations around going to the games. I like the summer games better because it's warmer," adds the veteran of 17 Olympic Games.

Kalmuk has brought display books filled with duplicates of pins he is willing to trade for new and in some cases more desirable ones to his collection and the first question he asks everyone is whether or not they have any pins to trade.

"I like pins from different national Olympic committees, I really like the ones from Thailand, they were really well-made," said Kalmuk, who attended the opening ceremony and is planning to watch some of the ice hockey.

"Going back to '84, there were so many big, beautiful pins. Some are harder to get so you trade two for one on something." Though items like Olympic torches and medals can fetch huge sums at sports memorabilia auctions, the value of Olympic pins is mostly sentimental.

Helpful local volunteers are often rewarded for their efforts with a pin which is then worn on the lanyard holding their accreditation. Many athletes, like American figure skater Mirai Nagasu, are also keen to take home as many as they can.

"It's a long-time tradition, and we're also given pins to trade and it gives us an opportunity to meet pin collectors and to trade with other athletes as well," Nagasu told Reuters as she inspected the pins of Kalmuk and the other traders.

"In the village this Olympics, there's actually a pin quest game, you can collect Olympic pins. It's kind of like Olympic pins and (TV game show) 'Jeopardy' at the same time."

The 24-year-old Nagasu won bronze in the team figure skating and while the pins she trades are less valuable, she is no less enthusiastic about them, even if she is not sure what she is going to do with them.

"Maybe I'll display them," she said as she traded two US Olympic pins for a Harry Potter badge with another collector. "I like to keep them on my lanyard-I mean, this credential becomes something special, that's something cool to have."

"It's a cool tradition that only the Olympics has. I think every country participates and you get to collect pins from different countries, and it's a chance to meet with other people." — Reuters

South Korea and Japan celebrate skaters' bonhomie

GANGNEUNG: A photo of rival skaters from South Korea and Japan hugging each other after a tense race has touched many hearts in the two neighbours with a bitter history, with many including Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe applauding their friendship.

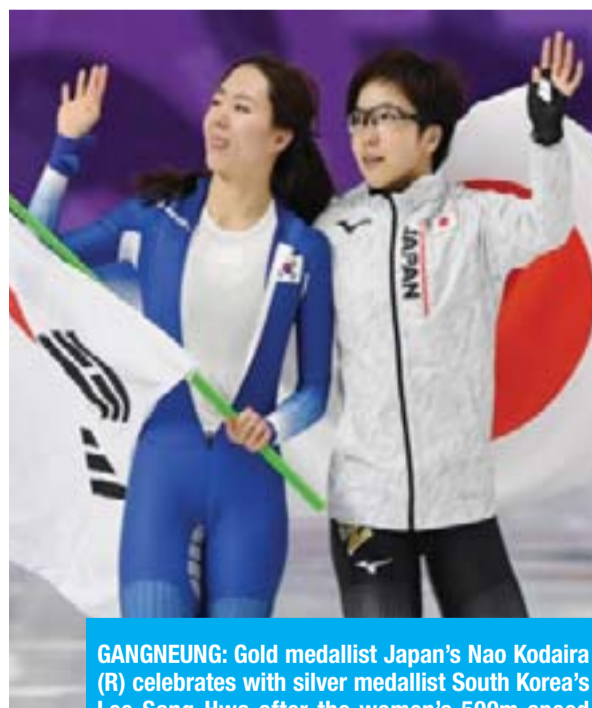
Japanese skater Nao Kodaira stormed to gold in the women's 500 metre race on Sunday night, beating defending champion and hometown favourite Lee Sang-hwa. But a picture of Kodaira hugging and comforting her rival, who was in tears holding a South Korean flag, has melted hearts in both nations. Bilateral relations remain strained due to the shared past in which Japan colonised South Korea from 1910-1945.

"The sight of two of you embracing each other after the race and congratulating each other was really wonderful," Abe told her yesterday during a phone call to congratulate Kodaira on her first Olympic win.

Japanese viewers tweeted that the scene brought them to tears, while one wrote: "The scene of the two embracing is something all humanity has been waiting for." Newspaper headlines in Japan also lauded the gesture, saying "Embrace for Rival Lee" and commenting on their bond.

In South Korea, photos of the two were prominently carried in major newspapers with headlines such as "A borderless friendship" and "Lee's tears and Kodaira's consolation-The rivals' beautiful finale."

Thousands took to the Internet and social media to praise their gesture as a true friendship and sportsmanship. "I was sobbing while watching Kodaira and Lee strolling around the ice rink after the race. That scene



GANGNEUNG: Gold medalist Japan's Nao Kodaira (R) celebrates with silver medalist South Korea's Lee Sang-Hwa after the women's 500m speed skating event during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games. — AFP

really grasped the core Olympic value," wrote one commentator on Naver, South Korea's biggest Internet portal. Others heralded the friendship of the two women as a sign of a real "Peace Olympics," instead of the thaw in inter-Korean relations lauded by the country's president. South Korean President Moon Jae-in has termed the Pyeongchang Winter games the "Peace Olympics" for bringing the two Koreas together and helping ease tensions on the peninsula after a tense standoff over North Korea's nuclear and missile programme. — Reuters

Medals Table					
Olympic Games complete medals table on day 10 in PyeongChang.					
Rank	Country	G	S	B	Total
	Norway	10	9	8	27
	Germany	10	5	4	19
	Canada	6	5	6	17
	Netherlands	6	5	2	13
	U.S.	5	3	2	10
	Sweden	4	3	0	7
	France	4	2	4	10
	Austria	4	2	4	10
	South Korea	3	2	2	7
	Japan	2	5	3	10
	Switzerland	2	4	1	7
	Italy	2	1	3	6
	Czech Republic	1	2	3	6
	Slovakia	1	2	0	3
	Belarus	1	1	0	2
	Britain	1	0	3	4
	Poland	1	0	0	1
	Ukraine	1	0	0	1
	China	0	5	2	7
	Olympic Athlete from Russia	0	3	8	11
	Australia	0	2	1	3
	Slovenia	0	1	0	1
	Finland	0	0	3	3
	Spain	0	0	2	2
	Latvia	0	0	1	1
	Liechtenstein	0	0	1	1
	Kazakhstan	0	0	1	1
	Total	64	62	64	190

G = Gold, S = Silver, B = Bronze

13 Team LeBron rallies to beat Team Stephen in All-Star classic



14 Heynckes brings treble spirit to resurgent Bayern



15 South Korea and Japan celebrate skaters' bonhomie



GANGNEUNG: Canada's Tessa Virtue and Canada's Scott Moir compete in the ice dance short dance of the figure skating event during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Gangneung Ice Arena in Gangneung yesterday. — AFP

Virtue, Moir set new ice dance record

Papadakis, Cizeron trail by less than two points



GANGNEUNG: Canada's Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir made a perfect start in their bid to add another Olympic medal to the four they already possess by breaking their own ice dance short programme world record to skate ahead of the field yesterday.

The pair have tasted defeat just once since coming out of retirement in late 2016, when a loss to France's Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron at the Nagoya Grand Prix Final last December was enough to make them tweak their programme.

Virtue and Moir, who are competing in their last Olympics and played a key role in Canada's team tro-

phy gold last week, scored 83.67 points for their sizzling Latin-themed routine, breaking their previous record mark of 82.68.

They edged out their French rivals, whose stellar skate had the audience clapping along to the Ed Sheeran soundtrack that accompanied their dance, by less than two points with Papadakis and Cizeron awarded 81.93 by the judges.

"It feels great but even better than the world record is the feeling we had when we ended the programme," Virtue told Reuters. "We're really pleased with that performance. On the world's biggest stage when the pressure is mounting, it's nice to be able to deliver like that." Virtue and Moir have two individual

Olympic medals, gold from Vancouver in 2010 and silver in Sochi four years ago, as well as a 2014 team silver to go with last week's gold.

These Olympics have been billed as a showdown between the Canadian and French pairs, with figure skating experts believing a loss for Virtue and Moir would signal a generational change in the sport.

RESPECTFUL RIVALRY

The Canadians told reporters last week that after December's stinging loss to the French, they went back and changed things in their programme, mainly to improve their transitions to make both the short and free skates more fluid and seamless.

Asked about the showdown with Papadakis and Cizeron, who share the same coaches and practice at the same rink in Canada, Moir said: "We've marked them as our rivals for a long time, from the start of this comeback. "We watched their worlds when we weren't there and we have nothing but respect for these two."

Papadakis and Cizeron appeared a little disappointed after their skate, with the former saying, "It felt great but could have been better." They said the rivalry was sometimes frustrating but more often helpful.

"Yeah, it has been something that has been really hard to work with but really inspiring at the same time," Cizeron said. "It really pushes us to go over our limits and it has been an interesting journey. It brings out our competitive energy but that's what we look for in sport I think. Every athlete wouldn't be as good if he didn't have someone to push against." Americans Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue claimed third place with a 77.75 score that was just enough to put them above compatriots Maia and Alex Shibutani by 0.02 points. The free skate takes place today before the ladies event kicks off a day later. —Reuters



Two American pairs in virtual dead-heat for third

shared gold when they dead-headed in the two-man bobsleigh—the first time two teams have shared the title since Nagano 1998. Robert Johansson and his bushy handlebar moustache anchored Norway to victory in the men's team ski jump, while Havarard Lorentzen won the men's 500m speed skating as Norway went clear on the medals table with 11 golds to Germany's 10.

Shiffrin arrived in Pyeongchang capable of challenging, Michael Phelps-style, for five gold medals, but it has been a tough Games so far for the American. After bombing in the slalom and pulling out of the super-G, she announced her withdrawal from the downhill yesterday as looming bad weather forced yet another schedule change.

It means that Shiffrin, who won the giant slalom, can finish with a maximum of two individual golds, with just Thursday's combined event left on her schedule. "As much as I wanted to compete in the Olympic downhill, with the schedule change, it's important for me to focus my energy on preparing for the combined," said Shiffrin.—AFP

Russian dope case rocks Olympics, Shiffrin trims schedule

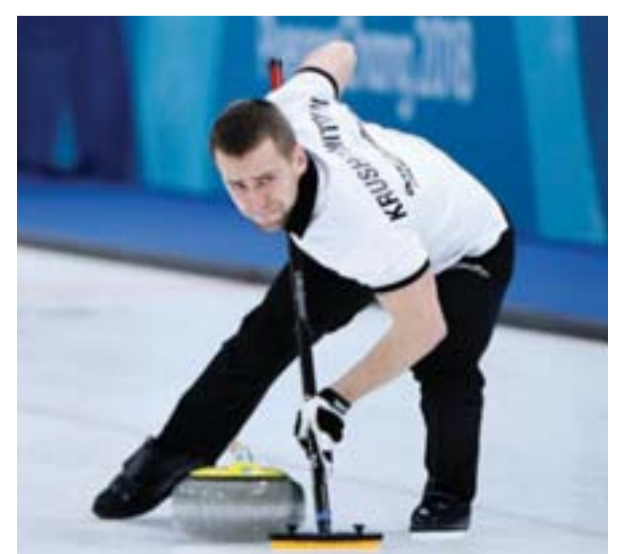
PYEONGCHANG: A doping case involving a medal-winning Russian curler rocked the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics yesterday, as Mikaela Shiffrin's turbulent Games took another twist when she pulled out of the downhill skiing.

Alexander Krushelnitsky's failed drug test came to light a week after he won mixed doubles bronze with his wife, Anastasia Bryzgalova, and could extend Russia's suspension from the Olympics. The case, now with the Court of Arbitration for Sport, will be consid-

ered by Olympic officials deciding whether to lift Russia's ban in time for Sunday's closing ceremony.

"Should this case be proven... that will also be part of the consideration as to whether there will be an allowance for them to march in the closing ceremony under their flag," said International Olympic Committee spokesman Mark Adams. Russia were banned from the Olympics after investigations revealed an extensive doping plot culminating at the Sochi 2014 Winter Games, where the hosts topped the medals table. But 168 Russian athletes declared clean after extensive vetting were allowed to compete in Pyeongchang as neutrals, under the banner of "Olympic Athletes from Russia". "Only athletes for whom there was no suspicion were invited to the Games," Adams said, adding: "Unfortunately wherever there's competitive sport, you'll have people cheating."

"But I think you can be pretty confident we have a very, very thorough testing process in place and we have the experts with the expertise who are doing that." Among yesterday's events, Canada and Germany



Aleksandr Krushelnitskiy

Business

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2018

18 NBK Capital hosts fourth annual investment forum 'The Insight'**19** New Mercedes-Maybach S-Class: Taking exclusivity to a new level**21** Toyota sells over 1.52 million electrified vehicles in 2017

MUMBAI: A woman speaks on her phone while a journalist waits next to the sealed entrance of the Brady House branch of the Punjab National Bank (PNB) which had been sealed in Mumbai yesterday.—AFP

PNB fraud points to Cen Bank failure: Govt

Investigators close bank branch at heart of \$1.77bn scam

MUMBAI/NEW DELHI: India's government has said the \$1.77 billion fraud at state-run Punjab National Bank was a "manifestation of supervisory failure" at the country's central bank, local media reported yesterday.

In a letter to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the government said the failure to detect the fraud, the biggest ever in India's banking sector, raised questions about the central bank's "efficacy of supervision to detect and check systemic failure", NewsRise and other local media reported.

"Either the framework designed by RBI to prevent and detect such frauds is inadequate or RBI is unable to ensure its effective implementation," they quoted the letter as saying. The RBI did not immediately respond to a request for comment yesterday, which was a holiday in Mumbai. A finance ministry spokesman declined comment. Rajeev Kumar, the top government bureaucrat overseeing banks, told Reuters in New Delhi the finance ministry had written to the country's banks to take effective steps to avoid a repeat of a PNB-like fraud. Kumar declined to comment if the government had written to the RBI.

The government action comes as federal police briefly locked down the PNB branch in south Mumbai

that was at the heart of the scam and continued searches yesterday to gather evidence. The bank would have been closed yesterday anyway because of the holiday. A source at the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) said the branch was likely to resume operations today.

Besides searching the premises, the police also questioned more PNB officials yesterday, the CBI source said, taking the total number bank staff who have been questioned so far to 13. Three people, including two employees of PNB, India's second largest state-run lender, were arrested and presented before a Mumbai court over the weekend in the case that involves billionaire jeweler Nirav Modi. Police also questioned some executives from Nirav Modi's group, the source said.

The bank has said that the two employees arrested

by police colluded with companies belonging to Modi and another jeweler Mehul Choksi, who heads jewelry retailer Gitanjali Gems Ltd and other companies.

Jeweler Modi, whose clients include Hollywood stars such as Kate Winslet and Dakota Johnson, has not commented on the allegations. Police have said Modi and his family left India before PNB filed a complaint on the alleged fraud. Choksi has also not commented, and police have said he also left India last month.

Shares plunge

PNB has said the two bank officials issued fraudulent letters of undertaking to overseas branches of other Indian banks which lent money to the jewels based on the guarantee from PNB. All the letters of undertaking were issued by the two employees who were working at the Brady Road branch in south Mumbai. PNB shares slid for a fourth

straight day yesterday, closing 7.2 percent lower. The selloff has wiped out about \$1.7 billion, or more than a quarter of the bank's market value, since it disclosed the fraud last Wednesday. Meanwhile in a sign of the widening fallout from the PNB case, shares of Choksi's Gitanjali Gems fell 9.9 percent after its chief financial officer and company secretary resigned yesterday. In a letter shared with stock exchanges, Company Secretary Pankhuri Warange said she was resigning because of the company's lack of disclosure despite her advice to be forthcoming.

"I have advised the management on the required disclosures to be made. There is however no consensus in my opinion on the disclosures to be made and that of the management, and in these circumstances, my conscience doesn't permit me to continue with my position," she wrote.

Warange did not disclose additional details. The other executive, Chief Financial Officer Chandrakant Karkare, cited his wife's health as the reason for his resignation, according to a Gitanjali filing to stock exchanges. A representative for Gitanjali, which last week denied Choksi's involvement in the alleged fraud, did not respond to requests for comment yesterday.—Reuters



Indian banks' shares plunge after scam

For Aramco IPO timing, watch forward oil price curve

LONDON: It's the burning question in the oil industry: when will Saudi Arabia pull the trigger on the Aramco stock market listing? Many industry experts are focusing on the current level of oil prices. However another key consideration for Saudi officials in floating up to 5 percent of the state oil producer is where they see prices in one to two years' time, two sources close to the IPO said.

The Riyadh government is carefully analyzing the future price curve structure in oil markets because it regards prices further out as an important element in achieving a high valuation in what could be the biggest

initial public offering in history, the sources told Reuters. Ideally, so-called long-dated prices for one and two years ahead need to move at least \$10 higher - to around \$70 per barrel - for the government to be happy to launch the listing, said the sources, who declined to be named as the information is confidential.

"When will the ideal moment come?" said one of the sources. "Maybe you should also look at the forward curve for oil ... as the forward curve will be key for investors valuing Aramco."

The Saudi energy ministry and Saudi Aramco did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Many considerations are likely to influence the IPO timing, and the final decision may rest with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. But if long-dated prices at around \$70 are an important factor, this could indicate a listing may be some way away.

Brent oil futures for March 2019 are valued now at \$60.60, about a \$4 discount to the \$64.50 current - spot - price, and for two years away at \$57.70.

Saudi officials have given few clues about the IPO, with energy minister Khalid Al-Falih and finance minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan saying only that the govern-

ment will proceed when "the time is right".

Spot and long-dated prices often do not move together. Immediate prices are more influenced by developments such as politically driven supply outages or natural disasters, while prices further down the curve are more affected by broader expectations of supply and demand, factoring in issues such as OPEC output policy and the rise of electric vehicles. Spot prices rose to a three-year high above \$70 in January but have since slid nearly 15 percent together with a broader decline in the stock markets due to fears about global inflation as well as renewed concerns about rising US oil production.

The concern about long-dated prices could also cast OPEC kingpin Saudi Arabia's oil-supply policies in a new light. The kingdom has orchestrated a global oil output cut deal to support prices, a move which Reuters has previously reported was partly driven by a desire to maximize Aramco's valuation for the IPO. Falih has repeatedly said he sees OPEC cuts lasting until the end of 2018 and even then that the exit would be very gradual - comments that helped support not only near-term but also longer-dated prices.

'Sweet spot'

The Saudi government says Aramco is worth \$2 trillion and aims to list on one or more foreign stock exchanges in addition to Riyadh. Saudi sources have said the listing on a local bourse could happen before the international listing. It is not clear if the forward oil price indicator will be a key consideration for the timing of a local listing. The IPO is a central part of the crown prince's reform drive aimed at restructuring the kingdom's economy and reducing its dependence on oil revenue. The prince is also one of the architects of the output production pact between OPEC and Russia.

While Saudi officials think \$60 per barrel is a reasonable price for oil in the long term, the rally at the start of 2018 has provided an incentive to bump up the Aramco valuation, according to a third source close to the IPO. "\$60 is a sweet spot. But now they are making hay while the sun shines," the source said. He added however that, inside Aramco, concerns were also rising that a prolonged rally could again spur US shale production too much and lead to a loss of Saudi market share. "A rally to the \$70s carries the seeds of its own destruction," the source said. — Reuters

Business

NBK Capital hosts fourth annual investment forum 'The Insight'

Clients, investors and financial experts attend forum



Faisal Al-Hamad welcoming the guests



Panel discussion hosted by international analysts and specialists in the real estate sector

KUWAIT: Watani Investment Company (NBK Capital) hosted its fourth annual Investment Forum entitled "The Insight" during which the Company's economic, investment and asset management experts presented an outlook on the dynamics and developments in the investment industry in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Also speaking at the Forum were financial experts from regional and international companies whom focused on investment solutions and ideas to provide analysis-based insights to investors.

Through such forums, NBK Capital aims to provide its clients and investors with insights on the latest development and trends in the investment industry, giving them expert opinion in the world of finance and offering them valuable recommendations to help shareholders make informed investment decisions to benefit their investments.

In his talk, Chief Executive Officer of NBK Capital, Faisal Al-Hamad, said, "We are pleased to host our

fourth annual Forum, a vital platform allowing us to exchange insights, open a dialogue and further strengthen our partnership with clients amidst fluctuations in the local, regional and global financial markets and the rapid developments in technologies. Our ultimate goal is to continue developing innovative financial solutions that address the specific investment needs of our clients".

Participants in the Forum discussed key economic and financial challenges affecting today's markets, including a presentation titled "Global Markets Review & Outlook" highlighting challenges and opportunities in

global markets. It was mentioned that strong growth and slowly rising inflation can keep the rally going, and we should expect more volatility after the completion of Brexit by coming Autumn. The investors should beware of political risks in 2018, even though emerging markets may look healthy and promising.

NBK Capital Managing Director of MENA Asset Management, Dr Husayn Shahrur, have a presentation on "The Interplay Between Active and Passive Investing", highlighting historical evidence from global and regional markets showing how investment evolves from focusing on single products and performance to solutions based on outcomes and goals.

NBK Capital Smart Wealth Chief Executive Officer, Fahed Al-Bader, discussed innovations in investment management and the use of technology to drive best-in-class solutions, emphasizing on the convenience and efficiency of digital investment solutions.

The Forum concluded with a panel discussion hosted by international analysts and specialists in the real estate sector to share thoughts on mature real estate markets. Speakers stressed that investors' appetite for real estate continues to grow and discussed means and opportunities that generate valuable returns. Discussions also showed the importance of efficient and professional management of financial assets, today more than ever.

Since its inception in 2005, NBK Capital prides itself on a reach and scale that is global, a focus that is regional and a service level that always remains personal.

Forum aims to share insights on markets and industry



NBK Economic Report

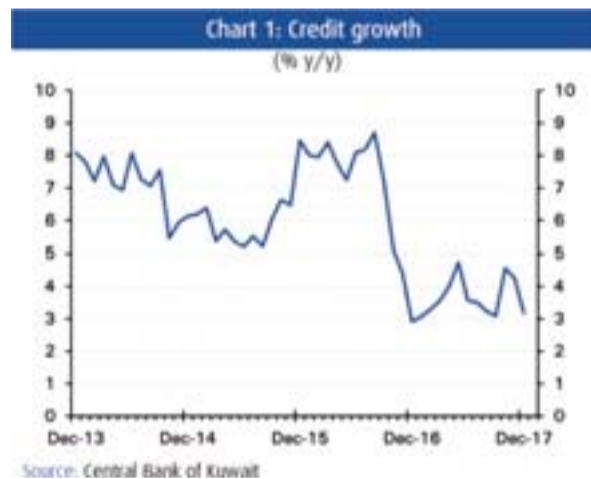
Kuwait credit growth slowed to 3.2% in December

KUWAIT: Bank credit contracted for the third consecutive month in December, with growth slowing to 3.2 percent y/y. Outstanding credit declined by KD 65 million, despite the usual end-of-quarter spike in lending for the purchase of securities. Business credit was particularly weak, registering its largest monthly decline in over a year. By contrast, private deposits rose for the second consecutive month, pushing money supply growth to its most rapid pace in 13 months. Meanwhile, interest rates were higher on the month, pricing in the CBK's repo rate increase.

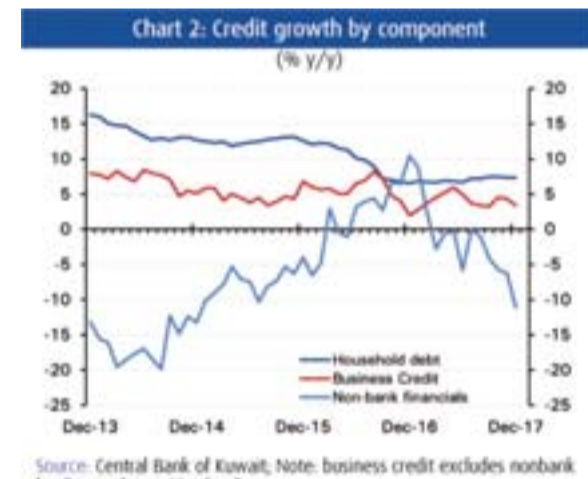
Business credit (excluding nonbanks and securities lending) dropped by KD 225 million, with growth slowing to 3.4 percent y/y. The declines were in the industrial, construction, trade and "other" sectors. The only sector to see a noticeable gain was oil & gas, which added KD 52 million and grew by 25 percent y/y in December. Separately, lending for the purchase of securities rose by KD 100 million: a smaller jump than the usual end-of-quarter increases seen in the past. Meanwhile, the non-bank financial sector saw a small gain.

Household lending saw a moderate gain during the month, with growth steady at 7.3 percent y/y. The KD 53 million net increase in household debt (personal facilities excluding securities lending) came from a KD 60 million increase in installment loans, which are used primarily for financing a home, while consumer credit shrank during the month. The contraction in consumer loans continued to widen to -4.9 percent y/y while installment loan growth was steady at 8.8 percent y/y.

Private deposits rose by KD 383 million in December, on



Source: Central Bank of Kuwait



Source: Central Bank of Kuwait. Note: business credit excludes nonbank lending and securities lending



Source: Central Bank of Kuwait

gains in KD time and foreign currency deposits. Money supply (M2) growth accelerated to 3.8 percent y/y. Meanwhile, government deposits, which have been weakening over the last year, saw a small KD 51 million gain, with growth at just 0.9 percent y/y.

The banking system's liquid reserves edged higher in December. Bank reserves (cash, deposits with the CBK, and CBK bonds) increased by KD 271 million to KD 5 billion or 7.9 percent of bank assets. This coincided with the absence of public debt issuance in December: in fact, outstanding domestic public debt instruments (PDIs) were steady at KD 4.77 billion, or an estimated 12 percent of GDP.

Domestic rates were higher in December, pricing in the CBK's 25 basis point increase in the repo rate. Customer deposit rates were up 8-11 basis points across the board. The average 3-month interbank rate rose one basis point in December to settle at 1.80 percent. Rates have moved higher since, with the 3-month Kibor now at 1.88 percent.

Ratings upgrade lifts Greek debt

LONDON: Greek government bond yields dipped yesterday after a ratings upgrade from Fitch that highlighted improving sentiment towards the country while Italian bonds came under pressure from jitters ahead of next month's election. Bond yields across the euro zone were broadly higher in the absence of any fresh drivers with overall trade subdued due to holidays in Asia and the United States.

Greece was the exception following news on Friday that Fitch had upgraded Greece's long-term rating to 'B' from 'B-' and kept its outlook positive despite its debts.

Fitch said general government debt sustainability would improve on sustained economic growth and reduced political risks. That marks the second ratings upgrade this year-S&P Global Ratings last month lifted Greek ratings for the first time in two years on improvements in the finances and fiscal outlook.

Sentiment has been boosted by expectations that Greece will exit its latest bailout in August and get debt relief from its international creditors. "Greece's ratings story is on track and strongly supported by progress in reforms," said DZ Bank rates strategist Sebastian Fellechner. "Keep in mind that it is possible that Greece will get debt relief, which is a supportive factor." —Reuters

EXCHANGE RATES

Al-Muzaini Exchange Co.

ASIAN COUNTRIES

Japanese Yen	2.752
Indian Rupees	4.695
Pakistani Rupees	2.720
Sri Lankan Rupees	1.946
Nepali Rupees	2.957
Singapore Dollar	228.630
Hongkong Dollar	38.448
Bangladesh Taka	3.604
Philippine Peso	5.842
Thai Baht	9.524

Euro	374.910
Sterling Pound	421.960
Canadian dollar	241.290
Turkish lira	80.500
Swiss Franc	324.500
Australian Dollar	239.620
US Dollar Buying	299.450

Japanese Yen	3.810
Syrian Pound	1.585
Nepalese Rupees	2.936
Malaysian Ringgit	77.970
Chinese Yuan Renminbi	47.650
Thai Bhat	10.565
Turkish Lira	79.710

Asia

Bangladesh Taka	0.003222	0.003806
Chinese Yuan	0.046048	0.049548
Hong Kong Dollar	0.036294	0.039044
Indian Rupee	0.004227	0.004868
Indonesian Rupiah	0.000018	0.000024
Japanese Yen	0.002733	0.002913
Korean Won	0.000271	0.000286
Malaysian Ringgit	0.073403	0.079403
Nepalese Rupee	0.002995	0.003165
Pakistani Rupee	0.002518	0.002808
Philippine Peso	0.005701	0.006001
Singapore Dollar	0.223281	0.233281
Sri Lankan Rupee	0.001640	0.002220
Taiwan	0.010190	0.010370
Thai Baht	0.009223	0.009773

Dollarco Exchange Co. Ltd

GCC COUNTRIES

Saudi Riyal	80.227
Qatari Riyal	82.630
Omani Riyal	781.315
Bahraini Dinar	798.860
UAE Dirham	81.932

ARAB COUNTRIES

Egyptian Pound - Cash	19.700
Egyptian Pound - Transfer	16.985
Yemen Riyal/for 1000	1.207
Tunisian Dinar	126.860
Jordanian Dinar	424.050
Lebanese Lira/for 1000	2.004
Syrian Lira	0.000
Morocco Dirham	33.406

Rate for Transfer

US Dollar	299.800
Canadian Dollar	240.760
Sterling Pound	421.450
Euro	374.990
Swiss Frank	279.880
Bahraini Dinar	797.280
UAE Dirhams	82.025
Qatari Riyals	83.255
Saudi Riyals	80.840
Jordanian Dinar	424.120
Egyptian Pound	17.046
Sri Lankan Rupees	1.929
Indian Rupees	4.693
Pakistani Rupees	2.712
Bangladesh Taka	3.636
Philippines Peso	5.771
Cyprus pound	17.850

Selling Rate

US Dollar	299.800
Canadian Dollar	240.760
Sterling Pound	421.450
Euro	374.990
Swiss Frank	279.880
Bahraini Dinar	797.280
UAE Dirhams	82.025
Qatari Riyals	83.255
Saudi Riyals	80.840
Jordanian Dinar	424.120
Egyptian Pound	17.046
Sri Lankan Rupees	1.929
Indian Rupees	4.693
Pakistani Rupees	2.712
Bangladesh Taka	3.636
Philippines Peso	5.771
Cyprus pound	17.850

BAHRAIN EXCHANGE COMPANY WLL

CURRENCY	BUY	SELL
British Pound	0.414894	0.422394
Czech Korune	0.006661	0.015961
Danish Krone	0.045899	0.050899
Euro	0.366712	0.374212
Georgian Lari	0.133728	0.133728
Hungarian 0.001103	0.001293	
Norwegian Krone	0.034517	0.039717
Romanian Leu	0.062864	0.079714
Russian ruble	0.005308	0.005308
Slovakia	0.008907	0.018907
Swedish Krona	0.033586	0.038586
Swiss Franc	0.316652	0.327652
Australian Dollar	0.229214	0.241214
New Zealand Dollar	0.215308	0.224808
America	BUY	SELL
Canadian Dollar	0.237390	0.242790
US Dollars	0.296150	0.300570
US Dollars Mint	0.296650	0.300570

Business

New Mercedes-Maybach S-Class: Taking exclusivity to a new level

World premiere at Geneva Motor show from March 3 to 18



STUTTGART/GENEVA: Mercedes-Maybach stands for the ultimate in exclusivity and individuality. The luxury brand combines the perfection of the Mercedes-Benz S-Class with the exclusivity of Maybach. Now the top model from Mercedes-Benz is even more refined. A new radiator grille, optional two-tone paintwork and new exclusive color combinations in the interior ensure an even more majestic look. The world premiere is at the Geneva Motor Show from March 3 to 18.

A reinterpretation of the Mercedes-Maybach radiator grille with its fine, vertical struts accentuates the front end. The grille was inspired by a pinstriped suit. It celebrated its world premiere in the Vision Mercedes-Maybach 6, the

exclusive coupe study which thrilled connoisseurs and fans of the brand in 2016.

The two-tone exterior paint finish is also a classic Mercedes-Maybach theme. In future there will be nine different color combinations available on request. The double clear coat is available as a further new option for all dark colors. It creates a brilliant surface finish with a piano lacquer effect and a special impression of depth. The second bodywork clear coat, including intermediate sanding, is intricately applied by hand in the Maybach manufactory by specially trained varnishers.

The exterior look of the top model is rounded off by a new luxury 20-inch multi-spoke wheel. There are also

three exclusive 20-inch wheels to choose from for the Mercedes-Maybach, including the wheel with a 20-hole design familiar from the Mercedes-Maybach S-Cabriolet.

Two new exclusive color combinations are offered in the interior: armagnac brown/black and savanna beige/black. The black Maybach Exclusive nappa leather upholstery appointments can also be ordered with a choice of copper-, gold- or platinum-colored contrasting topstitching. Also new in the range are trim inserts in designo flowing lines Magnolia.

With a length of 5462 mm and a wheelbase of 3365 mm, the flagship of the Mercedes-Benz model range exceeds the long-wheelbase S-Class Sedan by 20 cm in both

dimensions. Rear passengers benefit from this increased size, as well as from standard equipment that includes Executive seats on both left and right and other exclusive details such as innovative voice amplification. The huge success of the Mercedes-Maybach speaks volumes: since the market launch of the Maybach in February 2015 over 25,000 Mercedes-Maybach S-Class models have already been delivered to customers. In 2017, too, more than 1 in 10 S-Class models sold was a Mercedes-Maybach. The main markets are China, Russia and the USA.

Mercedes-Maybach S-Class will be in available in June 2018 in the Middle East, where customers will be able to pre-order.

Australia, US, India and Japan in talks to found Belt and Road alternative

SYDNEY: Australia, the United States, India and Japan are talking about establishing a joint regional infrastructure scheme as an alternative to China's multibillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative in an attempt to counter Beijing's spreading influence, the Australian Financial Review reported yesterday, citing a senior US official.

The unnamed official was quoted as saying the plan involving the four regional partners was still "nascent" and "won't be ripe enough to be announced" during Australian Prime Minister Turnbull's visit to the United States later this week. The official said, however, that the project was on the agenda for Turnbull's talks with US President Donald Trump during that trip and was being seriously discussed. The source added that the preferred terminology was to call the plan an "alternative" to China's Belt and Road Initiative, rather than a "rival."

"No one is saying China should not build infrastructure," the official was quoted as saying. "China might build a port which, on its own is not economically viable. We could make it economically viable by building a road or rail line linking that port."

Representatives for Turnbull, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Trade Minister Steven Ciobo did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, asked at a news conference about the report of four-way cooperation, said

Japan, the United States, Australia, and Japan, Australia and India regularly exchanged views on issues of common interest.

"It is not the case that this is to counter China's Belt and Road," he said. Japan, meanwhile, plans to use its official development assistance (ODA) to promote a broader "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" including "high-quality infrastructure", according to a summary draft of its 2017 white paper on ODA. The Indo-Pacific strategy has been endorsed by Washington and is also seen as a counter to the Belt and Road Initiative.

First mentioned during a speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping's to university students in Kazakhstan in 2013, China's Belt and Road plan is a vehicle for the Asian country to take a greater role on the international stage by funding and building global transport and trade links in more than 60 countries. Xi has heavily promoted the initiative, inviting world leaders to Beijing last May for an inaugural summit at which he pledged \$124 billion in funding for the plan, and enshrining it into the ruling Communist Party's constitution in October.

Local Chinese governments as well as state and private firms have rushed to offer support by investing overseas and making loans. In January, Beijing outlined its ambitions to extend the initiative to the Arctic by developing shipping lanes opened up by global warming, forming a "Polar Silk Road".

The United States, Japan, India and Australia have recently revived four-way talks to deepen security cooperation and coordinate alternatives for regional infrastructure financing to that offered by China.

The so-called Quad to discuss and cooperate on security first met as an initiative a decade ago - much to the annoyance of China, which saw it as an attempt by regional democracies to contain its advances. The quartet held talks in Manila on the sidelines of the November ASEAN and East Asia Summits. —Reuters

ABK offers customers 5% cash back on bill payments

KUWAIT: In line with its Simpler Banking strategy and to commemorate the National & Liberation Day Celebration, Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait

(ABK) announced yesterday that it is bringing back the 5 percent cashback promotion for customers who pay their phone bills via ABK's mobile app or online banking service on eahli.com. During the campaign period, customers will receive 5 percent cash back of the value of the bills they have paid up to 200 KD (cashback is up to KD 10). The campaign will run from 20th February to 10th March, 2018 and is open for all ABK customers.

The service offers customers easy mobile bill payments, for both prepaid and postpaid numbers through a familiar, secure and convenient channel. Customers are not required to enter their card details to make a



payment, but are only requested to enter the mobile number for which the bill will be paid.

This promotion comes in line with ABK's Simpler Banking strategy, which focuses on providing its customers with a simpler banking model that offers speed, security and easy banking.

Japan books first trade deficit in eight months

TOKYO: Japan logged a trade deficit in January, the first negative figure in eight months, as imports of fossil fuel overwhelmed the revenue from exports, government data showed yesterday.

The world's third-largest economy registered a trade balance deficit of 943.4 billion yen (\$887 million) in January, the first since May last year, the finance ministry said. The market had expected a deficit of 1.02 trillion yen. Exports rose 12.2 percent to 6.086 trillion yen but imports also rose 7.9 percent to 7.029 trillion yen.

The yen was on average 3.4 percent higher against the dollar compared to the same month a year earlier. Still, the costs of imports in crude oil, medical products and liquefied natural gas increased as the volume of trade in such items grew, the ministry said.

Japan's often politically sensitive trade surplus with the United States shrank 12.3 percent on increased imports of liquefied natural gas, organic chemicals and medical products.



TOKYO: Containers are transferred from the docks to awaiting trucks at the international cargo terminal at Tokyo's port yesterday. —AFP

For decades into the 1990s, the two countries battled over their trade flows, but the balance has become less of a hot-button issue under recent US administrations, with China's trade surplus a greater concern for Washington. —AFP

ECB freezes Latvian bank after allegation

FRANKFURT AM MAIN: The European Central Bank said yesterday it has frozen payments by the third-largest bank in tiny Baltic state Latvia, as its finances have deteriorated in the wake of money laundering allegations from Washington.

"Temporarily, and until further notice, a prohibition of all payments by ABLV bank on its financial liabilities has been imposed, and is now in effect," the ECB said in a statement. It is the first time the ECB has used its power to impose a moratorium since taking on eurozone-wide banking supervision responsibilities in 2014. The US Department of the Treasury last week named ABLV "an institution of primary money laundering concern" and accused it of connections to North Korea's weapons development program. —AFP

Services

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Business



Toyota sells over 1.52 million electrified vehicles in 2017

Milestone puts Toyota on track to achieve its 2030 target



KUWAIT: Toyota Motor Corporation recently announced that it reached a landmark milestone in annual sales of electrified powertrains in 2017 with over 1.52 million sold worldwide as of February 2, 2018, surpassing the prior record set in 2016 by eight percent. The numerical milestone marks back-to-back years of growth and accomplishment of one of Toyota's Environmental Challenge 2050 goals, selling more than 1.5 million electrified vehicles in a single year, three years in advance of the original target set for 2020. Additionally, cumulative sales of electrified vehicles now exceed 11.47 million, which represents a reduction of more than 90 million tons of CO2 compared to sales of equivalent conventional vehicles.



Environmental challenge 2050 goal

to the quality, durability, and reliability (QDR) of our electrified powertrains, and, thanks to them, this enables us to establish a solid and sustainable foundation for the mass production of a more diverse portfolio of electrified vehicles across our range."

Yugo Miyamoto, Chief Representative of Middle East & North Africa Representative Office, Toyota Motor Corporation, said, "We are excited to achieve this significant milestone, which reinforces our commitment to tackling environmental challenges. Toyota has the competitive expertise and know-how in the core technologies of electrification thanks to its experience in developing,

producing, and improving major electrified components and many years of collecting feedback from markets around the world. We are deeply grateful to our customers in the MENA region for being an integral part of our success journey, and for continuously extending their support towards our com-

mitment to environmental sustainability."

Since the introduction of its first commercially available electrified powertrain on the Prius in Japan in 1997, Toyota has worked on improving the technology as the basis for its electrification efforts, having launched first mass-produced Fuel Cell Electric Vehicle (FCEV), the Mirai, in 2014, the fourth generation of the Prius hybrid electric vehicle in 2016, and the second-generation Prius Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle (PHEV) in 2017. The company will continue the development and diversification of electrified vehicles as it now turns its sights to include the mass production of Battery Electric Vehicles (BEVs) from 2020, starting in China and India, followed by Japan, the United States, and Europe. Toyota also aims to further expand sales of Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEVs) in emerging markets to further contribute to lowering CO2 from new vehicles sales worldwide.

The efforts to improve and increase the diversity of electrified powertrain options is tied directly to Toyota's 'Environmental Challenge 2050,' wherein the company aims to achieve annual electrified vehicle sales of 5.5 million units by 2030, as announced in December 2017. To achieve its goal, Toyota unveiled plans to have 10 BEV models available worldwide by the early 2020s, and from around 2025, the company aims to have an electrified version available for all vehicle models across its global lineup.



New Jazeera Airways terminal shortlisted for WAN future transport projects award



KUWAIT: The new Airport Terminal design for Jazeera Airways - the first private airline in Kuwait and the Middle East - has been shortlisted to win the "Future Transportation Projects" award presented by World Architecture News (WAN). The WAN Future Projects Transport Award 2017, in its 2nd edition, was founded to celebrate excellence in 'design only' projects. Pace - a leading Kuwaiti multidisciplinary consultant in the region - has been commissioned to undertake the complete design, supervision and management of the project. Pace's Airport Terminal design was the only design from the entire Arabian peninsula shortlisted by WAN.

This year's jury were selected for their expertise within this sector, and will be assessing the submitted projects based on a number of criteria, including design concept, originality, function, innovative solutions, vision and progressive thinking, in addition to smart building applications and challenges that have been overcome.

Jazeera Airways stated that the project is one of the most important infrastructure projects in Kuwait, aiming to help alleviate the current overcrowding at Kuwait International Airport and meet the requirements of travelers in Kuwait for years to come. Project works are scheduled for completion next January 2018, with the goal of the terminal being fully operational and open for travelers by March 2018, to accommodate the winter travel season. The project comprises of a flight terminal, car parking, retail, offices and food & beverages. The new terminal will divert 2.2 million passengers a year from the extremely busy airport once it opens, which will increase to over 4.0 million travelers per year in the next few years.

Pace CEO, Tarek Shuaib, commented: "The building has been designed to highlight reliability and strength, which reflects the core values of the airline that will call it home. In representation of the iconic Jazeera Airways logo, a diamond-inspired facade was designed using a combination of perforated metal mesh and glass, interweaved to give a three-dimensional visual for the exterior, which also features grey limestone and dark rendered concrete to create a stark and eye-catching contrast with the blue glass and silver metal. The perforated mesh additionally allows a dazzling interior effect of shade and light".

"The interior of the terminal is contemporary in design, and creates a relaxed atmosphere for business and leisure passengers alike. Grey granite flooring compliments cherry wood paneling on the walls, creating a calming effect. LED lighting has been used in place of harsh lighting found in most airports" he added.

Jazeera pointed out that a 5-level car parking facility will provide 354 parking spaces and will relieve the existing, and often overcrowded airport parking lots saying that it is a key component of Jazeera Airways' Park & Fly initiative. The strategy aims to reduce both congestion at the terminal and long check-in times. A dedicated bridge will speed up travelers' transit directly from the parking to check-in and security, minimizing the period needed for land-side processes.

The new Jazeera Airways Terminal will offer passengers and visitors a rich a secure experience. Halls and lounges of the terminal will offer exceptional views of the outside, new shopping experiences will be available and the terminal will be equipped with the latest in technological security measures.



Catalan corporate property market cools on political uncertainty

MADRID: Global pension funds, insurers and other investors are holding back on buying office space in Catalonia due to fears a split from Spain could lead to an exodus of business from the region.

Corporate property in the wealthy northeast and its capital Barcelona has been a hot ticket but interest has cooled since October's disputed independence referendum and pro-independence parties' bid to reinstate sacked leader Carles Puigdemont.

Investment in office space in Catalonia from October to December dropped by 63 percent from the previous quarter and 84 percent on the year-ago period to 71.5 million euros

(\$88.4 million), according to data provided by Los Angeles-based real estate services and investment adviser CBRE.

The concern is that if Catalonia splits from Spain, it would drop out of the European Union, forcing companies to move from the region to avoid being subject to tariffs.

"We speak regularly to our investors and they have told us they don't want to touch Barcelona office investments for now," said Carsten Czarnetzki, country head for Spain at AEW Europe which has 26.6 billion euros of assets under management in Europe of which 430 million euros are in Spain.

The figures, along with a drop in tourist numbers, are a sign the political standoff is already having an economic fallout as funds wait to if companies which have already moved their registered headquarters follow up by shifting employees. Some investors are using the uncertainty to win discounts. Meridia Capital, a Barcelona-based fund investing in Spanish real estate on behalf of global pension funds, insurers and sovereign funds, got five percent off the price of Barcelona shopping center Barnasud, bought for 21 million euros in November, said Javier Faus, founder and chief executive officer.

"I said: 'Give me a small discount to reflect the Catalan sit-

BEC opens doors to a new branch in Mahboula

KUWAIT: Bahrain Exchange Company W.L.L. (BEC), one of Kuwait's leading worldwide money transfer and foreign exchange companies, has announced yesterday the opening of its 46th retail outlet in Mahboula.

Situated on Block 1, near Masjid Al Mariam, BEC has opened its eighth branch in the most populated residential area in Kuwait. Open from Saturday to Friday, 9am - 9pm the branch will cater to many locals and expatriates in the area who require money transfer and currency exchange services. Customers can expect to receive BEC's highly competitive rates on currency exchange and BEC's full suite of money transfer services, including Cash Pick-up and Credit to Account through EzRemit, Xpress Money, Transfast and MoneyGram.

To celebrate the opening and to thank our new customers to the branch, BEC gave away 500 gifts to the first 500 customers who undertook a money transfer or currency exchange transaction. Commenting on the new branch Mathews Varughese, General Manager of BEC said, "We aim to be where our customers need us by offering conveniently situated BEC branches to ease money transfers back home to family and loved ones. We believe this branch will serve as an accessible location for many expats residing and working in and around this area and will save our customers time and money traveling to other BEC locations."

BEC currently has 46 branches conveniently located across Kuwait and specializes in sending money around the globe safely and quickly to over 46,000 locations in 30 countries through its own money transfer product - EzRemit. Its global reach is extended to over 200 countries through its partnership with MoneyGram an international remittance company. BEC also has its own online money transfer service allowing customer to send money fast, safe and securely from the comfort off their own home or office.



uation," said Faus, whose firm has invested 800 million euros in real estate over the last four years, mostly in office space split more or less equally between Madrid and Barcelona.

Meridia has 400 million euros of assets under management in Barcelona and Faus said high demand and a scarcity of buildings had made discounts harder to get earlier in the year.

Important for Spain

Real estate accounted for 11 percent of foreign investment in Spain in the first nine months of 2017, making it the second-biggest sector to receive funds from abroad after energy, according to economy ministry figures.

Spain is still an attractive destination for those seeking to invest in commercial real estate. The government expects the economy to grow by around 3 percent this year, making it one of the fastest-growing in Europe.

However, the weighting of Catalonia in investment in Spanish office space roughly halved in the fourth quarter compared to the three previous quarters to 18 percent, the CBRE data showed.

Catalonia's capital Barcelona is a thriving Mediterranean city that has drawn many corporate tenants in the technology and media businesses in recent years from Amazon.com Inc

to online game maker King, creator of Candy Crush.

The region is a manufacturing and industrial hub, accounting for one fifth of the Spanish economy and a quarter of exports, and it was named top European large region of 2018/19 for its strategy in attracting foreign investment by FDI Intelligence, a Financial Times unit.

"It's true that many have put investment on hold. On the bright side, no-one has told me to get out of Catalonia for the next ten years," said Faus of Meridia Capital.

The Catalan rental market, which has seen prime office rents rise by nearly a third since Spain emerged from recession in 2013, has so far held up, said Ines Arellano, director of investor relations at Merlin Properties, which has around 250,000 square metres of office space under management in Catalonia.

There were fewer deals in the office rental market in the fourth quarter, but rents and occupancy rates continued to rise, she said, adding that the rental market took longer to react to external factors than investors.

Rents averaged 23.5 euros per square meter for prime office space in the fourth quarter of 2017, compared to 31 euros in Madrid, according to CBRE. Average yield was 4.25 percent.—Reuters

Technology

After years of stunning growth, Amazon ambitions seem boundless

It has been ramping up profits in recent quarters

SAN FRANCISCO: Triumphant in online retail, cloud computing, organic groceries, and streaming television, Amazon founder and chief disruptor Jeff Bezos is turning his seemingly limitless ambition to health care. Amazon, launched as an internet bookseller nearly 24 years ago, has branched into offerings including voice-commanded speakers infused with Alexa artificial intelligence and original TV shows streamed online at its Prime subscription service. Health care now appears ripe for Bezos, who has earned a reputation for attacking high costs and inefficiencies.

A possible step in that direction was taken last month, with Amazon announcing an alliance with billionaire Warren Buffett and JPMorgan Chase chief executive Jamie Dimon to provide a health care system for employees of the three companies. According to the Wall Street Journal, Amazon would also like to become a supplier of medical equipment for hospitals.

"I think Bezos is methodical and thoughtful," eMarketer senior analyst Patricia Orsini told AFP. "He has identified a market that is ready for disruption. The healthcare system in the US is ripe for reform." Bezos faces the challenge of taming skyrocketing costs throughout US health care from insurance and medicine to supplies and therapy. "Just as with every other industry Amazon has entered, Bezos is envisioning lower-priced alternatives with frictionless services that could, over time, make a lot of money for Amazon," Orsini said.

Barclays analysts said in a recent research note on Amazon's potential in health care, "We are never dismissive of anything disruptive that Amazon is involved in. Amazon arguable has the best technical abilities of any company we cover." Amazon has been on a stunning growth streak of late, expanding its international retail operations as far as India and Australia, while devouring the US organic

Robert Shulz noted that Amazon has succeeded with a patient strategy of investing for the long term. "Their approach is growing the business," Shulz said, even if some of the efforts don't yield a quick profit.

For years, Amazon invested heavily in distribution networks so it could get goods to buyers fast while controlling delivery costs. A report surfaced this month that Amazon is preparing to test a delivery service that would compete directly with services like FedEx and UPS. Amazon did not directly comment on the report but said, "We're always innovating and experimenting on behalf of customers and the businesses that sell and grow on Amazon to create faster lower-cost delivery choices." Separately, Amazon this month unveiled plans to deliver groceries in a number of US cities for Prime subscribers using its recently acquired Whole Foods supermarket chain. It is the first major effort to integrate Whole Foods—a chain of 460 stores—into Amazon's e-commerce effort.

“**Bezos is methodical and thoughtful**”

supermarket Whole Foods group. With increased scale, it has been ramping up profits in recent quarters, helping Amazon leapfrog in market value to one of the top companies in the world and making Bezos the world's richest individual with a net worth well over \$100 billion.

Moving and shaking

Amazon has repeatedly shaken up sectors with technology and efficiency. With success has come leverage to pressure suppliers and manufacturers for better deals it can use to be the preferred venue for online shopping. Standard & Poor's retail analyst

Ultimate disruptor

Bezos, whose personal investments have included buying the Washington Post, has been referred to as the "ultimate disruptor" with a long-term view that only recently has begun to yield hefty profits. Amazon recently reported its profits had more than doubled in the past quarter to \$1.9 billion as revenue grew 38 percent to \$60.5 billion. But Amazon has been vilified for trampling on traditional practices at home and



TRACY: In this file photo taken on January 20, 2015 shows an Amazon.com worker sorting packages onto a conveyor belt at an Amazon fulfillment center. — AFP

abroad. It also earned a reputation for high-pressure work conditions to minimize costs in warehouses, and a sometimes difficult corporate culture for executives.

Its search for a new "HQ2" or second headquarters meanwhile has set off an intense competition among cities desperate for the estimated \$5 billion investment, drawing comparisons to the dystopian "Hunger Games" story. Amazon's pattern of success has caused fear to ripple through sectors it eyes. When Amazon last year

made the surprise buy of Whole Foods, shares sank of major retail chains Wal-Mart and Target.

S&P Global Ratings said in a research note that Amazon "has brought price transparency and convenience to many retail segments," while shifting consumer expectations, thus creating problems for rivals. "Legacy retailers are in various stages of adapting to the new landscape and not all have been successful," the analysts said. — AFP

Scientists complete mock Mars mission in Negev desert

RAMON CRATER: A team of six Israeli researchers on Sunday ended a four-day Mars habitat experiment in Israel's Negev desert where they simulated living conditions on the Red Planet, Israel's Science and Technology Ministry said. The experiment was held near the isolated Israeli township of Mitzpe Ramon, whose surroundings resemble the Martian environment in its geology, aridity, appearance and desolation, the ministry said.

The participants were investigating various fields relevant to a future Mars mission, including satellite communications, the psychological effects of isolation, radiation measurements and searching for life signs in soil. Participant Guy Ron, a nuclear physics professor from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, said the project was not only intended to look for new approaches in designing a future mission to the Red Planet



Israeli analog astronauts start their mission on the D-MARS Project on February 18, 2018, in cooperation with the Israel Space Agency, which simulates life on Mars by performing several scientific experiments and staying in the D-MARS (Desert Mars Analog Ramon Station). — AFP

but to increase public interest. "D-Mars is half about the research, and the other half is about the outreach. A major part of this project is getting public interest and getting students interested in space," he said. The

"D-Mars" project was being held in Israel for the first time in cooperation with the Israel Space Agency. It is one of a number of Mars simulation projects taking place worldwide. — Reuters

Japan team builds second skin message display

TOKYO: Palmreading could take on a whole new meaning thanks to a new invention from Japan: an ultra-thin display and monitor that can be stuck directly to the body. The band-aid-like device is just one millimeter thick and can monitor important health data as well as send and receive messages, including emojis.

Takao Someya, the University of Tokyo professor who developed the device, envisions it as a boon for medical professionals with bed-ridden or far-flung patients, as well as family living far from their relatives. "With this, even in home-care settings, you can achieve seamless sharing of medical data with your home doctors, who then would be able to communicate back to their patients," he told AFP. Slapped onto the palm or back of a hand, it could flash reminders to patients to take their medicine, or even allow far-away grandchildren to communicate with their grandparents.

"Place displays on your skin, and you would feel as if it is part of your body. When you have messages sent to your hand, you would feel emotional closeness to the sender," Someya said. "I think a grandfather who receives a message saying 'I love you' from his grandchild, they would feel the warmth, too." The invention could prove particularly useful in Japan, with its rapidly ageing population, replacing the need for in-person checks by offering continuous, non-invasive monitoring of the sick and frail, Someya said. — AFP

Website of top Kremlin critic blocked after tycoon complaint

MOSCOW: Russia's media watchdog on Thursday blocked the website of opposition leader Alexei Navalny after he posted a video alleging a deputy prime minister enjoyed lavish hospitality from a billionaire tycoon. State body Roskomnadzor has threatened to block any site distributing the video, including YouTube and Instagram, but both remain accessible in Russia.

"Roskomnadzor has blocked <https://navalny.com/> at the request of (Russian oligarch Oleg) Deripaska," Navalny said on Twitter. "The site remains accessible through some service providers, but this is temporary," he added. Roskomnadzor confirmed the website had been added to a list of banned pages that service providers are required to block, in comments to Russian news agencies. Navalny, who has been barred from running against President Vladimir Putin in next month's election, says the video appears to show the Russian leader's former top foreign policy adviser Sergei Prikhodko vacationing on the yacht of 50-year-old Oleg Deripaska, an aluminium magnate.

Both Deripaska and Prikhodko, who rarely makes comments to the media, denied the allegations. "Mr Deripaska's

claim is to protect his right to privacy, and has nothing to do with any political struggle between Mr Navalny and his political opponents," a spokesperson for the oligarch said in a written statement to AFP following news of the site being blocked.

Call for vote boycott

The woman who Navalny said filmed the video, Nastya Rybka, describes herself as a model and has penned a book on how to seduce billionaires. She has more than 60,000 followers on Instagram where she has posted scantily-clad or naked snaps of herself and a video of herself having sex. Rybka's posts relating to the allegations were no longer accessible on Instagram on Wednesday, but Navalny's 25-minute YouTube video—that has racked up more than five million hits since it was posted last week—was still available. AFP has learned that the woman removed most of the snaps from Instagram, with the Facebook-owned service taking down the remaining few to avoid being banned in Russia.

"When governments believe that something on the Internet violates their laws, they may contact companies and ask us to restrict access to that content," an Instagram spokesperson said in response to an AFP inquiry. "We review such requests carefully in light of local laws and where appropriate, we make it unavailable in the relevant country or territory." Navalny has called for a boycott of Russia's March 18 presidential election after he was barred from running over a criminal conviction he says was politically motivated. — AFP

UK academic gets 32 years in prison for online abuse

LONDON: A Cambridge University graduate who admitted 137 criminal offences involving online abuse, including encouraging the rape of a four-year-old boy, was sentenced yesterday to 32 years in prison. Matthew Falder, who dubbed himself "666devil" and "evilmind" online, blackmailed many of his 45 victims into sending "severe abuse images" of themselves, according to Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA). The images were defined as "hurtcore" by prosecutors.

"Hurtcore does what it says on the tin really—its aim is to hurt the individual to their very core," NCA investigator Matthew Long said. Falder, whose victims ranged from young children to people in their 30s, would pose as a woman and get his victims to send naked images. He would then manipulate them into sending increasingly depraved abuse images. Judge Philip Parker described the 29-year-old as an "internet highwayman" who had a lust for controlling and tormenting victims.

"It is a tale of ever-increasing depravity," he said. "The effects on the girls, women and men were devastating. The damage is ongoing for these individuals. It will never end," he said. Falder, a geophysicist who was a post-doctoral researcher at Birmingham



A handout photograph released on October 16, 2017 by Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA), shows the custody image of British Geophysicist Matthew Falder. — AFP

University in central England, admitted the charges at a court hearing in October, making him one of Britain's most prolific sex offenders.

"In more than 30 years of law enforcement I have never come across an offender whose sole motivation was to inflict such profound anguish and pain," NCA senior investigating officer Matt Sutton said at the time. "I have also never known such an extremely complex investigation with an offender who was technologically savvy and able to stay hidden in the darkest recesses of the dark web," he added. The NCA set up a taskforce involving Australian, US and Europol investigators to catch Falder with support from Britain's online spying agency GCHQ. — AFP

Siemens plans to float Healthineers in first half of 2018

FRANKFURT AM MAIN: Industrial giant Siemens yesterday said it plans to list its Healthineers medical unit in the first half of 2018, in what is expected to be Germany's largest initial public offering in over two decades. The group said it would float "a meaningful minority share" in the medical equipment division on the Frankfurt stock exchange to "create a liquid market for the Siemens Healthineers shares".

The IPO "is expected to be completed in the first half of calendar year 2018, subject to capital market conditions," it

said in a statement. German media have speculated that Siemens will sell off a 15-to-25 percent stake in Healthineers. They have described the flotation, expected to raise some nine billion euros (\$11.2 billion), as the country's largest since Deutsche Telekom's roughly 10-billion-euro IPO in 1996.

Siemens gave no such details in its statement, saying only that it will "retain a majority stake in Siemens Healthineers in the long term." "Siemens Healthineers is now ready for its market debut," said Michael Sen, a member of the Siemens managing board. Healthineers, which makes medical devices such as X-ray machines and lab diagnostics gear, is one of Siemens' largest and most profitable divisions and a leading player worldwide in the industry. The division saw revenues of 13.8 billion euros in the 2017 fiscal year, booking adjusted profits of 2.5 billion euros—giving it a profit margin of some 18 percent, according to the statement. — AFP

Health

Tackling the issue of obesity at the International Diabetes Federation

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The International Diabetes Federation held its congress in Abu Dhabi recently, which saw the participation of more than 160 countries. The congress was held for four days and saw a scientific program that introduced the latest developments in diabetes management and treatment, and alluded to diabetes prevalence and the public health issues that go along with it. The event brought all those working in the field of diabetes together starting with doctors, educators and planners. There were more than 300 renowned speakers on hand who covered all issues related to diabetes, its management and complications.

An exhibition was organized alongside the congress in which around fifty international and regional companies and organizations participated, displaying the latest in the field of dealing with diabetes, its causes and complications. Many of the diseases the world has faced in the past and is facing now are treatable with a pill or injection, others are chronic and obesity is no exception. Obesity is on the edge of becoming a full blown epidemic, as one out of three in suffer from it.

Professor Carel Le Roux from the UCD Conway Institute, School of Medicine and Medical Science, University College Dublin spoke during a round table organized by Novo nor disk on "is the medical establishment prepared to treat the obesity epidemic?" On the sideline of the International Diabetes Convention, he said the case of approaching obesity is the same as any other disease. It is to prevent the disease, then once it is there - to treat it and if left alone, it will lead to many complications.

He said that in fighting obesity one has to make himself feel less hungry, eat less and move more. He said the disease is genetically related and has physical and mental aspects and stressed that even 10% weight loss is very difficult to sustain. "The message of having to combat obesity must be communicated to both patients and health care providers (HCP), and this can be supported by studies as they are very good tools."

Professor le Roux drew attention to the fact that certain people develop obesity complications at a much lower body mass index (BMI) that what is recognized (30), adding that focus should not be on weight loss as much as it should be on health gain. He said that with the presence of many methods to deal with obesity, starting with diet, then exercise, treatment and finally surgeries, obesity should always be thought off and treated as a chronic disease and it is a fact that some patients do not respond to new medications simply due to biological reasons.



Study suggests link between ultra-processed foods, cancer

PARIS: Scientists suggested on Thursday a link between cancer and "ultra-processed" foods such as cookies, fizzy drinks and sugary cereals, though outside experts cautioned against reading too much into the study results. Researchers from France and Brazil used data from nearly 105,000 French adults who completed online questionnaires detailing their intake of 3,300 different food items. This was compared to cases of diagnosed cancer among the group.

"The results show that a 10-percent increase in the proportion of ultra-processed foods in the diet was associated with increases of 12 percent in the risk of overall cancer and 11 percent in the risk of breast cancer," said a press statement from The BMJ which published the research. No significant association was found for prostate or colorectal cancer. Foods on the list included packaged breads, buns, pizzas and cakes, crisps, industrially-produced desserts, sodas, fish and chicken nuggets, instant noodles and soups, and frozen ready meals.

Previous research had linked processed foods high in sugar, fat, and salt to obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, but firm evidence for increased disease risk has been "scarce", the team said. They stressed their research showed no more than a correlation between a diet high in ultra-processed foods and cancer. This could be coincidental, and does not prove conclusively that these types of food actively cause cancer.

Ian Johnson, a nutrition researcher from the Quadram Institute Bioscience in England, said the authors identified "some rather weak associations, of low statistical significance." "The problem is that the definition of ultra-processed foods they have used is so broad and poorly defined that it is impossible to decide exactly what, if any, causal connections have been observed," he said in comments via the Science Media Centre. Tom Sanders of the King's College London agreed that the term "ultra-processed food" was "difficult to define".

"The definition excludes many home-made or artisanal foods such as bread, cakes, biscuits, butter, meat, cheese, tinned fruit and vegetables as well as sugar and salt used in domestic food preparation," he said. "From a nutritional standpoint, this classification seems arbitrary and based on the premise that food produced industrially has a different nutritional and chemical composition from that produced in the home or by artisans. This is not the case." — AFP

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248 33 199

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What's On

Mark the joyous National & Liberation Days at Jumeirah Messilah Beach Hotel & Spa



Jumeirah Messilah Beach Hotel & Spa, Kuwait's idyllic resort, is launching its campaign marking the country's forthcoming joyous festivities of National & Liberation Days. General Manager, Savino Leone, said: "We look forward to welcoming our guests to enjoy the festivities in our family resort. We take this as an opportunity to proudly showcase and embrace Kuwait's spirit and tradition through our diverse range

of activities as we transform our resort into a haven of national colors and cultural celebrations. We wish all the people of Kuwait a joyous National and Liberations Days as we rejoice in the magnificent festivities of the country".

For the occasion, the luxurious resort is offering guests a Stay Experience for a special rate of KWD 70, excluding service charge. Complimentary benefits

include breakfast for two persons in Garden Café, the hotel's famous all-day dining restaurant. For lunch and dinner, themed buffet decorations will also be open for further indulgence. Additionally, the venue will celebrate with BBQ nights held at the outdoor gardens on the 22nd, 23rd and 24th of February.

On these dates, guests can also avail a 20% discount in all the resort's diverse dining outlets such as Pepper

Steakhouse, Salt Restaurant for Seafood & International Cuisine and Olio Italian Restaurant. At Mint Cafe, live music will entertain guests throughout the night on the beach and poolside, complimented by specially-prepared offerings. The resort is lavishly adorned with Kuwait's national colors starting from the main entrance all the way to the garden vistas to capture the joy of the month.

Al Mulla Exchange conducts 156th and 157th concerts

Al Mulla Exchange concluded their 156th and 157th shows at American International School for their Indian customers. The two-day concert was led by Shrikant Narayan popularly known as the voice of Mohammed Rafi, a legendary singer and composer. He was accompanied by the very talented Jayant Pingulkar, Shefali Taggarsari, Mona Prabhugaonkar and anchor Renu Saxena. The customers were taken back to the yesteryears popularly known as the Golden Era of Hindi music.

"Customers from the central sphere of our business and we are excited to conduct such events continuously for our customers", said R Shankar, General Manager of Al Mulla Exchange speaking at the event. He also pointed out the introduction of the Al Mulla Exchange App, the first remittance app in Kuwait. This is now available on the Google Play store for Android phones and will be soon available on the App store. The app has been designed keeping in mind simplicity, ease of usage and the best user interface immersive technology. Overall the customer experience will be unparalleled'.

Al Mulla Exchange has been known as a pioneer in the field of remittances. Starting from being the first to introduce RTGS, NEFT in Kuwait which led to the demise of an obsolete 'draft' product, Al Mulla Exchange showed the way for 3 seconds credit with the API technology. Now remittances through Al Mulla Exchange gets credited within split seconds enabling beneficiaries to withdraw money almost immediately.

Al Mulla Exchange website and the online portal have also undergone a major haul. The website and the portal are now in sync with the best according to global standards with the customer able to navigate through the website and the online portal effortlessly. The app which is an extension of the online complements the ease of use for the customer. Customers get to gain more by being a client of Al Mulla



Exchange. Other than the free events conducted by them, some of the value-added services that are provided by Al Mulla Exchange include the free loyalty points

which lead to sending transactions without commission and the free insurance coverage which has benefited more than 200 families since they had started the program.



Exclusive activities on National & Liberation days at Hilton Kuwait

In commemoration of Kuwait National and Liberation Day, Hilton Kuwait Resort will host an array of exciting entertainment opportunities for parents and children alike. For the celebratory weekend, on 24, 25 and 26 February, families can enjoy various fun activities on the main beach, including but not limited to magic show, bouncing castle, balloon twisting and face painting. Furthermore, hotel guests are promised to witness a breath taking performance at the remote airplane show at the resort's beach side.

Teatro, the resort's elegant dining restaurant overlooking the Arabian Gulf, will serve Brunch buffet of authentic Kuwaiti and international food, with live music and children's activities. For dinner, the restaurant's buffet will feature international cuisines, Kuwaiti Ouzi and live music performances to wrap up the day's festivities.



For those wishing to stay at the resort, Hilton Kuwait is offering a great opportunity to spend the holiday and revel in its unparalleled rooms starting from KWD 87,000 per night inclusive of breakfast. Families can choose to stay in the hotel's impressive chalets, Presidential villas and Royal villas.

"Hilton Kuwait Resort is thrilled to offer families a great time by the beach in celebration of Kuwait's landmark days. From children's activities to cultured dining offerings, we look forward to providing a weekend of fun for everyone," said Ziad Tantawi, General Manager of Hilton Kuwait Resort.

Oliver Twist at KNES

At Kuwait National English School besides academic excellence, developing talents in Music and Drama is part of the mission. The Drama and the Music Departments of Kuwait National English School produced in the school theatre of Hawally Oliver Twist based

on Charles Dickens Novel. This novel described the sad and black side of the society in UK in the 19th century when children especially orphans like Oliver were working, badly treated and abused. Anyhow, after misadventures there is a happy ending in the drama play when Oliver finds his true family and will be able to enjoy a normal life for his young age. The audience was thrilled by the excellence of the performance from the cast and the whole choir. Congratulations to the Drama and Music Departments from Kuwait National English School.



Malaysian rapper probed over Lunar New Year dog video

A rapper in Muslim-majority Malaysia is under police investigation for allegedly insulting Islam with a Lunar New Year video that features dancers wearing dog masks and performing suggestive moves, reports said yesterday. The video features controversial rapper Wee Meng Chee, known by his stage name Namewee, sitting on a chair in front of a domed building and mimicking barks of canines from around the world. Several black-clad dancers wearing masks of dogs — an animal considered unclean in Islam — gyrate around him. The video, which marks the start of the Year of the Dog currently being celebrated across Asia, generated accusations that it was filmed in front of a mosque in the administrative capital Putrajaya.

National police chief Mohamad Fuzi Harun

reportedly said a probe had been launched into the artist—who is from the country's ethnic Chinese minority for hurting religious feelings and "transmitting offensive communications". Namewee, who is reported to be abroad, faces up to a year in jail if found guilty. In a YouTube video, the rapper denied having insulted Islam and said that the domed building visible in the background was the prime minister's office, not a mosque. "The reports saying I insulted Islam are not true," he said. "We did not film the music video at any place of worship. It was done in an open area."

The probe was launched after complaints from Muslim groups and public criticism from the deputy prime minister over the video, which has more than 700,000 views on YouTube since being released on February 10. Lunar New Year is a major celebration

in Malaysia, where a quarter of the population are from the Chinese diaspora, but the Year of the Dog has proved sensitive. Some shops have avoided displaying canine imagery in their decorations for fear of causing offence.

Namewee has repeatedly been at the center of controversy. In 2016, he was detained for several days for allegedly insulting Islam over a video partly filmed inside a mosque. Malaysia generally practices a moderate form of Islam but religious tensions have escalated in recent years, with concerns growing over a rise in conservative Islamic attitudes. — AFP

Wee Meng Chee, center, a Malaysian rapper popularly known as Namewee, is escorted by law enforcement officials.



In this file photo Oprah Winfrey speaks at the White House Summit on the United State of Women in Washington, DC. — AFP

Trump blasts Oprah over 60 Minutes episode

US President Donald Trump blasted media mogul Oprah Winfrey on Twitter on Sunday night over a segment on CBS's 60 Minutes program and again said he hoped she would face him as an opponent in the 2020 presidential race. Actress and television host Winfrey, now a contributor to the CBS program, led a panel of 14 Republican, Democrat and Independent voters from Grand Rapids, Michigan in a wide ranging discussion about Trump's first year in office.

Trump tweeted: "Just watched a very insecure Oprah Winfrey, who at one point I knew very well, interview a panel of people on 60 Minutes. The questions were biased and slanted, the facts incorrect. Hope Oprah runs so she can be exposed and defeated just like all of the others!" Winfrey has told various media outlets, including Entertainment Weekly, that she is not running for president, but has considered it, after there was much recent media speculation.

The panelists ranged from voters who said "I love him more and more every day," to others questioning Trump's stability, saying, "All he does is bully people." Winfrey made no declarative statements for or against the president in the program. But she did ask questions ranging from whether the country is better off economically to whether respect for the country is eroding around the world. — Reuters

French jazz violinist Didier Lockwood dies aged 62

Noted French jazz violinist Didier Lockwood, a disciple of the late Stephane Grappelli, has died of a heart attack in Paris, his agent said. Lockwood, who turned 62 on February 11, died early on Sunday morning. The night before his death, he had performed at Paris jazz venue Bal Blomet. "His wife, his three daughters, his family, his agent, his co-workers and his record label are sad to announce the sudden passing of Didier Lockwood," his agent said in a statement.

Lockwood was playing at a jazz festival when he met Grappelli, another French jazz great who founded a string quintet called the Hot Club of France in 1934 with gypsy guitar legend Django Reinhardt. The violinist invited the then 20-year-old Lockwood to join him on a European tour, kicking off an international career in which he gave around 4,500 concerts and released more than 35 records. "That was the start of my career, the launchpad that got me into the world of popular jazz," Lockwood told Radio France in 2008.

Lockwood was committed to music education, in 2001 setting up the Didier Lockwood Music Centre in a town south of Paris teaching improvisation according to a jazz violin method he developed. French culture



In this file photo taken on July 30, 2000 French composer and jazz violinist Didier Lockwood performs in Nice, during the 7th Edition of the Nice Jazz Festival.

minister Francoise Nyssen described Lockwood as "deeply generous and outgoing" and said he would be missed by "his friends, music and all the children he wished to enlighten with his passion".

"He wanted to make music without borders or prejudices," she added. Born in 1956 in Calais to a French-

Scottish family, Lockwood, whose father was a music teacher, gained an early taste for improvisation thanks to his elder brother Francis, a jazz pianist. Aged 17, Lockwood joined a popular French prog rock band called Magma. He later threw himself into a multitude of musical projects and collaborations, experimenting with varied jazz styles, both electric and acoustic, from classical fusion to gypsy swing. During his career, he wrote two operas, violin and piano concertos, lyrical works and music for films and cartoons.

"France has lost an exceptional musician, a man with rare qualities," wrote violinist Renaud Capucon on Twitter. Lockwood's widow is the coloratura soprano Patricia Petibon, acclaimed for her interpretations of French Baroque music. The couple had just recorded an album together, said Lockwood's agent Christophe Deghelt, who called him "Mr. 100,000 volts" and said the musician had a "huge" number of projects under way when he died. Lockwood was previously married to the singer Caroline Casadesus, with whom he had created a musical called "Jazz and the diva". — AFP



In this file photo taken on October 10, 2005 French composer and jazz violinist Didier Lockwood (right) pose with his companion French Opera singer Caroline Casadesus (left), at the Theatre of the Gaité Montparnasse in Paris, at the end of their show 'le Jazz et la Diva' (The Jazz and the Diva).



In this file photo taken on March 14, 2007 French composer and jazz violinist Didier Lockwood interprets excerpts of the music score during the world film premiere of the animated Franco-Belgian co-production 'Princess of the Sun', a cartoon staged during Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen's reign and presented at the Giza pyramid's esplanade in Cairo. — AFP photos



Cosplayers portraying characters from the 2018 US superhero film based on the Marvel Comics character, 'The Black Panther' pose in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. — AFP photos



Cosplayers portraying characters from the 2018 US superhero film based on the Marvel Comics character, 'The Black Panther' pose in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.



Invited guests watch the film "Black Panther" in 3D which featuring Oscar-winning Mexico born Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o during Movie Jabber's Black Panther Cosplay Screening in Nairobi, Kenya.

As 'Black Panther' shows, inclusion pays at the box office

Alavish, headline-grabbing premiere. Lightning word-of-mouth stoked by glowing reviews. Packed movie theaters with sold-out shows, long lines and fans decked out as characters from the film. The phenomenon of "Black Panther" had the look and feel of a classic, bona fide blockbuster in route to its record-setting \$192 million debut over the weekend, or an estimated \$218 million Friday through Monday. Much has been made about the film industry's struggles to tap into pop culture the way it once more regularly did - that TV and streaming options and a dearth of fresh ideas have diminished the power of the big screen.

But when Hollywood does manufacture a must-see theatrical event, it has increasingly been propelled by the power of inclusivity. Just as Jordan Peele's Oscar-nominated "Get Out" (\$253 million worldwide on a \$4.5 million production budget) and Patty Jenkins' "Wonder Woman" (\$821.1 million) did before it, "Black Panther" captured the zeitgeist by the potent combination of top-notch filmmaking (the film stands at 97 percent fresh on Rotten Tomatoes), studio backing and an audience hungry to see itself represented on the big screen in a way it seldom has before. At the box office, inclusion is paying - and often, it's paying off big time.

Global stage

"Diversity does in fact, sell," said Darnell Hunt, a professor and director of social science at UCLA whose research has detailed the connection between diversity and bottom lines. "In hindsight, it's kind of a no-brainer. The American public is about 40 percent people of color now, and we know that people of color over-index in terms of media consumption. The patterns we've been seeing are only becoming more pronounced as time goes on." "Black Panther" debuted with \$361 million in worldwide ticket sales, setting up the \$200 million film for a theatrical run that should easily eclipse \$1 billion. History is assured. Just months after Jenkins helmed the biggest box-office hit directed by a woman, Ryan Coogler will set a new mark for films directed by an African American. The debut, the best ever for February, is the fifth highest of all time, not accounting for inflation.

At a time where hits are hard to come by for Hollywood, diversity in storytelling is proving to be not only a just cause, but a box-office imperative. "If you want to succeed on the global stage, certainly in

the tent-pole business, you have to have diversity in storytelling, in the characters that you put in front of the camera, in the artisans you put behind the camera - to be able to get that better, richer storytelling and to drive huge results," said Dave Hollis, distribution chief for Disney. "The results speak for themselves." Hollis pointed to the many factors that made "Black Panther" a hit: Coogler's direction, the stewardship of Kevin Feige's Marvel, the reliability of the brand. But he also noted a developing pattern for Disney - that inclusive films are both richer for their diversity and, often, richer for the bottom line.

"It feels like the right thing to do. It makes for better, richer storytelling, and we're a business. It's something that's just delivered big, huge box office," said Hollis. "When we have leaned into and had inclusion and representation as part of the mix, it's just really worked. When you think about 'Star Wars' and 'Rogue One,' the female protagonist leading those stories. Also 'Moana' or 'Coco.' 'Coco' has been an absolute juggernaut."

Culturally authentic

"Coco," which is expected to win the Oscar for best animated feature next month, has gross more than \$730 million worldwide. It's the biggest budget release starring an all-Latino cast. Rian Johnson's "Star Wars: The Last Jedi," which has grossed \$1.3 billion worldwide, did more than any previous "Star Wars" film to elevate its female characters, and featured the widely hailed breakout star Kelly Marie Tran. By promoting diversity in its films, Disney has faced some backlash from social-media critics who deride films like "The Last Jedi" and Sony's 2015's female-led "Ghostbusters" as politically correct overreach. Some fans have even gone to the extraordinary length of trying to drive down audience scores for those films.

But consider the fate of movies that haven't tried as hard to be culturally authentic. Paramount's "Ghost in the Shell," which starred Scarlett Johansson in a role originally written as a cyborg in a Japanese woman's body, last year bombed at the box office after a backlash over Johansson's casting. Meanwhile, the diverse cast of Universal's "The Fast and the Furious" films helped make it one of the most bankable franchises in movies. Other standout hits have included "Girls Trip" - the biggest comedy of 2017 - and Sony's unexpectedly lucrative "Jumanji: Welcome

to the Jungle." The film, starring Dwayne Johnson and Kevin Hart, reigned over the January box office as the no. 1 film on four weekends.

"Jumanji" has grossed more than \$904 million worldwide, including more than a half a billion dollars overseas. The old argument that films starring African-American actors don't travel well has never had a worse two months. "Black Panther" opened with \$160 million abroad, even without several markets (China, Japan, Russia) yet open. And in Hollywood, nothing talks like money. "Black Panther" can be an important first step toward really dispelling the myth that has held Hollywood back for generations in terms of telling the stories that we certainly want to see in this country but I think that the rest of the world wants to see, too," said Hunt.

Films reflect society

Studies have also shown that diverse casts attract wider audiences. Last year, talent agency CAA found that of the top 10 grossing films in 2016, 47 percent of the opening-weekend audience was made up of people of color, up 2 percent from the year before. The effect was even more pronounced in the biggest hits. Seven of the 10 highest-grossing films from 2016 had opening weekend audiences more than 50 percent white. The audience for "Black Panther" was 65 percent non-white, including 37 percent black, according to comScore. Latinos and African Americans are also more eager moviegoers, according to the Motion Picture Association of America.

In the MPAA's most recent report, it found that though Latinos make up 18 percent of the US population, they account for 23 percent of frequent moviegoers. Though African Americans are 12 percent of the population, they make up 15 percent of frequent moviegoers. "If you look at some of the bigger blockbusters from the last year, they were representative of what the audience are looking for, how they're feeling," said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for comScore. "These films reflect society and then society reflects back on the films. That's when you get to these much bigger than expected debuts. It becomes more than a movie. It becomes a cultural event." Communal movie-going may be under siege from other entertainment options. But films like "Black Panther" are making movie theaters more communal than ever. — AP



What is Valletta 2018?



Valletta 2018 is an exciting year-long celebration - a cultural program that starts in our capital city and reaches out to towns and villages all over Malta and Gozo. Our Opening Week draws crowds to the heart of Valletta with music and entertainment, street artists and performers spreading word of the Opening around the capital's streets, exhibitions set in diverse venues around the city, open days that re-discover Valletta's fascinating historical spaces, community storytelling events centered around the city's residents and the spaces they use, and much more. Our European Capital of Culture year begins with a unique celebration that's worthy of the traditional Maltese Festa. Visit the capital from the 14th to the 21st of January and participate in our island-wide festa!

Valletta 2018: An island-wide festa

When you live on an island, the horizon always holds the promise of new and exciting connections to be made, while the shore draws you back home to a wealth of detail that's just waiting to be explored.

Malta and Gozo can be likened to tiny but vibrant stages packed with drama, excess and exuberance constantly playing out in close quarters, amid tight-knit communities: all the while, these small island scenarios have co-existed with the comings and goings afforded by our harbors, and today they walk alongside ever-growing international connections.

The strategic geography of the Maltese Islands - which places them right between Europe and Africa - thus puts our communities in a unique position to host such a diverse cultural celebration as the European Capital of Culture. And our Mediterranean style is another valuable feature of the islands' identity, capable of reaching out to the varied and valuable perspectives that surround it.



Lifestyle | Awards



British-Irish filmmaker Martin McDonagh (left), producer Peter Czernin (second left), supporting actor award winner US actor Sam Rockwell, and British producer Graham Broadbent (right) pose with leading actress award winner US actress Frances McDormand (2R) after receiving the award for Best Film for 'Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri' at the BAFTA British Academy Film Awards at the Royal Albert Hall in London on February 18, 2018. — AFP photos



(From left) Canadian set decorator Jeff Melvin, Production designer Paul Austerberry and set decorator Shane Vieau pose with the award for Production Design for work on the film 'The Shape Of Water' with citation readers Swedish actress Rebecca Ferguson (left) and British actor Toby Jones (right) at the BAFTA British Academy Film Awards.

'Three Billboards' tops Baftas as 'Time's Up' campaign shares stage

Crime drama "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" captured five British Bafta film awards on Sunday, including best film, topping an emotionally charged ceremony that featured fashion and rhetoric in support of the fight against sexual harassment sweeping Hollywood. The movie, chronicling a grieving mother's campaign for justice, won for original screenplay and outstanding British film, while Frances McDormand bagged best actress and Sam Rockwell best supporting actor prizes. "The Shape of Water"—the most heavily nominated film of the night with 12 nods—came away with only three awards, including best director for Guillermo Del Toro, while "Darkest Hour" claimed two prizes, including for Gary Oldman as best actor. With Hollywood still reeling from the fallout of the Harvey Weinstein

Duchess of Cambridge chose to wear a dark green dress, by British designer Jenny Packham, as she accompanied husband Prince William, president of Bafta, to the ceremony.

'Brave revelations'

Jane Lush, chair of Bafta, opened the evening soberly telling the star-studded audience it was important to acknowledge a "difficult" past year, and noted efforts to tackle gen-



US actress Frances McDormand, recipient of the award for a Leading Actress poses in the press room after presenting the award for Best Film at the BAFTA British Academy Film Awards.



English actor Gary Oldman poses after winning the leading actor award on the film 'Darkest Hour'.



US actor Sam Rockwell poses with the award for a Supporting Actor for his work on the film 'Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri'.



British-Irish filmmaker Martin McDonagh poses with the award for Best Film for 'Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri'.

scandal, the resulting anti-sexual harassment campaigns were reflected in the mood of the evening. "Our film is a hopeful one in lots of ways but it's also an angry one," Martin McDonagh, writer and director of "Three Billboards", said in his acceptance speech.

"And as we've seen this year, sometimes anger is the only way to get people to listen and to change, so we're thrilled that Bafta has recognized this." Stars arrived at London's Royal Albert Hall predominantly dressed in black in solidarity with the #MeToo and "Time's Up" campaigns, mirroring other recent American red carpets including last month's Golden Globes. Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lawrence and Kristin Scott Thomas were among the stars who wore black. British royals avoid making overtly political statements or gestures, so there was little surprise when the

der inequality. "Brave revelations have followed brave revelations of bullying and sexual harassment, and which to all our shame has been hidden in plain sight for decades," she said. "This is a moment in history, it should be a watershed, a catalyst for lasting change." Host Joanna Lumley, a British film and TV star, also praised the gender equality movement as a continuation of the work of the Suffragettes a century ago. She hailed the "determination to eradicate



British actor Daniel Kaluuya poses with the Rising Star Award at the BAFTA British Academy Film Awards.

the abuse of women the world over" as she took to the stage. Meanwhile in an open letter published Sunday before the awards, almost 200 British and Irish stars backed a new fund to help women facing sexual harassment and abuse at work. It echoes a similar initiative launched in Hollywood last month, and was kick-started with a £1 million (1.13 million euro, \$1.4 million) donation from actress and activist Emma Watson.

'Thank you, Sir Winston'

Choices at the Baftas, which fall between the Globes and the Oscars, often mirror those of the American heavyweights. "The Shape of Water", a story of love between a mute cleaning woman and a mystery merman-like creature, led the pack just as it has across the Atlantic, where it has topped the list of Oscar nominations with 13 nods, including for best picture. As well as director del Toro's award for direction, composer Alexandre Desplat collected the original music award—his third BAFTA win—and the film also won best production design. Allison Janney won best supporting actress for her role as the mother of controversial figure skater Tonya Harding in biopic "I, Tonya". "I loved doing this crazy part and finding her humanity, that's what I try and do in all roles," she said backstage.

Gary Oldman's turn as Churchill in "Darkest Hour" has so far won him a Golden Globe, a Bafta and the chance of an Oscar on March 4. He paid tribute to the wartime British leader, saying: "In those dark, uncertain days in 1940, he held the line for honor, for integrity and freedom for his nation and the world, so I thank you, Sir Winston." Accepting her best actress accolade, McDormand, who chose not to wear black, quoted her on-screen character who has "a little trouble with compliance". "But I want you to know I stand in full solidarity with my sisters tonight in black," she added. — AFP



US filmmaker James Ivory poses with the award for an Adapted Screenplay for the film 'Call Me By Your Name'.



(From left) Japanese special effects make-up artist Kazuhiro Tsuji, Lucy Sibbick, make-up and hair artists Ivana Primorac and British Special effects make-up artist David Malinowski pose with the award for Make Up And Hair for their work on the film 'Darkest Hour'.



(From left) Special effects artists Richard R. Hoover, Gerd Nefer, John Nelson and Paul Lambert pose with the award for Special Visual Effects for their work on the film 'Blade Runner 2049'.



(From left) Sound engineers, editors and mixers Alex Gibson, Mark Weingarten, Gregg Landaker, Richard King and Gary A. Rizzo pose with the award for Sound for their work on the film 'Dunkirk'.



British writer and director Rungano Nyoni (center left) and British producer Emily Morgan (center right) pose with their awards for an Outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director or Producer for their work on the film 'I Am Not A Witch' with citation readers British actress Lily James (left) and British actress Gemma Arterton (right) at the BAFTA British Academy Film Awards at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

Lifestyle | Awards



US actress Jennifer Lawrence



British celebrity Cressida Bonas



British actress Lily James (left) and British actress Gemma Arterton



US actress Anya Taylor Joy (left) and Guyanese actress Letitia Wright



US actress Angelina Jolie



British actor Orlando Bloom (right) and British actress Gugu Mbatha-Raw.



British actor Chiwetel Ejiofor (left) and guest pose on the red carpet.



Mexico-born Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o



British actress Karen Gillan



British actress Natalie Dormer



British actress Andrea Riseborough

Britain's Bafta awards - The winners

Crime drama "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" captured five British Bafta awards on Sunday, including best film. Here is the complete list of winners from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (Bafta) ceremony, held at London's Royal Albert Hall.

- Best film**
"Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri"
- Outstanding British film**
"Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri"
- Leading actor**
Gary Oldman ("Darkest Hour")
- Leading actress**
Frances McDormand ("Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri")
- Supporting actor**
Sam Rockwell ("Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri")
- Supporting actress**
Allison Janney ("I, Tonya")
- Director**
Guillermo del Toro ("The Shape of Water")
- Original screenplay**
Martin McDonagh ("Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri")
- Adapted screenplay**
James Ivory ("Call Me by Your Name")
- EE rising star**
Daniel Kaluuya
- Outstanding debut by a British writer, director or producer**
"I Am Not a Witch", Rungano Nyoni (Writer/Director), Emily Morgan (Producer)
- Film not in the English language**
"The Handmaiden"
- Documentary**
"I Am Not Your Negro"
- Animated film**
"Coco"
- Original music**
Alexandre Desplat ("The Shape of Water")
- Cinematography**
Roger Deakins ("Blade Runner 2049")
- Editing**
Jonathan Amos, Paul Machliss ("Baby Driver")
- Production design**
Paul Austerberry, Jeff Melvin, Shane Vieau ("The Shape of Water")
- Costume design**
Mark Bridges ("Phantom Thread")
- Makeup and hair**
David Malinowski, Ivana Primorac, Lucy Sibbick, Kazuhiro Tsuji ("Darkest Hour")
- Sound**
Alex Gibson, Richard King, Gregg Landaker, Gary A. Rizzo, Mark Weingarten ("Dunkirk")
- Special visual effects**
Richard R. Hoover, Paul Lambert, Gerd Nefzer, John Nelson ("Blade Runner 2049")
- British short animation**
"Poles Apart"
- British short film**
"Cowboy Dave" — AFP



British actor Andy Serkis (left) poses on the red carpet upon arrival at the BAFTA British Academy Film Awards.



French composer Alexandre Desplat poses with the award for Original Music for his work on the film 'The Shape Of Water'.



US costume designer Mark Bridges poses with the award for Costume Design for his work on the film 'Phantom Thread'.



US director James Ivory (left) and British actress Helena Bonham



US filmmaker Lee Unkrich (right) poses with the award for an Animated Film for 'Coco'.



Colin O'Toole (right) and Jonas Mortens (left) pose with the award for a British Short Film for the film 'Cowboy Dave'.



British actress Naomi Harris (left) and British actor Patrick Stewart (right)



British actress Amy Jackson

Lifestyle

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2018



An aerial view taken with a drone on February 17, 2018 shows spectators as they watch the burning of a thirty-meter structure built of twigs and debris made in the form of a Gothic style building by Russian artist Nikolay Polissky during the celebration of Shrovetide (Maslenitsa) in the village of Nikola-Lenivets, Kaluga region, some 220 km (140 miles) outside Moscow. Shrovetide or Maslenitsa is an ancient farewell ceremony to winter, traditionally celebrated in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine and involves the burning of a large effigy. German Vinogradov, performance artist at Nikola-Lenivets, turned the huge art object into an openwork burning building, according to organizers. — AFP

For single Syrian women, search for soul mate comes up empty



This picture shows the general view of a wedding dresses shop in the Syrian capital Damascus. — AFP photos



A Syrian man arranging dresses at a wedding dresses shop in the capital Damascus.

Syrian student Nour wistfully examines her bare ring finger, then scans fellow classmates around her at Damascus University. Amid the sea of women, there's no eligible single man in sight. At 30, Nour says she is eager to get married-but Syria's protracted conflict means potential suitors have emigrated, joined the army or lost their lives. "I hope a wedding ring will decorate this finger someday," says Nour, who asked to use a pseudonym to speak freely. "But there are no more young men here. They all left years ago. I'm noticing a drop year after year."

Syria's conflict erupted in 2011 with mass protests, just as Nour was preparing to graduate with her first degree in economics. She recalls fielding weekly marriage proposals at the time. "But today these proposals have

almost completely stopped. They're limited to ones I see as incompatible for a normal marriage-either from men who are already married or old!" To pass the time, Nour has opted to pursue her second degree at Damascus University in literature. "I've got nothing to fill my time with. No friend, no lover, no husband," she sighs, pulling her dyed blonde hair away from her face. "I'm terrified I'll find a grey hair before I get married. I'll definitely lose all hope at that point." In Syria's broadly conservative society, women were generally expected to marry in their 20s, but the lack of eligible bachelors has somewhat relaxed those norms.

Missing 'the marriage train'

"Now, because of the crisis, a woman could marry at 32 without people saying she's late to

wed," said Salam Qassem, a psychology professor in Damascus. More than 340,000 people have died in Syria's war, and thousands of men have been deployed on front lines far from home. Of the country's pre-war population of 23 million, more than five million have fled the country and even more are internally displaced. That has unraveled the social networks parents once used to find potential spouses for their sons and daughters, said Qassem.

"Neighbors used to all know each other in the past, or could get to know each other easily. But today, families are scattered all over the place," she said. Some Syrians have creatively circumvented such obstacles with "Skype weddings", where brides and grooms in different provinces or even countries authorize a third party to sign their marriage licenses as they exchange vows online. Yusra, 31, said the fact that she has yet to wed makes her parents fret that she will "miss the marriage train".

"I don't want you to become a spinster," her mother warns her repeatedly, advising her to

"look around carefully to find a catch". But much like Nour, Yusra—who works as a government translator—finds herself surrounded by women or by male colleagues that she considers too old to be compatible. "Everyone knows a huge section of Syria's youth has paid the biggest price for what's happening," the tall, slender woman told AFP.

"Some emigrated. Some are fighting. Financial considerations prevent others from even thinking about getting married—not to mention, of course, those who died over the past seven years," Yusra said sadly. On top of all that, she said the war has "widened the sectarian rift in society", making people from different religious backgrounds less likely to get hitched.

Mission impossible: marriage

The war has also led to skyrocketing inflation, widespread unemployment, and economic losses estimated at more than \$225 billion-making 37-year-old Firas balk at the thought of a wedding. "Rising living costs and other financial factors

make getting married like mission impossible," said Firas, who works in a washing machine repair shop in the Damascus neighborhood of Bab Touma. Mortar rounds fired by rebels entrenched outside the capital have landed near his shop, endangering his life and those of his customers.

"I can't make plans or imagine my future. I'm living day by day—God knows if I'll be alive tomorrow," said Firas, who keeps a pencil tucked behind his ear even when he is not in the shop. "Anyone that gets married in these circumstances is crazy. I can't guarantee a safe and dignified life for myself, so how I could I guarantee one for my wife and children?" In a nearby district, medical student Munzer Kallas hangs a massive calendar on his bedroom wall, with key dates circled in red. They mark upcoming application deadlines for scholarships to pursue his studies abroad. "I don't think about marriage at all. Marriage needs stability, and I decided to follow my brother to Germany," said Kallas, 26. "I'm better off looking for a plane ticket than a wife." — AFP



Syrians walking past a wedding jewelry shop in the capital Damascus.



Syrian men arranging dresses at a wedding dresses shop in the capital Damascus.

