

3 Govt agrees with proposal to tax expat remittances



11 Porn actress 'threatened' to keep silent on Trump fling



11 64 dead in Russia inferno; Amir sends condolences



14 Australian cricket in crisis over ball-tampering scandal



Saudi-led coalition warns Iran after Houthi missile barrage

Falling debris kills Egyptian • Amir condemns attacks • Yemenis stage rally



RIYADH: A man looks yesterday at a hole in a ceiling of a house in the Um al-Hammam district caused by falling shrapnel from Yemeni rebel missiles that were intercepted over the Saudi capital. — AFP



RIYADH: Saudi soldiers reveal the remains of missiles that a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia claims are Iranian during a press conference at the Armed Forces Club yesterday. — AFP

RIYADH: A military coalition led by Saudi Arabia yesterday threatened retaliation against Iran, accusing it of being behind a barrage of Yemeni rebel missile attacks on the kingdom. Saudi forces said they intercepted seven missiles on Sunday, including over the capital Riyadh, in a deadly escalation that coincided with the third anniversary of the coalition's intervention in Yemen.

Displaying wreckage at a news conference in Riyadh of what it said were fragments of those missiles, the coalition claimed forensic analysis showed they were supplied to Houthi rebels by their ally Iran. We "reserve the right to respond against Iran at the right time and right place", coalition spokesman Turki Al-Malki told reporters.

The missile strikes resulted in the first reported fatality from Houthi fire in the Saudi capital. Egyptian national Abdul-Moteleb Ahmed, 38, died instantly in his bed when what appeared to be burning shrapnel struck his ramshackle room in Riyadh's Um al-Hammam district, leaving a gaping hole in the roof, witnesses told AFP at the site. Three other Egyptian laborers in the same room were wounded and hospitalized, they said.

Continued on Page 11

Jabri handed additional youth portfolio

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, with the attendance of HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, received yesterday HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. The premier presented to the Amir Mohammed Al-Jabri, who was sworn in as Minister of Information and Minister of State for Youth Affairs.

Jabri said the lofty directives he received from HH the Amir offer a



Mohammed Al-Jabri

roadmap for promoting youth services. This is likely to guarantee youth distinction and creativity in assuming their national responsibilities in building the nation and developing it in all fields, Jabri said in an exclusive press statement to KUNA after he was sworn in. — KUNA

Hajraf explains delay in paying labor allowances

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: Finance Minister Nayef Al-Hajraf yesterday said that the ministry was not responsible for delaying the payment of the national labor support allowances. He said that through the Civil Service Commission, the Manpower and Government Restructuring Program (MGRP) had "unofficially" asked on March 13, 2018 for KD 11,640,000 to pay the allowances. The finance ministry requested more details, which were only sent back to the ministry on Sunday, March 25, and the ministry approved the payment on the same day. The allowances are usually never paid later than the 24th of every month.

Accordingly, the finance ministry urged all government bodies to fully commit to its directives and regulations concerning submitting the needed documents and details as well as responding to the ministry's inquiries to protect public funds. The ministry also confirmed that it will not accept blame for the failure of any government body to meet its commitments and obligations towards citizens. "It is the responsibility of every government body to verify the data submitted as well as how every single dinar is spent," the ministry stressed.

Meanwhile, MP Abdulkareem Al-Kandari demanded referring those responsible for the delay for immediate investigations. "A government that is incapable of coordinating between various ministries and bodies cannot be trusted with citizens' vocational rights," he underlined. MGRP Secretary General Fauzi Al-Majdali stressed that the salaries of 59,299 citizens registered with the national labor support program would be paid by Thursday or Sunday at most - a total amount



Nayef Al-Hajraf

of KD 40 million. Majdali added that MGRP had sent the lists to the finance ministry on March 15, insisting that it was the ministry which was late in providing the needed funds.

News in brief

100-day 'probation' visas introduced

KUWAIT: An official source at the Public Authority for Manpower said the labor inspection department has begun issuing temporary work permits for 100 days for those who change jobs or those under probation after entering the country for the first time. Employers have been asked to obtain the temporary permit during the trial period as determined by the private sector labor law to protect workers from any violations and from facing any punishments including administrative deportation and fines. The temporary work permits will be issued online in the near future - meanwhile, these permits are currently being issued only by the central department in Egaila. — Al-Anbaa

First UAE nuclear reactor complete

ABU DHABI: The United Arab Emirates said yesterday that one of four nuclear reactors at its debut plant has been completed as it moves closer to becoming the first Arab nation to produce atomic power. The announcement came after visiting South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed toured the \$20-billion Barakah plant, the state-run WAM news agency reported. The second reactor is 92 percent complete, the third 81 percent, while 66 percent of the fourth has been completed, WAM reported. — AFP

Syrian FM in rare Oman visit

MUSCAT: Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem arrived in the Omani capital yesterday for talks with officials, the two countries' official news agencies said. The talks would cover "the current situation in the region and means of strengthening bilateral ties", as well as regional and international issues, said Syria's SANA news agency. — AFP

New rules due to presence of 'fake' engineers

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Public Authority of Manpower (PAM) claims there are many fake and uncertified engineers in Kuwait, so in cooperation with the Kuwait Society of Engineers (KSE), it decided to rectify the

situation in the labor market in favor of certified engineers. According to a PAM administrative circular dated March 11, 2018, all expat engineers working in the private sector have to get certified by KSE in order to renew their work visas, which has resulted in large crowds at the society.

"Expat engineers will benefit from this decision as there are many fake engineers in the country, who have led to the monthly salary of an engineer falling to KD 300. After these uncertified engineers will be gone from the labor market, the salaries of real engineers will rise," argued Ali Mohseni, member of the board of directors of KSE. He estimated around 40,000 expat

engineers work in the private sector. "In the past two weeks, around 4,000 engineers came to get more information and have their certification done. We are under huge pressure as we are dealing with over 300 people daily," he told Kuwait Times.

Some engineers' residencies will expire soon and they are worried of getting into legal troubles. "The procedure of receiving the certification from KSE will only take a few days. If their visa expires before getting the certificate, they can always get a two-month extension till they have their papers ready. Applicants have to pay KD 30 for the certificate by KSE," explained Mohseni.

In order to get certified by KSE, an engineer should be a graduate of an accredited university. "Those who graduated from universities that are not recognized by their own countries won't be able to hold the title of 'engineer' in their work permit. Those who have graduated from a recognized university will either have to pass a test (for those who graduated before 2010) or just an interview (for those who graduated after 2010). The interview is held by an academic committee consisting of doctors from Kuwait University and engineers from inside and outside Kuwait. The test is in English, and the results should be ready in four days," he pointed out.

Sisi supporters revel as election gets underway

CAIRO: Hundreds of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's supporters revealed outside polling stations in Cairo yesterday as voting got underway to celebrate what they expect will be his certain re-election. In the southwestern neighborhood of Al-Haram, close to the ancient Giza pyramids, women danced and a man beat a large drum, while those gathered around them waved the Egyptian flag and sang in unison. Nearby, trucks carrying large speakers blasted nationalistic and pro-military pop songs, encouraging people to take part in the vote. "In spite of America, long live Egypt. Long live Egypt with its great military," chanted a woman dressed in a black

gown and a bandana in the colors of the Egyptian flag, and with a flag wrapped around her shoulders. Scores of employees, mainly assembly line workers, at a government pharmaceutical company across the street arrived together, not to vote, as they were not registered at this station, but to cheer for Sisi, the military, and the police.

Sisi was elected a year after leading the 2013 military ouster of former Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, amid mass protests against his rule. "We got together with the officials from the (company's) union and they told us all to come to this school... The whole company is united... we all love Sisi," said Sahar Nasr, 41. Mother-of-six Nasr added: "We came here to salute Sisi and each of us will go to their (polling) station and then go back to work".

Sisi is facing a single opponent, Moussa Mostafa Moussa, a little-known



CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi casts his vote on the first day of the presidential elections at a polling station in the capital yesterday. — AFP

Continued on Page 11

Amir meets charity organization's members, commends their works

Charity is a deep-rooted value in the Kuwaiti society: Sheikh Sabah



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with Marafi Charity members. —KUNA Photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with the outgoing Malaysian ambassador to Kuwait Dato' Ahmad Rozian Abd Ghani.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with the Swiss ambassador to Kuwait Aldo de Luca.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with former minister of commerce and industry Falah Fahad Al-Hajri.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with President of National Security Bureau Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Seif Palace yesterday members of Marafi Charity, namely Abdul-Elah Mohammad Marafi, Nader Abdulqassem Marafi, Mohammad Taqi Marafi, Abdulhakeem Abdulfatah Marafi and Khaled Abdul Ghaffar Marafi.

They briefed His Highness the Amir about the charity's latest developments. His Highness praised the charity officials and the charitable works that they offer, which is a deep-rooted value in the Kuwaiti society since the old times. His Highness wished them everlasting progress and success. Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir received the outgo-

ing Malaysian ambassador to Kuwait Dato' Ahmad Rozian Abd Ghani. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received the Malaysian ambassador as well. His Highness the Amir also received the outgoing Swiss

ambassador to the country Aldo de Luca, who also met with His Highness the Prime Minister. In the meantime, His Highness the Crown Prince received President of National Security Bureau Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, as well as former minister of commerce and industry Falah Fahad Al-Hajri. —KUNA

Kuwait-proposed Jerusalem emergency article passed: Speaker

GENEVA: Kuwait National Assembly Speaker Marzuq Al-Ghanem said yesterday that the passing of the emergency article relating to Jerusalem, presented by Kuwait and three other countries, confirmed that Arab and Islamic countries could achieve a lot when cooperating. The Israeli delegation has been deeply embarrassed in terms of voting and this confirms that 'peaceful' parliamentary diplomacy can achieve a lot, Ghanem said. The Kuwaiti delegation, in cooperation with Arab and Islamic countries' delegations, succeeded in passing the Kuwaiti proposal, which was a difficult challenge, he added.



National Assembly Speaker Marzuq Al-Ghanem

Since the establishment of the IPU, the proposals of the Arab geopolitical group have not succeeded in any of the sessions except in the past two, when a proposal for the Rohingya went through and this year the proposal of Kuwait, he pointed out. A committee in the Arab Parliament recommended to include an emergency article related to Jerusalem crisis on the agenda of IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) meeting. The article passed concerns Washington's decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, two Kuwaiti MPs have shared the view that an emergency article on Jerusalem was passed at the 138th Assembly of the IPU thanks to Kuwait's balanced policies and respect of human rights. Member of the Kuwaiti Parliamentary Group attending the IPU Assembly Ali Al-Deqbasi said the fact that the proposal, submitted by Kuwait, Bahrain, Palestine and Turkey, received 843 votes in favor and 108 against, reflected the distinctive status of the Kuwaiti National Assembly. He stressed the significant role of the Kuwaiti parliamentary diplomacy that always defended causes of the Muslim nation.

"One has learnt this active and elevated role from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah," Deqbasi stressed. MP Naif Al-Ajmi expressed meanwhile his gratitude over the success of the Kuwaiti Parliamentary Group led by Ghanem, to secure the emergency article on the Assembly agenda. Kuwait has always been a pioneer in advocating the Arab and Muslim causes, he said. Ajmi, also member of the group, noted that the Palestine cause is that "of every Muslim."

In the meantime, MP Omar Al-Tabtabaei has lauded the victory secured by Kuwait's National Assembly as the 138th Assembly of the IPU voted for including an emergency item on Jerusalem on the agenda of the Geneva gathering. The success, realized thanks to support by the Arab and Islamic parliaments, is a "moral and political triumph for an issue the international parliaments forgot for the past years, namely the cause of the Palestinians' and their right in their capital, Jerusalem," Tabtabaei said. "The victory against the Zionist entity, represented by the Knesset, will be recorded in the name of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, which managed to include a similar emergency item on the Rohingya on the conference agenda last year, he stressed." —KUNA

Defense minister discusses cooperation with ambassadors



First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meets with US ambassador to Kuwait Lawrence Silverman.

KUWAIT: Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah held talks yesterday with a bevy of international ambassadors to the Gulf state, focusing on strategies to develop closer ties. The US ambassador to Kuwait Lawrence Silverman, Jordanian envoy Sager Abu Shtal, Vietnamese diplomat Trinh Minh Manh and Brazil's ambassador Norton de Andrade Mello were among those to have met with Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabah, read a statement by the Kuwaiti defense ministry. The statement pointed out that a sense of camaraderie pervaded the Kuwaiti defense minister's encounters with the diplomats, in which discussions were held over issues of mutual concern.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabah's meeting spree included talks with the Chief of the Australian Army Angus Campbell and a delegation accompanying him. Also yesterday, the Kuwaiti minister received the director general of Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences Dr Adnan Shihab-Eldin. The defense ministry's undersecretary Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Sabah was present during the meetings. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meets with Jordanian envoy Sager Abu Shtal. —KUNA



First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meets with Brazil's ambassador Norton de Andrade Mello.



First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meets with the Vietnamese ambassador Trinh Minh Manh.

Local

Government agrees with proposal to tax expatriates' remittances

Compromise reached after meeting with Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry

By A Saleh and Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Official sources said the government agrees with a proposal to tax remittances made by expatriates and denied that the Central Bank raised objections during a meeting of the parliamentary financial affairs committee to discuss the matter. "What the Central Bank suggested was taking more time to discuss the details of parliamentary proposals to avoid derailing the entire issue," the sources said.

The sources stressed that represented by the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the private sector had a different viewpoint, which was taken into full consideration and a compromise was reached by agreeing to categorize and reduce the fee value instead of the suggested five percent charge on all remittances regardless of the amount. "It was agreed to collect a two percent charge for amounts up to KD 100, three percent for sums between KD 100 and 500 and four percent for transfers more than KD 500," the sources explained, noting that this was the final vision that will be discussed further during the committee's meeting next week.

In addition, the sources warned that the chamber has fears that the fees might have a negative impact on attracting skilled labor to Kuwait, which was refuted by the parliamentary committee, which argued that such fees or taxes will help get rid of marginal labor already overburdening public services. The sources also noted that the argument now was how to control possible attempts to avoid paying the fees, saying that imposing them only on expats might lead to "agreements" with citizens to send the money on behalf of expats.

"Both the committee and the government need to

settle this before putting the law into practice, otherwise, the tax might be also imposed on citizens," remarked the sources, noting the bill will be discussed in parliament in this term to take effect by October if passed.

Budget deficit

The state budget deficit as of the end of February (11 months of the fiscal year) reached KD 2.52 billion after deducting KD 1.44 billion for the Future Generations Fund, according to the finance ministry's monthly report. The report added the budget deficit dropped by KD 211 million in February compared to January, when it was KD 2.73 billion.

The report explained the drop in the deficit due to growth in revenues, as KD 1.7 billion was added to increase revenues from KD 12.7 billion at the end of January to reach KD 14.4 billion by the end of February. On the other hand, the report showed that expenses increased by KD 937 million by the end of February to reach KD 13.6 billion, compared to KD 12.7 billion by the end of January, which makes the difference between February revenues and expenses reach KD 758 million.

Students fainted

Over 10 ambulances were dispatched yesterday to a private girls school in Khaitan, where a power out-

age took place during the second period without any backup plan. A large number of students fainted and were rushed to Farwaniya Hospital for treatment.

Chairman of the Public Authority for Food and Nutrition Essa Al-Kandari issued a directive exempting seasonal foodstuff outlets from the conditions mentioned in the ministerial decision number 25/2017, provided they get temporary licenses

according to certain conditions. Kandari explained that the conditions for the temporary licenses should include full observation of hygiene conditions and protecting food items from spoilage, that workers should have valid health certificates, that they fully observe personal hygiene conditions, full commitment to the license tenure, activity, location and getting all the relevant approvals.

Exceptions

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) urged the owners of mobile vending trucks already engaged in activities included in the ministerial resolution number 693/2017 to check with the ministry and legalize their statuses, according to some conditions. MoCI assistant undersecretary for companies and licenses affairs Ahmed Al-Fares said the ministry already started receiving applicants to issue licenses for these trucks from March 11. He added that the resolution set a six-month grace period effective

Marine wildlife

As part of its fourth season of surveying and documenting marine wildlife in Kuwait, Kuwait Environment Protection Society (KEPS) used a helicopter to scan various locations to the northeast of Kuwait, said KEPS' wildlife committee member Dr Ra'fat Mesak, noting that the chopper took off from Ali Al-Salem airbase and flew over Subbiya and Boubyan creeks. Mesak added that the survey flight also covered Al-Melh and Al-Tha'lab creeks - the two main entrances to Mubarak Al-Kabeer sanctuary - which covers around a third of Boubyan island (around 51 hectares) and was declared as one of 2,200 international wetlands on Sept 5, 2015. Mesak stressed that the aerial scanning also covered Meskan, Failaka and Um Al-Naml islands, Shuwaikh Port, Oshairej cape and the western side of Kuwait Bay, before landing back at the base. KEPS Chairperson Wejdan Al-Oqab said the flight was in collaboration with the ministry of defense and the air force.

Iraqi delegation

Ministry of Electricity and Water's (MEW) undersecretary yesterday met a delegation from the Iraqi ministry of electricity headed by his counterpart Adel Al-Dulaimi to discuss linking Kuwait, Iraq and GCC power grids.

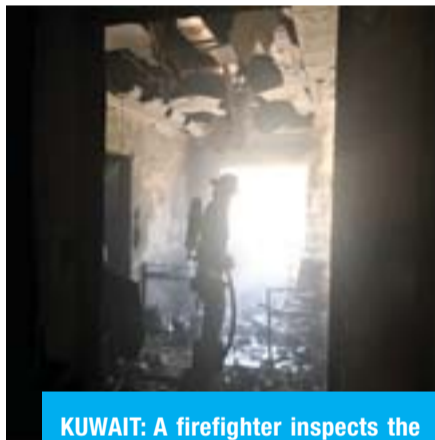


Taxes help get rid of marginal labor

Woman dies after leaping off burning building

By Hanan Al-Saadoun and Agencies

KUWAIT: A woman died after she jumped from a burning building in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh yesterday. The victim reportedly died on the scene from fatal wounds she sustained after jumping from a seventh floor apartment. Firemen from the Jleeb, Ardhiya and Technical Rescue fire stations headed to the scene in response to an emergency call reporting a blaze in a sixth floor apartment in the 10-storey building. Firefighters were able to evacuate the building before extinguishing the flames. Two firemen suffered burns while battling the blaze. Separately, an explosion rocked a Hawally restaurant due to a gas leak, but no injuries were reported. Firemen and paramedics rushed to the scene and put out the fire.



KUWAIT: A firefighter inspects the scene after tackling a blaze in a Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh apartment yesterday.

the company. The man cashed the cheque, then switched off his phone and disappeared. Police are working on the case.

Forged notes

Hawally detectives raided an apartment following information that a citizen was planning to release KD 200,000 in forged notes into the market. The suspect had KD 260 in forged money as well as three scanners. A woman who was found in his apartment was released as she was not involved in the forgery.

Swindling

Concerned authorities closed down a money exchange shop after it swindled various customers of more than KD 200,000. The manager was sent to the central prison, as investigations are underway to find out how the money can be recovered. The public funds prosecution received more than 75 complaints from people who said they were attracted by special offers from the Hawally shop to make transfers for 200 fils cheaper for every 1,000 Egyptian pounds. The victims kept going to this shop for transfers that were not delivered, so they complained to the police.

Prostitution

Two Spanish and two Romanian women who entered the country together were found engaged in prostitution. The Spanish women used a furnished apartment in Hawally after they "promoted" themselves on the Internet before arriving in Kuwait. The Romanians did the same before arriving in Kuwait, and all of them were arrested by vice detectives. The arrest was made after vice police learned about the women's activities, who charged KD 250 per hour. The women arrived in Kuwait four days ago. The suspects face legal action before being deported.

Drug smuggling

A policeman at the central prison acted as a link between drug dealers outside the prison and inmates. Prison drug fighting officers learned the policeman had been active for one year, and was arrested while reporting to work. He said he used to smuggle drugs to prisoners and gave information about the sources. He was referred to the public prosecution.

Awareness campaign

Kuwait Municipality's public relations department said the environment affairs department carried out an awareness campaign at Saeed bin Al-Aas School in cooperation with the cleanliness and road occupancy department in Hawally to clean up Anjifa Beach. It said such campaigns educate students on the importance of protecting the environment and to stop beachgoers from leaving rubbish strewn around by using color-coded garbage bags: Yellow for medical waste; black for home garbage and solid municipal waste; and red for fecal waste, in addition to educating them on how to place the garbage in designated areas. The campaign resulted in removing 32 bags of trash and plastic material, in addition to dead fish.

Assault

A citizen told police he was beaten by a compatriot, adding that while he was leaving his farm, he saw his friend with some other people. He approached them to say hello, but the man hit him with an axe instead. Separately, the Dhaher police station investigator asked for information about the owner of a vehicle, whom a doctor accused of insulting him while on duty at Dhaher health center. The doctor handed over the license plate number of the suspect's car to police as he lodged a complaint.

Theft

A Palestinian man told police that he gave a cheque to an Indian national to cash, but the man escaped with the money. The plaintiff, who manages a food company, told Jleeb police that he would usually give the Indian suspect money to deposit in the bank, but this time he gave him a cheque of KD 19,000 to cash and bring the money to

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Local

Government issues decisive orders to develop Failaka island

Sheikh Mohammed Al-Yousef named head of agriculture authority

KUWAIT: Ministers dedicated special attention during the cabinet's weekly session yesterday to the topic of developing Failaka island, instructing competent authorities to take all necessary action to press ahead with renovating it and barring any new transactions or contracts on it. The executives examined a recommendation on the final report of the team tasked with developing Failaka island.

They have decided to charge the department of reclaiming properties for public interest to take the proper measures regarding the irregular private plots on Failaka island and report back to the cabinet in two months.

Furthermore, they have decided to task the ministry of finance to take required legal measures and coordinate with the competent authorities to vacate the plots; contracts of which have expired, and removing any illegal structures. Also in this vein, the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources, in coordination with the Environment Public Authority and other concerned departments, to take all needed legal and practical measures to remove all enclosures on the island. Identical instructions are to be given as well to Kuwait Municipality.

As to the Ministry of Defense, it will be responsible for demining and clearing the island of lethal ordnance left behind after past wars. The team tasked with developing the island is instructed to pursue all needed and necessary activities for renovating it. The cabinet has stressed no new contracts will be allowed for venture on the island.

The cabinet also approved a bill appointing Sheikh

Mohammad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah as Chairman and General Director of the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR). This was announced by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh. The ministers tackled other matters,

praising the mission carried out by the parliamentary delegation during the ongoing 138th session of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (in Geneva), particularly with respect of the unscheduled topic on Jerusalem, which came as a new manifestation of support for Arab and Islamic causes—also in line with the unwavering policy bases of which

had been placed by His Highness the Amir.

Missile attacks
The cabinet meanwhile reaffirmed Kuwait's strong condemnation of the ballistic missile attacks on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Sunday. Chairing the government's meeting at Seif Palace, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah also voiced deep relief that the Saudi Air Defense Forces intercepted the missiles, the Houthi militia launched from Yemen on Saudi Arabia targeting populated areas and innocent people. His Highness the Premier reiterated Kuwait's utter rejection of these "criminal acts" that threaten regional and international security, minister Saleh said after the meeting. They are incriminated by the international laws, resolutions and covenants. The criminal acts reflect intransigence on the side of the Houthis who insist on undermining, and abort-



No new contracts to allow island's renovation



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

ing all opportunities and endeavors for peace, which urges the international community, topped with the UN Security Council, to immediately and seriously move to end these despicable criminal acts, that terrorize peaceful people.

His Highness the Prime Minister reasserted full confidence in Saudi Arabia's determination and ability to face the "forces of evil and to maintain the security and safety of the (Saudi) people." His Highness Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak, stressed Kuwait's solidarity with Saudi Arabia and support to whatever measures Riyadh may take to maintain the Kingdom's security and stability, embodying the historical well-established relations between both states. His Highness the Premier prayed Allah Almighty to

bless Saudi Arabia with everlasting security, stability and prosperity under leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

The cabinet also condemned a recent bomb attack in the Egyptian city of Alexandria that targeted the local security chief, leaving a police officer dead and four others wounded. The ministers also deplored in equal measure an attack in southwestern France last week, in which a gunman opened fire on scores of people, in addition to a suicide bomb attack in the Afghan capital Kabul. The Kuwaiti cabinet emphasized its disapproval of such heinous acts, urging the international community to work as a cohesive unit in the fight against terrorism.—KUNA

Chinese embassy donates 1,000 books to National Library

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Ambassador of China to Kuwait Wang Di yesterday led the handover ceremony of books gifted by China to the National Library of Kuwait. The books were received by Ali Al-Yoha, Secretary General of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL). NCCAL also arranged an exhibition of Chinese books and culture at the National Library, which the two officials inaugurated.

"I am glad to come to the National Library of Kuwait, a sacred place of knowledge, and attend the opening ceremony of the exhibition of Chinese books and culture with my friends," Wang said. "Thank you for providing this good platform for Kuwaiti friends to understand Chinese culture. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to all guests present to appreciate Chinese culture with its 5,000-year history, rapid modernization and achievements and the future-oriented, human-oriented blueprint for development. China-Kuwait relations are traditionally friendly. Kuwait was the first Gulf Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with China," he said.

According to the ambassador, since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Kuwait in 1971, both countries enjoy even stronger links in mutual political trust, business cooperation, cultural exchanges and friendship between their peoples. "The Chinese Embassy in Kuwait has always attached importance to promoting exchanges of humanities between the two countries and is committed to building a bridge of friendship to enhance both peoples' understanding about each other's society and culture and strengthen the people-to-people bond under the "Belt and Road" framework, laying a solid social foundation for further deepening China-Kuwait cooperation," he said.

Wang presented to the National Library more than 1,000 books on more than 80 subjects in English and Arabic covering Chinese history, culture, politics, diplomacy, tourism and many other fields. "There are also some basic books on learning the Chinese language and exquisite children's books. It is believed that these books will become a window for Kuwaiti friends to fully understand China and become a bridge connecting the Chinese and Kuwaiti people. Today, we bring the seeds of knowledge from China to Kuwait, believing that they will root, grow, bloom and bear fruit in the care of China-Kuwait friendship, promoting the development and progress of Kuwait's society, making contributions to the friendship of both peoples and the bright future of China-Kuwait cooperation," he concluded.



KUWAIT: Ambassador of China to Kuwait Wang Di (center) and other officials inaugurate the handover ceremony of books gifted by China to the National Library of Kuwait.—Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Officials view books gifted by China to the National Library of Kuwait.

Zain diamond sponsor of GUST's 20th Career Fair

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading telecommunications company in Kuwait, announced its Diamond Sponsorship of the Gulf University for Science and Technology's (GUST) 20th Career Fair held from 25-26 March at the university's main campus in Mubarak Al-Abdullah area with the attendance of GUST's President Dr Donald Bates.

Zain's continuous support to this annual job fair comes in line with the company's core belief that contributing to educational development is essential for students to then go-on to be successful and contributing members of the society. This particular event plays a big role in exposing bright and opti-



KUWAIT: GUST's President Dr Donald Bates visits Zain's booth at the fair.

mistic youth who are looking for job opportunities in the various industries within the local private sector.

Through its dedicated booth, Zain showcased its available vacancies as well as its human resources policy, which closely focuses on attracting national talents that are capable of enriching its internal culture. The company also showcased the available vacancies for undergraduates to work in part-time jobs as part of its Future University Network (FUN) program.

Zain is committed to playing an active role in the investment in the human capital of Kuwait. The company seeks to provide young and eager Kuwaitis with suitable job opportunities that allow them to apply their practical skills, achieve their potential, and fully develop their capabilities. Zain was present at the job fair and its representatives highlighted to visitors the available job vacancies in addition to providing a detailed explanation of the nature of work at various departments and divisions.

PAAAFR bans bird imports from Holland Italy and Missouri

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR) announced yesterday banning the importation of all kinds of live birds, one-day old chicks, and hatching eggs from the Netherlands, Italy, and Missouri (United States), while, PAAAFR lifted the ban on exports from Cameroon, Slovenia, and Lithuania.

It added in a press release issued yesterday that the ban was lifted from the mentioned countries after checking that imported birds are free from bird flu. Any sent dispatches infected by any infectious and epidemiological diseases after PAAAFR's lab checkup, will be sent back to the exporting countries at the expense of the importer, as PAAAFR claims no responsibility for such goods. All imported cargo must meet conditions and regulations issued by PAAAFR's Animal Health Department, which come in accordance with the measures of World Organization for Animal Health measures, as well as veterinary quarantine at Kuwait and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.—KUNA

Deputy FM upbeat about prospects of cancelling Schengen

SOFIA: The visiting Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah held lengthy and intensive talks yesterday with his Bulgarian counterpart Todor Stoyanov aimed at bolstering further the 55-year-old bilateral relations between the nation and the State of Kuwait. He has also voiced optimism the Kuwaiti diplomatic efforts aimed at cancelling Schengen would be successful and fruitful.

Speaking after the meeting, Jarallah expressed satisfaction at the outcome of the discussions saying he had "sensed from our friends in Bulgaria all concern and keenness on boosting the relations in various sectors." Jarallah has noted significance of his mission to the nation at a time Bulgaria is heading the European Union in first half of the current year, hoping Sofia will "respond to Kuwait's request to one of the mission's topics, which is of great significance: canceling the Schengen visa for Kuwaiti citizens."

"We have made headways in this regard and we have sensed response from Bulgaria and the European Union via Bulgaria," he said, expressing hope there would speedy response to the request, "and we are optimistic to reach what we are aspiring to," he added.

Jarallah added that his talks with Stoyanov dealt with a host of issues related to the economic, business, energy, medical and educational sectors. There are 22 accords that govern the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and the State of Kuwait, Al-Jarallah said, noting that 12 others would be inked during a scheduled visit to Kuwait by the Bulgarian premier in middle of April. "We view with great optimism the prospect of further growth of the relations between Kuwait and Bulgaria and there will be meetings in preparation for the premier visit to Kuwait," he said.

On Gulf affairs namely Kuwait's mediation efforts among some of the GCC countries, Jarallah said the Bulgarian officials expressed strong support for His Highness the Amir bids to heal the rifts. Stoyanov said meanwhile that he was pleased with Jarallah's visit, during which there were follow-up talks on previously held official discussions.—KUNA



SOFIA: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah and his delegation meet with his Bulgarian counterpart Todor Stoyanov and Bulgarian officials.—KUNA

Local

Dhaman signs partnership agreement with IBM to establish advanced healthcare system

Launches Kuwait Digital Health Roadmap Initiative

KUWAIT: In a pioneering step made in line with Kuwait's development plan and Vision 2035 'New Kuwait', the Health Assurance Hospitals Company (Dhaman) signed a strategic partnership agreement with multinational technology company IBM, for the development of the Digital Health System and the launch of the Kuwait Digital Health Roadmap Initiative. Through the agreement Dhaman aims to become a regional leader in the technological healthcare sector by 2020.

Opening the doors for further cooperation and the development of the industry in Kuwait through IBM's breakthrough technology and world-renowned experience: Dhaman will establish a Digital Health System and launch the Kuwait Digital Health Roadmap Initiative to advance and digitize the healthcare sector including the management of Electronic Medical records and providing high-quality services to all beneficiaries in a professional and efficient manner.

The agreement aims to achieve a qualitative leap in the quality of services provided to the public to increase efficiency, reduce operational costs and waste, and optimize capital assets and equipment. It will also link and integrate different departments at Kuwait's Ministry of Health, which will permit the ministry to monitor health facilities and real time performance management.

Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health Dr Mohammad Al-Khashti said: "This initiative between Dhaman and IBM is a strategic step in the direction of reformation as the technological solutions and outputs expected from it will serve as a launching pad of innovative ideas to further develop quality, standards and ease of access to services in the healthcare sector in Kuwait. I commend Dhaman and IBM for their initiative and hope it will be the beginning of enhancing the digital healthcare system for the benefit of the community." IBM is ranked as one of the top 10 brands influencing the world's economy, and is one of the largest technology, digital health, and artificial intelligence companies in the world.

Dhaman CEO and Board Member, Dr Ahmad Al-Saleh said: "Since our establishment, Dhaman has put

forth an ambitious strategic vision and technical plans to become a leader in the healthcare sector. This vision can only be achieved by the full integration of healthcare with the Information Technology (IT) sector to enable us to achieve our goals and provide a unique experience to beneficiaries through unified access across all services. It will also enable us to establish a state-of-the-art technical and practical platform that meet international standards in health.

"Dhaman is proud to present a national vision through the 'Kuwait Digital Health Roadmap Initiative' offering a better future to Kuwaiti citizens. The partnership with IBM will enable Dhaman to connect with international and innovative institutes and centers around the world and stay up-to-date with the latest advancements in technology and healthcare. The roadmap will feature a unified e-health file, infrastructure for cloud services, access to health services through multiple channels, and establish a medical decision support system and artificial intelligence systems in addition to the development of public health systems, awareness, and preventive solutions.

"IBM will provide project management and consulting services to Dhaman through the establishment of a full-integrated digital system that will accommodate Primary Healthcare Centers and Secondary Healthcare Hospitals geographically spread across Kuwait. Setting the criteria to reach HIMSS Analytics Stage

7 and continuing to work towards establishing Dhaman as a leading digital health organization in the Middle East by 2020. HIMSS Analytics is a global healthcare IT market intelligence, research and standards organization that tracks and benchmarks technological progress against other healthcare organizations. This comes in addition to signing an agreement with JCI, an international non-profit organization and the oldest and largest accreditation organization in the field of healthcare in the world, to strengthen and enable core activities to meet standards in clinical care, effective leadership, safe facility management and continuous quality improvement. Our local strategic partner Arabi Holding Company is working



Under the Health Ministry's patronage



KUWAIT: Dhaman Chairman Mutlaq Al-Sanea (left) and IBM Region Executive Middle East Bashar Kilani (right) shake hands after signing the agreement as the Health Ministry's Undersecretary Dr Mohammad Al-Khashti looks on. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

tirelessly to provide the support needed to achieve our goals and overcome the challenges in order for us to contribute towards the development of the healthcare sector in Kuwait."

Dhaman Information Technology Director, Engineer Abdullah Al-Najjar said: "The modern interactive technologies to be provided by this agreement will offer beneficiaries with unified access to all services and securely automate all internal and external operations, which in return will achieve the strategic objectives of managing the public's health. Dhaman has set a strategy to healthcare and a roadmap to implement the EMR Adoption Model (EMRAM), which aims to achieve minimal paper use and harness technology to support and improve patient care. Our partnership with IBM is divided into two phases; the first of which is offering consulting services to help

transform Dhaman into a leading digital healthcare system in the MENA region, and the second is project management and execution of the vision. These phases in return will set the long-term agenda for the future vision in technology through well-studied experiences and scientific methodologies, and determining the technological and strategic requirements to achieve a digital healthcare system."

Dhaman was established in 2015 as a public-private-partnership (PPP) project with an authorized capital of KD 230 million. Government entities represented by the Kuwait Investment Authority and General Authority for Social Insurance own 24 percent of the company, while 26 percent is owned by strategic partner Arabi Holding Company. The company allocated 50 percent of its shares for public subscription for Kuwaiti citizens.

Ooredoo, Najat Charity organize 'Imagine' campaign



KUWAIT: Stemming from the company's deep-rooted values of caring, connecting, and challenging, Ooredoo Kuwait participated in Najat Charity Society's fundraising campaign 'Imagine,' which successfully raised funds for digging 50 artesian wells in the driest areas of the African continent. The fundraising campaign took place in 360 Mall last Thursday from 10 am to 10 pm. Ooredoo participated with a social media awareness campaign ahead of the Thursday, to invite the public to this event.

The event was attended by several social media influencers, charity patrons and donors. It included several activities aiming to raise awareness about the gravity of the issue of lack of potable water, which affects millions of people, causing more than 650 deaths a day.

Ooredoo Kuwait's Corporate Communications Senior Director Mijbil Alayoub said in a statement that the company is committed to fostering charitable and

socially-responsible activities through its corporate social responsibility agenda. "We are happy that the campaign raised the necessary funds to reach its target and are proud of every person who participated in this campaign, and this isn't strange to the charitable and kind people of Kuwait. We're honored to work with Al-Najat Charity Society, who have an extensive portfolio of activities around the world serving the underprivileged."

Al-Najat Charity Society will announce the second phase of this campaign at a later stage. Donations for Al-Najat Society are possible through its locations in Sabah Al Salem and Rawda, in addition to its affiliate societies of Salwa Zakat Committee and Al-Othman Zakat Committee, Rumaithiya Zakat Committee, Andalus Zakat Committee, Kaifan Zakat Committee, and the Islam Presentation Committee. Donors can call the Society's hotline on 1800082 for more information.

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Comoros passport scheme unlawful, abused by mafia

Pregnant migrant workers in Asia face deportation, discrimination

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PARIS: Photo shows a general view of the embassy of the Russian Federation in Paris. Fourteen EU states are expelling Russian diplomats in a coordinated response to the nerve agent attack on a former spy in the English city of Salisbury, EU President Donald Tusk said yesterday. —AFP

US expels 60 Russian diplomats

Russians expelled from 14 EU states, Canada, Ukraine

LONDON: The United States said yesterday it would expel 60 Russian diplomats, joining governments across Europe in taking action against the Kremlin for a nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy in Britain that they have blamed on Moscow. It was the toughest action that US President Donald Trump had taken against Russia since coming to office. British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson tweeted that "Today's extraordinary international response by our allies stands in history as the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers ever and will help defend our shared security."

British Prime Minister Theresa May said the coordinated measures "clearly demonstrate that we all stand shoulder to shoulder in sending the strongest signal to Russia that it cannot continue to flout international law". Russia's Foreign Ministry called the actions a "provocative gesture" and promised to respond. Moscow has denied being behind the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the southern English city of Salisbury on March 4.

The staff expelled by the United States included 12 intelligence officers from Russia's mission to United Nations headquarters in New York. Trump also ordered the closure of the Russian consulate in Seattle. "To the Russian government we say: when you attack our friends, you will face seri-

ous consequences," a senior US administration official told reporters, speaking on condition of anonymity. EU leaders last week said evidence of Russian involvement in the attack presented by British Prime Minister Theresa May was a solid basis for further action.

Germany and France made good on those threats by announcing expulsions and in a coordinated move, other states across the EU followed suit, along with Canada and Ukraine. Skripal's poisoning, alleged to have employed the Soviet-era military-grade nerve agent Novichok, is the first known offensive use of a nerve toxin in Europe since World War Two. "In solidarity with our British partners, we have today notified the Russian authorities of our decision to expel four Russian personnel with diplomatic status from French territory within one week," said French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.

'Response will be symmetrical'

European Council President Donald Tusk said 14 EU countries in all were expelling Russian diplomats and warned that further measures could be taken in the coming weeks and months. Russia said it would respond in kind. "The response will be symmetrical. We will work on it in the coming days and will respond to every country in turn," the RIA news agency cited an unnamed Foreign Ministry source as saying.

Moscow fumes, vows to respond

The Kremlin has accused Britain of whipping up an anti-Russia campaign and sought to cast doubt on the British analysis that Moscow was responsible. The two countries have already expelled 23 diplomats each in tit-for-tat moves. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova suggested that the EU's expression of support for Britain was misguided

given that it would be leaving the bloc next year. "Britain is leaving the European family. No one cancelled Brexit, and the divorce process is in full swing," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova wrote on Facebook. "Therefore a country which is leaving the European Union is exploiting the solidarity factor and is foisting on those countries that remain a worsening of relations with Russia." Skripal, 66, and his 33-year-old daughter Yulia were found unconscious on a public bench in a shopping centre, and remain in hospital in critical condition. A British court has said they may have suffered brain damage, while a policeman who went to help them has also indicated that he has suffered lasting damage to his health.

British Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson hailed the support Britain had received during a visit on Monday to Estonia, where Britain has troops as part of a NATO mission to deter any Russian aggression following its seizure of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014. "The world's patience is rather wearing thin with President Putin and his actions," Williamson said. "Their aim is to divide, and what we are seeing is the world uniting behind the British stance - and that in itself is a great victory and sends an exceptionally powerful message to the Kremlin and President Putin." —Reuters



Afghan mum cradling baby during university examination goes viral

KABUL: Afghan farmer Jahantab Ahmadi sits on the ground, her baby resting in her lap, as she focuses on the university entrance exam she hopes will help her fulfil her dreams. The powerful photo, taken by a professor at Nasir Khusraw private university in central Afghanistan, has gone viral after striking a chord in a country where most women are illiterate and treated as second-class citizens.

The picture has sparked an outpouring of admiration and offers of financial help for the 25-year-old mother of three. "I don't want to be deprived of my studies," Ahmadi, who comes from a remote farming village in Daikundi province where wheat, corn and potatoes provide a meagre income, told AFP in Kabul. "I want to work outside the house, I want to become a doctor, someone who serves women in my community or society."

Ahmadi passed the exam after undertaking an arduous journey to reach the provincial capital Nili-two hours on foot through mountains and nine hours in public transport on a bumpy road. An online GoFundMe campaign launched by the Afghan Youth Association to help pay for her university fees has so far raised more than \$14,000 — a fortune in a country where about 39 percent of the population lives in poverty. Ahmadi appears a little bemused by the attention triggered by the photo of her cradling baby Khizrzan during the exam last month, which she only found out about later.

"My friends in the village told me 'you have been photographed'. I said 'how did I not know that I was being photographed and they said 'you were concentrating on the paper,' she said, smiling shyly. At the beginning of the test, which was held outdoors, Ahmadi sat at a desk with Khizrzan in her lap. But the infant had an ear ache and would not stop crying. To keep her quiet and not disturb others, Ahmadi sat on the ground in the shade of another person and kept writing. "I had to concentrate on the baby and do the paper," she said.

University a 'life goal'

Ahmadi's story has resonated with social media users across the country, who have praised her determination



NILI, Afghanistan: Afghan student Jahantab Ahmadi (bottom right), 25, sits on the ground as her baby lays on her lap as she takes an entrance exam for Nasir Khusraw private university. —AFP

to be educated. "You are a true world champion, you have shown that a Hazara girl can do anything in any conditions or circumstances," Nazar Hussein Akbari wrote on Facebook, referring to her ethnicity. Another user posted: "I hope this hard-working woman reaches her goals." Afghan women's rights activist Zahra Yagana was also impressed.

She contacted Ahmadi and convinced her to come to Kabul to study. The family is staying with Yagana while she helps Ahmadi get into a private university in the Afghan capital. "If she had to study in Daikundi it would be difficult for her," Yagana said at her apartment. "The standard of education is low. There is no student hostel in

Daikundi and she would have to live in a rented house.

"We will give her a house (in Kabul). There are many friends who have promised to help her. We are trying to find a job for her husband and also raise money for her children to go to school." For Ahmadi, this would be the fulfillment of her dreams. "My life goal was to get admitted into university," said Ahmadi, who finished high school after she got married at the age of 18. "But due to our poor economic situation and poverty I could not afford to study for three or four years." Afghanistan's general literacy rate is one of the lowest in the world-just 36 percent, according to official figures. It is much lower for women. "I don't want to be left behind," she said. —AFP

Puigdemont in court as arrest ignites protests

NEUMUNSTER: Former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont is to appear in court yesterday following his arrest in Germany which triggered a wave of protests in Catalonia where thousands of separatists faced off with police. Puigdemont spent the night in a German jail cell following his arrest Sunday after he crossed the border from Denmark, under a European warrant issued by Spain.

The arrest comes five months after Puigdemont went on the run as Spanish prosecutors sought to charge him with sedition and rebellion in the wake of a vote by the Catalan parliament to declare independence. It marks the latest chapter in a secession saga that has bitterly divided Catalans and triggered Spain's worst political crisis in decades. According to Puigdemont's lawyer Jaume Alonso-Cuevillas, he was on his way back to Belgium, where he fled after Spanish authorities moved to impose direct rule over Catalonia. The ousted Catalan leader, 55, will be brought before a German court yesterday to confirm his identity. It will later decide if he is to remain in custody pending extradition proceedings.

'Delicate' situation

"It will take place in the course of the day, probably in the afternoon," a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office for Schleswig-Holstein state told AFP. Calling the situation "very delicate", Alonso-Cuevillas told Catalonia's Racl radio it was "very likely that he will not be allowed to leave Germany". Clashes erupted as protesters took to the streets in Catalonia on Sunday following his arrest.

Catalan police decked out in riot gear shoved and hit demonstrators with batons to keep the crowd from advancing on the office of the Spanish government's representative in Barcelona, the capital of the wealthy northeastern region. Officers fired warning shots in the air to try to contain the demonstrators, who pushed large recycling containers towards police. Some people threw glass bottles, cans and eggs at police. About 90 people were slightly injured during the protests in Barcelona, including 22 police officers, emergency services said. —AFP

International

Death and despair: Life under siege in war-ravaged Ghouta

Corpses become commonplace as rockets rain down

GIHAL ZER: The image of a small, limbless girl lying in a hospital in Ghouta is burned into the memory of Mohammad Fadh Akram, one of the first people to flee a rebel Syrian city under bombardment from government forces. Years of siege left the enclave a desperate place, where hungry people depended on the kindness of neighbors for food; where disease lurked in the faltering water supply and where death fell from the sky in a hail of rockets. "We did not know who was killing us and who wasn't," says Akram, now in Pakistan.

"The one thing we knew was that they were destroying our city." Initially the violence that has engulfed their adopted country since 2011 did not worry Akram, a Pakistani who arrived in Syria in 1974 and took two wives—a woman from Ghouta, Rabah Jarrad, and Saghran Bibi, a Pakistani cousin. Then foreign militants came. Two of his sons enlisted in an armed group, while a third was caught up in street violence in 2013. Akram remembers darkness thickening as the family waited for their son to return home. When he did, he lay lifeless in the back of an ambulance. The boy's mother "could not stand it, she had a heart attack" and died, he says, clutching Rabah's blue passport.



Witnessing the annihilation of the population

Prisoners
In 2015 Akram and his family tried to flee. "The armed groups shot at us first, then the government forces, we could not get out." Prisoners of the enclave, they found themselves witnessing the progressive annihilation of its population. Corpses became commonplace as rockets rained down; images of human beings strewn among rubble are seared into his mind. People with horrific injuries were everywhere. The sight of a girl "without arms and legs" particularly haunts Akram. "I pray to Allah that he

should not show these scenes to any man," he said. Increasing deprivation eroded neighborhood solidarity. They scavenged in garbage for fuel, washed clothes in ash, and as water ran short did not shower for months. "There was no salt, no sugar, no tea, nothing... We ate leaves," said Akram. A livid scar on Akram's abdomen, which he pulls his white shalwar kameez up to reveal, bears witness to an appendectomy performed without anaesthetic in a clinic that lacked both drugs and doctors.

Barrage

On February 18 this year, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's forces turned their full fury on this hold-out enclave on the edge of Damascus. More than 1,600 civilians have died since, and 107,000 people have fled, with many using "corridors" opened up by Syrian army troops advancing

into rebel territory. For Akram and Bibi, evacuated in a "humanitarian pause" announced by Russia earlier this month, the increasing desperation of the five-year siege—and the children and grandchildren they were forced to leave behind—will forever haunt them.

The terrifying final month of government bombardment at first brought Bibi a kind of acceptance of the inevitability of death, and she felt stronger. But her husband began to deteriorate. "He... stopped eating, and even drinking water." By chance they met a journalist, who warned the Pakistani embassy in Damascus of their plight. On March 1, Akram and Bibi were the first residents of Ghouta to be evacuated. Bibi described their fearful journey out, passing through four checkpoints as planes roared overhead, dropping their bombs on the home they had left behind. "I thought we would not get out alive," she said. "It is too hard." She was so weak that by the third checkpoint she could no longer stand, and had to be given oxygen in an ambulance. "It was so terrifying, we were hun-



HARASTA: A Syrian soldier takes photos in the town of Harasta in Eastern Ghouta yesterday, after government forces entered the town and struck an evacuation deal with the rebels.—AFP

gry and thirsty, we had no strength. I could not walk... we had no hope in ourselves." At the embassy, horrified officials tried to feed them, cooking Pakistani staples to strengthen their malnourished bodies. At first unable to eat, their strength slowly began to return. But the grief was setting in. "I was so sad," Akram sobs. "I left behind 40 years of work, my house, my grandchildren running between my legs." Bibi described a toddler at the embassy kissing her as her granddaughter had once done. It felt like a heart attack, she said. "I could not feel where I was."

Silence

Weeks later and thousands of kilometers (miles) away

in Pakistan, the couple have not yet adjusted. Motorbikes sound like planes, slamming doors like bombs. Bibi, still weak, closes her eyes, her face tense as her husband recounts their experiences. "They are destroyed from within," sighs their nephew Mohammad Irfan, who has taken them in. The decision to leave their family was agonizing, and made only after the children begged them to go. "They said, 'For God's sake, you leave. We will come later.'" Bibi said. Three days before he spoke to AFP, Akram was able to call one of his sons in Syria. "His son told him: 'We are in the worst of situations, and soon we will not be able to talk to you anymore,'" Irfan said. Since then, there has been silence from Syria.—AFP

Three years on, Yemeni war at deadly impasse

DUBAI: Three years after Saudi Arabia and its allies joined the Yemen war, triggering a devastating humanitarian crisis, the conflict is at a deadly impasse. Iran-backed Houthi rebels remain in control of large parts of the country including the capital Sanaa and government forces have struggled to retake territory, despite the support of a coalition led by the powerful Saudi military. And as the conflict rumbles on—with 27 million people caught in the middle—cracks are beginning to show in the unity of the coalition. On March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia, joined by the United Arab Emirates and other allies, launched an operation aimed at reinstating the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi.

Multiple rounds of UN-brokered talks between the warring parties have failed and UN special envoy to Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed threw in the towel last month. His successor, Martin Griffiths, arrived on Saturday to a political quagmire that grows more complicated by the month. One thousand days of war have further punished a people already living in the Arab world's most impoverished country. Nearly 10,000 people have been killed since 2015, as one million people fight cholera and another eight million look for famine in the face. And analysts say there seems little hope of the situation changing.

Stagnant front lines

"While there does not seem to be a seri-

ous push by either party to divide Yemen, there seems to be investment in maintaining the status quo of weakness and that hinders the chance of a political solution," said Yemeni analyst Majed Al-Madhaji. Territorial control has not changed hands much over the past year: the Houthis control Sanaa and much of the north, while the south is nominally under the control of Hadi's government but is now effectively in the hands of rival separatist forces, which include troops trained by the UAE.

Long marginalized in Yemen, the Houthis have consolidated their grip on power after the death of their onetime ally Ali Abdullah Saleh, the ex-president killed by rebel forces in December. "Even if the Saudi-led coalition... advances along the Red Sea coast, as it appears to be doing, the Houthi front will not collapse," said Robert Malley and April Longley Alley of the International Crisis Group. "The most the Saudis can hope for is prolonged guerrilla warfare in the inhospitable northern highlands," they wrote in a column this month.

The Saudi-led alliance is meanwhile starting to show signs of unraveling, analysts say. A spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition declined to comment. The official narrative from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi has been one of unconditional support for Hadi, who has lived in the Saudi capital since 2015. But reports that Saudi Arabia could be open to talks with the Houthis have been swirling, and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeiri hinted at a press conference in Washington last week that the Iran-backed Houthis could "play a role" in Yemen's future.

'Signs of tension'

"Although neither the Saudis nor the Emiratis have yet split from the coalition,



SANAA: Performers dance during a rally to mark three years of war on the country, in the capital Sanaa yesterday.—AFP

signs of tension have emerged," said Rice University's Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. "The two combatants face very different perceived and actual threats that range from border security and territorial incursions for Saudi Arabia to the region-wide campaign to crush Islamist groups in the case of Abu Dhabi," Coates Ulrichsen wrote in a Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) memo.

"This has produced distinct alignments with local forces on the ground, with the Saudis backing president Hadi and the Emiratis supporting various factions and militias in southern Yemen that reject Hadi's leadership," Saudi Arabia's military has little battle experience, with the Yemen operation marking its first major campaign. The

UAE, which deployed troops to Kosovo in the 1990s, has had more impact on the ground, working closely with the Yemeni army and training southern troops.

This has given them the upper hand in southern Yemen, where they back the separatists who wrenched control of the south from Hadi, their former ally, in January. But despite divergent priorities, analysts say the coalition will likely hold strong. "We cannot bet on the differences between them," said Madhaji. "The fact that they need each other precedes any disagreement between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. "There are clear political differences between the two... but what unites them is the joint need to manage the complex military situation on the ground."—AFP

Living in limbo: Indonesia's refugees face uncertain future

MEDAN: When she was eight, Sharifa Begum was forced to flee her village in Myanmar's Rakhine State after fighting erupted and homes were set on fire. Separated from her parents in the panic, she escaped with her 17-year-old brother and 66 other Rohingya people on a boat, drifting at sea for a month with little food or drinking water. Eventually rescued and towed to land by Indonesian fishermen, Begum - whose name has been changed to protect her identity - has since spent almost half her life living as a migrant in limbo.

Like almost 14,000 other refugees in Indonesia and more than 250,000 across Southeast Asia, Begum, now 15, has no access to citizenship and few rights in the country where she lives - but she is unable to go home due to safety fears. "There is no peace back in Myanmar, so I cannot return," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at a refugee centre in Medan, one of Indonesia's largest cities, on the island of Sumatra.

Since insurgent attacks last August sparked a military crackdown, amid reports of arson, murder and rape, nearly 700,000 more Rohingya have fled Myanmar, mostly to Bangladesh. As many wealthier coun-

tries around the world resettle fewer refugees and impose stricter criteria to accept migrants, Begum's predicament could be shared in years to come by millions of others who flee their homes in response to pressures including climate change and persecution.

No place to go

By the end of 2016 there were about 22.5 million refugees worldwide, according to the U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR), the highest number recorded since the agency was established in 1950, in the aftermath of World War Two. During 2016, 37 countries participated in UNHCR's resettlement program, taking in about 126,300 people, or less than 1 percent of the world's refugee population.

But in 2017, the number of refugees resettled fell by nearly half, to just over 65,000. It is likely to drop even further, refugee officials said, as the United States, Australia and Europe tighten restrictions. For Begum, the news is particularly bad: She has just been told by UNHCR that she - like many fellow refugees in Indonesia - is extremely unlikely to be resettled in a third country. Several aid workers in Indonesia said some refugees had attempted suicide or killed themselves after being given that information. Begum now faces an uncertain future in Indonesia, where she has no right to settle, as the country is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention.

'Most lose hope'

Mozhgan Moarezadeh, an Iranian



MEDAN: A refugee prepares food in a shared kitchen at a migrants accommodation facility in Medan, Indonesia.—Reuters

refugee and co-founder of the Refugees and Asylum-seekers Information Center, which runs projects around Jakarta, said those she works with often suffer mental health problems including depression and anxiety as a result of past abuses or experiences in their home countries. "Indonesia doesn't give any rights to refugees," said the Iranian, who has spent five years in Indonesia.

"The challenge is to survive on a day-to-day basis. But most lose hope." Indonesia's government should support

migrants with housing, healthcare, counseling and training, she said. Campaigns to boost awareness of the plight of refugees in Indonesia are needed both locally and overseas, she said.

In Southeast Asia, only Cambodia, the Philippines and East Timor have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, which enshrines basic human rights for migrants and displaced people. Although Indonesia has not, it does have a long tradition of offering protection to refugees, who in the past have used it as a transit country.—Reuters

US sanctions Pakistani firms over nuke trade

ISLAMABAD: The United States has imposed sanctions on seven Pakistani companies over suspicion they have links to the nuclear trade, potentially hurting Pakistan's ambitions to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Pakistani government spokesmen could not be immediately reached for comment yesterday. Relations between the United States and Pakistan have been strained in recent years over Pakistan's alleged support for Islamist militants waging war in Afghanistan, something Pakistani officials deny. The US Bureau of Industry and Security, Commerce imposed the sanctions on the Pakistani companies on March 22 by placing them on its "Entity List".

The companies had been "determined by the US government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States", the bureau said in a report on a US government website. The Department of Commerce's Entity List does not freeze assets but requires that US and foreign companies doing business with those on the list first obtain a license. Companies placed on the Entity List will need special licenses to do business in the United States. None of the seven sanctioned Pakistani companies, which are not well known, could be immediately reached for comment, nor could a Singapore-based company which the bureau said was linked to one of the Pakistani companies.

Pakistani officials have in the past been accused of handing over nuclear secrets to North Korea. The government has denied the accusations though Pakistan has a poor record on nuclear proliferation. The Pakistani scientist lionized as the father of Pakistan's atomic bomb, Abdul Qadeer Khan, in 2004 said he had sold nuclear secrets to North Korea. A UN nuclear watchdog said in 2008 that Khan's network smuggled nuclear weaponization blueprints to Iran, Libya and North Korea and was active in 12 countries.

Sanctioned companies

Of the latest companies to be sanctioned, Singapore-based Mushko Logistics and Pakistan-based Mushko Electronics "procured items for several Pakistani entities on the Entity List", the U.S. bureau said in its report. Another company, Solutions Engineering, "has been involved in the procurement of US-origin items on behalf of nuclear-related entities in Pakistan that are already listed on the Entity List". Three of the companies - Akhtar & Munir, Proficient Engineers and Pervaiz Commercial Trading Co. (PCTC) - were on the list due to "involvement in the proliferation of unsafeguarded nuclear activities that are contrary to the national security and/or foreign policy interests of the United States".

Marine Systems was placed on the Entity list for helping other already-sanctioned bodies obtain items without a licence, while Engineering and Commercial Services (ECS) was sanctioned for "involvement in supplying a Pakistani nuclear-related entity on the Entity List". The sanctions could deal a blow to Pakistan's application to join the NSG, a 48-nation club dedicated to curbing nuclear arms proliferation by controlling the export and re-transfer of materials that could foster nuclear weapons development. Nuclear-armed Pakistan applied to join the NSG in 2016 but little progress has been made. The United States has been concerned about Pakistan's development of new nuclear weapons systems, including small tactical nuclear weapons, and has been trying to persuade Islamabad to make a unilateral declaration of "restraint".—Reuters

International

Comoros passport scheme
unlawful, abused by mafia

Comoros-Kuwait-UAE passport deal dogged by controversy

NAIROBI: A program to sell Comoros Islands citizenship to fund development resulted in thousands of passports being sold outside official channels via "mafia" networks and up to \$100 million of revenues went missing, according to a report by the small Indian Ocean state's parliament. The report, produced by a parliamentary commission set up in June 2017 to investigate the citizenship program, also said former presidents Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi and Ikililou Dhoinine, who were in power when the alleged abuses took place, were "suspected of the embezzlement of public funds."

The program was flawed from its inception and the current Comoros government should seek international help to recover the missing funds and take officials involved to court, the report concluded. In a video posted on Facebook, Sambi rejected all accusations against him, saying they had been fabricated to discredit him. He didn't respond to a request for further comment. Ikililou told Reuters by telephone that he could not comment on the report as he had not read it yet. Both men have previously said they believed the scheme would help develop the country, an archipelago off the east coast of Africa.

The report was completed in December but has not been publicly released. Reuters has reviewed a copy that was signed by Dhoihir Dhoulkamal, head of the commission and an independent member of parliament. Abdallah Tocha Djohar, a Sambi supporter initially on the commission who later called for it to be disbanded, said the report had not been officially approved by the entire commission and its disclosure violated procedures relating to how the commission should operate. The current Comoros government,

led by President Azali Assoumani, has said it has suspended citizenship sales since coming to power in May 2016.

Missing funds

Nearly a decade ago, Comoros launched a program with the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait to sell citizenship to stateless people in those countries, known as Bedoon, in return for cash to help develop the poor Indian Ocean archipelago. The scheme was dogged by controversy from the beginning, with some members of parliament and civil society saying the changes to Comoros law that allowed the sale of citizenship were made illegally. The cross-party commission found that the law allowing the sale of citizenship was changed during a parliamentary session that violated its own procedures. The bill that was promulgated lacks the correct signatures and stamps, and does not officially figure on a list of laws passed by the National Assembly, the commission found.

Critics of the passport program also called for more transparency over revenues from the Gulf after promised development projects failed to materialize. While most of the passports were sold to Bedoon, Comoros and Emirati officials said a number of passports had also been sold to other foreigners. A Reuters investigation published last year found that two Iranians accused by the US government of breaking sanctions were among those who bought Comoros passports via the networks that sold documents outside the official program.

The parliamentary commission estimates that the overall sum of government revenues from the passport sales to have gone missing amounts to around 17 percent of the

country's gross domestic product in one year. The commission said that the secrecy of contracts, lack of documentation and variety of groups of officials involved in passport sales complicated efforts to establish how much money went missing. However, by analyzing the number of passports issued without official approval and the shortfall in revenues from those sales that were approved, the commission estimated an overall revenue gap of about 43 billion Comoros francs (\$100 million).



ANJOUAN, Comoros: This general view from the port of Mutsamudu, the capital of the Comoros Union island of Anjouan shows fisherman waiting for incoming boats. —AFP

The economic citizen program generated significant

financial resources. Sadly a big part of the funds generated never arrived in the state coffers," the report concluded. The commission's report is due to be debated in parliament when the next session begins in April. A spokesman for Assoumani said that the president had not yet received a copy but the president would analyze the findings. "If some people are found to have embezzled money or broken the law, there is no doubt that steps will be taken to establish who is responsible," Mohamed Ismaella, Assoumani's spokesman, said. —Reuters

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The plunder of
Albania's coastline
exposes deeper ills

TIRANA: Only when the police questioned him in January did Rrahman Qosja discover he had been the victim of identity theft—some of Albania's publicly owned coastline had been sold in his name. "This is a mafia, more dangerous than a mafia," said the shocked septuagenarian, a farmer from Sterbeg, a hillside village some seven kilometers from the Adriatic coast. And Qosja was not alone in his misfortune—in total, 180 ordinary people like him were caught up. They were all supposedly co-owners of the land-part of an army military base at Rreth-Greth-and had "sold" it to a businessman, according to prosecutor Artan Madani in the western town of Kavaja, who is leading the probe.

Although spectacular in scale, the case is far from unique. Similar variations of the audacious fraud have become common in Albania, one of Europe's poorest countries. "It seems to follow the same pattern" in each case, the police's anti-financial crime chief Lutfi Minxhozi told AFP. With the help of corrupt property notaries, officials and local politicians, crooks, money launderers or shady promoters create false property certificates on behalf of individuals who are totally unaware. They then "buy" the plots of land, which are actually the property of the state, and resell them at a higher price or construct villas, buildings and hotels on them.

A gravedigger with 220 hectares

A top judiciary official, who asked not to be named, told AFP about the case of a gravedigger in the southern coastal city of Vlora. He had no inkling that he was supposedly the "owner" of 220 hectares (540 acres) of military land in the Karaburun peninsula. In early March, the authorities decided to examine more than 30,000 property titles on 200 square kilometers of coastline, according to the urban planning administration. Thirty-five land registry agents have already been sacked. By mid-March, all sales had been suspended along 450 km of the coast, from Shengjin in the north to Saranda down in the south.

Land, buildings, accounts seized

Other moves to clamp down on property fraud already got under way at the start of the year. In February, a dozen beach bars and restaurants were pulled down near Golem in the north. Bank accounts, villas, land and hotels are increasingly being seized. Albania is plagued by corruption, the looting of public property and an anarchic land registry system. Its coastline has been disfigured by concrete, environmental degradation is ignored, while money laundering and trafficking, especially of drugs, is rife. In Qosja's case, the police probe revealed that his personal documents and signature had been misused by a local official when Qosja went to register land acquired by his family in the 1990s, Madani said. Prosecutors in the case, which concerns 10 hectares, are investigating 23 people, including officials and local politicians.

Assassinated judge

"It is white-collar organized crime, which falls under corruption and money laundering via property," said Fabian Zhilla, of the Canadian Institute of Technology who specializes in the subject of organized crime. It is a "mafia style" crime "if one looks at the nature of its organization and the land concerned", said Minxhozi, of the police's anti-financial crime squad. In 2011, a judge Skerdilajt Konomi was assassinated in Vlora. Investigators believe he paid the ultimate price for refusing to sign fake property deeds for land near the western port city of Durrës, a legal source from the prosecutors' office for serious crime said. Stretching to the south of Durrës, kilometers of concrete buildings, often empty, blight the coast. —AFP

Malaysia proposes
10-years jail term
for 'fake news'

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian government yesterday proposed a "fake news" law which would carry a maximum 10-year jail term, including for articles published abroad, sparking fears of a crackdown on dissent as elections loom. Governments in several countries, emboldened by US President Donald Trump's fulminations against "fake news", are considering such legislation. But rights groups warn that authoritarian regimes are likely to use such laws to silence opposing voices.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has already been targeting critics in politics and the media who have attacked him over allegations that huge sums were looted from sovereign wealth fund IMDB. Najib and the fund deny any wrongdoing. The proposed law, introduced in parliament Monday, fuelled fears the government is seeking to intensify a clampdown before a general election, which must be called by August but is widely expected sooner. Opposition MP Charles Santiago said the bill was "a powerful weapon for the government to silence dissent in the country". "It is timed for the elections and to silence discussions on IMDB," he said.

The bill, which described fake news as a "global concern", includes a maximum 10 years in jail or fine of up to 500,000 ringgit (\$130,000) for anyone guilty of creating or disseminating what authorities deem to be fake news. It said anyone—including foreigners—who breaks the law outside the country by publishing fake news can face punishment in Malaysia, as long as what is published concerns Malaysia or a Malaysian citizen. Fahmi Fadzil, spokesman for the opposition People's Justice Party, said it suggested the government was seeking to target foreign media, which have led the coverage of IMDB.

Erdogan insists Turkey
wants EU membership
as tense summit looms

VARNA: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday insisted Turkey still wanted to become a member of the European Union ahead of a potentially stormy summit with EU chiefs seeking to repair an increasingly fractured relationship. European Union President Donald Tusk and European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker will talk with Erdogan at the Bulgarian Black Sea resort of Varna with a litany of problems clouding their discussions. Topic expected to be high on the agenda include the crackdown in Turkey after July 2016's failed coup, Ankara's demands for visa liberalization and the near-endless saga of the country's own EU membership bid.

And a row over Greece and Cyprus that erupted last week has added another point of contention just days before the talks. Before departing Istanbul for Bulgaria, Erdogan said Turkey was still seeking to become a full EU member and blasted the bloc for what he said were "double standards" towards Ankara. "EU membership continues to be our strategic target," Erdogan said. But Erdogan added: "We are going to remind them (Tusk and Juncker) once more that Turkey will not tolerate hypocrisy."

'Mixed feelings'

Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the EU Council, said it was expected to be "a very difficult meeting". Juncker said he was "looking with mixed feelings towards the summit because the differences in views between the EU and Turkey are many". But he added that "we will have a frank and open debate with President Erdogan". Temperatures were raised last week after EU leaders condemned Turkey's "illegal actions" towards Greece and Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. Ankara hit back at the "unacceptable comments" and said the EU had



KUALA LUMPUR: Commuters wait for the train in front of an advertisement reading 'sharing a lie makes u a liar' at a train station in downtown Kuala Lumpur yesterday. —AFP

Phil Robertson, Asia deputy director for Human Rights Watch, accused the Malaysian government of employing "Trump-style scare tactics to grant itself powers to arbitrarily determine what people can say about Malaysia in the world". Amnesty International said the bill was "nothing but a blatant attempt to shield the government from peaceful criticism". It was no coincidence that it had been tabled with general elections just around the corner, said Amnesty's regional director James Gomez in a statement.

Taking aim at fake news

Malaysia's traditional pro-government media have reported on the IMDB controversy only occasionally and in

a muted and largely uncritical fashion. Despite the concerns, cabinet minister Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar insisted the law "will not be abused", adding: "It is not aimed at silencing critics." The bill must be approved by a majority in the 222-seat lower house and also in the upper house, and this is likely as both chambers are controlled by the ruling coalition. It needs to go through several readings in parliament before it passes. Malaysia is ranked 144th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index. The government has the power to revoke newspapers' printing permits and regularly attacks critical media, particularly online news sites that have gained a following by reporting on official malfeasance and corruption. —AFP



BERLIN: Protesters hold a giant banner reading 'No deals with Erdogan, stop weapons export, Protect Afrin' during a demonstration of Kurdish groups to protest against Turkey's offensive against Kurds in Syria's Afrin region in Berlin. —AFP

lost its objectivity on Cyprus, which is divided between the Greek-majority internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus and the breakaway Turkish Cypriot north.

The statement on Thursday by the 28 EU members meeting in Brussels condemned Turkey over Ankara's arrest of two Greek soldiers and its promise to prevent the Greek Cypriot government from exploring for oil and gas. Ankara and Brussels had in March 2016 agreed a controversial deal to stop the flow of migrants, in what was seen as a landmark in cooperation and which Turkey hoped would yield visa free travel to Europe. So far this incentive has not been realized and Erdogan is expected to press this point strongly in the talks.

Looser partnership?

Brussels has repeatedly criticized the post-coup crackdown, which has seen nearly 160,000 people detained, including dozens of journalists. Turkey, for its part, has accused Brussels of failing to show solidarity after the coup and appears set on forging a strong partnership with President Vladimir Putin's Russia. —AFP

Slavery on the
rise in Britain

LONDON: From children being forced by gangs to carry illegal drugs, to migrants smuggled into Britain and trapped in exploitative work, reports of slavery in Britain have surged as authorities crack down on the crime, according to data released yesterday. The National Crime Agency (NCA) said it received 5,145 reports of suspected slavery victims in 2017 across Britain, an increase of more than a third from 3,804 in 2016. Those involved were commonly British, Albanian and Vietnamese, said the NCA, which is dubbed Britain's FBI, warning that criminal networks were heading online to sexually exploit people, especially through adult services websites.

"What this report reinforces is that we are now dealing with an evolving threat," NCA director Will Kerr said in a statement. "Particularly concerning to us is the rise in young people being exploited for sexual purposes or drug trafficking." The NCA said the jump in numbers was largely due to British children being reported to authorities as suspected victims of sexual exploitation or being used by gangs to carry illegal drugs in the so-called 'county lines' drug trade.

There were also increased crossovers between smuggling rings, that transport vulnerable migrants into Britain, and slavemasters, who force them into exploitative work, Kerr said. Kerr said the figures "almost certainly" represent an underestimate of the true scale of slavery and trafficking in Britain. At least 13,000 people across Britain are estimated by the government to be victims of modern slavery - trapped in forced labor, sexual exploitation and domestic servitude - but police say the true figure is likely to be in the tens of thousands. Britain is regarded as a leader in global efforts to combat slavery, with its 2015 Modern Slavery Act introducing life sentences for traffickers, forcing companies to address the risk of forced labor, and better protect people at risk. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) said yesterday it held 568 police operations in February alone but despite more arrests, authorities are struggling to jail slavemasters. —Reuters

International

In the rush to develop, Asia's cities advised to think green

Philippines tackles booming population, density, congestion, pollution

CLARK: He may never set foot in New Clark City, but taxi driver Edgard Labitag hopes the Philippines' first green, disaster-resilient, high-tech metropolis will ease the pressure on Manila - meaning fewer hours stuck in traffic and more time with his children. On a sweltering Sunday afternoon, the 42-year-old at the wheel bemoaned another shift spent inching along the infamously congested streets of the capital city of 13 million people. "Crowding, pollution and traffic - this is what people say about Manila," he said, gesturing at the gridlock.

"But luckily the government has a plan ... and (President Rodrigo) Duterte is the right man to see it through." That plan is New Clark, a 9,450-hectare city that government officials say will be bigger than New York's Manhattan by the time it is completed in 25 to 30 years - with an expected population of more than 1.2 million. The aim is to build a city equipped to deal with climate shocks in one of the world's most cyclone-affected regions, and to promote healthy, eco-friendly and sustainable living by putting nature at the heart of development, urban experts say.

Reflecting a rising trend from Japan and India to the United States, New Clark seeks to challenge conventional urban planning by uniting government, developers, business and the public - and proving that green and resilient cities can be cost-effective. "The objective is not simply to build a disaster-resilient city, but rather a successful, innovative and economically competitive city that is also disaster-resilient," said Benjamin Preston, a researcher at RAND Corporation, a global think tank. New Clark is still in its infancy, but officials

say Duterte is fast-tracking the project as the Philippines, one of Asia's fastest-growing economies in 2017, seeks to boost spending on infrastructure to create jobs and attract more foreign firms.

Yet even as the government races to build New Clark and tackle Manila's booming population, density and congestion, it must plan the new city with care and avoid past mistakes, says the state-run Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA). "We need to strike a balance between fast-paced development that maximizes value for the private sector, and protecting open spaces and making the city walkable, green and resilient," said Vince Dizon, president of the BCDA, which oversees the project. "Traditional development cannot overwhelm or overpower the area," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "For New Clark City, here lies the challenge."

New Clark - a city equipped to deal with climate shocks



Thomson Reuters Foundation. "For New Clark City, here lies the challenge."

Green agenda

Situated about 100 km (62 miles) north of Manila in Tarlac province near Clark International Airport, one of the country's busiest hubs, New Clark will be home to several government departments, an agro-industrial park and a huge sports complex. Yet despite the range of planned infrastructure, only a third of the \$14-billion city's land will be developed, with two-thirds reserved for green spaces and agriculture, the government said. Houston in Texas and nearby Singapore have provided inspiration on how to plan the city in an inte-



An artist impression of the New Clark City development in the Philippines. — Reuters

grated manner where water management and green spaces are linked closely to all urban systems, according to Dutch architect Matthijs Bouw.

By focusing on nature and allowing plenty of open space along rivers, for example, New Clark can benefit beyond protecting itself from floods, said Bouw, who has worked on the master plan for the city with the government. "Putting green areas on the agenda not only helps with water storage and drainage, but creates community spaces and guides street design in a way that benefits pedestrians and bikes ... so social resilience also gets strengthened," Bouw said. Yet the rapid pace of development and large number of actors working on different structures and systems means some aspects could "fall through the cracks resilience-wise," he warned.

Making the case

Another challenge in designing and developing such a city is changing the mindsets of officials used to traditional planning

approaches, who may be wary of going green, urban experts say. "How do you do this in a regional context in Asia where there is massive and widespread corruption, and where elected representatives change in the short term?" asked Harini Nagendra, an author and academic based in southern India.

The answer: convince politicians and bureaucrats that making a city stronger and safer against modern-day threats will not slow down development, and will save their governments money in the long run, said Oesha Thakoerdin of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which is backing the New Clark project. Economists at RAND are seeking to demonstrate the social, environmental and economic gains from building resilience and are developing a business case to prove that green urban planning is not only an option for wealthy economies. "Increasingly we are seeing middle-income countries realize that planning and investing in green areas in cities is critical for their development - and cost-competitive," Thakoerdin said. —Reuters

Pregnant migrant workers in Asia face deportation, discrimination

CHENNAI: Women migrant workers in parts of Asia risk being deported if they become pregnant, forcing many to have unwanted abortions or abandon their newborns, researchers said yesterday. Migrant workers in garment and footwear factories are forced to undergo regular pregnancy tests, according to the Fair Labor Association (FLA), a coalition of companies, universities and charities.

In a report, the FLA called for an end to "pregnancy discrimination", and urged countries to scrap laws that

allow or encourage pregnancy tests and the use of contraception as a condition of employment. The group also encouraged brands - including those who have committed to FLA's code of conduct, such as Nestle and Hugo Boss - to support initiatives to protect pregnant workers. "Our affiliates have made a commitment to not discriminate against women who want to become pregnant or who are pregnant," said Sharon Waxman of the FLA. "It's time for the laws of these important manufacturing countries to catch up," she said in a statement.

There are more than 122 million women working outside their home countries globally, the report states. Many of them find factory jobs in Asian nations like Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia. Migrant workers in these countries are under tremendous pressure to finish their contracts so they can continue to financially support their families back home, campaigners say. The report states that Malaysia - an export manufacturing hub and the largest destination for migrant workers in Southeast Asia - has the most restrictive legal environment for female migrants.

They are required to take a pregnancy test prior to

departure from their home country, and on a yearly basis thereafter, according to the report entitled "Triple Discrimination: Woman, Pregnant and Migrant". A migrant working in a Malaysian factory found to be pregnant is immediately deported at her own expense. To avoid deportation, many enter the informal workforce where labor laws are often ignored and abuses are common. "If you don't have money to pay for an abortion or to break your contract, and you cannot go home, then what else can you do?" the report quoted a worker in Malaysia saying.

While Taiwan bans pregnancy testing and prohibits employers from terminating a pregnant worker, it provides no legal status for their children. Workers are therefore forced to choose between having abortions, going home, or even abandoning their children to keep their jobs, the report states. In Thailand, pregnant workers from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia are eligible for pre and post natal care. But they are subjected to pregnancy tests as part of a general medical exam when they apply for a work permit. —Reuters

News in brief

Israeli PM questioned

JERUSALEM: Israeli police arrived at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Jerusalem residence yesterday morning to interrogate him over one of several graft cases that threaten to topple him, Israeli media said. Multiple Israeli media reports said the longtime premier was to be questioned over a case of alleged corruption involving Israeli telecoms giant Bezeq. He could for the first time face questions over information provided to police by Nir Hefetz, a longtime Netanyahu ally who has turned state witness. Netanyahu's wife Sara and son Yariv are also being questioned along with Shaul Elovitch, Bezeq's largest shareholder, Israeli media reported. A police spokesman confirmed "various investigative activities" linked to the probes, without mentioning the Netanyahu's by name. —AFP

Indian journalist killed

NEW DELHI: Indian police yesterday detained a former village chief accused of running over and killing a journalist with his sports-utility vehicle. Navin Nischal, a reporter for Danik Bhaskar, a major Hindu newspaper, was the latest in a string of journalists to be killed in one of the world's most dangerous countries for media. Nischal and an associate Vijay Singh were on a motorbike when they were run over in Bhojpur, about 50 miles from Patna, capital of the eastern state of Bihar. Police said they had detained Mohammad Harsu, a former village chief in the region. "Navin's brother filed a complaint for his journalist brother. He said it was a murder as he had an argument with the former village head yesterday," Bhojpur police superintendent Avkash Kumar told AFP. —AFP

Ethiopia detains 11

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopian police have arrested a group of 11 high-profile dissidents, some of whom had been pardoned and freed from jail just weeks before, an attorney said yesterday. Among those detained on Sunday were journalist Eskinder Nega and opposition politician Andualem Arage, who were pardoned in a mass prisoner amnesty ordered by the prime minister last month, lawyer Ameha Mekonnen said. Two of Ameha's clients, Befekadu Hailu and Mahlet Fantahun of the Zone 9 blogging collective, whose members were the subject of a years-long prosecution that the government abandoned in February, were also arrested. —AFP

23 killed in Mozambique

MAPUTO: Mozambique police said yesterday that a pick-up truck ploughed into a crowd of party-goers at the weekend killing 23 people, many of whom were teenagers. The speeding vehicle ignored orders from traffic police, hit an obstacle and veered into the local carnival in the working-class Luis Cabral neighborhood of Maputo in the early hours of Sunday morning. "The driver was speeding when he did not obey the signal from a traffic police officer," Maputo police spokesman Orlando Mudumane told reporters in the capital. "A few meters later he lost control of the car, crashed into an obstacle and caused the accident." The male driver and his passenger were among the dead, with 30 others injured. —AFP

'Not rude, just French'

MONTREAL: A French waiter fired for being "aggressive, rude and disrespectful" says his behavior wasn't out of line - he's simply, well, French. Guillaume Rey, who worked at a Vancouver restaurant on Canada's Pacific coast, filed a complaint with British Columbia's Human Rights Tribunal against his former employer, claiming "discrimination against my culture." The restaurant, operated by Cara Operations, accused Rey of violating its code of conduct and said he persisted in his behavior despite verbal and written performance reviews. In alleging discrimination Rey said French culture just "tends to be more direct and expressive." —AFP

Japanese 'First Lady' role now puts her in scandal spotlight

TOKYO: Japan's first lady, Akie Abe, once known mainly for embracing progressive causes that put her at odds with her conservative spouse, is now in the hot seat as doubts revive about a murky land sale to a nationalist school to which she had ties. The daughter of a confectionary magnate, Abe has tried to carve out a US-style public "First Lady" role in a land where political wives typically stay in the shadows.

But that approach comes with risks, acquaintances and experts say. "Her ideas and those of other wives of prime ministers are different," said Yu Toyonaga, head of a non-profit organization promoting organic rice, who has done volunteer work with Akie Abe. "Rather than being a woman who is 'useful' within a male-dominated society, she wants to interact ... as an autonomous person."

Opposition parties are demanding she testify in parliament about her ties to Moritomo Gakuen, the nationalist school operator whose deeply discounted purchase of state-owned land is at the heart of a suspected cronyism scandal and possible cover-up that has sliced Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's support ratings. The finance ministry admitted on March 12 that it had altered documents about the deal, including removing references to Akie Abe. Her husband has denied he or his wife intervened in the sale or that he ordered a cover-up.

The prime minister is opposed to her testifying, but 62 percent of respondents to a Nikkei business daily poll published yesterday said she should answer questions in parliament. The survey showed Abe's support sank to 42 percent while those opposed to his cabinet jumped to 49 percent. Akie Abe, 55, has made waves since her husband returned to office in 2012 for a second term with activities that include taking part in an LGBT rights parade, opposing nuclear power, and visiting protesters against a planned US military facility on Okinawa - all positions that resonate with liberals. She also runs a tiny organic restaurant and has spoken in favor of legalizing marijuana for medical use.

Such progressive views won her the nickname "domestic opposition," and helped soften Shinzo Abe's own hawkish image. Akie Abe has also, however, at times publicly aligned more closely with her husband's conservative views. She has visited Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine for war dead, seen by China and South Korea as a symbol of Japan's past militarism because it also honors World War Two leaders convicted as war criminals by an Allied tribunal. Abe visited Yasukuni once in December 2013 but has since stayed away to avoid angering Beijing and Seoul. Until the scandal broke last year, Akie Abe was set to become honorary principal of an elementary school that Moritomo Gakuen planned to open in western Japan on the discounted land. —Reuters

Taiwan scrambles jets; China holds drill near island

TAIPEI: Taiwan sent aircraft yesterday to shadow China air force fighter jets as they flew through the Bashi Channel to the south of the island, its defense ministry said, the latest such incident to add to tension between Taipei and Beijing. China sent an unspecified number of Xian H-6 bombers, Su-30 fighter jets and Y-8 transport aircraft over the waterway on their way to the West Pacific Ocean, the Taiwan ministry said.

They were followed by Taiwan jets until the mainland aircraft returned to base, it said in a statement. Taiwan on March 21 sent ships and aircraft to shadow a Chinese aircraft carrier group that sailed through the narrow Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is one of China's most sensitive issues and a potential military flashpoint. The Chinese military movements come during a time of heightened tension between Beijing and the self-governed island and follows strong warnings by Chinese President Xi Jinping against Taiwan separatism.

China claims Taiwan as its own and considers the island a breakaway province. Xi said last week Taiwan would face the "punishment of history" for any attempt

at separatism. China's hostility towards Taiwan has grown since Tsai Ing-wen from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party won presidential elections on the island in 2016. Meeting New Taipei City Mayor Eric Chu in Shanghai yesterday, the newly appointed head of China's policy-making Taiwan Affairs Office, Liu Jieyi, said China was clear in its opposition to Taiwan independence, Chinese state television said.

China hopes both sides of the Taiwan Strait can work together for the peaceful development of relations and "jointly promote the process of the peaceful reunification of the motherland", Liu told Chu, state television added. The New Taipei City government said in a statement that Chu, from the China-friendly opposition Nationalist Party, told Liu they hoped for peaceful cooperation. "Although the political situation has changed, what people hope for most is peace," said Chu, who Tsai defeated for the presidency two years ago.

While China insists it has no hostile intent, its military exercises and patrols around Taiwan, and in the busy South China Sea waterway, have touched a nerve in the region and in the United States. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex Wong angered Beijing during a recent visit to Taiwan by saying the US commitment to the island had never been stronger. Beijing is already furious about a law signed two weeks ago by US President Donald Trump that encourages the United States to send senior officials to Taiwan to meet counterparts and vice versa. —Reuters



TAOYUAN: Lee Ching-Yu, wife of detained Taiwanese rights activist Lee Ming-cheh, speaks to the press at Taoyuan International Airport, near Taipei, prior to boarding her flight to Changsha, China yesterday. Lee Ming-cheh-an NGO worker arrested during a trip to the mainland last March-was sentenced in November 2017 to five years in prison on charges of subverting state power. —AFP

Analysis

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Here's one way to help Facebook protect user data

Mark Zuckerberg has apologized for "mistakes" and "a major breach of trust" after it came to light that the data of millions of Facebook users was compromised by a formerly little known consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica. But if you're tempted to join the growing chorus of people pledging to boycott the behemoth tech giant, you should also be involved in finding a way to prevent this happening again.

Facebook isn't the only company that's vulnerable to cyber intrusions. Unless you live off the grid, the chances you've had your electronic data mined by a social media company or an online retailer hovers at just about 100 percent. And while there's no easy answer to the question of how to stop abuse of that information, the time is long overdue for Americans to have a blunt conversation about our data and the federal government's role in protecting it.

In America, data mining is built into the DNA of the Internet. Most every time you click an icon or browse anything on a digital platform that seems far away in that nebulous realm we've grown accustomed to calling "cyberspace," you're opening yourself up to being violated in this other realm, commonly referred to as reality.

It's not like this everywhere. In Europe web surfers have to physically opt-in to having their data mined. Many choose to take the leap because they've tasted the seamless glory of an inanimate screen that knows and remembers them - quirks, refined tastes and dark secrets alike. (Although in some cases they're tracked even if they explicitly opt out.)

Here in America we only know an internet that owns us and that potentially knows more about our tastes, desires and infidelities than we do ourselves. That's because in the United States the web demands that we actively opt-out of being tracked - and we lose some functionality if we do.

American capitalism is the foundational underpinning of our Internet. That's fine and good, but what we should be talking about now is whether websites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and also spots like Amazon - or even Hulu or Netflix - should be designated critical national infrastructure - along with all the consumer protections that go along with that. Sure, they're all private corporations. But they're also entities most of us rely on to get through our regular routines, especially when it comes to conversing with our neighbors who live down the block or an ocean away.

That makes these firms more like the telephone lines dotting the national landscape than they are like CBS or CNN. No one will ever own the internet, just as no one will ever own the television airwaves or radio signals. But web-based companies are as vital to the contemporary way of life as highways, airplanes and rail lines.

The Internet's reach gives it almost unimaginable power. The political consultants at Britain's Cambridge Analytica are said to have embezzled personal data to build voting profiles of millions of Americans who formerly trusted Facebook. But cyber criminals have also recently stolen credit card details, social security numbers, addresses and even more intimate data from the likes of Yahoo! (3 billion!), My Space (360 million!), Equifax (145 million!), eBay (145 million!), Target (110 million!), LinkedIn (100 million!) or even Uber (57 million!).

Vulnerable

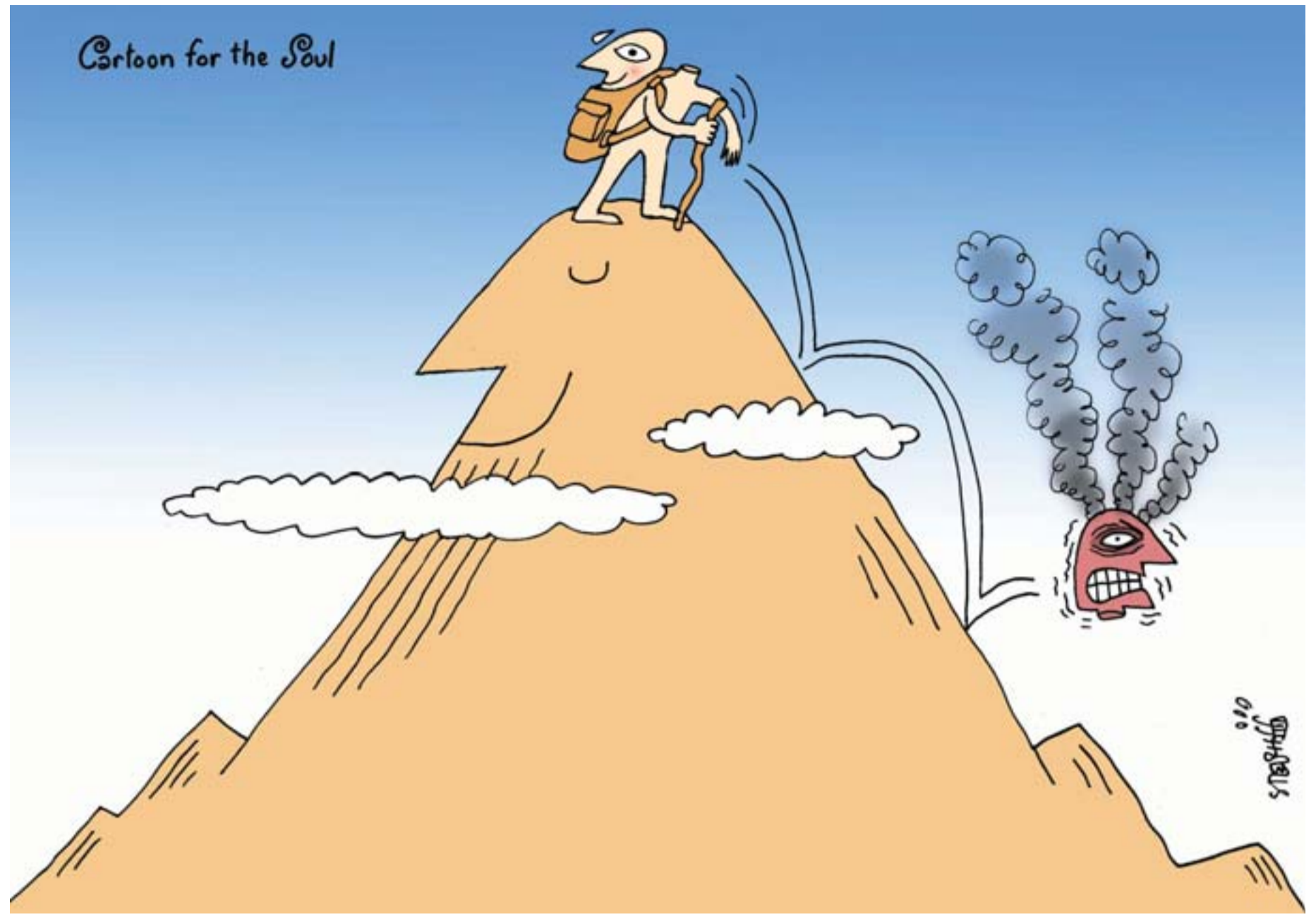
Just because these are private companies shouldn't mean the federal government doesn't have a duty to safeguard the data of American citizens. Sure, we're now talking about Facebook, but tomorrow it will be... (insert any company you love, trust and have grown to rely on here). Every website is vulnerable.

The Department of Homeland Security deemed election centers across America as critical national infrastructure in 2016 in order to help the local entities combat cyber intrusion from powerful foreign actors. Well, what's now more American than the Internet we all individually surf as a collective whole?

DHS didn't force states into the election program, rather the designation enabled states to coordinate with their federal counterparts. Today, these tech giants ought to ask, even beg, the federal government to help them protect users' data. At the very least that could renew trust in these companies, but it would also be in their own self-interest because when they're breached again - and it will happen again - then they can pass the blame up the chain to Washington, where it rightfully belongs.

Even without that declaration, Congress needs to stop living in a sleepy 1950s mindset. This social media era is the time for lawmakers to exert pressure by demanding accountability from the likes of the Zuckerbergs, Tim Cooks and Jeff Bezos' of the world. Their products may be their own, but they belong to the rest of us now too.

This is in no way calling for censorship. In fact, social media censorship is dangerous and raises serious First Amendment concerns. Americans also need to demand their privacy is guarded when the federal government takes a more hands-on role in protecting their data, but for the moment action against hacking needs to be a priority. For now, it's time to let everyone know the risk of logging on so they can either opt-in or opt-out. And I bet more would opt-in with carefree ease if they only were given something more tangible to put their trust in. —Reuters



India's most vital hub city isn't in India

Look up at the departures screens at any major Indian airport and you are likely to see a familiar pattern: Dubai and Abu Dhabi appear repeatedly on the flickering displays. Roughly one in three international passengers in India are either heading to or arriving from the United Arab Emirates. Many Indian passengers use Dubai, Abu Dhabi or, increasingly, Sharjah as hub airports, connecting in the UAE to flights bound for Europe, North America, or elsewhere in Asia.

Now that the UAE has become India's gateway to the world, the two countries are also developing a strategic alliance that could reshape geopolitics across South Asia and the Middle East. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the Indian passengers disembarking last month in Dubai, a city that has come to signify, for upwardly-mobile Indians, what Hong Kong represents for affluent mainland Chinese: A place to trade, invest, shop and connect.

When Modi last visited the UAE, in 2015, he was the first Indian prime minister to do so in 34 years. Given the two countries' shared past, this seems remarkable: When the UAE became a nation in 1971, Indian merchants had already lived there for generations; until 1959, the Indian rupee was the official currency. But while history helps explain why trade between India and the UAE remains robust, at \$53 billion annually, the UAE's relationship with Pakistan hampered a broader alliance with India for decades.

In recent years, however, Emirati ties to Pakistan have grown increasingly frayed. As UAE officials began taking a stronger stand against militant Islam, Pakistan's murky ties to the Taliban became more problematic. In April 2015, the UAE publicly repudiated Pakistan for refusing to take sides in the war in Yemen.

In Jan 2017, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan was the guest of honor at India's National Day celebrations in Delhi. That visit elevated the relationship beyond the purely commercial. Last month, an Indian consortium led by India's Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) was awarded a significant stake in an offshore oil concession by the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, and the two countries agreed to a currency swap arrangement that would allow for direct trade in UAE dirhams and Indian rupees.

Last year, India was the largest source of tourists to Dubai, beating out Britain and Saudi Arabia. But many more

of the Indians landing in the UAE are neither tourists nor transit passengers. They are returning to jobs and residences: Some 2.8 million Indian nationals live and work there, outnumbering Emirati nationals by nearly three to one. These Indians are the clerks and accountants, the travel agents and the real estate brokers that make up the large emerging market middle class that calls the UAE home.



Sense of ownership stops short of citizenship

In addition, there are many Indians in C-suites and professional firms across the UAE, filling the consultancies, banks, design firms, and public relations shops that keep the commercial wheels moving. Then, of course, there are the laborers who toil long hours to erect the buildings that have put the UAE on the global map. During Modi's 2015 visit to the UAE, he visited a worker's camp in Abu Dhabi, home to thousands of Indian laborers. The message was clear: India will be paying attention to the UAE's often-criticized treatment of its migrant laborers. This was an important message, and should be followed up with consistent engagement on the issue.

Domestic workers from India and elsewhere have also been under the spotlight recently, as the UAE passed reforms to the kafala, or sponsorship, system, which leaves workers beholden to the employers who secured their visas, thereby creating opportunities for exploitation. Human Rights Watch called the new worker protections a "step forward," though implementation will be the key to their success.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges, Indians continue seeking oppor-

tunities in the UAE. Indians working in the Emirates send more than \$12 billion back to India annually, making the UAE India's largest single source of remittances. What's more, Indians based in the UAE are the largest group of non-resident investors in real estate back home, accounting for some 20 percent of all investment. According to the Dubai Land Department, Indians are the biggest foreign investors in the UAE as well.

It's no wonder then that the 130,000 seats per week on flights between India and Dubai are often overbooked. When global air giant Emirates was founded in 1985, the oft-branded "Middle East carrier" chose two Indian destinations for its first three flights: Mumbai and Delhi (the other was Karachi, Pakistan). Abu Dhabi-based Etihad Airways boosted India's aviation industry when it bought a minority stake in Jet Airways in 2013.

Despite its relatively small population of 9.5 million, the UAE is India's second-largest export destination, accounting for nearly 12 percent of all exports. A large proportion of those goods land in Dubai ports and are transhipped elsewhere. Clocking in at \$30.7 billion, India exports to the UAE roughly the same amount as it does to its next three top export destinations combined: Hong Kong, China, and the United Kingdom.

UAE entities are significant investors in India as well. Dubai-based DP World has invested some \$1 billion in developing ports across India and last month announced a \$3 billion joint fund alongside an Indian state entity to invest in logistics businesses. In a series of advertisements organized by Dubai's tourism board, Shah Rukh Khan, the Bollywood mega-star, walks around Dubai, surprising - and delighting - people while posing as a waiter, or turning up for a game of beach volleyball. In the videos, which have gone viral on YouTube, he welcomes visitors to "MY Dubai." (Fans of Shah Rukh Khan and Indian cinema may also enjoy Dubai's latest theme park: Bollywood Parks.)

The sense of ownership that "my Dubai" suggests stops short of citizenship. Unlike Singapore, for example, the UAE rarely grants citizenship to foreign nationals, even those whose families have lived there for generations. Still, with Bollywood premieres, top-notch Indian schools, clean air to breathe, and some of the best Indian food this side of Mumbai, a joke has been making the rounds among Indian professionals in the UAE. "What's the best city in India?" the joke goes. The answer? Dubai. —Reuters

Girls #blessed by sugar daddies add to HIV epidemic

Before 20-year-old Lebogang Motsumi even had sex with her first "blesser" - or sugar daddy - a successful, married, company boss more than twice her age, he handed her a wad of cash. He was soon making regular deposits into her bank account, paying her rent and taking her out in exchange for sex, which the young single mother readily accepted as she had a three-month-old baby to feed. "It's a confidence boost at the time but when you're alone and you're thinking about this, you feel very disgusted. This man is old enough to be your dad," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "I would bathe and I would really scrub myself because I just wanted whatever smell to get out of my body."

Experts are grappling for ways to reduce relationships like these, which are fuelling new HIV infections in South Africa, home to 7 million HIV positive people - the highest number in the world, according to the UN agency for HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). But "blessing" - where wealthy, older men spend lavishly on younger women - has become a symbol of prestige for teenage girls trapped in a toxic cycle of poverty and ignorance, amid record unemployment and stark inequalities in South Africa.

The term emerged when girls and

women started tagging #blessed on Instagram and Facebook posts showing their expensive clothes and shoes, paid for by men dubbed blessers. "There is actually a group of women who are happy to be called 'blesses', who own it, who are at the mercy of this person that can provide them with money for as long as they're willing to comply," said Karabo Sitto, a Johannesburg academic. More than 10 percent of young women in South Africa are HIV positive, compared to 4 percent of young men, UNAIDS says. "Women often do not have the power to negotiate safe sex in these relationships, especially as some men offer more money for sex without a condom," said Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, head of Embrace Dignity, a charity that supports women who sell sex.

Honest

Although new HIV infections have fallen, almost 40 percent of the 270,000 people infected in 2016 were young women aged between 15 and 24, South Africa said last year, amid a push to roll out pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to at risk adolescents. As the daily medication almost eradicates the risk of infection, South Africa is one of several countries on the continent conducting trials to assess how it could help protect people who have difficulty negotiating condom use. About a third of teenage girls in South Africa have had a partner at least five years older than them, a 2012 government survey found. "Reducing age-disparate sex is key to slowing HIV rates in young women," said Salim Abdool Karim, director of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa, a partnership between five research institutions. —Reuters

Denmark faces dilemma over Russian pipeline

Denmark is under pressure to rule on whether a new Russian pipeline supplying gas to Germany can be built near its Baltic coast, a decision that puts it in the line of fire from friend and foe alike. Denmark does not want to act alone in resolving one of the biggest foreign policy quandaries that the small European Union nation has faced since the Cold War. But its search for a united EU stance on the proposed pipeline is deadlocked by divisions among member states over whether to do more business with Moscow despite its military incursions in Ukraine and Syria and accusations it used a nerve agent in an attempted assassination on British soil.

The Danish government is facing fierce lobbying by Russia, EU allies and the United States over the €9.5 billion (\$11.7 billion) Nord Stream 2 project championed by President Vladimir Putin and financed by five Western firms. "They are under huge pressure from all sides," one senior EU official said. There is no definite timing for a decision, which has been expected this spring but has been delayed while Denmark considers the security implications. But officials say it cannot be postponed indefinitely.

A Danish veto, under new legislation allowing it to do so on security grounds, would force Russia, which supplies about one third of Europe's gas needs, to find a new route for the pipeline. "This is not about gas, it is one of the

most important foreign policy decisions in Denmark since the Cold War," said senior foreign policy researcher Hans Mouritzen at the Danish Institute for International Studies. A delay would weaken Russian gas giant Gazprom's hand in talks with Ukraine for a new gas transit deal after 2019 and create uncertainty for the firm's partners: Germany's Uniper and Wintershall, Anglo-Dutch Shell, Austria's OMV and France's Engie. Access to cheap Russian gas to offset declining Dutch production takes priority for nations in northern Europe, particularly Germany, but eastern European countries fear the pipeline will make the EU a hostage to Russian gas.

Security Concerns

In the Nordic states, where Moscow's military posturing in and around the Baltic Sea has rattled nerves, security is the main concern. The United States has played up these worries in its opposition to Nord Stream 2. Confidential guidance from Washington, seen by Reuters, for US embassy officials in meetings with EU governments argues that the pipeline could strengthen Russia's projection of power in the region.

Sweden and Finland have yet to issue permits for the 1,225 km pipeline to run under the Baltic Sea through their exclusive economic zone, which is regulated by UN law. Germany did so earlier this year. But only in Denmark would the undersea pipe pass through sovereign territorial waters, giving it a greater say. US diplomat Sandra Oudkirk, who visited Copenhagen on her first European tour as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy Diplomacy last week, said Washington does not want Nord Stream 2 built and wants to understand "if the Danish law is a means to that end". —Reuters

News

Porn actress 'threatened' to keep silent on Trump fling

WASHINGTON: Porn actress Stormy Daniels said she was threatened in a bid to keep her silent about her alleged fling with Donald Trump, which she detailed in a highly-anticipated primetime TV interview broadcast Sunday. She is seeking to be released from a non-disclosure agreement she signed 11 days before the 2016 presidential election that brought Trump to power, for which she was paid \$130,000 - leading to allegations that the payment amounted to an illicit contribution to his campaign.

Daniels told Anderson Cooper on CBS's "60 Minutes" that Trump had not asked her to keep their 2006 sexual encounter secret, but said she was approached by a man in a Las Vegas parking lot after agreeing to sell her story for \$15,000 in 2011. "I was in a parking lot, going to a fitness class with my infant daughter. Taking, you know, the seats facing backwards in the back seat, diaper bag, you know, gettin' all the stuff out," she said. "And a guy walked up on

me and said to me, 'Leave Trump alone. Forget the story.' And then he leaned around and looked at my daughter and said, 'That's a beautiful little girl. It'd be a shame if something happened to her mom,'" Daniels said.

Cooper asked: "You took it as a direct threat?" "Absolutely," Daniels said. "I was rattled, I remember going into the workout class and my hands were shaking so much I was afraid I was gonna drop her," she said of her daughter.

Daniels said she was introduced to Trump at a celebrity golf tournament in Lake Tahoe in July 2006. He invited her to his hotel suite, the only time they had sex. The conversation "started off all about him, just talking about himself," with Trump asking if Daniels had seen his picture on the cover of a magazine, she said. "I was like, does this, does this normally work for you? And he looked very taken back." She told him: "Someone should take that magazine and spank you with it." She took the magazine and told Trump to drop his pants, which he did - with underwear still on - "and I just gave him a couple swats," said Daniels.

The real estate mogul "was a completely different person" after that, and he stopped talking about himself, Trump told her. "Wow, you, you are special. You remind me of my daughter. You know, he's like, 'You're smart, beautiful and a woman to be reckoned with,'" she said. Trump's wife Melania - who had recently given birth to their son - came up only briefly: "I asked, and he brushed it aside, said, 'Oh yeah, yeah, you know, don't worry about that, we have separate rooms,'" Daniels said. — Agencies

Saudi-led coalition warns Iran after...

Continued from Page 1

The Houthis said on their Al-Masirah television that Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport was among the targets.

Malki alleged the Iran-aligned Houthi rebels in Sanaa were using the airport there to launch missiles on Saudi territory, adding the coalition had targeted a "missile shipment" at the facility. Iran has repeatedly rejected claims it is arming the rebels. A Saudi-led military coalition intervened in Yemen on March 26, 2015 to try to restore the government of President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi after the Houthis and their allies took over large parts of the country, including the capital Sanaa.

HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah strongly denounced the missile attacks on Saudi Arabia. This hostile act violates all international norms, values and principles, the Amir said in cable sent to King Salman Sunday evening. He reaffirmed Kuwait's solidarity with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and support of all measures it takes to maintain its security. He prayed to Almighty God to protect the brotherly kingdom and its people against all evils. He also wished Saudi people everlasting security, safety and prosperity under the wise leadership of King Salman. HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables to King Salman.

Sheikh Jaber yesterday expressed his deep satisfaction at the success of the Saudi air defense forces in foiling the missile attacks carried out by the Houthi militia. In a statement, he expressed Kuwait's condemnation and rejection of these Houthi criminal acts that threaten regional and international security. He also called on the international community, in particular the Security Council, to take immediate and serious action to put an end to these despicable criminal acts. The prime minister affirmed the confidence of Saudi Arabia and its ability to confront these criminals and preserve the security and the safety of the brotherly people of the kingdom. He reiterated Kuwait's solidarity with its brothers in Saudi Arabia and its support of all measures taken to protect its security and stability under the wise leadership of King Salman.

An official source at Kuwait's Foreign Ministry also firmly denounced the missile attacks. Kuwait followed with full dismay and condemnation the news about missile attacks on Saudi Arabia which terrorized innocent people, the source said. The source reiterated Kuwait's total denunciation of these attacks, which showed the Houthis' rejection of peace and the will of the international community to put an end to the conflict in Yemen

as well as its aim to undermine all chances of peace. The source urged the international community, especially the UN Security Council, to take immediate action to stop such attacks. The source affirmed that these actions will not undermine the determination of the brothers in Saudi Arabia in maintaining its security and stability as well as the safety of its people.

Hours after the missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, hundreds of thousands of Houthi rebel supporters flooded the streets of Yemen's capital yesterday to mark three years of war. Sanaa's Sabaen Square was a sea of Yemeni flags as rebel authorities ordered all schools and government offices shut for the anniversary. Houthi supporters carried portraits of rebel chief Abdulmalik Al-Houthi and speakers blasted out a fiery speech by Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah Shiite movement, praising the "steadfastness" of the Yemeni people.

War songs, poems and speeches condemning the United States, the main arms supplier for the Saudi-led coalition, echoed across the square. "No one can speak on behalf of the Yemeni people. The people talking to the streets today are the real voice," Ibtisam Al-Mutawakel, head of a Houthi cultural committee, told AFP. About 10,000 Yemenis have been killed and 53,000 wounded since the start of the coalition intervention in Yemen, which triggered what the United Nations has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Despite the intervention the rebels remain in control of the capital, northern Yemen and the country's largest port.

Amnesty International, which has criticized both sides in the Yemen war for neglecting civilian safety, yesterday said the "indiscriminate" Houthi missile attack "could constitute a war crime". Britain urged Iran to "stop sending in weapons which prolong the conflict", while Tehran accused London - a key arms supplier for Saudi Arabia - of hypocrisy. The US State Department said Washington would support the Saudis' "right to defend their borders against these threats".

Rebel leaders have sought to highlight the role of the United States in the Saudi-led intervention. At Monday's rally, Saleh Al-Sammad, head of the rebels' Supreme Political Council, said the rebels were "ready to reach an understanding" to end the intervention and the coalition's blockade of Yemen. "It is the Americans who are directing this aggression and participating directly on a number of fronts," Sammad told the rally.

The Hadi government, for its part, said yesterday that the overnight attacks on Saudi Arabia amounted to "an open rejection of peace". The US Senate last week rejected a bipartisan bid to end American involvement in Yemen's war, voting down a rare effort to overrule presidential military authorization. The US has provided weapons, intelligence and aerial refuelling to the Saudi-led coalition. Washington formally approved defense contracts worth more than \$1 billion with Riyadh last Thursday during a high-profile visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. — Agencies

64 dead in Russian mall inferno; Amir sends condolences

MOSCOW: Investigators looking into a fire that killed at least 64 people at a busy shopping mall in Siberia said yesterday a security guard had turned off the public address system and exits had been illegally blocked. The fire, one of the deadliest in Russia since the break-up of the Soviet Union, swept through the upper floors of the "Winter Cherry" shopping center in the city of Kemerovo, where a cinema complex and children's play area were located, on Sunday afternoon. Dozens of children were feared to be among the dead.

Vladimir Putin, re-elected last weekend, expressed "deep condolences", the Kremlin said. But the president has yet to speak publicly about the tragedy, which has stirred anger in Kemerovo, a coal-producing region about 3,600 km east of Moscow. HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday cabled Putin expressing condolences. HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables.

Russia's Investigative Committee, which handles major crimes, said it was trying to bring in the mall's owner for questioning and wanted to detain a security guard who turned off the public address system after learning of the blaze. "Serious violations (of the law) took place when the mall was being built and when it was functioning. The fire exits were blocked," Svetlana Petrenko, a spokeswoman for the committee, said in a statement. Four people have already been detained, including two employees of the firm that services the mall's fire alarm.

Emergency services said they had extinguished the fire, but later said it was trying to bring in the mall's owner for questioning and wanted to detain a security guard who turned off the public address system after learning of the blaze. "Serious violations (of the law) took place when the mall was being built and when it was functioning. The fire exits were blocked," Svetlana Petrenko, a spokeswoman for the committee, said in a statement. Four people have already been detained, including two employees of the firm that services the mall's fire alarm.

unaccounted for. Health Minister Veronika Skortsova said from the scene that 13 people were in hospital, including an 11-year-old boy in a serious condition. Russian media said the boy had leapt from a window and that both his parents had been killed. Many of the victims will only be able to be identified via DNA testing, officials said.

An unofficial list of those missing circulating on Russian media included more than 20 children, some as young as five. Mobile phone messages sent from one of those on the list, 13-year-old Maria Moroz, and published by Russian media, said: "We are burning. I love you all. This is perhaps farewell."

Alexander Lillevyali told online newspaper Meduza that he and his wife Olga had lost all three of their daughters, two aged 11 and one five, in the blaze. He was cited as saying he had dropped the girls off at the cinema and that one of them had phoned later to say the auditorium was filling with smoke and that they couldn't get out because the doors were locked. He described how he had led rescuers up the stairs, but that they had been ordered to go elsewhere and that rescuers, citing regulations, had refused to give him a respiratory mask. "My daughters were left to burn because of their bloody rules," Lillevyali told Meduza.

Anna Kuznetsova, Russia's children's rights commissioner, said the fire had been caused by incompetence and that similar shopping centers across Russia should be urgently checked. Pro-Kremlin politicians called for anyone found guilty of negligence or worse to be harshly punished. Witnesses told Russian media the fire alarm and sprinklers had failed to function. Video footage showed a group of people in a smoke-filled staircase trying to smash a fire exit door, which was jammed. The cause of the blaze remains unclear.

The Interfax news agency cited an unnamed local official source as saying the main theory being looked at was that the fire had been caused by an electrical short circuit. However, it quoted Vladimir Chernov, the region's deputy governor, as saying on Sunday that the blaze may have started when a teenager set fire to the rubber foam on a trampoline in a play area using a lighter. Other officials were quoted as saying the blaze may have been started by candles used in a children's celebration. — Reuters



KEMEROVO, Russia: An aerial view taken on Sunday with a drone shows a fire raging in a shopping center. —AFP

Sisi supporters revel as election...

Continued from Page 1

politician and head of the liberal Al-Ghad party who himself is a supporter of the incumbent. All other presidential hopefuls were arrested or withdrew. The opposition has called on people for weeks to boycott the vote, calling it a "charade". A few motorists passing by hurled insults at the pro-Sisi crowds, accusing them of being "liars" before quickly driving away.

With Sisi's win a certainty and without a serious contender, the only barometer that concerns Sisi is the turnout. In the past few weeks, and increasingly in recent days, Sisi, his government, and pro-state media have called on people to go and vote, saying that by doing so, they were standing up to terrorism. In Al-Haram, police barricaded the street where the polling station is set up, two days after a car bomb killed 20 policemen in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria. The Islamic State group's affiliate in Egypt, based in North

Sinai, has vowed to disrupt the elections. Since polling stations opened at 9:00 am (0700 GMT), both candidates voted. Sisi in the eastern district of Heliopolis, according to state TV, and Moussa at a station in downtown Cairo. In front of Sisi's polling station, guarded by the military, ordinary citizens also came to vote to the tune of a new song by Egyptian pop star Hakim, calling on people to participate. "Since the revolution (2011), I have considered it as my duty to vote," said Basma Sherif, a physical education professor.

The Jan 2011 uprising, which toppled longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak, left Egyptians to endure years of political, security, and economic turmoil, as well as successive presidents and ruling councils. Since Sisi's election in 2014, conditions have calmed, although the opposition says it has been effectively silenced, while domestic and international rights groups say abuses are on the rise. In the middle of Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the 2011 uprising, a large truck played loud patriotic songs as dozens of young men and women waved the Egyptian flag and danced. Excerpts of Sisi's speech, often spoken in a nationalistic tone, played in sequence on a large screen, installed a few days earlier in the place were, seven years ago, Egyptians celebrated Mubarak's fall. — AFP

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Sports

Checkmate or knockout: Chess boxing lands a punch

The rules of chess boxing are simple

BERLIN: With his dental guard still in his mouth and a slightly queasy feeling in his gut, a shirtless Thomas Cazeneuve was exuberant after checkmating his opponent during a chess boxing bout in Berlin, the world capital of the unusual sport.

Just as deft in the movement of his rooks as with his fists, Cazeneuve claimed victory against his Ukrainian challenger after seven alternating rounds of boxing and chess. The match played out before a crowd of curious onlookers drawn to the spectacle of the so-called "Intellectual Fight Club". Chess boxing was born 16 years ago when its founder Iepe Rubingh brought to life a seemingly far-fetched idea from a French graphic novel, "Cold Equator" by Enki Bilal.

Today, Rubingh has set his sights on introducing chess boxing to the Olympics and even looking at sending robots into battle, as the multi-disciplinary sport gains popularity. The rules of chess boxing are simple. Three minutes of gentlemanly chess played on a board in the ring is alternated with three-minute bouts of intense boxing over 11 rounds—six of chess, five of boxing.

The winner has to earn either a boxing knockout or a checkmate on the chessboard, but either chess boxer can be disqualified for taking too long to make a chess move or by breaking the boxing rules.

'WE WERE SOBER'

"You need to be good in both disciplines, which can be quite complicated. But it's true that one mustn't be afraid of being punched," said Rubingh. The biggest difficulty may be staying lucid to pull off the winning chess move despite the physical demands of boxing.

"It was my toughest fight with a rival who is a total all-rounder, and who has left me exhausted, especially

in boxing," said Cazeneuve, 24, a recruitment consultant. "I held on thanks to my mental strength," he added. In fact, "60 percent of the winning moves are made on the chessboards and 40 percent in boxing," said Rubingh, a 43-year-old Dutchman. Recalling the sport's gestation, chess-lover Rubingh said that it began in 2002, when, after a round of chess that ended

in stalemate, he suggested to a friend that they go for a boxing bout at a bar in Amsterdam. "The idea was born, but we were sober," he said. "Combined, the two sports are the amalgamation of the most beautiful capacities of human beings to create a type of supreme being," he said. The author of the graphic novel, Bilal, told AFP that he found it "rather amusing that the idea that was potentially absurd had become reality".

'MORE KASPAROV THAN TYSON'

While it was considered more a curiosity than a real sport in the beginning, chess boxing has gained a strong following, including chess fans who have crossed over to the more physical realm of boxing. Alina Rath, a 29-year-old German, has been a member of a chess club for 20 years but only began adding boxing to the mix in August. "Chess boxing breaks down clichés of the rough guy who only knows how to beat up the weak intellectual," said the accountant. Although Rath says she feels "more like Kasparov than Tyson", she said she was tempted to sign up for the dual discipline after five years of practice in mixed martial arts.

Some 3,500 people are card-carrying members of 11 federations in countries including Britain, Iran and Russia. And it is Berlin that is the undisputed headquarters of the sport after the World Chess Boxing Organisation was set up there in 2004.

“ You need to be good in both disciplines ”



BERLIN: File photo shows Daniel Biman (R) and Mohamad Kadija attend a chessboxing fight during an amateur fight event at the Intellectual Fight Club IX in Berlin on December 15, 2017. — AFP

MAN VERSUS ROBOT?

Regular exhibition games are organised, pitting players of all nationalities. "Our aim this year is to create a professional league financed by investors and partners," said Rubingh, who is pushing for the sport to be included in the Olympic Games in Paris in 2024.

To gain publicity for the sport, Rubingh has another seemingly space-aged idea up his sleeve. This time, he is turning to science fiction guru Isaac Asimov for inspiration. Taking a leaf from Asimov's series depicting man's fight against the machine, Rubingh wants robotic

companies to partner him in organising a series of matches pitting men against robots.

"I would fight against a robot with artificial intelligence and which is much stronger than us in chess but also weaker in terms of reflexes," he said. "Every year, I would challenge the best of the robots and it would become increasingly difficult for me to win as they improve."

"The day that I lose, the machine will have overtaken mankind," said Rubingh, who is dreaming of a million-dollar fight in New York's Times Square. — AFP

Stung Mercedes vow to bounce back after 'one that got away'

MELBOURNE: Mercedes have vowed to bounce back in Bahrain next month after throwing away Sunday's season-opening Australian Grand Prix to Ferrari, with team boss Toto Wolff admitting it was tough to take. Sebastian Vettel got the jump on world champion Lewis Hamilton as Mercedes blundered their calculations on the Ferrari ace's pit stop under Virtual Safety Car (VSC) conditions.

Vettel went on to keep Hamilton at bay for his second straight win in Melbourne and third overall. It's a defeat that sticks in the craw of Mercedes and team principal Wolff, who is determined the champion team will not repeat the same error again. "This was one that got away and it's a bitter pill for us all to swallow," Wolff said.

"Following Lewis's pit stop, we believed that we had the scenarios of both the safety car and the virtual safety car covered, so that Sebastian could not pit and come out ahead of Lewis on track."

"We should have been several seconds safe, then suddenly saw on the TV screens that we were not. "Of course, under the VSC sometimes you benefit and sometimes you lose out but it was clearly a problem on our side and we need to analyse that to understand what happened and correct it."

Wolff said what was particularly frustrating was that Mercedes had the pace to win the Melbourne race. "Lewis was in control through the opening stint, then after the pit stop as well, and looked on course for a strong victory but it wasn't to be," he said. "Congratulations to Ferrari on their win. For us, it's a tough one to take, but there are lots of lessons to be learned so we can come back stronger next time." Mercedes have already set their sights on the second race of the season in Bahrain on April 8.

'NOT WHERE WE WANT TO BE'

Hamilton said he was bewildered to find himself behind as Vettel emerged from the pits to hold on to the lead around the notoriously-restrictive Albert Park street circuit. "I did everything I could, but it's not what anyone expected to happen," said the Briton.

"I'm still in a little bit of disbelief as I don't really understand what happened yet. "At least in my heart I know that I gave everything this weekend. I'm sure the team is feeling pain right now but we will regroup and we'll work on it." For his part Vettel believes Ferrari's 2018 car is not currently "a true match" for Mercedes, despite having won the first race. Vettel and teammate Kimi Raikkonen had been unable to challenge Hamilton in Melbourne qualifying, both finishing almost seven-tenths of a second off the defending champion.

The German conceded he was "a bit lucky" to win, and admitted Ferrari was not yet where it wanted to be. "If you look at the gaps the whole weekend, we are not yet a true match (for Mercedes)," he said. "Therefore at this point we know that we are not yet where we want to be, because we want to be fastest." — AFP

Advantage Vettel, but Hamilton can feel confident

LONDON: Sebastian Vettel won the first round of what could be a long and lively Formula One title fight with Lewis Hamilton on Sunday but the Ferrari driver may be the one with more to worry about as they leave Australia. Champions Mercedes messed up in Melbourne, their mistake denying Hamilton what had looked a nailed-on victory from pole position, but they also left rivals in no doubt about their pace.

"At the moment we're a bit worse off," Vettel told reporters after repeating last year's opening win thanks to a pitstop during a virtual safety car period that wrong-footed Mercedes, whose data wrongly indicated Hamilton had him covered.

"Last year we had more pace at this point. If you look at the gaps the whole weekend, we're not yet a true match," added the German, who is vying with Hamilton to become a five-times champion.

"I think if you look, and you are fair, then Lewis was fastest whereas last year I think we were fastest and it was very, very close." Last year, Vettel led from Melbourne to Monza before his challenge imploded.

Hamilton took pole on Saturday with one of the great qualifying laps of his career, lapping a massive 0.664 quicker than Ferrari's Kimi Raikkonen. The time may have flattered him, with the Briton producing a near-perfect lap while Vettel would doubtless have been closer had he not made a mistake.

Professionalism has changed rugby, says Hugo Porta

LONDON: Argentina great Hugo Porta says rugby's Corinthian spirit has taken a hit in the professional era and believes it is vital the sport holds on to its unique identity. The 66-year-old former Pumas fly-half, capped 58 times for Argentina, said the gruelling international schedule makes it difficult for players from opposing teams to bond and that the game lacks the conviviality of previous decades. Porta, who opted for rugby instead of football, said players do not have time to absorb the culture or immerse themselves in the countries they visit. "I think one of the best things that rugby gave me when I was playing was the opportunity of touring countries as a youngster," said Porta, who played for just one club, Banco Nacion, for his 24-year career. "Nowadays the teams are playing one weekend in Japan then the next in London and the next one in Buenos Aires. They don't get to know the people they are playing against or their culture."

Porta, who is an architect by profession, told AFP about his enduring friendship with South African great Morné du Plessis. "I played my first game against the Springboks when he played 40 years ago and now our families are friends and I have friends everywhere thanks to my touring days. "I think that is one of the things that rugby is losing, its conviviality and spirit." Porta said he understands that World Rugby cannot treat every country the same and has to respect the culture of every nation but he added that the sport must preserve its identity.

Former Waratahs flanker Omar Hassanein, now the chief executive of the International Rugby Players' Association,



MELBOURNE: Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel (C), second-placed Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (L) and third-placed Ferrari's Finnish driver Kimi Raikkonen (R) attend a press conference after the Formula One Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on Sunday. — AFP

But rivals also pointed to Mercedes' qualifying 'party mode' engine setting with concern. "Mercedes is playing with everyone... with that engine, no one can beat Mercedes. They're in a different world," Red Bull motorsport consultant Helmut Marko was quoted as saying after qualifying. Despite the pessimism, and the absence of Red Bull drivers from the year's first podium, Melbourne did not dispel hopes of a three-way team battle. Australian Daniel Ricciardo, who finished fourth after starting eighth following a grid penalty, set the fastest lap of the race for Red Bull and was right on the

tail of Raikkonen. "We are convinced that we had a better car than Ferrari, though the Mercedes still probably had something in hand," said Red Bull principal Christian Horner. Melbourne is a hard track to overtake on but Bahrain is next up and more open. Vettel won there last year when it was the third race of the season but Hamilton will also fancy his chances.

"We still got second. It feels like a dark cloud but it's not," the Briton had said on Sunday. "We have a great car, we are still the world champions and with a couple of adjustments we can win the next race." — Reuters



BUENOS AIRES: File photo taken on April 17, 1999, former rugby player Hugo Porta (C) from Argentina reaches for the ball as Berrie-Jon Mather tackles him, in Buenos Aires, during a friendly match between the Argentine "Los Pumas" and an international team of players. — AFP

admits the game has changed. "Professionalism means we can't always have as many beers as we want and we need to respect that," he said. "That is where organisations like the Barbarians, who were kind of losing their role in the game, bring back that romanticism around the game and the reason why we all laced on boots aged seven years old." But Hassanein believes the character of those playing the game has not changed, nor have the principles underpinning the sport. "The fabric remains the same, we are all

still the same type of people," said the 41-year-old. "I played in Japan for a number of years, which is a very diverse culture, but the rugby thread is very similar in the manner in which we interact with each other."

"There is an incredible amount of respect for each other and that will always remain consistent. "There is a special bond and attitude. Our sport is always first and in all of our players I believe there is a common understanding you represent the sport and not just yourself." — AFP

Sports

Former US champs Cilic, del Potro reach Miami Open fourth round

Cilic to face John Isner for quarter-final berth

MIAMI: Former US Open champions Marin Cilic and Juan Martin del Potro powered into the fourth round of the Miami Open on Sunday with straight-sets victories.

Argentina's fifth-seeded del Potro, chasing his second ATP Masters title in as many weeks, breezed past Japan's Kei Nishikori 6-2, 6-2. Ranked sixth in the world after vanquishing Swiss great Roger Federer in the final at Indian Wells last weekend, del Potro needed just 73 minutes to book a fourth-round meeting with Filip Krajinovic of Serbia, who beat France's Benoit Paire 6-3, 6-3.

Second-seeded Cilic also reached the fourth round with a 7-5, 7-6 (7/4) victory over Canadian Vasek Pospisil. Cilic produced six aces and saved all three break points he faced. But Pospisil made him work to finish it off, save three match points on his own serve in the 12th game of the second set.

"It was a relief at the end," Cilic admitted. "I had those three match points at 6-5 and there was that great rally at deuce. I was playing really well in the tie-break, returning really well and serving really good. I saved the best for last and I'm really pleased with the victory." Cilic will face 14th-seeded American John Isner for a quarter-final berth.

Isner defeated Russian veteran Mikhail Youzhny 6-4, 6-3. Cilic and del Potro are the biggest names left in a

field lacking star power thanks to the early exits of Federer and Novak Djokovic and the injury absences of Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray.

Third-seeded Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria joined the exodus as he fell 6-4, 6-4 to unseeded Frenchman Jeremy Chardy. Del Potro, the hottest player on the ATP tour right now, is actually in search of a third straight ATP crown after back-to-back victories in Acapulco and Indian Wells.

His win in the California desert was his first in a Masters 1000 event, a welcome milestone after a succession of injury setbacks almost forced him into retirement in 2015. "I think I'm playing good," Del Potro said after his 13th straight match win. "I can play even better, but I need to get confidence playing in this court, trying to keep win-

“ It was a relief at the end ”

ning matches. "But it's not easy," he added. "My body starts to feel tight because of all my success." In other third-round action, South Korean Chung Hyeon posted a convincing 6-1, 6-1 victory over American qualifier Michael Mmoh.

Chung, who has yet to drop a set in Miami, needed just 63 minutes to advance to a meeting with Portugal's Joao Sousa, who rallied for a 1-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over American Jared Donaldson. — AFP



KEY BISCAZYNE: Marin Cilic of Croatia serves during the Miami Open at the Crandon Park Tennis Center in Key Biscayne, Florida. — AFP

Venus outlasts Bertens to book Konta clash

MIAMI: Three-time winner Venus Williams saved three match points in a three-set victory over Kiki Bertens on Sunday, lining up a fourth-round clash with reigning champion Johanna Konta at the Miami Open. Williams, ranked eighth in the world, labored nearly three hours to beat 29th-ranked Bertens 5-7, 6-3, 7-5.

The 37-year-old American was cruising with a 5-0 lead in the opening set, but she squandered three set points as Bertens reeled off seven straight games to snatch it. The second set was another streaky affair, but Williams gained a decisive break for a 5-3 lead and fought off a break point in the next game to force the decider. The seven-time Grand Slam champion would have to dig deep when she fell 1-4 down to her Dutch opponent in the third. Bertens served for the match at 5-3 but was unable to convert two match points as Williams broke to put the match back on serve. Williams would face one more match point against her own serve in the next game, but she held on as Bertens appeared to struggle with cramps in the final games.

Williams sealed the win with an emphatic forehand winner, giving a little leap of elation. "It didn't look good sometimes, that's why you keep playing until the last point," said Williams, who lifted the trophy in Miami in 1998, 1999 and 2001. "And that's why I love this game." Konta, whose victory here last year propelled her into the top 10 in the world rankings, advanced with relative ease, beating Belgian Elise Mertens 6-2, 6-1. Konta exchanged early breaks with Mertens, but gained the upper hand with a break for 3-2 when the Belgian double faulted four times in one game. It launched a streak of four straight games for Konta that gave the Briton the opening set.

She powered through the second to reach the fourth



KEY BISCAZYNE: Venus Williams plays a shot against Kiki Bertens of the Netherlands during Day 7 of the Miami Open at the Crandon Park Tennis Center on Sunday in Key Biscayne, Florida. — AFP

round, where the 26-year-old will try to get past the last 16 of a tournament for the first time this season.

SVITOLINA, OSTAPENKO ADVANCE

Fourth-seeded Elina Svitolina and sixth-seeded Jelena Ostapenko, the reigning French Open champion, also advanced, as did 2016 Olympic gold medalist Monica Puig. Ukraine's Svitolina beat Daria Gavrilova 4-6, 6-0, 6-1, her fourth straight win over the Australian. In a match of tense rallies Svitolina finished with 28 winners and won 70 percent of her first-serve points. Svitolina will battle for a quarter-final berth against another Australian, 21st-seeded Ashleigh Barty, who beat Croatia's Petra Martic 6-4, 6-3.

Latvian Ostapenko defeated Brazilian Beatriz Haddad Maia 6-2, 7-6 (7/2). She led by a set and a break before Haddad Maia battled back to level the set. Ostapenko twice served to avoid a third set. She fell behind 0-2 in the tiebreaker before winning seven straight points for the victory. "In the tie-break, I showed my great tennis, and I won the match," Ostapenko said. "I'm really glad it happened that way." She next faces ninth-seeded Czech Petra Kvitova, who rallied for a 3-6, 6-2, 6-4 victory over American qualifier Sofia Kenin. Puerto Rico's Puig followed up her upset of second-seeded Australian Open champion Caroline Wozniacki with a 6-3, 7-5 victory over Greece's Maria Sakkari. — AFP

Winnipeg Jets clinch playoff berth with thrilling shootout win over Nashville

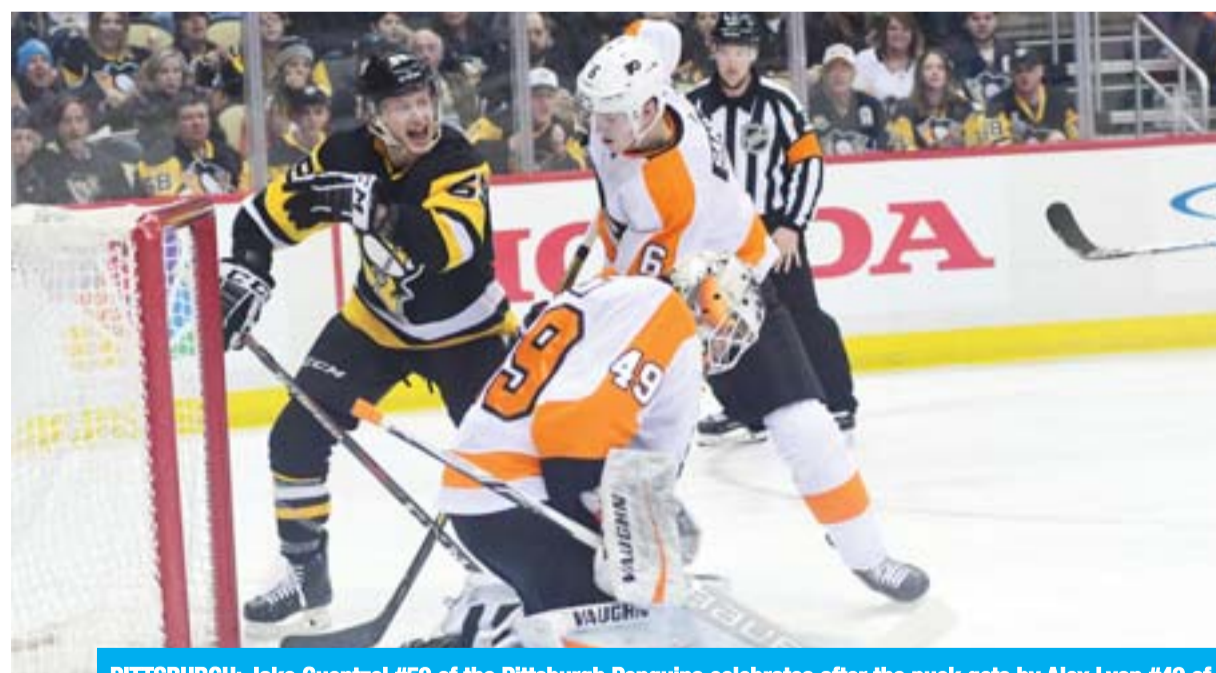
WINNIPEG: Mark Scheifele scored in a shootout and Connor Hellebuyck made it stand up by stopping all three attempts as the Winnipeg Jets clinched a playoff berth with a 5-4 victory over the visiting Nashville Predators on Sunday night. Kyle Connor had a goal and two assists, Bryan Little and Blake Wheeler each had a goal and an assist, and Dustin Byfuglien also scored for Winnipeg, which won its fifth consecutive game with its NHL-best 29th home win. Hellebuyck finished with 32 saves. Viktor Arvidsson, Kyle Turris and Ryan Ellis each had a goal and an assist and Roman Josi and also scored for Nashville, which moved a point ahead of the Tampa Bay Lightning for the NHL's top total. Predators goalie Juuse Saros made 43 saves.

BRUINS 2, WILD 1 (OT)

Brad Marchand scored his fifth overtime goal of the season and Tuukka Rask made 24 saves as Boston beat Minnesota in Saint Paul. Marchand, sprung by Torey Krug, zipped down the wing and ripped a top-corner shot past Wild goalie Alex Stalock 28 seconds into overtime. David Pastrnak scored a second-period goal for the Bruins, and evened the score for the Wild midway through the third period. Marchand finished with a goal and an assist, giving him a five-point weekend in which he had a hand in all five goals over two games. He tied the record for most overtime goals in one season, also held by Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Toews and Alex Galchenyuk.

PENGUINS 5, FLYERS 4 (OT)

Bryan Rust redirected a Sidney Crosby shot into the



PITTSBURGH: Jake Guentzel #59 of the Pittsburgh Penguins celebrates after the puck gets by Alex Lyon #49 of the Philadelphia Flyers at PPG PAINTS Arena on Sunday in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. — AFP

net 2:25 into overtime, giving host Pittsburgh a victory over Philadelphia. Crosby shot the puck from the left wing, and Rust sent it past goalie Petr Mrazek from right in front. Derick Brassard, Patric Hornqvist, Evgeni Malkin and Crosby scored in regulation for the Penguins, and Justin Schultz notched three assists. Travis Sanheim, Brandon Manning, Jordan Weal and Sean Couturier (the tying goal with 43 seconds left in regulation) scored for the Flyers.

DUCKS 5, OILERS 4 (OT)

Hampus Lindholm scored the game-winning goal 1:21 into overtime as Anaheim overcame a big night by Connor McDavid and posted a victory at Edmonton. The Ducks gained a point in their sixth straight game after Adam Henrique netted the tying goal with 89 seconds left

in regulation on his second tip-in of the night. McDavid scored Edmonton's first goal and set up two others, increasing his season points total to 99. He is four points ahead of Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov for the league lead.

CANUCKS 4, STARS 1

Reid Boucher scored a goal and added an assist as visiting Vancouver beat Dallas. The Canucks earned only their second win in the past 10 games. It was only Vancouver's second win in the past 16 meetings with Dallas. The Stars took their eighth straight loss and saw their flickering playoff hopes fade further. Vancouver goaltender Jacob Markstrom finished with 30 saves on 31 shots, while Dallas netminder Kari Lehtonen blocked 23 of 26 shots. — Reuters

Pakistan touts PSL final in pitch to host foreign teams

KARACHI: The trouble-free Pakistan Super League (PSL) cricket final, held in Karachi on Sunday amid a festival atmosphere, has reignited calls for foreign national teams to look past security concerns and play regular cricket in Pakistan.

The South Asian nation has largely been starved of international cricket since the 2009 attack on a bus ferrying Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore which killed eight Pakistanis as well as wounding six players and a British coach.

Pakistan's biggest city ground to a halt for several hours on Sunday as fans packed restaurants and cafes to watch Islamabad United defeat defending champion Peshawar Zalmi by three wickets after being set a 148-9 target.

"This is a very big historic occasion," Najam Sethi, Pakistan Cricket Board chairman told fans in the stadium just before the culmination of the Twenty20 league started. "You have filled this stadium and shown the world that we are ready for the return of the international cricket."

In its third year, the PSL has become a phenomenal success in the cricket-obsessed nation of 208 million but security concerns mean many of the group games and Pakistan's international test matches are played in the Middle East.

Ahead of Sunday's final, the first major cricket event in Karachi since the Sri Lanka bus attack, key roads leading to the stadium were closed and checkpoints erected amid tight security.

Despite temperatures soaring to 38 degrees Celsius, many fans queued for hours to get into the stadium early to catch a glimpse of the local and foreign players whose popularity has soared in the run up to the final.

"We are happy on return of international cricket to Karachi," said Ahmed Alam, 20, an engineering university student on his way to the stadium clutching bottles of chilled water and packets of potato snacks. "Cricket was unjustly kept away from Karachi for so long. Such matches could be held here much before."

WINDIES SERIES

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi said the successful hosting of the PSL final "was a victory of the entire nation".

Pakistani officials are keen to repair the country's image and reassure sceptical foreign nations, especially the more reluctant Western countries, that security is now good enough host major events.

Since the bus attack, Pakistan has hosted Zimbabwe, a World XI, and a Sri Lanka team for limited overs matches, all at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium. Pakistan also received a further boost earlier this month when West Indies agreed to play a three-match Twenty20 series in Karachi in the first week of April.

"I am looking forward to playing more cricket here, I have enjoyed it," Darren Sammy, a West Indies cricketer and Peshawar Zalmi captain, told local Geo Super TV channel after the game. The fans are excited at the prospect of more cricket inside Pakistan.

"West Indies' three matches at Karachi next month truly heralds the return of international cricket to Pakistan," added Alam, the student. "It's a real treat for the people of this city." — Reuters

Sports

Australian cricket faces huge backlash over ball-tampering

Cricket Australia chief Sutherland rushing to S Africa

SYDNEY: Sutherland was rushing to South Africa yesterday with the sport facing one of the toughest weeks in its history as a backlash grows over a ball-tampering scandal which is likely to cost Steve Smith the Test captaincy. Sponsors expressed "deep concern" as media and fans called for widespread changes and decisive action following the shock admission that Smith and senior team members plotted to cheat in South Africa. Smith, 28, was removed from the captaincy for the remainder of the third Test against South Africa on Sunday and was then banned for one match by the International Cricket Council (ICC).

His team's weekend of shame then ended in a crushing 322-run rout. Set an unlikely 430 to win, Australia were bowled out for a paltry 107 with fast bowler Morne Morkel taking five for 23. Now Smith is expected to face a harsh sanction from under-pressure Cricket Australia (CA) for his role in the plot which saw team-mate Cameron Bancroft tamper with the ball by using yellow sticky tape, before desperately trying to conceal the evidence down the front of his trousers. A charge of conduct contrary to the spirit of the game includes a possible life ban. CA has sent its head of integrity Iain Roy and head of team performance Pat Howard to Cape Town to conduct an investigation, with Sutherland, who is facing mounting pressure to take responsibility for what Australian media slammed as a "rotten" team culture, now deciding to join them.

'HORRIBLE 24 HOURS'

"I am travelling to Johannesburg this evening and will arrive today morning local time to meet Iain to understand the findings of the investigation to that point, and to determine recommended outcomes," he said late

Monday. "We know Australians want answers and we will keep you updated on our findings and next steps, as a matter of urgency." Smith and all members of the team will remain in South Africa to assist in the probe to determine exactly what happened, and who knew.

Smith, whose talents with the bat have drawn breathless comparisons with Aussie great Don Bradman, is not the only man caught in the crosshairs.

David Warner also stood down from his role as vice-captain, while questions remain over coach Darren Lehmann although Smith said the former Australian international was not involved in the conspiracy.

Smith initially said the decision was made by the leadership group within the team, but reports in Australia said Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc, seen as among those senior figures, were not involved and angry at being implicated. "It's been a horrible 24 hours—I want to apologise to our fans and those back home," said Tim Paine, who was handed the stand-in skipper role on Sunday. "We're struggling but the reality and the enormity of what's happened has probably started to sink in. I don't think we expected this to be as big as it has been, the fall-out we have seen from back home."

'DISGRACE AND HUMILIATION'

Smith, also docked 100 percent of his match fee by the ICC, will miss the fourth and final Test in Johannesburg from Friday due to his ban.

However, Bancroft, the 25-year-old opening batsman, escaped an ICC suspension. He was instead fined 75 percent of his fee, warned, and hit by three demerit points. The admission of cheating brought a firestorm of anger, with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull saying he was "shocked and bitterly disappointed". In

Root denies reports of concerns of Ashes ball-tampering

AUCKLAND: The ball tampering scandal by Australia was disappointing for cricket said England captain Joe Root, but he was unaware of Steve Smith's side employing similar tactics during the recent Ashes series. Smith stood down from his post as captain and was banned for one test match by the International Cricket Council (ICC) on Sunday after admitting conspiring to tamper with the ball during the third test against South Africa in Cape Town.

Unsubstantiated media reports in Britain have said that some England players had suspicions over whether Australia had doctored the ball during their 4-0 series victory, but Root quickly knocked that down yesterday.

"Not to my knowledge. I was not aware of any ball tampering," Root told reporters in Auckland after his side crashed to an innings and 49-run loss to New Zealand in the first Test. "I have enough to worry about... but it's disappointing for test cricket and cricket in general."

England pace bowler Stuart Broad had also said that he was unaware of any tampering by Australia's bowlers, despite the fact they were able to get reverse swing in conditions that were not usually conducive to being able to do so.

Pakistan ignore Kamran in T20 squad for Windies series

KARACHI: Pakistan yesterday ignored in-form opener Kamran Akmal but included three uncapped players in the squad for next month's three-match Twenty20 series against the West Indies in Karachi. Sarfraz Ahmed will captain the hosts in the matches played in Karachi on April 1, 2 and 3 — the first ties between international sides to take place in the port city since 2009.

The 36-year-old Kamran misses out despite notching 425 runs in 13 Pakistan Super League (PSL) matches, including a century and four half-centuries for Peshawar Zalmi. But the selection committee led by former captain Inzamam-ul-Haq and head coach Mickey Arthur did not include him due to his age and poor fielding.

Two players from Islamabad United, who won the PSL by beating Peshawar Zalmi in Sunday's final, were included in the squad—Asif Ali and Hussain Talat. Lahore Qalandars' teenage pacer Shah Sheheen Shah Afridi also received a call-up.

"We have included Talat, Asif and Sheheen in the squad primarily for their performances in the PSL," said Inzamam. "Imad Wasim and Ruman Raees are still recovering from injuries so were not included."

Asif, 26, smashed three sixes in one over to help Islamabad win the final and impressed with his power hitting throughout the PSL. Talat, 22, is an exciting allrounder who bats left-handed. Sheheen, a tall left-arm pacer, took 5-4 against Multan Sultan in one PSL match. Head coach Mickey Arthur said the 17-year-old can become an important asset for the national team.

Smith quits as Royals captain after scandal

NEW DELHI: Indian Premier League side Rajasthan Royals yesterday replaced Australia's Steve Smith as captain over his role in a ball-tampering controversy. Smith, who is on a \$1.9-million contract with the Royals, will be replaced by India's Ajinkya Rahane as skipper for the IPL season starting next month. "Steve believes given the current circumstances it's in the best interest of the Rajasthan Royals that he steps down as captain so the team can get ready for the start of the IPL without the ongoing distractions," the club said. Australia captain Smith, 28, was banned for one Test and fined by the International Cricket Council after admitting that he and leading players planned ball tampering during the third Test against South Africa. "The incident in Cape Town has certainly disturbed the cricket world. We have been in constant touch with the BCCI (the Indian board) and taken their counsel. Furthermore we have been in regular contact with Steve," said Zubin Bharucha, Royals head of cricket.

Australia's senior opening batsman David Warner also faces IPL uncertainty after he stepped down as vice-captain over the scandal. Warner has not been punished by the ICC. However his IPL side, Sunrisers Hyderabad, said they would wait for any action by Cricket Australia before deciding on Warner's captaincy of the side.

"It's very unfortunate what has happened in the Cape Town Test," said Hyderabad advisor VVS Laxman, adding that it was too early for the team to make a decision. "We will wait for the decision of Cricket Australia," Laxman told Press Trust of India news agency.

The Royals won the inaugural IPL 11 years ago under Shane Warne but this year are returning from a two-year ban for corruption, which increased pressure on the franchise for action over Smith. A Supreme Court-appointed panel barred the Royals and Chennai Super Kings from the wealthy T20 league in 2015. "Rajasthan Royals will do everything possible to protect the values and the integrity of the game," team's co-owner Manoj Badale said of Smith's replacement as captain.

"We agree with Steve's decision to step down as captain, and we are fortunate to have such a capable successor with Ajinkya Rahane," Badale added: "What happened in South Africa was clearly wrong, especially given that it appears to have been pre-meditated. That said, this will be a difficult time for Steve as well, given how much he cares about the game." Royals will travel to Hyderabad in their opening match of the season on April 9. The IPL tournament itself starts two days earlier in Mumbai. Smith is hugely popular in India, and last year featured for Rising Pune Supergiant. The controversy surrounding Smith exploded on day three of the Cape Town Test on Saturday, when Australia's Cameron Bancroft was caught using yellow tape to alter the condition of the ball before hiding it in his underwear. Smith took responsibility for Bancroft's actions, admitting the move was planned by the team's "leadership group" and was "a big mistake". — AFP



Sponsors expressed 'deep concern'



SYDNEY: Photo shows Australian cricket captain Steve Smith on the front pages of the major newspapers in Sydney yesterday. Australia's cricketers have heaped disgrace and humiliation on the country, the local press said in blasting the "rotten" team culture under the current leadership of Steve Smith. — AFP

scathing commentaries Monday, Australian media said the team had heaped "disgrace and humiliation" on the country, while sponsors also weighed in.

"This is deeply disappointing and certainly not what anyone expects from our national cricket team," airline Qantas, whose logo is on the team shirts in South Africa, told AFP in Sydney. "We are in discussions with Cricket Australia as this issue unfolds."

South Africa captain Faf du Plessis, who has himself twice been sanctioned for ball-related offences, gave Smith qualified support for coming clean. "Obviously

he's trying to take responsibility so there is right in that but there's also a right in that people are responsible for their own actions," he said Sunday.

Smith had insisted on Saturday he wouldn't resign the captaincy he has held for three years since succeeding Michael Clarke, but his position appears to be increasingly tenuous. Several former Australian Test stars have said it was impossible for him to continue, and Clarke insisted Smith must suffer the consequences. But Clarke added: "I think it's important that we do over time forgive as well." — AFP



Joe Root

Root added that while the burden of responsibility for teams' behaviour always fell upon the captain, some of it rested with the players themselves. "As captain you're responsible for how everyone else behaves," he said. "I have to look after my own group

and make sure I'm happy with how they conduct themselves.

"As an international player you should know the rules. I should not have to back that up. It's as simple as that." — Reuters



KARACHI: Cricket players of Islamabad United celebrate their victory at the end of the Pakistan Super League final match between Peshawar Zalmi and Islamabad United at the National Cricket Stadium in Karachi on Sunday. — AFP

"Shaheen is an exciting and amazing talent and I am sure after a few years he will be a star," said Arthur of Shaheen, who hails from the northwestern tribal district of Khyber bordering Afghanistan, where Taliban and Islamist groups had been active.

The 29-year-old Rahat Ali stages a comeback after last playing for Pakistan in January 2016. The last international match Karachi hosted was a Test between Pakistan and Sri

Lanka in February 2009, a week before the visitors were attacked by gunmen in Lahore. It hosted several international players for the PSL final on Sunday.

Squad: Sarfraz Ahmed (captain), Ahmed Shehzad, Fakhar Zaman, Babar Azam, Shoaib Malik, Asif Ali, Hussain Talat, Faheem Ashraf, Mohammad Nawaz, Shadab Khan, Mohammad Amir, Hasan Ali, Rahat Ali, Usman Khan Shinwari, Shaheen Shah Afridi. — AFP

Sports

England have World Cup places up for grabs, says Southgate

England's boss planning to make several changes against Italy

LONDON: Gareth Southgate has told England's World Cup hopefuls there are still places up for grabs as he prepares to finalise his squad for the tournament in Russia. Southgate must submit his 23-man squad for the World Cup no later than June 4, but the England manager would ideally prefer to finalise his selection before the friendly against Nigeria on June 2.

Southgate wants his final World Cup group together for the warm-up games against Nigeria and Costa Rica, which means today's friendly against Italy at Wembley represents a significant milestone in the fight to secure a seat on the plane to Russia.

After England's solid 1-0 friendly win over Holland on Friday, Southgate is planning

to make several changes against Italy, giving his fringe players one of their last chances to stake their claim.

"It's not too late for anybody. We will still be monitoring everyone until the end of the season," Southgate told reporters at England's north London training base yesterday. "There are 31 or 32 players that will be in contention and no one knows what will happen over the next few weeks."

"In lots of positions we've got really good options, players we know would come in and do well. We have to get the balance right. It's important we have competition all over the pitch, the additional pressure of knowing you have to play well to retain your place, that takes players to another level."

One of the most intriguing selection battles is between Jack Butland, Jordan Pickford and Joe Hart for the goalkeeper's jersey. Everton's Pickford started

against Holland, keeping his second clean-sheet in two appearances, but Southgate confirmed Stoke's Butland will begin the Italy match.

Joe Hart is also a contender but he has dropped down the pecking order after struggling with West Ham. "Jack will play in goal. I wanted to give him and Jordan a game each for the experience," Southgate said.

"I can't predict if Joe will play for England before the World Cup. It's up to the goalkeepers to perform well in the last six or seven matches, and we'll take decisions from there."

LOW EXPECTATIONS

Once Southgate has settled on his final squad, he will turn his attention to England's group stage matches against Tunisia, Panama and Belgium. Expectations are low among England fans after years of underachievement in major tournaments, but Southgate is adamant his team are heading in the right direction.

"What is more pleasing is the way the players are starting to adapt to the system. We were more fluid with the ball, we played with more freedom, there were really good signs of that on Friday," he said.

"We have to allow this young team to go and perform, there are some super exciting young players. They have to grow together, they don't have 50 or 100 caps. We have to give them space to do that."

"I know people don't always want to do that, but if we want to go further in the tournament than our ranking shows we have to allow them that." One of the key figures for England at the World Cup is likely to be



LONDON: England's midfielder Raheem Sterling (L) and England's manager Gareth Southgate attend a press conference following a training session at Tottenham Hotspur's training ground in north London yesterday, ahead of their international friendly football match against Italy. — AFP

Manchester City winger Raheem Sterling.

After starting the season with his place at City in doubt, Sterling has emerged as a significant threat for the Premier League leaders, but he has yet to hit the same heights with England. "I feel established with

England, but I'm still young. I'm always trying to develop," he said. "With the City aspect, and (City boss) Pep (Guardiola), he's been fantastic with me." "It hasn't benefited England at all yet. I haven't got to the level I want." — AFP

'Ghost' of 7-1 Germany mauling still haunts Brazil

BERLIN: Brazil coach Tite says the "ghost" of their 7-1 mauling by Germany at the 2014 World Cup still haunts the 'Selecao', as the teams prepare to meet today. Brazil suffered their heaviest home defeat when Germany hit four goals in six devastating first-half minutes of the Belo Horizonte semi-final nearly four years ago.

Toni Kroos and Andre Schuerle both scored twice over the 90 minutes as Germany's attack ran riot en route to winning the World Cup title. The teams meet in a friendly for the first time since at Berlin's Olympic Stadium and Tite says Brazil still bear the scars.

"This has a huge psychological meaning - no one needs to fool themselves about that," Tite told German magazine Kicker. "The 7-1 from the World Cup is like a ghost. It's present, people still talk about it, but the more you talk about it, the less this 'ghost' disappears."

"It won't just be a sporting challenge, but a huge emotional challenge too. We are preparing to give our best performance, which will be important, but of course I also want a good result." Tite has been in charge of Brazil since 2016, but Felipe Scolari was head coach for the mauling by Germany at the last World Cup. "I was watching the game at home in Sao Paulo with my wife and after the third goal went in, she started to cry," said the 56-year-old Tite. "That started me off. It was a moment of great inspiration for Germany, every shot was a goal - stuff like that doesn't even happen in video games."

"Sometimes you get that in football, a team comes close to perfection and that's what happened to Germany. The wound is still open and the match in Berlin is a part of the process of closing it." Germany lost to Brazil on penalties in the men's final of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, but this is their first



BERLIN: Brazil's players attend a training session on the eve of the friendly football match Germany vs Brazil in Berlin, Germany, yesterday, in preparation of the 2018 Fifa World Cup. — AFP

meeting at senior international level since the 7-1 rout.

Tite told Brazil reporters that Manchester City midfielder Fernandinho will replace Douglas Costa in the only change from the team which beat Russia 3-0 in Moscow on Friday. Germany head coach Joachim Loew expects to make up to five changes from the starting line-up of Friday's 1-1 with Spain.

Stars Mesut Ozil and Thomas Mueller have been released by Loew to rest while Ilkay Gundogan is

expected to start in Germany's midfield. Tite explained in depth why he sees Germany as one of the favourites to defend their World Cup title this June in Russia. "Not only because of the football, but because of something hard to attain: Continuity in their performances," said the Brazilian. "It has been a process in the years under Joachim Loew. Tactically, Germany has a lot of options, you saw that at the Confederations Cup (which they won) with high quality young players." — AFP

World Cup hosts Russia seek French redemption

SAINT PETERSBURG: After getting well beaten by Brazil, Stanislav Cherchesov says his Russia side must step it up a notch in their next World Cup warm up match against France today. Cherchesov's men were thoroughly outplayed from start to finish by the five time champions in a 3-0 loss on Friday in Moscow. It was a deflating performance that left 2018 World Cup hosts Russia with just one win against South Korea in October in their last five warm up friendlies. Russia's problems have been compounded by a string of injuries that ruled out two starting defenders Georgy Dzhibkiya and Viktor Vasin and a top striker Alexander Kokorin for the June to July final.

Cherchesov stayed positive by calling Friday's performance better than the one Russia showed in a 1-0 loss to Argentina in November. But he admitted that he held a team meeting after the Brazil match to regroup. "The defeat did not make us very happy and we held a little meeting," Cherchesov said after yesterday's training session. "Tomorrow we have a chance to redeem ourselves. We want to show much better quality against France."

Russia's training session began after a minute's silence held for the 64 victims of a fire that engulfed a shopping mall in Siberia on Sunday. World Cup organisers and the world football governing body FIFA expressed their "heartfelt condolences" in a joint statement. Tuesday's



ST PETERSBURG: France's forward Antoine Griezmann (L) and France's forward Olivier Giroud take part in a training session at Krestovski Stadium in St Petersburg yesterday, on the eve of their international friendly football match against Russia. — AFP

clash in the brand new Saint Petersburg Stadium pits two teams thirsting for a win. France want to avoid ending their World Cup preparations on a sour note after giving up a 2-0 lead and losing 3-2 to Colombia at the Stade de France. And Cherchesov is desperate to restore team confidence heading into Russia's first home World Cup.

Yet his streak of bad luck continued over the weekend with the loss of three more players for today's game. Spartak Moscow midfielder Daler Kuzyayev had an old foot problem flair up and returned to his club.

His Zenit Saint Petersburg counterpart Roman Zobnin suffered a knee injury while Rubin Kazan defenceman

Ruslan Kambolov developed an undisclosed muscle strain. All three are expected to be healthy for the World Cup. Cherchesov will also play reserve goalkeeper Andrei Lunev of Zenit Saint Petersburg instead of CSKA Moscow's veteran Igor Akinfeev. Lunev was accidentally kneed in the face by Rodrigo Moreno and stretched off at the end of Russia's 3-3 draw against Spain in November. Cherchesov wants to see Lunev put in a steady display that can guarantee his spot as Akinfeev's backup.

Russia will have one last chance to fine-tune their squad on May 30 in Innsbruck against Austria and June five against Turkey in Moscow. — AFP

Dooley's Philippines set sights on maiden Asian Cup appearance

HONG KONG: In the Philippines, where basketball monopolizes the airwaves and ageing boxer Manny Pacquiao is still king, a small piece of football history could be made today evening. At the rundown Rizal Memorial Stadium in the Malate district of Manila, Thomas Dooley will lead the Philippines into their biggest ever game when they take on Tajikistan in the final round of qualifying for next year's Asian Cup finals. A draw will be enough to take the Azkals - 'Street Dogs' in Tagalog - to January's finals in the United Arab Emirates and seal the nation's first-ever qualification in the 62-year history of the continental championship.

"Obviously it's a very important game for us," said Dooley, the former United States international defender now in his fifth year as Philippines head coach. "We never expected it would come back to the last day. I hoped we could have closed it down a little bit earlier, but that happens sometimes."

"We have a home game and we cannot afford to lose, so we have to get a point or a win and then we qualify. I'm trying to get the pressure away from the players and I'm just trying to get them focused on writing history for the Philippines."

Qualification for the Asian Cup finals, which have been expanded from 16 to 24 teams for next year's edition, would give the game a boost in a country where the sporting landscape is overwhelmingly dominated by basketball.

The Philippines, however, occupies a unique position within the fabric of football in Asia. The country played in the first international fixture on Asian soil when they won the opening game of the 1913 Far Eastern Games against China.

In an even less likely claim to footballing fame, former Philippines international Paulinho Alcantara was Barcelona's all-time leading goalscorer until Lionel Messi surpassed his tally almost four years ago.

Manila was also the birthplace of the Asian Football Confederation in 1954 but, despite those deep connections, the Philippines has little track record of which to speak.

DIASPORA TAPPED

The nation has never qualified for the continental championship since its inception in 1956 and no club from the country has ever qualified for the group stages of the elite Asian Champions League. Over the last decade, however, there have been some encouraging signs as officials have tapped into the country's vast diaspora to enhance hopes of turning the Philippines into a regional force.

Brothers Phil and James Youngusband, both former trainees at Chelsea, were among the first and they were soon followed by goalkeeper Neil Etheridge, currently first choice goalkeeper with Cardiff City in the second tier of English football.

In 2010, they, and others, helped the Philippines reach the semi-finals of the AFF Suzuki Cup - a regional tournament played amongst South East Asian nations - and since then expectations have grown. There have been ups and downs along the way, with the Philippines narrowly missing out on a place at the 2015 Asian Cup finals when they were defeated in the final of the AFC Challenge Cup by Palestine. — Reuters

12 Checkmate or knockout:
Chess boxing lands a punch



13 Former US champs Cilic, del Potro
reach Miami Open fourth round



15 England have World Cup places
up for grabs, says Southgate



AUCKLAND: New Zealand's Neil Wagner (L) is unable to run out England's Stuart Broad on the fifth day of the day-night cricket Test match between New Zealand and England at Eden Park in Auckland yesterday. — AFP

Wagner bounces NZ to innings victory

New Zealand complete rout with under 19 overs to spare

AUCKLAND: Neil Wagner bounced New Zealand to a comprehensive victory against England in the first Test in Auckland yesterday, taking the key wicket of Ben Stokes as he fought for a draw. The hosts now head to the second and final Test starting in Christchurch on Friday in buoyant mood, confident that they are tough to beat on home pitches.

New Zealand have now won seven and drawn two of their past 10 home matches, while England's disappointing away record has stretched to 12 matches without a win. There were times on the final day of this Test when Stokes threatened to repeat the heroic performance of Matt Prior, whose century on the same ground on the same day five years ago salvaged a draw for England.

But after facing 188 deliveries for a patient 66, Stokes lost his composure in the midst of a Wagner barrage and clipped a bouncer to Tim Southee at point. Stokes's dismissal, after his first substantial innings

since his return from exile, ended what little hope England had of saving the Test after they were rolled for 58 in their first innings.

They started their second innings 369 in arrears after New Zealand had declared on 427 for eight. "We were confident, but we knew it would be hard work," skipper Kane Williamson said after New Zealand completed the rout with under 19 overs to spare in a Test where almost two full days were lost to rain.

Stokes "was a big wicket. He was playing very, very well, an innings that perhaps wasn't to his true nature in terms of the stroke player that he is and he knuckled down and batted a long period of time and kept us out for a long time," Williamson said.

"It was a brilliant match for our team in all departments. The first innings was the perfect storm. The boys put the ball in the perfect area ... and the way the boys built those partnerships with the bat was very pleasing." New Zealand's innings featured an unbeaten 145

by Henry Nicholl and 102 from Williamson. But Stokes's 66 was the best England could produce in two turns at bat. Stokes, out just on dinner, was one of three England batsmen dismissed in the last over before a break. Joe Root was out on the last ball before stumps on Sunday and Moeen Ali was removed in the last over of the first session yesterday. Williamson described the three wickets as "big moments" while England captain Root depicted them as part of the difference between the sides. "We stood up and showed some resolve (in the second innings) and they continued to put us under pressure and you have to give them credit. It is very disappointing and it's another thing we need to start improving on," Root said.

"Obviously it was a massive task coming back from the start we had in that first innings, which was bitterly disappointing, and we were always fighting our way back in the game.

"We need to be better when we get to

Christchurch." But Root would not be drawn on whether any changes were likely in the line-up. "There's a lot of emotion knocking around now, it's still very raw," he said when asked if changes were likely. "I think it's important we have some rational thinking behind that and we sit down and I'm sure we will go into that Test match with the Eleven we think is going to win the game."

It was only the 10th time New Zealand have beaten England in the 102-Test history between the two sides. The final session started with New Zealand just three wickets short of victory, while England needed a further 69 runs to make New Zealand bat again.

Chris Woakes, who featured in an 83-run stand with Stokes, made 52 before falling to Wagner and Mark Stoneman scored 55 earlier in the innings along with Root's 51 — but there was little else for the tourists to enthuse over. Wagner, Todd Astle and Trent Boult each finished with three wickets. — AFP

Pacers pull away late to clinch playoff spot

LOS ANGELES: Victor Oladipo scored 23 points, including a key overtime 3-pointer, to lead the Indiana Pacers to a 113-107 victory over the Miami Heat on Sunday in Indianapolis. Darren Collison scored eight of his 12 points in overtime as the Pacers clinched a playoff spot with the win. The result also sealed a postseason berth for the idle Philadelphia 76ers. Thaddeus Young contributed 22 points and nine rebounds, and Bojan Bogdanovic added 18 points for the Pacers. Tyler Johnson led the Heat with 19 points, including 12 in the first quarter. James Johnson added 15 points and Bam Adebayo 14 for Miami. Dwyane Wade had 13 points and seven assists off the bench.

Rockets 118, Hawks 99

James Harden posted his fourth triple-double of the

season, and Houston parlayed torrid 3-point shooting into a victory over visiting Atlanta. Houston extended its winning streak to nine games. The Rockets converted 14 of 28 3-point attempts in the first half to build their advantage. They finished 20 of 52 from long range while extending their home-court winning streak to 16 games. Harden tallied 18 points, 10 rebounds and 15 assists to help steer the Rockets, who were without Chris Paul (hamstring) for a third consecutive game. Taurean Prince and Isaiah Taylor scored 28 and 26 points, respectively, for the Hawks, who were without Dennis Schroder (ankle).

Celtics 104, Kings 93

Terry Rozier scored a career-high 33 points, including a tiebreaking 3-pointer with 8:53 remaining that gave Boston the lead for good at Sacramento. Rozier's game-high point total included a career-best eight 3-pointers as he singlehandedly outscored the Kings 24-21 from beyond the arc in Boston's third consecutive win. Reserve Buddy Hield had three of the Kings' seven 3-pointers and a team-high 21 points.

Cavaliers 121, Nets 114

LeBron James totaled 37 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists, and Cleveland made the plays down the stretch to win at Brooklyn. Kevin Love added 20 points and 15

rebounds for his 29th double-double of the season as Cleveland shot 50.6 percent from the floor. Joe Harris scored a career-high 30 points, but the Nets lost for the 14th time when holding a lead or being tied going into the fourth quarter.

Clippers 117, Raptors 106

Lou Williams had 26 points and Tobias Harris added 20, and Los Angeles opened the fourth quarter with a big run to post a win at Toronto. Montrezl Harrell had 19 points and Milos Teosodic added 15 points for the Clippers, who have won two of three after losing four straight. Jonas Valanciunas had 16 points and 10 rebounds, Fred VanVleet had 16 points and Pascal Siakam added 15 to lead the Raptors, who lost for the third time in five games.

Trail Blazers 108, Thunder 105

CJ McCollum scored 14 of his 34 points in the fourth quarter as Portland got past host Oklahoma City. Damian Lillard added 24 points for the Trail Blazers, who snapped a two-game losing streak. Jusuf Nurkic had 17 points and 12 rebounds for Portland, which swept its season series with Oklahoma City 4-0. Russell Westbrook collected 23 points, nine assists, eight rebounds and four steals for Oklahoma City. Steven Adams had 18 points and 10

rebounds for the Thunder.

Bucks 106, Spurs 103

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 25 points and 10 rebounds and Eric Bledsoe finished with 23 points to lead Milwaukee past visiting San Antonio. Coming off a career-high, 45-point performance in an overtime victory over Utah Friday night, LaMarcus Aldridge paced San Antonio with 34 points. Pau Gasol scored 22 points and grabbed 13 rebounds in 24 minutes off the bench for the Spurs, who saw their six-game winning streak end.

Jazz 110, Warriors 91

Joe Ingles, Donovan Mitchell and Ricky Rubio hit 3-pointers during an 18-3 flurry to start the second half as Utah pulled away from short-handed Golden State. Utah, which had a 12-game road winning streak snapped Friday in an overtime loss at San Antonio, regained its winning ways away from home en route to the 23rd victory in its past 27 games. Mitchell scored a game-high 21 points. Playing without injured stars Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson, Kevin Durant and Draymond Green, the Warriors fell for the fifth time in 11 games in March, their longest month in the Steve Kerr era. Quinn Cook led Golden State with 17 points. — Reuters

Business

TUESDAY, MARCH 27, 2018

18 Mercedes-Benz Kuwait unveils new AMG Performance Center**19** IMF head tells eurozone time right to set up rainy day fund**21** KIF 2018 concludes on a note of optimism among global investors

NORTH CHARLESTON: Planes are seen under construction at Boeing in North Charleston, South Carolina on Sunday. The sparkling new Boeing 787s bound for China Southern Airlines and Air China are waiting to be delivered but the prospect of a trade war could make for a less rosy future. — AFP

China slams US 'economic intimidation'

Beijing urges WTO: Put US tariff 'beast back in the cage'

BEIJING: China yesterday lashed out at US "economic intimidation" following President Donald Trump's announcement of new import tariffs, but said it was open to negotiations to resolve trade frictions. The two countries have traded threats and heated rhetoric in recent days, ratcheting up fears that the world's two biggest economies are heading towards a damaging trade war. Trump said last Thursday that the United States would impose new tariffs on some \$60 billion of Chinese imports over the "theft" of intellectual property, rattling global financial markets.

Vice President Mike Pence boasted the measures mean that the "era of economic surrender is over". Asked about the remarks, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a press briefing on Monday that "it would have been more appropriate to say that it's time to stop the US's economic intimidation and hegemony". Beijing has not stood idle. On Friday, it unveiled a list of \$3 billion worth of US goods, including fruits and wine, that could be targeted with tariffs in retaliation for steel and aluminum tariffs—if negotiations fail. "We

also have the confidence and the capacity to safeguard our legitimate and legal interests, whatever the circumstances," Hua said. "Now the ball is in the US court."

Trade negotiations

While the two sides have traded barbs in public, US and Chinese officials have begun behind-the-scenes negotiations to improve American access to the Asian country's huge market, according to the Wall Street Journal. "We keep saying that the Chinese side is willing to negotiate with the US to properly manage divergences, on the basis of mutual respect and equal mutual benefits," Hua said when asked about the report. "Our door is always wide open to dialogue and consultation."

The Wall Street Journal said the discussions led by China's economic "czar" Liu He, US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin and US trade representative Robert Lighthizer—cover topics including manufacturing and financial services, citing anonymous sources close to the issue.

Mnuchin and Lighthizer sent Liu a letter last week spelling out requests including greater US access to China's financial sector, the reduction of Chinese tariffs on US vehicles and for China to increase its US semiconductor purchases.

agency said at the weekend that Liu, a Xi aide who was promoted to the post of vice premier earlier this month, told Mnuchin on Saturday that Beijing was "ready to defend its national interests", but both "agreed to continue to communicate". China is not the only country facing Trump's ire over trade.

Trump on Thursday authorized the suspension of the controversial tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from key trade partners including the European Union, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Mexico and South Korea—but only until May 1. Seoul, a major US ally in Asia, said on Monday that it has agreed to concessions with the United States to escape the steel duties and to secure a revised trade deal that Trump has repeatedly threatened to tear up. Meanwhile, China called on World Trade Organization members yesterday to unite to prevent the United States "wrecking" the WTO and urged them to oppose US tariffs targeting China's alleged theft of intellectual property. Beijing's envoy Zhang Xiangchen told delegates at the Geneva-based trade body that

President Donald Trump's plan to impose tariffs on up to \$60 billion of Chinese goods under Section 301 of the 1974 US Trade Act broke WTO rules.

"The US is setting a very bad precedent by bluntly breaching its commitment made to the world. WTO members should jointly prevent the resurrection of 301 investigations and lock this beast back into the cage of the WTO rules," he said. Unilateral investigations under Section 301 were fundamentally against WTO rules, Zhang said, adding that Washington had given a commitment, after a previous WTO ruling, not to impose such tariffs unless it won the right to do so in a WTO dispute. China is prepared to react using WTO rules and "other necessary ways", to safeguard its rights and interests, he said, according to a written copy of his remarks provided to Reuters. "Unilateralism is fundamentally incompatible with the WTO, like fire and water. In the open sea, if the boat capsizes, no one is safe from drowning. We shouldn't stay put watching someone wrecking the boat. The WTO is under siege and all of us should lock arms to defend it." — Agencies



US, China open behind the scenes negotiations

Speaking on Fox News Sunday, the US treasury secretary said "we're working on a pathway to see if we can reach an agreement as to what fair trade is for them." "I am cautiously hopeful we reach an agreement, but if not we are proceeding with these tariffs." China's official Xinhua news

agency said at the weekend that Liu, a Xi aide who was promoted to the post of vice premier earlier this month, told Mnuchin on Saturday that Beijing was "ready to defend its national interests", but both "agreed to continue to communicate". China is not the only country facing Trump's ire over trade.

Iran currency hits record low, crashing through 50,000 mark

TEHRAN: The Iranian rial fell to a record low yesterday, breaking through the 50,000-to-the-dollar mark for the first time as analysts blamed uncertainty from Washington. The rial has lost around a quarter of its value in the past six months, hitting 50,860 against the US dollar, according to Financial Informing Network, a trusted Iranian website for open market currency rates.

The gap between that and the official rate, which stood at 37,686 yesterday, has continued to widen. Iran's government took drastic measures last month to stem the decline in the free market rate, arresting foreign exchange dealers, freezing speculators' accounts and raising interest rates.

But on the streets of Tehran, long queues continued to gather outside foreign exchanges in the run-up to this month's Nowruz New Year holiday. "The

issue is psychological rather than economic. There's no reason to buy dollars except in the hope that you can sell them later at a higher rate," said Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, founder of the Europe-Iran Forum, a business network.

He said Iranians were reacting to worrying news from the United States, where President Donald Trump this month appointed hardline anti-Iran figures Mike Pompeo and John Bolton to senior posts in his administration. Many analysts believe Trump will pull out of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran when it next comes up for renewal in May, bringing back crippling sanctions.

"I see many people looking to invest in neighboring countries because this fear is spreading about the future of the JCPOA (nuclear deal)," said Navid Kalhor, a Tehran-based financial analyst.

Local officials have complained that Iranians are hoarding billions of dollars as local banks run short of cash. "I have friends who go to banks and ask for 15 or 20 million rials (\$300 or \$400) and they're told to come back in a week because they're out of cash," said Kalhor.

'Very concerning'

The devaluation poses a major problem for President Hassan Rouhani's government, which had

hoped to attract massive foreign investment in the wake of the nuclear deal. Already facing huge obstacles from remaining, non-nuclear US sanctions, the collapsing currency will serve as another deterrent to potential investors, Batmanghelidj said.

"Even in an instance where an investor is willing to operate in Iran, the devaluation is very concerning. If you invest now and the currency falls even 15 percent, you have to discount that from your returns, and that's very difficult to hedge against," he said.

"This will be difficult for the government. There is very little they can do about the mentality of individuals." The government has resisted unifying the official and free-market rates of the rial because it would mean more expensive imports and therefore higher inflation. But analysts say the gap has distorted trade and fuelled corruption. Perhaps the biggest challenge is that hoarding dollars has become a preferred way to store money amid economic uncertainty, especially after a housing boom stagnated after years of over-construction.

Iranian banks have tried to counter this by offering interest rates as high as 20 percent. But this has only fuelled wider problems in the economy by discouraging investors from putting their money into businesses. "The situation in the economy right now is far from beautiful," said Kalhor. — AFP

Disclosure from NBK

As per article (4-4) of the Tenth Module of the Executive Bylaws of Law No.7/2010 regarding the Establishment of Capital Markets Authority and Regulating Securities Activities and its amendments. We would like to inform you; it came to NBK's attention that there are speculations among some traders that increasing Bank's authorized capital from KD 600,000,000 to KD 750,000,000 will be followed by imminent rights issue to increase its issued and fully paid-up capital.

In response to these speculations, the Bank would like to advise that issued and fully paid-up capital has been increased recently as a result of Bonus shares, where the Ordinary and Extra-Ordinary General Assembly - which convened on 10/3/2018 - decided to distribute 5 percent Bonus shares to the registered shareholders in Bank's shareholders register at the end of the due date on Thursday 29/3/2018.

As the Bank has a strong capital base and its Capital Adequacy Ratio exceeds the regulatory requirement, the Bank has not made any decision or have any intentions - for the time being - to get another increase in Bank's issued and fully paid-up capital through rights issue.

Business

IMF head tells eurozone time right to set up rainy day fund

Global upswing offers window for reform

BERLIN: International Monetary Fund (IMF) head Christine Lagarde said yesterday eurozone leaders should set up a "rainy day fund" to help cushion member states in economic downturns.

Officials in the bloc have been discussing such a fund since last year as one option for setting up a eurozone budget or boosting fiscal capacity—an idea championed by France and to which opposition from Germany appears to be softening. In a speech in Berlin, the Fund's managing director welcomed a "sustained and broadly shared upswing" in the global economy, which she said offered a precious window of opportunity for governments to "complete the architecture" of the euro zone.

"There are other, forceful headwinds threatening," Lagarde said. "Think of the rise of populism and the short-sighted siren call of protectionism." Talks among euro zone finance ministers on an additional fiscal capacity have so far brought no conclusions, partly because Germany was long without a government following an inconclusive election in September. Leaders are likely in June to give direction to further work.

Six-month lead-in?

Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives and the center-left Social Democrats offered some encouragement to that process in the coalition deal they sealed last month, agreeing to support devoting specific budget funds to economic stabilization, social convergence and structural reform in eurozone. Those funds - developed from the euro zone's existing ESM bailout fund - should form the basis for a future bloc-wide "investment budget", the parties said.

Lagarde said the initial decision to get to work on

building a rainy day fund could come quickly. "Within the next six months or so there could be a meeting of minds ... on the general principles and timeline," she said. Even if details took five years to hammer out, the announcement would "let it be public that members of the currency union stick together".

For the eurozone to prepare for the next downturn, she urged members to develop a modernised capital markets union, an improved banking union and to move towards greater fiscal integration - starting with a central fiscal capacity that would reassure investors.

Eurozone countries would contribute to the rainy day fund each year, building up assets in good times that they could then tap during a downturn. In extreme circumstances, countries could borrow from the fund and repay loans with future contributions, she said. Transfers should be conditional on members sticking to EU fiscal rules. Lagarde recommended that countries pay a premium in good times based on the benefits they receive in bad times, incentivizing members to streamline their economies and maintain fiscal discipline.

These twin steps would aim to avoid permanent transfers, also a priority of euro zone officials' own fund proposals. EU officials are also considering an unemployment re-insurance scheme, a fund to support investment during economic downturns and money to support structural reforms that help euro zone economies converge. On a capital markets union, she called for enhanced regulation and upgraded oversight arrangements to handle a likely influx of financial services firms to continental Europe after Brexit. Lagarde welcomed signs of progress on a banking union. —Reuters



BERLIN: International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Christine Lagarde (center) meets German Finance Minister and Vice-Chancellor Olaf Scholz (left) next to Germany's former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer at the 4th DIW Europe Lecture "Strengthening the Euro Area Architecture" at the German Institute for Economic Research DIW in Berlin, yesterday. —AFP

UAE awards major refining contracts to Korea's Samsung

ABU DHABI: Abu Dhabi National Oil Company said yesterday it has awarded two contracts worth \$3.5 billion to South Korea's Samsung Engineering to boost output at the largest refinery in the United Arab Emirates. ADNOC's announcement came as South Korea's President Moon Jae-in was visiting the oil-rich Gulf state.

The main contract, worth \$3.1 billion, is for an engineering,

procurement and construction (EPC) project at Ruwais refinery, the UAE's largest with a capacity of over 800,000 barrels per day. Slated for completion in 2022, the project will handle oil from the Upper Zakum field, freeing up more expensive Murban crude for export, the state-owned ADNOC said in a statement. It will also raise production capacity by part of the refinery, Ruwais West. The second contract worth \$473 million is to build a new waste heat recovery facility to reduce the environmental impact of the refinery and generate electricity, ADNOC said.

Several other South Korean companies are engaged in major energy projects in the UAE, including the construction of a \$20-billion nuclear plant due to open later this year. —AFP

ECB should quit crisis-fighting mode: Bundesbank chief

FRANKFURT AM MAIN: The European Central Bank should quickly wind down its crisis-fighting policies of ultra-low interest rates and massive bond purchases to brace itself for the next downturn, German central bank chief Jens Weidmann said yesterday.

"Such a normalisation would give monetary policy more room to manoeuvre to react to any future economic slowdown," the Bundesbank president said in a Vienna speech.

The present economic upturn, which saw the 19-nation eurozone hit growth of 2.3 percent last year—its fastest expansion in a decade—"will not last forever," the economist warned. ECB governors have already begun inching towards the exit from their support to the economy. Since January, the Frankfurt institution has slashed its monthly purchases of government and corporate bonds by half, to 30 billion euros (\$37 billion). —AFP

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Business

World stocks stage timid recovery

LONDON: World stock markets recovered lost ground yesterday following a sharp downturn the previous session, amid signs that global trade players are making efforts to avoid an all-out trade conflict, dealers said.

"Equities have started the week on the front foot, with reports of US-China talks helping ease the trade war fears which pushed equities lower last week, as well as Trump signing rather than vetoing a US government spending bill," said Michael van Dulken, head of research at Accendo Markets.

The Wall Street Journal reported at the weekend that China and the United States had begun behind-the-scenes negotiations to improve American access to the Chinese domestic market.

On Friday, Trump abandoned a threat to shut down the US government, signing off on a budget despite being "unhappy" with many of its provisions.

Will it last?

The dollar also bounced off a 16-month low against the Japanese yen but remained close to a one-month low against a basket of currencies, suggesting that fears have not receded completely. Safe-haven government bonds yields, which have been compressed in recent times by worries over a potential trade war, firmed on Tuesday with US Treasury yields rising 2 basis points and euro zone bond yields also edging higher.

Italian bonds underperformed, with 10-year yields rising as much as 4 basis points on further signs that the anti-establishment 5-Star Movement and the anti-migrant League might explore an alliance to form a government.

The dollar fought back against the yen, seen as a haven currency in times of economic unrest, but lost

ground against European units. "With equity markets so heavily beaten down last week, a rebound was a definite possibility, the only questions are how long it lasts and how far it goes," said Chris Beauchamp, chief market analyst at IG trading group.

The US move to impose \$60 billion in levies on China-claiming the country is breaching intellectual property rights-sparked a rout on equity markets across the world, while Beijing warned it was "not afraid of a trade war".

US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said at the weekend that Trump was not ready to back down but added that he had "very productive conversations" with Chinese officials on the issue. Trump's announcement came weeks after he unveiled tariffs on the import of steel and aluminum products as he presses on with his "America First" protectionist program.

Room for miscalculation

London, Paris and Frankfurt stocks held on to most of their modest opening gains in the European after-

noon, while Wall Street rose at the opening bell, after tumbling for the second successive day Friday. "How China escalates will determine the pace of play, but Chinese retaliation so far has been more genial than initially thought, and they have made efforts for a diplomatic solution," said Stephen Innes, head of Asia-Pacific trading at OANDA.

Asian stock markets kicked off the day with another drop but bargain-buying saw some return to positive territory and others pare the losses-as it emerged that South Korea and the United States had reached an understanding on revising their free-trade agreement and on steel tariffs.

"So far, the initial measures from Trump and China are relatively muted," said James Cheo, senior investment strategist at Bank of Singapore.

"The room for miscalculation seems to be high, both in terms of provoking Chinese retaliation or taking measures that end up hurting the US economy. The hope is that there is rationality from both parties." —AFP

Daily Kuwait Stock Exchange Report. Monday, March 26, 2018. Includes sections for Index, Trades, Oil & Gas, Basic Materials, Consumer Goods, Health Care, and Insurance.

National Bank of Kuwait Financial Markets Daily Report. At 02:00 PM Previous Day. Includes sections for Global Stock Indices, MENA Stock Indices, Global Currencies Exchange Rate, MENA Currencies Exchange Rate, Global Interest Rates, Global Bond Yields, and Commodities.

Health

Biodiversity 101: Are Earth's wild megafauna doomed?

Earth enters a so-called 'mass extinction event'

PARIS: Pop quiz: How many species of big, land-dwelling animals are there in the world? Count all the different kinds of big cats, bears, wolves, wild dogs and other carnivores weighing at least 15 kilos. Add large herbivores — 100 kilos or more—such as bison, zebra and deer, along with rhinos, elephants, large apes, giraffes, hippos, wild pigs, tapirs...

What's the final tally? The answer, based on this widely used definition of terrestrial megafauna, is 101. That modest number is sure to shrink to double digits, and could continue to diminish at an alarming rate, biologists warn. Two-thirds of these iconic creatures are already listed as threatened with extinction by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which tracks the survival status of Earth's animals and plants on its Red List.

More than a dozen are in the wildlife equivalent of intensive care, tagged as "critically endangered" or "extinct in the wild." "Conservation scientists will soon be busy writing obituaries for species and subspecies of megafauna as they vanish from the planet," said Bill Ripple, a professor at Oregon State University, and lead author of an appeal published in December—entitled "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice"—signed by more than 15,000 of his colleagues.

Just this week, the last male northern white rhino, a genetically distinct subspecies, died at age 45 in a Kenyan zoo. When the rhino, named Sudan, was born, there were at least 700 of its kind still roaming the wild. Conservation biologists, once circumspect, no longer mince words.

Silent savannah syndrome

The Saharan Addax antelope is "doomed to extinction". The Eastern Gorilla, also hunted for meat, is "only one step away from going extinct", as are the startlingly gentle and intelligent orangutans of Borneo and Sumatra. Charismatic species still numerous enough to attract millions of tourists to Africa each year are also in sharp decline.

Over the course of the last century, lions, rhino and cheetah populations have collapsed by more than 90 percent; once common giraffes—newly classified as "vulnerable" to extinction—are down by 40 percent in just three decades; polar bears are forecast to lose a third of their numbers by mid-century. "We are facing the very real possibility of seeing these titans of nature go extinct in the wild in our lifetime, on our watch," said IUCN Director General Inger Andersen.



GUWAHATI: An Indian mahout stands on his elephant as it washes itself after forestry officials conducted a census of one horn rhinos at the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, some 45km from Guwahati. — AFP

The broader context is not encouraging. Scientists agree that Earth has entered a so-called "mass extinction event" in which species of all sizes and shapes are disappearing at 100 times the normal rate. The last mass die-off—the fifth in half-a-billion years—was 65 million years ago, when an asteroid collision wiped out non-avian dinosaurs.

Many forces are pushing megafauna—especially vulnerable to such pressures—towards the edge, including habitat loss, poaching, conflict over livestock, and—in the case of polar bears—climate change. But the common denominator behind all this is a single cause: humanity's inexorable expansion. "The primary threat to wildlife in Africa is that we are eating it to death," said Paul Funston, senior lion program director for Panthera, a global wild cat conservation organization.

Time for triage

In some areas, this has led to what conservationists call the "silent savannah syndrome", he added. "There are many protected areas that look absolutely intact—the woodlands, the birds, the bees are all there," Funston said. "But the big mammals are gone, and that's because they have been eaten." Africa's population, he noted, is project-

ed to quadruple from one to four billion by 2100.

Conservationists are, by necessity, optimists—if they didn't see a silver lining, all their efforts would seem pointless. In certain regions, they have in fact helped species claw back from the brink. But they must also be realists, said Michael Knight, head of the IUCN's African Rhino Specialist Group, and a scientist at the Centre for African Conservation Ecology in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

"Africa is no longer the pipedream people imagine of open landscapes with wild animals running all over," he said in an interview. "We are going to have to face the reality that certain areas are not going to be complete ecosystems." Fifty years down the road, he added, "the challenges are going to be ten-maybe 50 — times harder".

For Funston, the key is strategic investment in national parks—studies have shown a direct correlation between dollars-per-square-kilometer invested, and the survival rate of protected species. "We are almost ready for triage," he said. "For lions, it's done—we have identified 14 key landscapes where conservation money and attention should be spent." "This applies to all megafauna," he added. "We urgently need to get away from our single-species approach to megafauna."—AFP

More than 130 pilot whales die in mass Australia beaching

PERTH: At least 135 short-finned pilot whales died Friday after a mass beaching in Australia as rescuers worked to herd those still alive back out to sea. The stranding of 150 whales at Hamelin Bay, some 315 kilometers south of Perth, was spotted by a commercial fisherman at daybreak, with fears the carcasses will attract sharks. Western Australia state's Parks and Wildlife Service said its staff were on site and assessing the health and well-being of the 15 still alive.

"Most of the whales beached themselves on dry land overnight and have not survived," said incident controller Jeremy Chick who added they were awaiting support and equipment to help in a rescue attempt. "The strength of the animals and the windy and possibly wet weather conditions will affect when and where we attempt to move them out to sea." The main objectives are to ensure the safety of staff and volunteers as well as the whales' greatest chance of survival.

Hamelin beach, named after French explorer Jacques Felix Emmanuel Hamelin who sailed through the area in about 1801, was closed with a shark alert issued for the area. Short-finned pilot whales inhabit tropical and subtropical waters and are often seen in the hundreds and when they beach, it is usually en masse. The reason why mass strandings occur is still unknown.

There are many theories including the shape of the coastline being a contributing factor, whales responding to distress calls from other whales, or groups following a leader into shore. The largest mass stranding in Australia's west was at Dunsborough in 1996 when 320 long-finned pilot whales came ashore. All but 20 survived.—AFP

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What's On



Oncost Cash & Carry opens its 4th branch



Oncost Cash & Carry, the first wholesale membership retail store in Kuwait, opened its 4th outlet in Shuwaikh yesterday. The new outlet was inaugurated by the Chairman of IFA Hotels & Resorts, Talal Jassem Al-Bahar, alongside the CEO of Oncost Cash & Carry, Saleh Al-Tunaib, and the COO of Oncost Cash & Carry, TA Remesh, in the presence of their excellences the Ambassadors to Kuwait, of Guyana, Mexico, South Korea, along with diplomats from the embassies of Turkey, Philippines and Indonesia, as well as top management, staff and well-wishers.

The new outlet is not only the largest Oncost store in Kuwait, but also the brand's first wholesale outlet in the Capital Governorate. Oncost's new branch offers customers the benefits of wholesale shopping in a modern retail environment that prioritizes significantly discounted prices to its customers. Wholesale shopping in a retail environment is a new and unique model that is unparalleled in Kuwait's



wholesale market sector. The brand's pricing policy has been constructed to focus on competitive pricing by the unit and wholesale prices by the carton, thereby passing on substantial savings to its loyal customer base, particularly to those who make large volume purchases. Moreover, there are the added benefits of weekly promotions that see customers shopping for household staples gaining great savings.

In January 2018, Oncost launched its first and the only retail Membership Program that offers a cash-back reward of up to 4 percent. Registration to the Membership Program is free to all customers and can be used in all Oncost stores. As part of its expansion drive, Oncost plans to open a new branch in Farwaniya Governorate in the immediate future, and more branches are slated to open shortly in the Hawally and Jahra Governorates. The expansion is in line with the company's strategy of extending its reach across Kuwait, while providing affordable prices to customers in all governorates.



ACK successfully concludes 2018 'Career Fair'

The Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) held its 2018 Career Fair on March 19th and March 20th of this year on campus, at the Aviation Hangar. The Fair hosted a total of 43 leading companies from different sectors in Kuwait to provide multiple networking, career, and internship opportunities for its students and alumni.

The guest of honor, Bandar Al-Rashed, Assistant Secretary General for Manpower and Government Restructuring Program (MGRP) and on behalf of ACK, Prof Isam Zabalawi - President, Dr Usameh Jamali - Advisor to the Chairman, Engineer Sager Abdullah Al-Sharhan - Deputy Managing Partner - Industry, Dr Abdullah Karkouh - Vice President of Administrative Affairs, and Dr Jassem Hajhi - Senior Manager of Student Support and Alumni, inaugurated the Fair with

the traditional ribbon cutting ceremony and opening remarks welcoming all guests and visitors, thanking the participating companies, and encouraging students and alumni to take this unique opportunity to connect with potential employers. The Opening Ceremony was followed by an official tour of the booths, awarding each participating company with a token of appreciation.

The Alumni and Career Placement Center organized the Fair and the Manager of the Center, Dr Zeina Nehme, declared the 2018 Career Fair a huge success, attracting a total of about 3,000 visitors on both days. In addition, she was delighted to see major interest from companies in ACK students and alumni.

On this occasion, the College thanked all participants and attendees and especially the Platinum Sponsors, such as: Kuwait Finance House (KFH), National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), Boubyan Bank, Limak Insaat Kuwait SPC, Ooredoo Kuwait and the Gold Sponsors: Manpower and Government Restructuring Program, Schlumberger, National Aviation Services (NAS), Kuwait International Bank, AL Wazzan Catering Co, Jassim Transport & Stevedoring Co KSCC. (JTC).

KU to hold Google Cloud Study Jam

Join us for our Google Cloud Study Jam on Wednesday 28th of March 6-9 pm at Kuwait University Khaldiya. Together with Burhan Khalid of GDG Kuwait we'll work through three Google Cloud Platform Essentials labs, then you will get free access to the next quest so you can finish this series of labs at home to get a Google-hosted

badge for your online profile. You will be able to get hands-on experience with - Docker, Kubernetes and Scientific Data Processing, all of which will earn additional badges. By learning together we think it's going to be more fun and more of us are going to be able to complete it. Bring your own laptop (PC, Mac or Chromebook) with charger! The labs will run on all of the latest versions of the popular browsers. For the best experience, make sure your laptop has Firefox or Chrome installed. Join this meet-up to get official Google training of \$70+ value at free of charge.

Sheraton Kuwait shows support for Earth Hour

Sheraton Kuwait, a Luxury Collection Hotel and Four Points by Sheraton Kuwait went dark for one hour on March 24 to shine a light on climate action in support of Earth Hour 2018. The hotel joined millions around the world in turning off its lights at 8:30 pm local time to illuminate a powerful message about environmental awareness and action. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) created the annual global environmental awareness event 11 years ago to emphasize the threat of climate change.

Sheraton and Four Points Kuwait participated by turning off exterior signage lighting; dimming or turning off non-essential interior lighting; using candlelight in appropriate public areas such as restaurants; and using in-room voicemail messages and in-room television messages to inform guests about Earth Hour observances. Sheraton and Four Points Kuwait also participated in Marriott International's drive to raise funds for WWF and used the bare minimum amount of electricity to help make a defined difference this Earth Hour.

"It's a privilege for us to support Earth Hour because it echoes Marriott International's global focus on the environment," said Denise Naguib, Vice President of Sustainability and Supplier Diversity. "Today, business plays a critical role in taking on our world's most pressing social and environmental issues, including climate change. Earth Hour reflects a philosophy we aim to practice year-round through our sustainability & social impact platform, Serve 360."

"It is a real pleasure and honor to support each and every year, such a powerful movement with such a simple gesture," said Fahed Abushaar, the General Manager of Sheraton Kuwait, a Luxury Collection Hotel. "Earth Hour itself mirrors our way of thinking that we try to spread on all year-round: No doubt that



every small step each of us takes make a big difference together." Marriott International embraces its global responsibility and unique opportunity to be a force for good. Guided by its sustainability and social impact platform, Serve 360: Doing Good in Every Direction, Marriott is committed to making a positive and sustainable impact wherever it does business. While integrating sustainability across its value chain and mitigating climate-related risk, the company is working to reduce environmental impacts, build and operate sustainable hotels, source responsibly, advance human rights, and create opportunities for the communities where we operate.

Lifestyle | Gossip

SWEDISH HOUSE MAFIA REUNITE
AT ULTRA MUSIC FESTIVALDeKnight wants
Hunnam to return to
Pacific Rim franchise

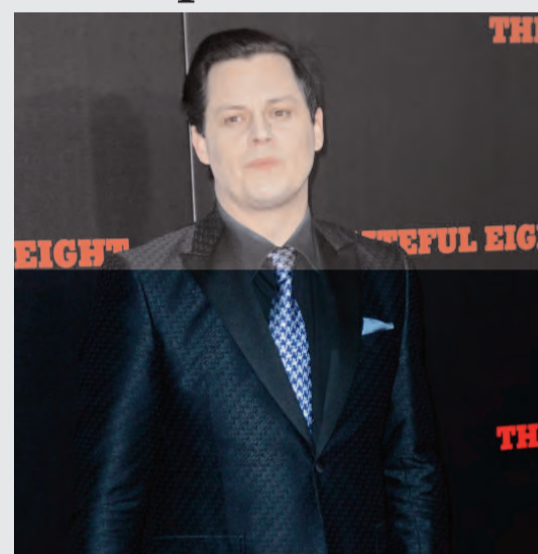
Steven DeKnight hopes Charlie Hunnam will come back for a third installment of the 'Pacific Rim' franchise. The 37-year-old actor starred as hero Raleigh Beckett in Guillermo del Toro's first installment of the sci-fi franchise, but due to scheduling conflicts, he was unable to reprise his role in DeKnight's sequel, but the filmmaker hopes Hunnam will return in the future. In an interview with Collider, DeKnight said: "There was a version that was shot where what happened to him [Raleigh] was explained and talked about. "We tested it, but people had more questions. We decided we didn't want to lock ourselves in and say Raleigh is dead or Raleigh has retired, which seemed a little cheap. "We wanted to leave it open for the third installment of the movie in case we can get Charlie Hunnam back. "The only reason Charlie isn't in the movie is scheduling problems, he had his dream project, a remake of 'Papillon', that as we had finished the script with him in it, it was announced he was doing 'Papillon', his passion project and unfortunately the dates were exactly the same as ours, right in the middle of when we would shoot "So very sadly he couldn't be a part of this one, but hopefully in a future installment he will be." The first film followed mankind's attempts to stop monstrous creatures known as Kaiju - who entered from breaches

in the Pacific Rim - from destroying the planet. Humans created giant robots called Jaegers - designed to be piloted by two humans locked together in a neural bridge. However, humanity's hopes relied on a washed-up ex-pilot Raleigh Beckett (Hunnam) and Stacker Pentecost (Idris Elba). The new film 'Pacific Rim Uprising' - which is set 10 years after the original - follows Jake Pentecost (John Boyega), the son of hero Stacker who sacrificed himself to save the world, who rises up to stand against the evolved alien race Kaiju alongside a rogue Jaeger to prevent humanity's extinction. Scott Eastwood - who stars in and say Raleigh is dead or Raleigh has retired, which seemed a little cheap. "We wanted to leave it open for the third installment of the movie in case we can get Charlie Hunnam back. "The only reason Charlie isn't in the movie is scheduling problems, he had his dream project, a remake of 'Papillon', that as we had finished the script with him in it, it was announced he was doing 'Papillon', his passion project and unfortunately the dates were exactly the same as ours, right in the middle of when we would shoot "So very sadly he couldn't be a part of this one, but hopefully in a future installment he will be." The first film followed mankind's attempts to stop monstrous creatures known as Kaiju - who entered from breaches

Swedish House Mafia reunited on stage for the first time in five years at Miami's Ultra Music Festival last night. The EDM stars - Axwell, Sebastian Ingrosso and Steve Angello - poignantly last performed as a trio at the same event in March 2013. Emerging from the dark stage, they said: "I am Axwell, I am Sebastian Ingrosso, and I am Steve Angello. "And Miami, tonight we go by Swedish House Mafia." The trio performed their breakthrough song 'Miami 2 Ibiza' which usually features Timie Tempah among hits including 'Greyhound' and 'Save The World'. Asked why they decided now was the right time to get back together, they simply said: "It was time..." Since they parted ways, Axwell and Ingrosso have performed under the name Axwell Ingrosso. The pair released their debut album 'More Than



You Know ' in December 2017, and revealed they hope to remain current. Ingrosso said: "We love to experiment and it's important as they also revealed at the time that they are looking at cutting back their shows in Ibiza and are keen to come back to the UK as much as possible. Axwell said: "We have played Ibiza for so many years, so we are only doing a couple of shows here now but making them as crazy as possible. Whether or not they plan on releasing new music as a trio is still unknown. Asked about reunion plans in 2016, Axwell said: "I think we're all in our happy places right now. Having said that it would be stupid of me to say never [to a reunion]. "Maybe one day something will happen inside of us that says 'boom'. But it's more [likely to be] coming from us than at a festival."

Jack White:
Hip-hop is the
new punk rock

Jack White says hip-hop stars have more of a "dangerous edge" than rock stars nowadays. The former White Stripes star has been vocal about how he feels current rock 'n' roll lacks a "wildness", and now he's admitted he is a bigger fan of hip-hop than rock because it's punk's next best thing. He said: "Rappers have the dangerous edge of music now - what I would consider the closest thing to that stuff you might not want your parents to know you're listening to." The 'Seven Nation Army' hitmaker recruited musicians that have worked with the genres big shots, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar, on his new solo LP 'Boarding House Reach'. The 43-year-old musician admits that critics would have preferred him to release new music like White Stripes' 2002 album 'Elephant' though. In an interview with the Orlando Sentinel, Jack admitted: "I hear a lot of talk about people listening to this album, saying, 'You don't even actually hear a song till you get to 'Over and Over and Over'. "What they're really saying is, 'I'm not hearing a song that I want from Jack White until 'Over and Over and Over'. They want me to write songs like I did on 'Elephant' [White Stripes' 2002 LP]". Jack used YouTube videos to search for players and asked his team to find them. He said: "I'd literally point and say, 'Can we find out who this guy is?'" The 'High Ball Stepper' singer says when it comes to being in charge in the studio, he was most like Captain Picard from 'Star Trek: The Next Generation' letting the musicians have an input. He said: "Star Trek: The Next Generation. "It wasn't like the old 'Star Trek', where there was this hero, Capt. Kirk, who told everybody what to do. "Capt. Picard said, 'Someone give me options.' "That's the way to be the captain of a ship."

Morrison supporting
Michael Buble at BST Hyde Park

Van Morrison will support Michael Buble at British Summer Time Hyde Park. The 'Brown Eyed Girl' hitmaker is set to open for the 'Haven't Met You Yet' singer at the London landmark on July 13, where Michael will perform for the first time since December 2017. Also performing on the same stage are iconic female pop vocal group Bananarama, indie rockers The Feeling and country music's rising duo The Shires. Siobhan Fahey of 'Shy Boy' group Bananarama commented: "British Summer Time Hyde Park has become such an important part of the year. "To be included in this year's line-up alongside so many wonderful acts is just joyous." Michael, 42, put his music career on hold when his four-year-old son, Noah, was diagnosed with cancer in 2016, and now the youngster is recovering the 'Home' singer is gearing up for his comeback. The Senior Vice President of AEG Presents, James King, said: "I am thrilled to be able to welcome Michael Buble to the Great Oak stage next year. July 13 is going to an amazing

night for his fans." The Head of Events, Filming and Commercial Development at The Royal Parks, Alun Mainwaring, added: "We are very excited to welcome Michael Buble to Hyde Park in what promises to be another unforgettable evening from a world class act. Since it began, Barclaycard presents British Summer Time Hyde Park has been attracting the biggest artists on the planet and delighting sell-out crowds - which in turn has helped us to maintain this precious park." And though Michael's performance at the music extravaganza will be his "only show in the UK", it will no doubt be a show "to remember". Roscoe Bowman, VP Senior Experiential Marketing and Partnerships Manager for Barclaycard, said: "We're really excited to announce Michael Buble as our third headliner at Barclaycard presents British Summer Time Hyde Park 2018. With his charismatic stage presence and catalogue of hits, his only show in the UK next year will surely be one to remember." Tickets are on sale now.

BOYEGA ALWAYS
WANTED TO BE IN SCI-FI

John Boyega always wanted to be part of the sci-fi genre. The 26-year-old actor landed the role of Stormtrooper-turned-Resistance fighter Finn in the newest 'Star Wars' trilogy and is currently starring in the sequel to 'Pacific Rim'. Before landing his breakout role in 'Star Wars', Boyega became a household name in the British sci-fi movie 'Attack the Block', and he always knew he wanted to be part of the genre. He told Fanfest.com: "I've always wanted to be part of the sci-fi genre. And also at the same time, I just thought that if I wanted to be in a film, that I always enjoy it, and be a part of it in a very unique way which means playing a character important to the story and at the forefront of these stories as well. "But honestly, not specifically to 'Star Wars' or 'Pacific Rim', I just wanted to be involved in sci-fi." Boyega is set to start filming the ninth instalment of the current Skywalker saga in July and admitted he felt more pressure starring in 2017's 'The Last Jedi' compared to his first outing as Finn in 2015's 'The Force Awakens'. He said: "I think definitely you feel the pressure when it comes to any role. "With 'The Force Awakens', we had so much time auditioning that the role was already built up so that by the time I got to the fourth or fifth audition I felt like I knew who Finn was and I felt like I knew how I was gonna perform exactly. "By the time you go into principal photography, you know exactly where the character is gonna go and so being heavily involved, especially with JJ. (Abrams) bringing us in, and being able to discuss and rehearse... it makes for an easier transition going obviously from myself as I am, into a character like Finn." Boyega will be reprising his role alongside Daisy Ridley as Rey, Adam Driver as Kylo Ren and Domhnall Gleeson as General Hux.

Hamill reveals change
to iconic Star Wars scene

Mark Hamill revealed an iconic 'Star Wars' scene had to be reshoot following a character name change. Most fans of the popular sci-fi franchise will know that Hamill's Jedi Master character Luke Skywalker was originally supposed to have the surname Starkiller. And Hamill has revealed in the first original movie 'A New Hope' the scene where Luke and Han Solo (Harrison Ford) rescue Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) had to be shot again. The 66-year-old actor wrote on Twitter: "FUN FACT - the name change to Skywalker came late enough in production that we had to re-shoot the scene where I liberated the Princess from her cell. "We had already shot it using the original line: 'I'm Luke Starkiller. I'm here to rescue you!'" The original 'Star Wars' legend have all reprised their iconic roles in the current trilogy and in two installments so far, both Han and Luke have died. However, Fisher tragically passed away in December 2016 after shooting her final scenes for the eighth instalment 'The Last Jedi' and director Rian Johnson decided not to include her death in his movie, leaving JJ. Abrams to complete Fisher's 'Star Wars' saga. Hamill - who was close friends with the actress - recently admitted that he cannot watch the final



scene between on-screen siblings Luke and Leia and said Fisher will be "forever missed". In an interview with Entertainment Tonight, Hamill said: "I can't watch that scene. "It's just, you know, takes me out of the movie completely. I'll get over it, but she'll be forever missed and she's irreplaceable." Although his character died during the events of 'The Last Jedi', Hamill admitted he would love to be back in the upcoming ninth movie but wants to see his Force Ghost used in a different way. He told RadioTimes.com: "Well I thought, if he's a Force Ghost I'd love to see him used in a way that hasn't been done before. "I mean let's use the word ghost! That implies that it's frightening." Although Hamill hasn't heard whether he will be returning in Abrams' ninth instalment of the franchise, he knows there is a "certain sense of closure" for him. He said: "We haven't really discussed it, so it's all in JJ's hands. "But you know, there's a certain sense of closure for me. JJ. gave me one of the most spectacular entrances, certainly of my career, maybe in all of film history. "I don't know if anybody's been talked about for two hours and then shows up for 30 seconds before the end credits roll. "And what a spectacular exit Rian gave me!"

LEPPARD HEAP PRAISE
ON FELLOW NORTHERNERS
ARCTIC MONKEYS

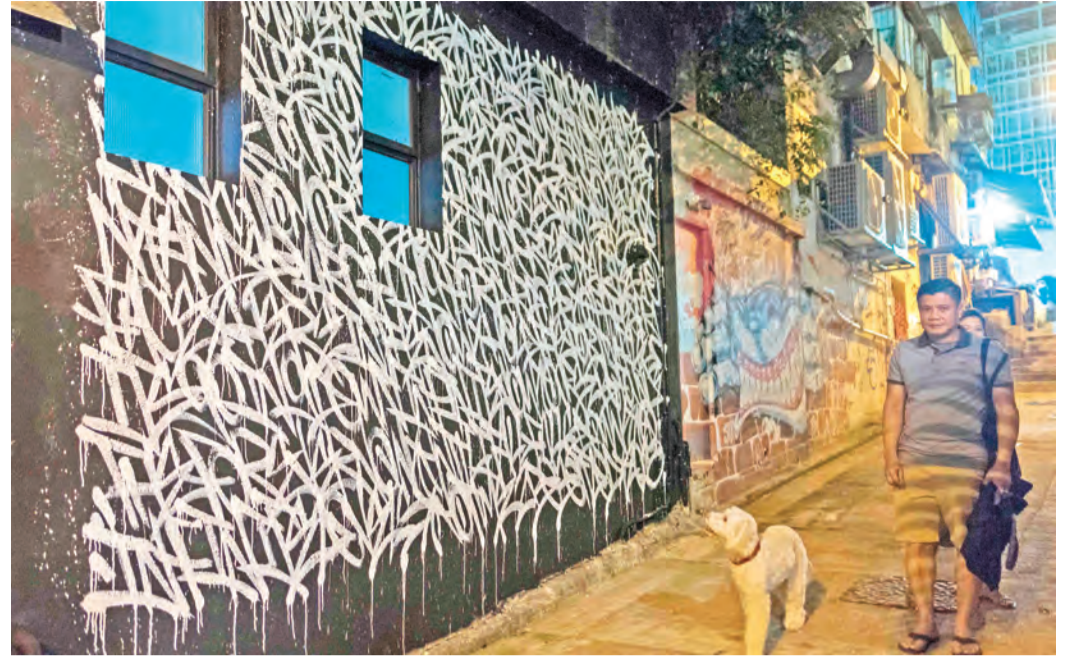
Def Leppard are proud of fellow Sheffield band Arctic Monkeys. The 'Pour Some Sugar On Me' hitmakers' singer Joe Elliott admires the indie band's frontman Alex Turner for staying true to his roots and singing in his northern accent, something he's always avoided as he wanted to sound more like The Rolling Stones' Sir Mick Jagger. Joe told the Daily Star newspaper: "We've got a work ethic up north. "When the first album came out I thought it was brilliant because Alex was probably the first singer who came from Sheffield that actually sounded like he came from there. "I didn't I wanted to be completely transatlantic like [Sir] Mick Jagger. "Alex embraced it, like the Manics did 10 years before. "I thought songs like 'Mardy Bum' were brilliant. "He's multi-talented, he's a bit like Damon from Blur, who can then go on and do stuff with that cartoon band Gorillaz." Meanwhile, Joe - who performed a Teenage Cancer Trust Gig with his bandmates at London's Royal Albert Hall on Sunday night - has revealed the late music icon David Bowie gave them his seal of approval of their cover of 1973's 'Drive-in Saturday'. He recalled: "Bowie emailed a friend and said, 'Tell Joe it's one of the best covers I've ever heard of one of my songs.' "I didn't believe them, but they forwarded the email." The 'Love Bites' rockers - also comprised of Vivian Campbell, Rick Allen and Rick Savage - will play their first UK and Ireland tour since 2015 in December. The run will see them playing their 1987 LP 'Hysteria' in full after demand from fans. Savage said: "After many requests from fans in the UK, I'm delighted that we can bring the whole 'Hysteria' album to arenas across Britain and Ireland later this year. From 'Women' to 'Love and Affection' plus many other faves thrown in for good measure. "Oh, and our old pals Cheap Trick will be there also to help with the celebrations!! We can't wait." The run kicks off in Dublin on December 1, and ends in Birmingham on December 17.



Lifestyle | Features



In this picture, local artist Zoei Lam paints a mural onto a wall.



In this picture, a man walks past a mural by US artist Bisco Smith.

Street art makes a splash in Hong Kong



In this picture, Australian artist Anthony Lister poses in front of his mural on a wall.



In this picture, the hand of local artist Neil Wang, bottom left, is seen as he paints a mural onto a wall.



In this picture, British artist Dan Kitchener spray paints a mural onto the outside wall of a bar.

From murals made famous by Instagram to painting battles, Hong Kong's once largely underground street art scene has exploded in recent years, and is now blossoming across the city's walls and alleyways. The commercial high end of the art world is at the fore in March, with galleries, collectors and celebrities descending on Hong Kong for the annual Art Basel fair.

But English mural artist Dan Kitchener, drawn to the city's unique geography and energy, made his third visit to Hong Kong this month to depict atmospheric urban scenes with spray paint in its narrow and steep streets. "Hong Kong's got that feel to me—the epic scale and the skyscrapers, and then it's got these little tiny alleyways," Kitchener said while balancing on bamboo scaffolding as he painted on the

outside wall of a city bar. Trained for many years in water color and acrylic painting, 43-year-old Kitchener is particularly fond of portraying neon lights, reflections and rain sights that first captivated him in Tokyo. He had just finished a detailed mural of a street market in the bustling Wan Chai district, before moving on to paint outside a watering hole in downtown Central. Just opposite the bar is a mural

by graffiti artist Alex Croft said to be the city's most photographed wall, featuring rows of old townhouses on a bright blue background. Hong Kong lacks a world-class art museum and marquee exhibitions rarely make a stop in the southern Chinese city, where it can be difficult to secure permission for public shows. But street art has enjoyed a boost from growing demand in Asia and an increasing number

of exhibitions in recent years, giving it a higher profile and more commercial spin in the city. In 2015 a mosaic of 1970s American cartoon character Hong Kong Phooey by French artist Invader sold at auction in Hong Kong for HK\$2 million. The popular piece of street art had been destroyed by the city's authorities, infuriating residents, and was later recreated for sale. —AFP



In this picture, Chinese artist SIK spray paints a mural in an alley in the Sai Ying Pun district of Hong Kong. — AFP photos



In this picture, a pedestrian runs past a mural spray painted by British artist Dan Kitchener.

Pyongyang Style? Seoul 'push' for Psy to play in N Korea

Seoul is pushing for "Gangnam Style" star Psy to perform in next week's historic concerts by South Korean artists in the North's capital, multiple reports said. A team of at least nine South Korean pop acts are set to visit North Korea next week for two concerts in Pyongyang, the first of their kind for more than a decade. The shows-part of reconciliatory moves ahead of a planned inter-Korean summit in April—feature many top stars including K-pop girlband Red Velvet. But Seoul is also seeking to include Psy in the lineup, South Korean media reports said, citing sources in the government and the K-pop industry. The 40-year-old rapper/singer became an international sensation in 2012 when his wacky but catchy "Gangnam Style" music video went viral on Youtube, pushing him into global stardom. The song satirized the lifestyle of the wealthy denizens of Gangnam in Seoul, the South's richest district, and the video has been viewed more than 3 billion times, spawning a host of imitations. "We have formally proposed to the North to add Psy to the lineup," Seoul's MBC TV station late Sunday quoted a Seoul government official as saying. But Pyongyang opposed the idea, it said, adding the conservative North was apparently concerned about the singer's provocative performance style. Psy has in the past stripped topless on stage in the South and his lyrics include Korean swearwords, while spectators at shows by the North's popular Moranbong band remain firmly seated throughout. The K-pop gigs are part of a cross-border deal made earlier this month when Seoul envoys met North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to pave the way for dialogue after months of tensions on the flashpoint peninsula. Kim offered to meet South Korean President Moon Jae-in before having a face-to-face



summit with US President Donald Trump, the envoys said, and Trump agreed to the rendezvous. North Korea has not officially confirmed or denied the proposed summits. The South's TV dramas and pop songs have taken Asia by storm and despite not being broadcast in the isolated North are known to enjoy growing popularity thanks to flash drives smuggled across the border with China. The authoritarian nation harshly punishes those who possess or view outside cultural material unsanctioned by the state, with offenders facing potential jail terms. —AFP

KANYE WEST'S MUSE ABLOH TAKES OVER LOUIS VUITTON MENSWEAR

American designer and celebrity DJ Virgil Abloh is to take over menswear at Louis Vuitton, the brand said yesterday, in a dramatic shake-up at the top of men's fashion. The appointment of rap star Kanye West's longtime friend and creative director to the world's biggest luxury label shows the massive impact street style is now having on fashion. Abloh, 37, an engineering and architecture graduate, has won plaudits for his Off-White label, with fans regularly queuing to get their hands on his latest designs. He posted a picture of a vintage Louis Vuitton travel chest to his 1.6 million Instagram followers to announce the move. He had earlier teased them with a post of a white T-shirt with the letters "SHM", which stood for "something huge Monday". Abloh is the second black man to head one of the big Paris fashion houses, with French designer Olivier Rousteing responsible for both Balmain's men and women's lines. They follow in the footsteps of British creator Oswald Boateng, who led Givenchy menswear from 2003 to 2007.

Black pioneer

"It is an honor for me to accept the position of men's artistic director for Louis Vuitton," Abloh said in a statement released by the brand, the largest in the luxury giant LVMH's stable. He later referred to his color, telling the New York Times that his appointment will "show a younger generation that there is no one way anyone in this kind of position has to look." Abloh takes over from British designer Kim Jones—who left to take over Dior Homme last week—and will stage his first Vuitton show during Paris men's fashion week in June, the label said. He looks set to continue Jones' high-profile hook-ups with street style labels, with Jones famously teaming up with New York street brand Supreme. Abloh—who has an address book full of celebrity friends that goes from the Kardashian clan to the art world—is responsible for some of the most sought-after trainers of the moment. "The Ten" trainers his Off-White label



In this file photo US fashion designer Virgil Abloh acknowledges applause following the presentation of the men's Fall/Winter 2018/2019 collection he designed for Off White in Paris. — AFP

designed for Nike have reportedly sold for as much as \$2,000 a pair, with his Air Jordan 1s on sale for up to 950 euros on eBay.

Purveyor of cool

Described by Vogue magazine as "one of fashion's consummate purveyors of cool and hype", and "a master of irony, reference and the self-aware wink" by the New York Times, he has not been afraid to court controversy. Last year he teamed up with the famed American artist Jenny Holzer for a show in Italy that shone a light on the migrant crisis there. Raised in the US state of Illinois by Ghanaian parents, his mother was a seamstress who taught him her trade before he went on to study civil engineering and later architecture. He began his fashion career alongside his friend Kanye West as a 500 euro-a-month intern at Italian label Fendi, setting up his own

label in 2012. The following year West made him his creative partner. He designed West's merchandise as well as his own lines which found a lucrative sweet spot between street wear and high Paris fashion. Known mostly for its bold diagonal stripes, Off-White has moved from loudly branded hoodies and T-shirts into a far more sophisticated silhouette. Clever collaborations with big brands have also brought it into the spotlight. Abloh's latest with furniture maker Ikea is rumored to include bags and mats with the legend, "Keep Off!" "I feel elated," the designer told the New York Times of his new role with Louis Vuitton, saying he would move his family to the French capital. "This opportunity to think through what the next chapter of design and luxury will mean at a brand that represents the pinnacle of luxury was always a goal in my wildest dreams." — AFP

Lifestyle | Awards



Nick Cannon, center left, Mariah Carey, center right, and from left, their children Moroccan and Monroe arrive at the Kids' Choice Awards at The Forum in Inglewood, California. — AP/AFP photos



Skai Jackson



Candace Cameron-Bure



Patrick Schwarzenegger

CELEBRITIES AT KIDS' CHOICE AWARDS PRAISE YOUTH MARCHES



Jace Norman accepts the award for favorite TV actor for "Henry Danger."



Lizzy Greene



Jayden Bartels

The power of the youth rallies against gun violence that were held across the US this weekend impressed many of the celebrities who turned out at the Kids' Choice Awards. Stars including former couple Mariah Carey and Nick Cannon voiced their support for the hundreds of thousands of teenagers and their supporters who spent Saturday marching for gun control.

"We were with them in spirit," Carey said as she arrived that night to the annual event with ex-husband Cannon and their twins, Moroccan and Monroe. "Oh, it's so amazing. Absolutely! I want them to see that as well," Cannon said, pointing to his son perched on his shoulders. The Kids' Choice Awards in Los Angeles featured host John Cena and others getting doused with green slime, as is tradition, along with performances and awards.

Before the ceremony, stars praised the kids and teens who participated in the rallies in the kind of numbers seen during the Vietnam era. They were called to action by a new corps of leaders: student survivors of the high school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that left 17 people dead on Feb. 14. The demonstration in Los Angeles was the first protest for 15-year-old Jenna Ortega. The "Jane the Virgin" actress was deeply moved by the atmosphere.

"We are kids. We have so much ahead of us. We have these full lives to live that these other people have already lived," she said. "We have so much hope, so many dreams. So when situations like school shootings happen, they're killing those dreams along with them and our future activists and politicians." Ortega said the prevalence of mass shootings has made her scared to go to public places.

Place for love

"I'm only 15! It shouldn't be like that. And school is supposed to be a place for love, where you learn, where you grow, not die. And that's the saddest thing," she said. Disney Channel actress Skai Jackson spoke at the Los Angeles rally and said teenagers still have power, even if they aren't old enough to vote.

"We still have a voice, and that change needs to be done," she said. "And I know even my friends, they want to feel safe when they go to school, and they shouldn't be scared." Candace Bure, a Kids' Choice Awards nominee for "Fuller House," said she's proudly raised her daughter to be an activist.

"I think it's so important to teach our kids to speak up for what they believe in and use their voice and know that they are never too young to have an opinion, to have their



Shay Haley from left, Pharrell Williams, and Chad Hugo of N.E.R.D perform "Lemon."

voice heard, regardless of whether people agree or disagree with them, but they have to speak up," she said.

Patrick Schwarzenegger, star of romantic teen film "Midnight Sun," said he can't wait to see this young generation of activists become the leaders of tomorrow. "They're the future, and I think it's awesome how they've handled themselves and gone out and used the situation (that) unfortunately (happened) to create a change," said Schwarzenegger, son of actor and former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. — AP



Yara Shahidi, left, and Zendaya participate in a snowball fight onstage.



Liza Koshy gets slimed as she accepts the award for favorite funny YouTube creator.



General view of the stage



Heidi Klum, left, and Mel B get slimed as they present the award for favorite movie actress.



JoJo Siwa performs at the Kids' Choice Awards.



Camila Cabello accepts the Favourite Breakout Artist award.



Zendaya accepts the Favorite Movie Actress award for "Spider-Man: Homecoming" and "The Greatest Showman."



Channing Tatum gets snowballed onstage



Alabama Barker



Ricardo Hurtado



Kristen Bell



Caleb McLaughlin



Host John Cena speaks onstage



Millie Bobby Brown walks to stage

Lifestyle

TUESDAY, MARCH 27, 2018



Host John Cena gets slimed onstage at the 31st Annual Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards on March 24, 2018 at the Forum in Inglewood, California. — AFP

In 'city of shanasheel', Iraqi heritage crumbles from neglect

As a child, Adnan Khalaf used to marvel at the Iraqi city of Basra's "shanasheel", finely crafted bay windows complete with intricate wooden latticework and ornate stained glass. Today, the Iraqi retiree can only watch as the hallmarks of his hometown—"the city of shanasheel"—crumble out of neglect. Authorities in Basra, the capital of Iraq's richest oil province, are struggling to provide the bare minimum of services to its inhabitants, as nepotism and corruption divert lucrative revenues from the black gold. But the southern port city's "golden age" was not all that long ago. At 71, Khalaf remembers it well.

He can still name the city's wealthy old families—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—who lived behind elaborate shanasheel in traditional homes along canals of Basra's Old City. "But the city has been neglected, rubbish has been dumped into its waters," said Khalaf. "No one cares about it anymore." The latticework windows—also known as mashrabiya—date back to the 16th and 17th centuries, according to Abdelhaq al-Moudhaffar, head of the city's Palace of Culture and Arts. They spread to other cities in Iraq, including Baghdad, and across the Levant and to Egypt.

'Dismantling' heritage

When lights are turned on at night inside the traditional homes, inspired by a mix of Indian, Persian and Islamic influences, a patchwork of orange, green, red and blue light is cast from the

“
Today about
400 are left
more or
less intact
”

stained glass windows onto the streets below. All the houses in the Old City, built by the commercial bourgeoisie and local aristocracy, were once adorned with shanasheel. The wooden beams, coated with a natural wax to resist water and fire, made for strong homes.

Whenever King Faisal II, the last monarch of Iraq, visited Basra, he would stay with the governor on the river running through the city, now just a trickle of water where waste floats. But with the fall of the monarchy, Saddam Hussein's rise to power and Iraq's multiple wars, the situation in Basra has slowly but surely deteriorated. The 2003 US-led invasion was the coup de grace. "The original inhabitants have gone, others have arrived. I've seen some dismantle the pieces of wood from their houses to sell them," said Khalaf.

The newcomers have "changed the buildings, demolished them and rebuilt them with breeze blocks", said heritage specialist Hashem al-Azzam. "If there had been a mechanism for the renovations and financing, the shanasheel would still be in good condition," he said. Of all Basra's traditional buildings and shanasheel—which allow inhabitants to see outside without being seen—"today about 400 are left more or less intact", according to Qahtan al-Obeid, head of archaeology and heritage in Basra province.

Where there once stood a Jewish library, a women's steam room and the home of a Kuwaiti sheikh, locals say, all that remains are crumbling walls, wooden beams eaten away by termites and dangerously leaning shanasheel. Obeid said that decision-makers at the local and national levels were failing to prioritize "heritage preservation" in their budgets.

No budget for heritage

Like elsewhere in Iraq, power cuts in Basra are chronic. The Old City's walls, where engraved inscriptions still remain, are now covered by webs of electrical wires connected to generators at every corner. Air conditioners have been installed in holes dug into the weather-worn stone facades. Some buildings, however, have been restored and now house a handful of cultural institutions, such as the union of visual artists, or centers dedicated to heritage.

In another rare success story, the home of Basra's most famous poet, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, has also been saved with funding from local authorities. With the ravages of time, the house had turned into a ruin piled up with rubbish. "Today, all the architecture and wooden ornaments have been redone to the original design," said Obeid. He said the province's antiquities department had been "there to oversee and provide technical support, but not to fund the renovation because it doesn't have the funds". — AFP



An Iraqi man walks in the courtyard of an old building with traditional 'shanasheel', finely crafted bay windows complete with intricate wooden latticework and ornate stained glass which allow inhabitants to see outside without being seen, in the southern city of Basra. — AFP

Sierra Leone 'people's popstar' on life as govt enemy No.1

For a musician used to receiving personal insults from the president and anonymous death threats with the release of every new single, Emmerson Bockarie laughs a lot. The Sierra Leonean popstar, a thorn in the side of successive governments over his 15-year career, chuckles as he recalls the countless times politicians have sought to dampen his appeal, and the countless times they have failed. "Politicians make mentions of my music on TV and radio. That means they hear the songs and are getting the message," he notes with delight, settling down for an interview with AFP at his Freetown studio. Better known simply as "Emmerson", the Afrobeat singer is the bete noire of Sierra Leone's music scene, one of few successful artists who refuse to play political rallies or back a party in a nation where rappers and singers are co-opted for their youth appeal.

With a new president due to be elected on Tuesday, Bockarie says he expects fresh inspiration for his soft yet scathing lyrics—whoever wins—the ruling All Peoples' Congress (APC) faces off against the main opposition Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP). The two parties have ruled the country alternately since independence in 1961. "I stand with the people; I am with the country," he enthuses. "It makes no sense for me to belong to a political party."

'Consistent criticism'

Emmerson began making music in the local Krio language after Sierra Leone's civil war ended in 2002, when he had just left school. His first single "Yu Go See Am" ridiculed government officials stuffing their faces and skimming money off state funds while ordinary citizens went hungry. "The (then) president, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, was like: it's better for them to sing than to go back to the bush and be rebels," he explains, referring to the legions of child and youth soldiers. These days, he is heavily engaged in civic educa-

tion, collaborating with four other artists on the song "Mi vote na mi life" last year to encourage voters deeply split along tribal and regional lines to consider policies when making their choice. "Emmerson songs are about issues affecting ordinary people," explained Murtala Mohamed Kamara, publisher of entertainment publication the Salone Jamboree. "He has been consistent with his criticism and advocacy for change without bias to any government," he added.



Sierra Leonean popstar Emmerson posing at his studio in Freetown, Sierra Leone. — AFP

'No easy eh'

A typical Emmerson song will encompass mockery of politicians' greed and uselessness, tributes to Sierra Leone and its long-suffering people, and some element of hope for the future. His lyrics about poverty—"wi weh no born mit money/ less opportunity/ still wi wan be somebody/ e no easy eh"—reflect the frustrations of young people in a country with high unemployment and enduring social injustice. "I started listening to Emmerson's music in 2007, and I still love him for telling the truth," fan Ophaniel Gooding told AFP. But his riotously successful songs have made him some powerful enemies. "I know there are propaganda machines out there organised by the government to go against my music on social media," Emmerson says.—AFP