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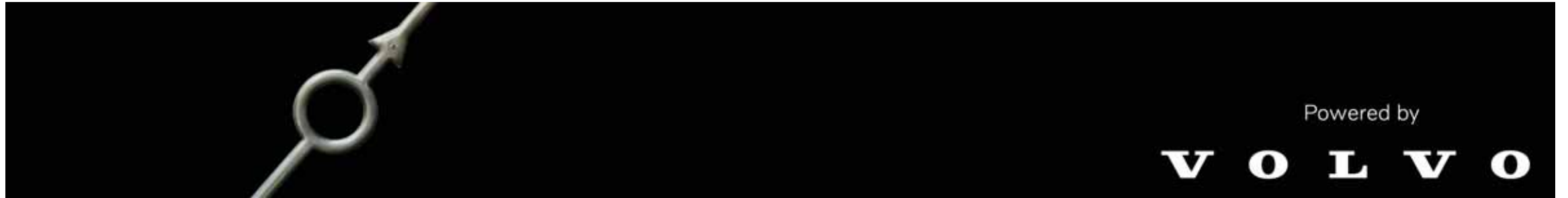
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US not pressuring Kuwait to normalize Israel ties: Envoy

Diplomat hails Kuwait's support to resolve Gulf rift, renew Iran arms embargo



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and acting Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker at the foreign ministry yesterday. — KUNA

By Shakir Reshamwala

KUWAIT: A US official yesterday denied his visit to Kuwait was part of moves by Washington to pressure Kuwait to follow in the footsteps of the United Arab Emirates and normalize ties with Israel. Speaking to reporters during a virtual press conference, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker said there are different views on the Israel-UAE peace agreement in the region, particularly in the Gulf.

"The UAE has deemed it is in their economic and strategic interests to have ties with Israel, which will benefit the state and the public. There will be states that share similar sentiments. This is nothing new - we have seen Israeli trade

offices in the Gulf, we have seen other types of relationships. Whether they are formalized or not, we will see other developments," he said.

Schenker added the US views normalization of ties between the UAE and Israel as something positive. "The UAE believes there will be increased trade, economic and security cooperation with Israel vis-a-vis Iran. It will benefit not only the UAE, but the entire region including Kuwait," he argued, on the eve of Israel's first commercial flight to the UAE, which will carry a US-Israeli delegation led on the American side by US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner.

Schenker however refused to comment on statements made by Kushner earlier

this month, when he said Kuwait was taking a "very radical" view on the Middle East conflict "in favor of Palestinians". Schenker also denied the recent flurry of diplomatic efforts is connected to the upcoming US presidential election.

On the Qatar-Gulf rift, Schenker said the schism has proved extraordinarily difficult to resolve and "undermines all our interests in the region". "It is a distraction from the threat posed by Iran in the region. We have been working at the State Department, the White House and even at the presidential level to resolve the crisis. It is a deep-seated difference that is ideological, there are differing viewpoints on domestic and foreign policy issues and the media and we are

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Qatar sets new minimum wage, lifts restrictions

DUBAI: Qatar announced yesterday changes to its labor laws, raising its minimum wage by 25 percent to 1,000 riyals (\$275) a month and scrapping a requirement for employees to get the permission of their employers to change jobs. It is the latest in a series of labor reforms by the 2022 FIFA World Cup host which in the lead up to the tournament has faced accusations that migrant workers are exploited.

The new minimum wage is non-discriminatory and applies to all workers, the labor ministry said in a statement. The new rules require all workers, including domestic staff, be paid at least 1,000 riyals for a month of full-time work. Companies must also provide workers with accommodation and food or an additional combined monthly stipend of 800 riyals, it said. Qatar also said yesterday that penalties for non-payment of wages had been increased.

The United Nations' labor agency welcomed the changes, calling them a "historic move". The International Labor Organization (ILO) said Qatar was to become the first country in the region to adopt a non-discriminatory minimum wage. "Qatar has delivered on a commitment. One that will give workers more freedom and protection, and employers more choice," said Guy Ryder, the ILO director general.

It also said, in addition to other reforms, removing the need for employees to obtain a No Objection Certificate from their employers to change jobs "effectively dismantles" the "kafala" system. The "kafala" sponsorship system is common in Gulf states, where visas for foreign workers are tied to their employer. Qatar last December scrapped restrictions on leaving the country for hundreds of thousands of domestic workers left out of earlier reforms. The changes announced yesterday will come into effect in six months, the labor ministry said.

Qatar has made a series of reforms to its employment regulations since being selected to host the 2022 World Cup which has required a vast program of construction dependent on foreign workers. "Qatar is the first country in the Middle East to have a minimum wage for all workers without discrimination, whether domestic workers or private sector workers," Qatar's assistant under-secretary for labor affairs, Mohammed Hassan Al-Obaidly, told AFP.

More than two million foreigners work in Qatar, many employed directly or indirectly on vast infrastructure projects for the World Cup. "The World Cup is a milestone in Qatar's long-term development strategy. In the interests of our country, we will continue to introduce new reforms that benefit the economy, businesses and the people who come to work here," Obaidly said. — Agencies

Bibi claims 'many more' secret talks with Arab leaders

JERUSALEM: Israel is in secret talks with several Arab states on establishing ties, premier Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday, ahead of the Jewish state's first commercial flight to the UAE following a normalization accord. "There are many more unpublicized meetings with Arab and Muslim leaders to normalize relations with the state of Israel," the prime minister said, without naming any countries.

A US-brokered agreement between the Jewish state and Dubai to normalize ties was announced on August 13, making the UAE the first Gulf country and only the third Arab nation to establish relations with Israel, after Egypt and Jordan. The first-ever commercial flight from Israel to the UAE will today morning carry a US-Israeli delegation led on the American side by White House advisor Jared

Kushner, who stood next to Netanyahu during the Israeli premier's remarks yesterday.

"Today's breakthrough will become tomorrow's norms," Netanyahu said. "It will pave the way for other countries to normalise their ties with Israel." Netanyahu's office said last week that National Security Advisor Meir Ben Shabbat will lead the Israeli delegation. The talks in Abu Dhabi will seek ways to boost cooperation in areas including aviation, tourism, trade, health, energy and security, Netanyahu's office said.

Since the agreement between the UAE and Israel was unveiled, there have been frequent bilateral phone calls between ministers and the signing of commercial contracts. On Saturday, the Emirates repealed a 1972 law boycotting Israel. "It will be permissible to enter, exchange or possess Israeli goods and products of all kinds in the UAE and trade in them," read a federal decree issued by UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last week undertook a regional tour, which took him to Sudan, Bahrain and Oman, in the hope of convincing other

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JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu holds his mask after making joint statements to the press with US Presidential Adviser Jared Kushner yesterday. — AFP

Record rise in India virus cases

NEW DELHI: Global coronavirus infections soared past 25 million yesterday, as countries around the world further tightened restrictions to try to stop the rampaging pandemic. A million additional cases have been detected globally roughly every four days since mid-July, according to an AFP tally, with India yesterday setting the record for the highest single-day rise in cases with 78,761. Even nations such as New Zealand and South

Korea, which had previously brought their outbreaks largely under control, are now battling new clusters of infections.

The surge in India, home to 1.3 billion people, came as the government further eased lockdown restrictions on the weekend to help ease pressure on the reeling economy. India is already the world's third-most infected nation with more than 3.5 million cases, behind the US and Brazil. It has also reported more than 63,000 deaths, according to the official health ministry toll. The US set the previous record on July 17 with 77,638 daily infections, according to an AFP tally.

Experts warn that while a ramp up in testing in recent months was

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CHENNAI: A health worker takes a swab sample from a woman to test for COVID-19 at a testing camp yesterday. — AFP

Palestinians raze homes in Jerusalem

JERUSALEM: Palestinian Alaa Borqan preferred to tear down his own house in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem after a court ruled that it was constructed illegally and must be demolished. The 35-year-old was given two options: to destroy his four-bedroom home in the Jabal Mukaber neighborhood himself, or to let the city council do it and then send him

the bill. The Israeli authorities regularly raze homes built by Palestinians on their own lands in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank if they lack Israeli construction permits.

The catch, according to an UN study, is that such permits are "virtually impossible" to obtain and the result is a chronic housing shortage. "I applied to city hall for a building permit, but without success," Borqan told AFP. "I spent around 75,000 shekels (\$22,000, 18,700 euros) on legal fees and on a ground survey," he said. Ben Avrahami, an advisor to the city authorities on east Jerusalem, said that every case is handled strictly

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JERUSALEM: Relatives of the Palestinian Shalalda family watch as an excavator hired by them demolishes their family home in Al-Tur on July 2, 2020. — AFP

Local

Deputy Amir congratulates Kuwaiti inventor for awards

Female engineer wins for inventing wireless power transmission system

KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent yesterday a cable of congratulations to Engineer Jenan Al-Shehab for winning two awards and a gold medal at a global event organized by the Toronto International Society of Innovation and Advanced Skills (TISIAS). His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince praised Shehab for her well-deserved achievement, as well as her keenness to participate in the name of Kuwait in regional and international competitions. His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent a similar cable.



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti inventor Jenan Al-Shehab shows a picture of her invention on her laptop. — KUNA

Kuwaiti inventor Shehab has grabbed two awards and a gold medal at the Fifth International Invention Innovation Competition in Canada, iCAN 2020, according to the winners list issued on Saturday. Shehab was declared one of the winners of the Canadian Special Awards presented by TISIAS and also a winner of the Best Woman Inventors Awards of iCAN 2020. She was also qualified to the final and grand prizes stage in July after winning a gold medal at the preliminary contest.

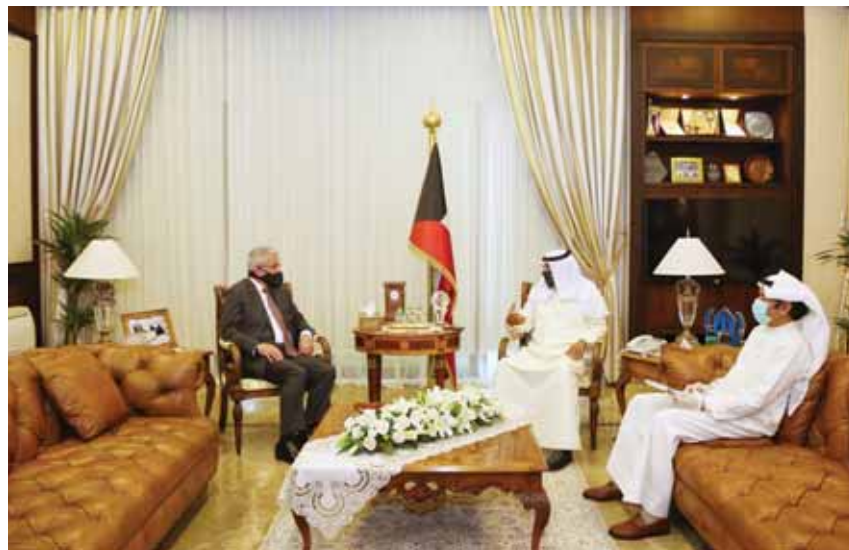
Shehab got the awards for inventing a wireless power transmission system, named Electrodis. "Electrodis helps transmit electricity wirelessly from a distance without the need for any physical connections as it converts electromagnetic waves into electricity that can be used in charging and activating electronic/electrical devices," she said in a statement to the press. She added that her invention is proven and patented to transmit wireless electricity from up to three meters. Over 600 inventors from 60 countries partook in the international competition which was held online.

Shehab won several international and local prizes including Kuwait's Youth Excellence and Creativity Award in 2018. Later, His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah honored her for grabbing the prestigious prize. In 2019, she bagged a gold medal at the Moscow International Inventions and Innovative Technology Salon 'Archimedes'. In June of the same year, she got the Special Recognition Award from Global Woman inventor and innovator network GWIN. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah at Dar Al-Yamama yesterday. — KUNA

Deputy FM meets Palestinian envoy



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah met Palestine's Ambassador to Kuwait Rami Tahboub yesterday to discuss bilateral relations along with regional and global developments. Assistant Foreign Minister for the Deputy Foreign Minister's Office Ayham Al-Omar attended the meeting. — KUNA

Interior Ministry praises personnel on end of curfew

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh and Interior Ministry Undersecretary Lt Gen Essam Al-Nahham toured a number of checkpoints Saturday night to check the mechanism of field operations, coordination amongst various security sectors, the execution of traffic plans and the deployment of security patrols as the curfew ended yesterday morning. During the tour, Saleh thanked ministry personnel for their dedication and achievements during the curfew periods in the past five months, noting that such achievements should be taken as the basis to achieve further successes and putting the instructions of His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah into practice.



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh (center) is seen during the tour.

Record rise in India virus...

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encouraging, more needed to be done to capture the scale of the pandemic in the world's second-most populous nation. India's home affairs ministry said gatherings of up to 100 people would be allowed with face masks and social distancing at cultural, entertainment, sports and political events from next month. Metro train services would also resume "in a graded manner" in major cities. Schools remain closed but students can meet teachers on a voluntary basis on school premises if needed, according to the new guidelines.

On the other side of the world, Latin America - the worst-hit region - is still struggling with its first wave, with COVID-19 deaths in Brazil crossing 120,000, second only to the United States. Brazil's curve "has stabilized now, but at a very dangerous level: nearly 1,000 deaths and 40,000 cases per day," said Christovam Barcellos, a researcher at public health institute Fiocruz. "And Brazil still isn't past the peak."

More than 843,000 people have died of COVID-19 globally, and with no vaccine or effective treatment available yet, governments have been forced to

resort to some form of social distancing and lockdowns to stop the spread of the virus. Masks will become mandatory from today on public transport and flights in New Zealand, which went more than 100 days without local transmission before the current cluster emerged.

And tightened virus curbs kicked in yesterday in South Korea, which is also battling fresh clusters - including in the greater Seoul region, home to half the country's population. In Iraq, thousands of Shiite pilgrims wearing gloves and masks flooded the holy city of Karbala to mark Ashura, in one of the largest Muslim gatherings since the pandemic began.

Typically, millions of Shiites from around the world flock to the shrine, but this year's commemoration was subdued with employees spraying disinfectant mist, checking temperatures and enforcing social distancing. "Honestly, this year is nothing like the millions-strong commemorations of other years," said Fadel Hakim, a blue medical mask cupping his chin. "It stands out because there are so few people."

Despite the grim numbers, there has been steady opposition to lockdowns and social distancing measures in many parts of the world, often because of their crushing economic cost. But resistance has also come from the extreme right and left of the political spectrum, as well as conspiracy theorists and anti-vaccine campaigners. — AFP

tion to extend the conventional arms embargo on Iran. "We are disappointed Russia and China stopped the proposal from moving forward. If this arms embargo is not renewed, Iran will be in a position to proliferate weapons more easily, such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq. In any event, I would like to thank the government of Kuwait for supporting us," he said.

Schenker earlier met Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah at the foreign ministry. The two officials discussed the "historic and solid" relationship between Kuwait and the US and latest regional and international developments, the foreign ministry said in a statement. Schenker also met National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem and the American Chamber of Commerce to discuss Gulf unity, regional security and economic cooperation.

From Kuwait, Schenker heads to Qatar and Lebanon. Last week, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Bahrain, Israel, Oman, Sudan and the UAE during a regional tour.

Palestinians raze homes...

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according to the law. "The demolitions are being carried out by order of an Israeli court and are subject to careful legal scrutiny," he said.

Borqan, a father of four, however said he was dismayed after he hired a bulldozer that tore down his own house in front of his eyes. He said he had invested all his savings in the building, taking on a debt of 800,000 shekels and putting in four years of work. The court, which ruled the structure illegal because it was built without a permit, fined him 60,000 shekels for the offence. He now lives with his family in a house that he rents for 2,800 shekels a month. Standing in the rubble of his former house, he recounted "how difficult it is to demolish (a home) with one's own hands".

According to city hall, 44 houses have been demolished in east Jerusalem since the start of this year. Some owners prefer to raze their homes themselves to avoid having to pay sometimes thousands of shekels to the city's demolition crews. Under Israeli occupation since the 1967 Six-Day War, east Jerusalem is home to around 300,000 Palestinians and 200,000 Jewish settlers.

Palestinians charge that the true purpose of the permit regime is to empty the city of its Palestinian inhabitants. The UN's Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted in an April 2019 report that in east Jerusalem "a restrictive planning regime applied by Israel makes it virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain building permits". "At least one-third of all Palestinian homes in east Jerusalem

lack an Israeli-issued building permit, potentially placing over 100,000 residents at risk of displacement," it added.

OCHA says that only 13 percent of east Jerusalem is designated for Palestinian construction, much of which is already built up, while 35 percent has been allocated to Israeli settlements, which are illegal under international law. According to the director of the Jerusalem Centre for Economic and Social Rights, Ziad Hammuri, the self-demolitions are "humiliating" and "have considerable psychological effects" on families, in addition to heavy financial costs. But many Palestinians still prefer to demolish their property themselves, fearing arrest if they are unable to pay the city's demolition bill or fines.

On July 2, the Shalalda family also demolished their home, a two-bedroom apartment in A-Tur. It is "very difficult, a dream has been destroyed," lamented Sara Shalalda, a mother of six. "We were about to move in, we didn't want to have to pay rent anymore." According to OCHA, 65 children were displaced and 85 others variously affected by self-demolitions in east Jerusalem in the first six months of the year.

Palestinians lack 30,000 to 40,000 housing units, rents are high, and building permits are expensive, said Mahmud Zahaykeh of the Jerusalem Housing Union. "The average rent is \$800 and a building permit for an apartment can cost \$50,000," he added. "Only 20 percent of residents obtain permits, and the process can take five years." Avrahami says the city grants around 250 building permits to Palestinians each year. Borqan had hoped to be among the lucky ones but his hopes were dashed. "They don't want us to stay," he said, referring to Israel. "But we are not going to move." — AFP

US not pressuring Kuwait to...

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working hard to find a solution, but it has proven elusive," he said.

"The rift has only compounded current challenges in the region, and is openly putting money in the pocket of Iran, which is collecting overflight fees from the region," Schenker warned, commending HHH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the leadership of Kuwait for working tirelessly to reach a solution to the crisis.

On the US push to maintain an arms embargo and restore broader UN sanctions on Iran, Schenker appreciated the support of Kuwait and Gulf partners at the UN Security Council. The US suffered a defeat at the Security Council earlier this month when it failed to muster support for a resolu-

continue to push to make this region achieve the potential that it really has."

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, who also met with Kushner yesterday, called on "other Arab and Muslim states to follow this path of friendship and to establish full and warm relations with the State of Israel - peace between nations and peoples, peace for peace". As part of the normalisation agreement announced by US President Donald Trump, Israel agreed to suspend planned annexations in the occupied West Bank, although Netanyahu quickly insisted the plans remained on the table in the long-run. — AFP

Bibi claims 'many more' secret talks...

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countries in the region to follow the Emiratis. "While this peace agreement was thought to be impossible, the stage is now set for more," Kushner said of the Israel-UAE accord yesterday. "What I felt over the last couple of weeks is a new sense of optimism, and we must seize that optimism and we must

Local

Disabled children's parents in Kuwait unhappy with school's suspension

Studies for disabled students stopped until further notice due to COVID-19

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Education's private and qualitative education sector issued a circular on August 23, 2020 suspending studies for disabled students until further notice. The decision, due to the coronavirus pandemic and MoE's decision to allow remote learning for all other students in public and private schools, will prevent the completion of studies for those yet to finish the 2019/2020 academic year and bans the start of the new school year online.

Many parents of disabled and differently-abled children in Kuwait are outraged and unhappy with the complete suspension of their children's education. There are 52,641 disabled persons registered with the government, including thousands of school-age children, though not all attend school full-time.

"This is a random decision that came without studies. It has a very negative effect on our children. The ministry didn't take our opinion nor did they conduct a survey. The director of the school where my daughter studies said the ministry didn't inform them of any plan for the next academic year. She told me that the school is ready for any decision - whether it is to study at school or e-learning," Naseema Al-Matrouk, a parent, told Kuwait Times.

Some students that study in programs for disabled or differently-abled children were able to complete the 2019/2020 academic year via remote learning. "My daughter graduated the 2019/2020 academic year in July after studying online. Her school - Dasman - provided an online option for students, but not all parents agreed to e-learning and preferred to wait for the in-class option to complete the school year. These students can't continue now due to the new decision. Also, my daughter won't be able to start the new year," she added.

Continuous learning

The interruption of learning for long periods will have a negative effect on disabled children. "My daughter is a Down syndrome child, and she has to continuously learn, otherwise she will forget what she [previously] learned. When she was studying online, she was keen to perform all instructions of the teacher and never complained. We, as parents of disabled kids, are considering a petition to present to the minister of education," Matrouk said.

Um Mohammed is also a mother of a disabled child with Down syndrome. "I am very disappointed with this decision, especially since my son is one of the best students in his class and always excels in his studies. He is also a champion in swimming. Unfortunately, his school did not provide e-learning for the last semester although other schools for dis-

abled students did so. Fortunately Al-Tomooch Kuwaiti Sports Club contacted us during this period and provided online activities daily through Zoom including yoga, zumba and lectures and competitions about Kuwait, COVID-19 and others. Over 50 students participated and they enjoyed it very much," she noted.

Many schools had planned to resume in-classroom learning with the appropriate social distancing and health requirements in place. Schools for differently-abled children are also ready for the new school year.

"Hope School informed us earlier this month that the academic year will start this week, and showed parents their preparations, including sanitizing classrooms and having only four students per classroom. The school also took our signatures to let our children study at the school under our responsibility, and we agreed. But suddenly the ministry of education decided to cancel all forms of learning," Um Mohammed said.

This situation is tough for disabled students. "It's hard to control my son now. He is shouting most of the time. He misses social life, and is now isolated and sits in his room. This long interruption from school has negatively affected my son and as a disabled child, he may forget all the information he learned, as disabled people need to have the information repeated all the time," she explained.

Virtual activities

The Kuwait Society of the Parents of the Disabled has been providing virtual activities for disabled children since the beginning of April. "Keeping disabled children at home all the time negatively affects their mental health, and may increase the level of their disability," warns Mustafa Hasouna, trainer at the society, and head of sports and training at Kuwait Special Olympics.

"I think the ministry's decision was abrupt and did not take into consideration the opinions and expertise of people in the field. If they are protecting disabled students from getting infected in school, their family members are also in contact with many other people outside the house," Hasouna argued.

According to him, making disabled students stay at home for months will change their behavior. "With learning and training, a disabled child adapts to the community, but now all these students may relapse and some may even be afraid to go out of the house. They have to be systematically active and continuously learn. For instance, if I changed one part of the training that he is used to without telling him, he will still repeat the old segment. Most of our neighboring countries have set a schedule for the new academic year for the disabled, and here the ministry canceled the year instead," Hasouna rued.

1.5 million expats hold high school or lesser certificates

KUWAIT: Official statistics show that 83 percent of expat workers have high school or lesser certificates, as their numbers reach around 1.5 million, Al-Qabas daily reported yesterday. Workers with intermediate certificates are around 900,000 while 114,000 have elementary certificates and 5,000 can only read and write. Stats showed university graduates number 212,000, while 12,000 have postgraduate degrees. The number of graduates is increasing, by 102,000 in 2016, 58,000 in 2017, 54,900 in 2018 and 14,700 in 2019. That means 2019 had the least increase of expat labor in the marketplace.

The Public Authority for Manpower recently issued administrative resolution number 520/2020, banning the issuance of work permits for expats aged 60 or higher and without university degrees starting from January 1, 2021. The decision was introduced as part of what the government describes as its efforts to curb Kuwait's demographic imbalance.

Quotas for nationalities

"The human resources committee seeks to set quotas for nationalities by law to remedy the population imbalance and limit the influx of expats in the marketplace," Al-Qabas reported, quoting sources. "However, the government along with the technical office of the committee support leaving setting percentages to concerned authorities which will set the ratios in a way that will not harm the function of public facilities and labor needs in the public and private sectors, reducing the number of

expats and replacing them with Kuwaitis."

The technical office said it is better to decide expat percentages in a way that does not exceed the number of citizens or half of them, and not to have a relative weight for each nationality in order to have flexibility in implementation. The quota determination should be made after studies to find Kuwait's actual needs of services and experiences, the sources argued.

Cash allowances

In other news, the Civil Service Commission (CSC) has rejected a Health Ministry request to pay cash allowances to its employees to make up for the annual leaves they have not taken due to the current health circumstances, justifying the rejection on legislative restrictions. Informed sources in the CSC told Al-Rai daily that compensating government employees for the annual leaves they did not take this year because of COVID-19 requires amending the civil service law, and stressed that CSC "will surely reject" other state departments' similar demands because the bodies know CSC's response in advance. "These departments must not 'throw the ball' in CSC's court and make it appear as if it is against incentives for public servants," the source said.

Camping season

Separately, Kuwait Municipality is currently awaiting health authorities' decisions on the possibility of allowing citizens to set up their own spring camps and the timing of the season, which usually starts November 15. However, all indications point out to the cancellation of this year's spring camping season due to COVID-19. In this regard, informed sources told Al-Rai that opening the receipt of applications to issue spring camp licenses this year is up to the health ministry to decide, and stressed that the Municipality will use all its potentials to overcome obstacles and facilitate camping procedures upon the health ministry's approval.

MPs released, deny involvement in trafficking case

KUWAIT: The public prosecution on Saturday released MPs Saadoun Hammad and Salah Khorsheed on KD 10,000 bail each after interrogating them in the human trafficking case in which a detained Bangladeshi lawmaker is accused. Al-Rai reported yesterday. Both MPs denied abusing their powers, as claimed by the Bangladeshi defendant, and strongly denied knowing him or having any connection with him. They added that his accusations are groundless allegations he uses to muddy the case. Meanwhile, informed sources in the investigation department said the department ordered summoning the Bangladeshi MP's brother after receiving new information that he was an associate of the main defendant, his wife and others in human trafficking operations involving thousands of their compatriots desiring to travel to Kuwait.

Recruitment agency

According to the Bangladeshi Daily Star newspaper, sending the victims to Kuwait was conducted through a recruitment agency known as 'Job Bank International' and a travel agency owned and run by the Bangladeshi MP's brother, who was known in the business as 'Leton Chowdhry' and used to charge every person they sent to Kuwait the equivalent of KD 1,800-2,500 in Bangladeshi takas.

Investigations also showed that the brother used to collect the sums and deposit them in several bank

accounts belonging to him and his brother. The sources added that Bangladeshi detectives had arrested the recruitment agency's chief accountant on Aug 20 and that he provided detectives with valuable information.

In this regard, the Bangladeshi investigation department's deputy manager Imtiaz Ahmed told the Daily Star that "We managed to get valuable information and names of new suspects involved in smuggling people to Kuwait and we are currently analyzing the information to verify whether the suspects are actually involved." Meanwhile, high-ranking sources at the investigations department, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told the Daily Star that a search is on for the Bangladeshi MP's brother.

Fatal accidents

In other news, three Kuwaitis died from burn injuries and a fourth was hurt in a two-vehicle collision along Abdali farms road, Al-Rai reported quoting security sources. The three bodies were recovered by forensics while the injured person was rushed to Jahra Hospital for treatment, the sources noted. In a separate accident, an Indian man died after a vehicle ran him over in Mahboula. The car's driver, Egyptian, turned himself in, said security sources, noting that the victim died in hospital.

Separately, police intervened to break up a fight that started as a dispute between two female neighbors over taking the garbage out, and escalated into an all-out brawl. Case papers indicate that a Kuwaiti woman knocked at her neighbor's door asking her to remove the trash she had allegedly thrown at her doorstep, which the neighbor refused, starting a fight in which each assaulted the other. Rushing to the scene, security forces controlled the matter and both were taken to the station, where a case was filed pending further investigations.

News in brief

Vaccine before large gatherings

KUWAIT: Weddings, ceremonies and other large gatherings will not be allowed back in Kuwait before a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available, although authorities might allow small-scale events during the fifth phase of return to normalcy, Al-Qabas reported yesterday quoting health ministry sources. There is currently no timetable of the start of the fifth phase, said the sources, noting that events grouping a maximum of 60 people with strict health protocols followed might be the way to go until a vaccine is available.

500 medical staff

KUWAIT: The health ministry is currently in the process of recruiting 500 medical staff members from Pakistan as part of its plan to deal with a potential second wave of the novel coronavirus in Kuwait, Al-Jarida daily reported yesterday quoting ministry sources. The team, which includes doctors, nurses, intensive care specialists and anesthesiologist, is expected to arrive within a few weeks to assist local medical staff in fighting COVID-19, the sources added.

Teachers back to work

KUWAIT: Around 100,000 teachers and educational staff members return to work at public schools around Kuwait tomorrow, in preparation for the start of the 2020/2021 academic year which begins on October 4, 2020, with online classes until further notice. Educational facilities will currently observe the maximum 50 percent staff attendance percentage set as part of the fourth phase of return to normalcy, Al-Jarida reported quoting education ministry sources.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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KRCS continues delivering aid to families in Lebanon



BEIRUT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society's (KRCS) teams continued delivering humanitarian aid for families affected by Beirut's explosion, which occurred on August 4, killing over 170 people and injuring at least 6,000 others. KRCS aims to distribute 10,000 food baskets in the first phase, in cooperation with the Lebanese Red Cross, said head of the society's delegation Dr Musaed Al-Enezi in a statement to the press on Sunday. Aside from delivering food aid, KRCS is also providing medical equipment to hospitals, he noted. Meanwhile, a number of citizens hailed Kuwait's humanitarian role and efforts to help Lebanon overcome the tragedy. They thanked Kuwait for the quick response to ease the suffering of Lebanon and families in need, and they also praised KRCS' continuous humanitarian and medical aid. —KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Shiite Muslim worshippers attend a mourning ritual commemorating the martyrdom of Prophet Mohammad's grandson Imam Al-Hussein, on Ashura Day at a Husseinia in Dalya on Saturday. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Bohra community marks Ashura Day



KUWAIT: Listening to the sermon of His Holiness Sultan of the Bohra Dr Mufaddal Saifuddin, the Bohra Community within the State of Kuwait marked Ashura Day (Muharram 10th) online while staying home safe. His Holiness reminded them of the sacrifices of our Prophet's Family (PBUH), most particularly the Master of Martyrs: i.e., Imam Al-Hussein (May Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon Him and His Family), who was martyred on Ashura Day.

The Bohra Community opted not to attend physically to the Husseinia sessions this year, as COVID-19 continues spreading, and deemed sufficient to stream the Muharram commemoration sessions online. All

preaching speakers lauded the efforts of the Kuwaiti government; most particularly, the Ministry of Interior, for providing all facilities for holding the Muharram commemoration sessions. Finally, they prayed to Allah Almighty to bestow His grace and permanent health on His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and that he would return safe to homeland soon. They also supplicated to Allah for bestowing permanent health on His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as well as security, stability, safety and prosperity on Kuwait, and that the COVID-19 crisis would end soon.

PACI issues civil IDs for all citizens, domestic workers

KUWAIT: Director General of Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) Musaed Al-Asousi announced yesterday that 105,000 civil IDs of nationals were issued by August 20. Civil IDs of nationals now are issued in 24 hours in case they do not have any issuance restrictions, or major refer-

ences like changing the home addresses, he said. He also added that PACI issued 26,000 IDs for domestic workers this past weekend, to reach a total of 115,000 cards since resumption of work July 5. The cards are distributed through PACI branches. PACI issued 190,000 IDs for expatriates since July 5 to reach 410,000 cards, he affirmed. The 'Hawayati' smartphone application can be used instead of physical civil IDs in many governmental and private sector transactions, along with authentication and electronic signature, he said. Asousi thanked all PACI workers for their relentless efforts, working for 12 hours daily to fulfill these achievements in 40 working days. —KUNA



KUWAIT: The Interior Ministry's relations and security media department said that on the occasion of the end of curfew which the government had imposed to help fight COVID-19, it has launched a special campaign to thank all security forces stationed at various checkpoints for their efforts to safeguard both citizens and expatriates during the total and partial curfew periods.

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Masks and tears -
Shiites mark Ashura
despite virus

Europe still mired in division after migrant crisis

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MANAUS, Brazil: Photo shows an aerial view of a man walking past graves in the Nossa Senhora Aparecida cemetery in Manaus. — AFP

Brazil surpasses 120,000 COVID deaths

Brazil records 120,262 deaths and 3,846,153 infections

RIO DE JANEIRO: Just over six months after registering its first case of the new coronavirus, Brazil crossed the grim threshold of 120,000 people killed by COVID-19 Saturday, with no end in sight to the crisis. The country of 212 million people has now registered 120,262 deaths from the virus and 3,846,153 infections, the health ministry said in its daily update.

Brazil is just the second country to surpass a death toll of 120,000 in the pandemic, after the United States, where the number killed is now more than 182,000. Unlike in Europe and Asia, where the virus hit hard and then subsided, Brazil's outbreak is advancing at a slow but devastating pace, said Christovam Barcellos, a researcher at public health institute Fiocruz. "Brazil is unique in the world. Since the start of the pandemic, its curve has been different from other countries', much slower," he said. "It has stabilized now, but at a very dangerous level: nearly 1,000 deaths and 40,000 cases per day.... And Brazil still isn't past the peak."

'Total lack of coordination'

Brazil confirmed its first case of the virus on February 26, a Sao Paulo businessman returning from a



No end in sight
to corona crisis

trip to Italy. It recorded its first death on March 16. The pandemic soon turned political in Latin America's largest country. President Jair Bolsonaro condemned the "hysteria" around the virus, and attacked governors and mayors who imposed lockdown measures, arguing the economic damage would be worse than the disease itself.

The far-right leader has instead pushed the drug hydroxychloroquine as the solution to the health crisis, despite studies showing it is ineffective against COVID-19. He again said Saturday the controversial medication had "saved thousands of victims' lives" in Brazil. Bolsonaro even took what he called the "right-

wing" drug himself when he was diagnosed with the virus in July. Experts widely agree the lack of a cohesive message from Brazil's leaders is responsible for the country's failure to "flatten the curve."

"It's terrible. There's been a total lack of coordination by the federal government, which unfortunately is another characteristic of the pandemic in Brazil," said Barcellos. The virus has meanwhile spread from the first demographic it infected—wealthy travelers returning from abroad—to more vulnerable groups and to the interior of the country. Impoverished residents of overcrowded favelas, or slums, in cities such as Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have been hit especially hard. So have indigenous groups in the Amazon rainforest, who have a history of vulnerability to outside diseases.

Bolsonaro popular as ever

Brazil's economy, the biggest in Latin America, is meanwhile heading for a record recession this year because of the fallout. The economy ministry estimates GDP contracted by eight to 10 percent in the second quarter of 2020, and economists are predicting a contraction of more than five percent for the year. But Bolsonaro, paradoxically, is as popular as ever. The

president, who took office in January 2019, received the best approval rating of his term earlier this month, 37 percent, up five points from June, according to leading polling firm Datafolha.

It found he was performing particularly well among poor Brazilians who have been receiving monthly stimulus payments of 600 reais (about \$110) to offset the economic pain of the pandemic. The former army captain had an approval rating of 42 percent among recipients of the temporary stimulus payments. The poll also found 47 percent of Brazilians do not blame Bolsonaro for the country's Covid-19 death toll, while just 11 percent saw him as the "main culprit."

Other recent polls have also found the man dubbed the "Tropical Trump" has rebounding popularity and a strong chance at re-election in 2022. "Bolsonaro is a phenomenon. He's a political force to be reckoned with," said political analyst Michael Mohallem of the Getulio Vargas Foundation. Still, he added, "it's shocking the way he has handled this. It's not just his denialism.... He has often crossed the line of disrespecting victims." Meanwhile, "the number of deaths is scandalously high," he said. "And I think someday he'll have to pay the price." — AFP



BERLIN: Participants gather on the 17. Juni avenue in Berlin at the end of a demonstration called by far-right and COVID-19 deniers to protest against restrictions. — AFP

Berlin halts 'anti-corona' rally amid protests

BERLIN: German police halted a Berlin march by thousands of people opposed to coronavirus restrictions in the biggest of several European protests Saturday against anti-virus curbs and masks to halt the pandemic. With new COVID-19 cases on the rise, European nations are starting to tighten controls while trying to avoid the major lockdowns imposed earlier this year to contain the outbreak that has killed more than 800,000 people worldwide.

Across the globe, governments are struggling to revive battered economies while managing public frustration over new restrictions and masks to curb infections. In Germany, around 18,000 people massed in Berlin's iconic Brandenburg Gate, before the rally was forced to stop due to a police injunction because many were not respecting social distancing measures.

The demonstration had initially been allowed to go ahead after a bitter legal battle. "The minimum distancing is not being respected by most (of the demonstrators) despite repeated requests," the police said. "There is no other option than to break up the gathering." Several thousands stayed on to protest after the announcement, chanting "resistance" and a small group clashed with police, tossing bottles and rocks, leading to around 300 arrests.

The city's interior minister Andreas Geisel said around 200 of the arrests took place in front of the Russian embassy, but most of those detained were subsequently released. Protesters waved German flags

and shouted "Merkel must go!", a chant often used by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party against Chancellor Angela Merkel. "I'm not an extreme right-wing sympathizer, I'm here to defend our fundamental freedoms," said Stefan, a 43-year-old Berlin resident with a shaved head and a T-shirt with the words "Thinking helps" written in large print.

About 1,000 anti-mask protesters also gathered in the Swiss city of Zurich and a similar number demonstrated in London at Trafalgar Square, many holding home-made banners. One called for an "End to medical tyranny"; another read "No to mandatory vaccines" while one man waved a placard declaring "Masks are muzzles".

Around 300 people protested peacefully in Paris to denounce the government's decision to make masks obligatory in all public places as cases rise in the French capital. Protesters, some waving placards stating "Stop the lies", were quickly surrounded by police who handed out 135 euro (\$160) fines to those not wearing masks. "There is no scientific proof of the usefulness of wearing a mask outside," said Anais, a sociology student. "COVID-19 is not so dangerous, it mainly kills people over the age of 60."

The pandemic has killed more than 839,000 people worldwide since surfacing in China late last year, and more than 24.8 million cases have been registered. The United States has recorded the highest number of deaths with 181,779. US President Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro were among global leaders who initially played down the gravity of the pandemic, while others have dismissed the need for social distancing measures. Many governments now hope tighter mask rules will offset the need for a return to economically-devastating lockdowns, though the French government said it could not rule out new stay-at-home orders. —AFP

Turkey lake turns into graveyard for migrants

VAN: Gravestones scribbled with identity numbers are all that remain of dozens of migrants aboard a boat that sank in a Turkish lake as they struggled to make it to Europe. Lake Van, a vast body of water nearly seven times the size of Lake Geneva, has become a death trap for Afghan, Pakistani and other migrants seeking security and work.

The sinking of two boats in June and December, claiming 68 lives in all, underscores the perils of a route used to circumnavigate checkpoints set up across the rugged eastern terrain of Turkey, not far from Iran. Hiding on the boat with 60 others that sank on June 27 was Mehdi Mosin, then just 17. He had left his hometown of Kharian in northeast Pakistan "for a better future," his sobbing father said. "My wife barely gets out of bed anymore," Shafqat Mosin said by phone from Pakistan. "At night, she cries out, asking me to open the door, thinking that our son will come home."

He tried to stop his son from going, but eventually relented. "If I had known it was that dangerous, I would never have let him go," Mosin said. Turkey, which offered fast-track access to Europe during the 2015 migrant crisis, has become an increasingly difficult country to cross. The first move to cut the flow of migrants came after Ankara and Brussels signed a migration deal in 2016, but the measures were stepped up from 2018 against the backdrop of an economic crisis in Turkey. The country is already home to around four million migrants, 3.6 million of them from war-torn Syria.

'I started to pray'

Before reaching the lake, the migrants must often cross perilous border mountains. Every year, villagers discover frozen bodies after the snow melts. In Van Province, which borders Iran, two cemeteries were set up to bury migrants who could not be identified. In one, there were freshly dug graves, awaiting the next victims. When the weather is pleasant, the lake appears harmless. Families have picnics on wooden tables while watching others wobble on their paddleboards, as a local municipality official cleans the promenade. But its unpredictable waters leave little chance for small, flimsy boats. Muhammad, a 25-year-old Pakistani man who made it to Istanbul, crossed the lake in early March at night in an overloaded and dilapidated boat.

"There were around 50 people on board and only five life jackets," he told AFP. "There were women and children. I kept wondering what we would do if the boat sank." When the waves started to rock his boat, "I start-

ed to pray," he said. "I saw from the looks around me that everyone was afraid." Three months earlier another boat carrying migrants had capsized, leaving seven dead. After the fatal June accident, security services detained several smugglers. Since then, migrants and residents say that crossings by lake, which had been staged almost daily before then, have fallen sharply.

'I have no choice'

Migrants who cannot find a boat are forced to walk for days under the blazing sun, cutting across fields to get around checkpoints. At a bus station in Tatvan, a town 140 kilometers west of Van, around 20 exhausted men sit on the ground, their damaged shoes lined up in front of them. Despite the dangers, none of them are ready to give up. "My father is sick. I must find work in Europe," said Mahmoud, a Kurd from Iraq. "It's dangerous, I'm hungry, I'm cold, but I have no choice."

Mahmut Kacan, a lawyer specialising in migration issues at the Van Bar Association, said the number of migrants dying in Van jumped after the closure of the local branch of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2018. Asylum applications are now instead being handled by the Turkish authorities. The lengthy, arduous procedures "create a climate of uncertainty" for migrants, who "take more risks" as a result, he told AFP.

Faced with the many dangers, some have opted not to take the risk. "We had agreed with the smuggler that he would take us to Greece," said Abbas Khasimi, an Afghan who came to Van last year. "But I decided to stay (in Van) for the life of my wife and my child, because the journey was too dangerous," he said. They have applied for refugee status in order to travel to Europe, and now cling on to this slim chance. "Our daughter must have a future," Khasimi said. "For my wife and me, it's too late. But it must not be too late for her." — AFP



BITLIS: A rescue diver stands on the shores of Lake Van after a boat carrying refugees and migrants sank in eastern Turkey. — AFP

International

Masks and tears - Shiites mark Ashura in Karbala despite virus

In crisis-hit Lebanon, Hezbollah and Amal scrap Ashura processions

KARBALA: Thousands of tearful Shiite pilgrims wearing gloves and face masks flooded Iraq's holy city of Karbala yesterday to mark Ashura, one of the largest Muslim gatherings since the Covid-19 pandemic started. Ashura, on the 10th day of the mourning month of Muharram, commemorates the killing of the Prophet Mohammed's (PBUH) grandson Hussein at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD—the defining moment of Islam's confessional schism.

Typically, millions of Shiites from around the world flock to the golden-domed shrine where Hussein's remains are buried, to pray and cry, shoulder-to-shoulder. But with coronavirus numbers spiking across the globe, this year's commemoration is subdued. Small clusters of pilgrims gathered in the vast courtyards outside the main mosque, wearing the customary mourning color of black and the new addition of medical masks and gloves.

Wading through the crowds were teams of shrine employees spraying disinfectant mist through long, thin hoses or distributing masks to any bare-faced visitor. To be allowed into the shrine, people must first have their temperatures taken at grey gates that resemble metal detectors.

Inside, signs on the carpet floor indicate the proper distance that should be kept between worshippers as they pray. Huge rolls of nylon sheets prevent people from kissing the walls, a habitual sign of reverence.

Praying alone

But in the enclave where Imam Hussein is buried, pilgrims press their unmasked faces up against the ornate grille separating them from the mausoleum. Many visitors are crying or sniffing, wiping their

faces with bare hands—oblivious that this is one way in which they could make the virus spread. There were notably fewer pilgrims this year as authorities in Iraq, other Shiite-majority countries and the United Nations urged people to mark the holiday at home.

Neighboring Iran, which usually sends tens of thousands of pilgrims to Karbala, is the hardest-hit Middle Eastern country with over 21,000 coronavirus deaths. Tehran banned the usual Ashura marches, indoor ceremonies, musical performances



Tehran bans the Ashura marches

and banquets, instead broadcasting the various religious rituals on state television. Even Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, prayed alone, according to images published by his office that showed him wearing a mask in the vast, empty mosque at his residence.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, health authorities have reported a fall in new virus cases but security remained a top concern, as Ashura has often been tainted by mass violence targeting Shiite Muslims. Many have opted for scaled-down family gatherings but some processions leading up to Ashura saw



KARBALA: Iraqi Shiite Muslims cry as they take part in a mourning ritual on the tenth day of the month of Muharram which marks the peak of Ashura, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, in the holy city of Karbala. —AFP

thousands turn out, and larger crowds are expected. "It's not possible that anyone would be infected with the virus," said Israr Hussain Shah, a Shiite devotee in the Pakistani capital Islamabad. "Rather people come to heal and protect themselves, whether that's a virus of faith or a sickness," he said.

'An inferno'

In crisis-hit Lebanon, which has seen a severe coronavirus spike this month, powerful Shiite move-

ments Hezbollah and Amal scrapped large Ashura processions. They asked the faithful to follow sermons online and through Hezbollah-linked media channels. Iraq has the second-highest regional toll with close to 7,000 deaths. Last week, the World Health Organization warned that Covid-19 cases in Iraq were rising at an "alarming rate" and said Iraq should take action to end the community outbreak "at all costs". "Mass assemblies of people should not take place at this stage," the WHO said. —AFP

5 years on, Balkans still a road of hope for migrants

SARAJEVO: With a smart black sweater and clean-shaven face, Younes Qermoua recalls his first attempt to reach Europe five years ago, at the peak of the continent's refugee crisis. Half a decade later, the world's attention has moved on but the 35-year-old Moroccan is back on the Balkan route, where traffic is picking up this summer even amid the coronavirus pandemic. After years of bouncing back and forth across the region in attempts by boat, on foot and even tugged above the wheel of a truck, Qermoua's goal remains unchanged.

"I want to live in a country where I can work and get paid for my work, a country where the laws are respected, where there are hospitals, schools," he told AFP in a migrant centre outside Sarajevo, where he is catching some rest before continuing westward towards EU member Croatia. In 2015, hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees traversed the Balkans in weary columns, reaching the peninsula through Greece before trundling northwards.

The route was officially shut down under a 2016 deal between Brussels and Turkey. But in reality, the movement has never stopped. While the numbers are lower, tens of thousands

still flow through the region annually, escaping war and poverty in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Qermoua, who in his first attempt never made it past Greece, is now making progress on a new route that bends west through Bosnia to avoid tighter controls in Hungary, which built a border fence in 2015.

He joins a summer surge of travellers in the Balkans who are on the move after the loosening in early spring of virus lockdowns, when movement was curtailed and some migrant camps were sealed shut. In June, the Western Balkans was the most active migratory route into Europe, while the first six months of 2020 saw a 73-percent increase in migrants detected at the borders compared to the same period last year, according to Frontex, the EU's border police.

Deja vu

For Lence Zdravkin, whose front porch looks out onto a railway track slicing through the centre of North Macedonia, there is a sense of deja vu. When huge numbers of people started passing her doorstep during the crisis five years ago - following the train tracks as a guide - she became a local hero for collecting



SARAJEVO: A group of migrants wait at the bus station in Sarajevo. —AFP

food, clothing and other donated aid for them. This summer, the 53-year-old sits on her balcony with a bright light to help spot travelers who are again passing regularly, though fewer donations are coming in as the world's attention is focused on the pandemic.

"The refugees are facing the same sufferings, with the same journeys, with all the problems that accompany them from the beginning of their travel to its end," she told AFP. The warm months always bring a new tide of migrants but this summer the numbers have "drastically increased", she said. While North Macedonia built a barrier on its southern border with Greece in 2015, migrants can still slip in

through a mountainous region where the barrier doesn't reach, said Jasmin Redjepi, from the Skopje-based NGO Legis.

Many then take the railway tracks, often hopping onto the links between the carriages of freight trains barreling past. According to data from the UN's refugee agency, arrivals in North Macedonia over the past six months have already topped last year's figures for the same period, reaching nearly 23,000. "They want to cross during this period and get to Europe because they do not want to find themselves in autumn and winter with closed borders and quarantines again," Redjepi told AFP. —AFP

Europe still mired in division after migrant crisis

PARIS: Since taking in more than a million people fleeing war and poverty in 2015, Europe has stepped up border controls but still falls short on common migration and asylum policies. At the time, the migrant crisis "laid bare Europe's structural flaws and political divisions," said Marie De Somer, a migration specialist at the European Policy Centre. Until 2015, the Dublin regulation had called for the first EU country where asylum seekers arrived to deal with their applications.

But the system "completely exploded" under the pressure that year, De Somer said. Early on, images of migrants trekking across Europe and the body of three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Greek beach sparked sympathy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel set aside the rules in summer 2015 to allow 900,000 mostly Syrian asylum seekers in - soon followed by countries with less experience of mass arrivals like Austria and Sweden. But a "quota" system to redistribute migrants among EU member countries, hastily cobbled together at Germany's request, never moved the 160,000 people originally agreed on.

Tightening the net

Initial openness to the newcomers foundered on the opposition of central European countries led by Viktor Orban's Hungary - as well as a surge in support for anti-immigration populist parties in western Europe. For lack of agreement, the Schengen free-movement zone was "significantly weakened, with controls reinstated on several frontiers" between members, a senior French official familiar with migration policy said on condition of anonymity. —AFP

Montenegro votes under shadow of church row

PODGORICA: Montenegrins voted yesterday in an election testing the three-decade domination of a pro-West ruling party which has faced a year of protests and high tension with supporters of the influential Orthodox church. A dynamic reformist to some and a corrupt autocrat to others, 58-year-old President Milo Djukanovic has led the Adriatic nation for half of his life, taking it from the end of communism in the 1990s to independence from Serbia in 2006 and more recently into NATO, to the dismay of Russia.

His Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) has never lost an election. But its majority in parliament is razor thin, and this year the party faces a challenge from an emboldened right-wing and pro-Serb opposition who want closer links with Belgrade and Moscow. Polling stations opened at 0500 GMT and will close at 1800 GMT, with voters obliged to wear masks, maintain their distance from others and disinfect their hands before casting ballots to avoid spread of Covid-19.

The virus has battered Montenegro's tourism-dependant economy, putting the country on course for its worst contraction in over a decade.

But the election campaign has instead focused on sensitive identity debates sparked by Djukanovic's row with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). The conflict erupted in late 2019 when the government passed a law that could turn hundreds of SPC-run monasteries in Montenegro into state property. While Montenegro declared independence from Serbia in 2006, the SPC remains its largest religious institution and a third of the country's 620,000 population identify as Serb.



PODGORICA: Supporters of Montenegro's President Milo Djukanovic Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) wave the Montenegrin flag while riding a car in capital Podgorica. —AFP

'Tense situation'

The law set off huge anti-government protests, led by priests and backed by the pro-Serb opposition. Ahead of the election, demonstrations have taken the form of car rallies, with demonstrators waving Serbian flags. The president, who projects himself as a custodian of stability, has used such reactions to raise fears about a threat to Montenegro's sovereignty. The opposition parties are "the political infantry of Greater Serbia nationalism", he said recently, referring to an ultra-nationalist dream to unite all parts of the Balkans with Serb communities. Analysts say a slate of smaller parties focusing on the economy and weak rule of law could play a decisive role in this year's election, given the closeness of the race. While DPS is still tipped to win, they could fall short of an absolute majority. "It is a tense situation and the outcome of the elections will depend on the outcome within the civic bloc," Podgorica-based analyst Milos Besic said. The country is a front-runner in the region on its path to joining the EU, but issues like graft, media freedoms and organized crime remain major concerns in Brussels. —AFP

News in brief

Czech delegation in Taiwan

TAIPEI: A Czech delegation arrived in Taipei yesterday in the second high-profile foreign visit to Taiwan this month—a setback for China's campaign to keep the democratic island isolated from the rest of the world. The 90-member group, led by senate speaker Milos Vystrelil, landed two weeks after US health chief Alex Azar marshaled the highest level mission to Taiwan by Washington since it switched diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979. Vystrelil will deliver a speech in Taiwan's parliament and meet President Tsai Ing-wen during a five-day trip described by Taipei as standing up to "the intimidation of authoritarian China". Beijing views Taiwan as its own territory—vowing to one day seize it by force if necessary—and bristles at any moves by foreign governments to recognize or conduct official exchanges with Taipei. —AFP

Hezbollah 'open' to proposal

BEIRUT: Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah yesterday said that his Shiite movement is "open" to a French proposal for a new political pact for Lebanon as long as there is national consensus. "On his latest visit to Lebanon, we heard a call from the French president for a new political pact in Lebanon... today we are open to a constructive discussion in this regard," Nasrallah said in a speech. "But we have one condition: this discussion should be carried out... with the will and consent of the various Lebanese factions." Nasrallah did not elaborate on what kind of changes his movement was willing to consider but cited criticism from "official French sources" over Lebanon's "sect-based political system and its inability to solve Lebanon's problems and respond to its needs." —AFP

Israel hits Hamas targets

JERUSALEM: Israeli tanks hit Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip yesterday, the army said, as Palestinian balloon attacks across the border continued despite international truce efforts. An early-morning military statement said there had been airborne explosive and incendiary attacks into southern Israel on Saturday. "In response to the ongoing events, a short while ago... tanks struck military posts belonging to the Hamas terror organization in the southern Gaza Strip," the English-language statement said. There were no immediate reports of casualties. Israel has bombed Gaza almost daily since August 6, in response to the airborne incendiary devices and, less frequently, rockets launched across the border. —AFP

Lebanese face food shortages

BEIRUT: More than half of Lebanon's population risk facing a food crisis in the aftermath of a Beirut port blast that compounded the country's many woes, a UN agency said yesterday. "More than half of the country's population is at risk of failing to access their basic food needs by the year's end," the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) said. "Immediate measures should be taken to prevent a food crisis," ESCWA executive secretary Rola Dashti said. Lebanon's government, she said, must prioritize the rebuilding of silos at the Beirut port, the country's largest grain storage. Lebanon was mired in an economic collapse even before the cataclysmic August 4 cataclysmic blast at Beirut's port, which killed 188 people, wounded thousands and destroyed swathes of the capital. —AFP

International

On India's COVID frontline, female health workers push for fair pay

'Now we work all hours, with no days off'

MUMBAI: Rushing from one home to another in a village in western India, health worker Ashwini Mhaske cannot afford to take a breather. Working to keep COVID-19 at bay while caring for mothers and babies, Mhaske races between households to meet job targets and earn bonuses for a average monthly wage of 4,000 rupees (\$54) that India's army of rural health workers say is derisory. Accredited Social Health Activists - or ASHA workers - are the government's recognized health workers who are usually the first point of contact in rural India, where there is often limited or no direct access to healthcare facilities.

Many of India's one million all-women ASHA workers - who have conducted door-to-door checks to trace coronavirus patients in addition to their usual duties - went on strike this month to demand job recognition, better pay and proper protective gear. "Now we work all hours, with no days off," said 33-year-old Mhaske, who used to do farm work shifts to supplement her ASHA income before the coronavirus pandemic struck India in March.

India's coronavirus cases crossed the 3.2 million mark this week - it is behind the United States and Brazil - after a surge in rural areas where two-thirds of its 1.3 billion people live. With infections spreading further to small towns and remote regions, experts say the epidemic in India is likely to be months away from its peak, putting more strain on an already overburdened healthcare system and struggling ASHA workers. "All we (ASHA workers)

are saying is that the government should think about us," Mhaske told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Osmanabad in Maharashtra state.

Pay dispute

Enlisted as part of a 2005 national program to boost healthcare services across rural India - from maternal care to vaccination drives - ASHA workers are treated like volunteers and not covered by state governments' minimum wage legislation. They recently received a 33% hike to their basic monthly salary due to the new coronavirus, and get bonuses for tasks such as 50 rupees for ensuring five children are immunized and 600 rupees for taking pregnant women to hospital to give birth.

Yet labour economists and campaigners said ASHA workers were still hugely underpaid for their duties, and earned about half as much as farm workers employed under government job schemes. "In the name of community service, they are working without commensurate remuneration or rights," said KR Shyam Sunder, a professor at the Xavier School of Management in Jharkhand. "This amounts to indignity or undignified labor ... the returns to the society from their work will far outweigh the meager economic cost in regularizing them."

India's health ministry has not officially responded to ASHA workers' demands for a base salary of 10,000 rupees per month. "They get task-based incentives and we already have a set of incentives ...



WEST BENGAL: A health worker examines swab samples for Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) for the Covid-19 coronavirus at a testing centre in Siliguri. — AFP

that would yield 5,000 to 6,000 rupees a month," said Vikas Sheel, joint secretary at the health ministry. Yet payment records reviewed by the Thomson Reuters Foundation of nearly 600 ASHA workers from four states - Maharashtra, Bihar, Uttar

Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh - revealed average earnings of about 4,000 rupees for the month of July. "We have already increased 1,000 rupees for their COVID-19 duties," Sheel added. "Right now, that's it." — Reuters

News in brief

Death toll in China hits 29

BEIJING: The number of people killed when a restaurant in northern China collapsed has climbed to 29, state media said yesterday, with efforts to find survivors brought to a close. The two-storey building in Xiangfen county, Shanxi province, came down on Saturday morning during an 80th birthday party, according to official news agency Xinhua. A total of 57 people have been pulled from the debris of the Juxian restaurant, with dozens injured. Seven people are seriously hurt, although Xinhua said the injuries were "not life-threatening". State broadcaster CGTN said the rescue operation ended in the early hours of yesterday morning. The cause of the collapse is unknown and the central government's State Council said it would supervise an investigation by provincial authorities. Footage on the CGTN website showed the roof caved in, with rescue equipment lifting rubble from the site. — AFP

Indian forces, Muslims clash

SRINAGAR: Indian forces opened fire with shotgun pellets and tear gas Saturday on a procession by hundreds of Muslims in troubled Kashmir, injuring dozens of people who had ignored a ban on religious gatherings, witnesses said. Indian authorities had reimposed the ban on Thursday after clashes with Shia Muslims wanting to stage traditional processions for the Muharram holy month. Jafar Ali, a witness, told AFP that the procession started in the Bemina area on the outskirts of the main city of Srinagar and that government forces were present in heavy numbers. Ali and other people who saw the clashes said security forces fired pellets and tear gas to break up the gathering. "The forces fired pellets at the procession that was mainly peaceful and included women," said another witness Iqbal Ahmad. At least 40 people were injured, according to witnesses. — AFP

Beirut blast death toll hits 190

BEIRUT: The death toll from this month's Beirut port blast has risen to 190 with more than 6,500 injured and three people missing, Lebanon's caretaker government said in a report yesterday. Lebanese authorities are probing what caused highly explosive material stored unsafely for years to detonate in a mushroom cloud, wrecking swathes of the city and fuelling anger at a political class already blamed for the country's economic meltdown. The army said on Saturday that seven people were still missing - three Lebanese, three Syrians and one Egyptian. It was not immediately clear if some had since been found. The Aug 4 explosion left 300,000 people homeless and caused \$15 billion in direct damage, said the report issued on Sunday by the presidency of the council of ministers. It said 50,000 houses, nine major hospitals and 178 schools had been damaged. — Reuters

Lebanon arrests 3 Egyptians

BEIRUT: Lebanese police announced Saturday the arrest of three Egyptian nationals accused of gang-raping a woman in a luxury Cairo hotel in 2014. Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF) said in a statement it received a letter from Interpol in Egypt on August 27 with the names of seven Egyptian nationals in Lebanon "accused of raping a girl in 2014 in a Cairo hotel". The ISF intelligence branch "found that five of the seven had entered Lebanon previously" and that three remained in the country, according to the statement. The three suspects were arrested on August 28 in the village of Fatqa in Mount Lebanon, the ISF added. The rape allegedly took place six years ago, but the accusations only emerged online in July. — AFP

'Learning pods': Magic words as kids return to school in US

LOS ANGELES: As parents across the United States come to terms with remote learning this fall because of the coronavirus pandemic, many who can afford it are opting for so-called "learning pods" to help their kids - and themselves - get through the school year. The pods, also known as "pandemic pods," are popping up all over the country and consist of small groupings of children typically living in the same neighborhood who meet at each other's homes to learn together with a tutor or teacher.

For some students, the pods - held preferably outdoors or in a home garage - will be full-time and follow the school curriculum. For others, they will supplement virtual learning adopted by many school districts in states where the rate of Covid-19 infections remains high. "These learning pods are occurring because many parents realize that their children are not doing well with online learning," said Pedro Noguera, dean of the University of Southern California's School of Education.

Noguera, whose own eight-year-old daughter is in a learning pod full-time this fall instead of all-virtual schooling, said although this form of instruction is by no means ideal and can be quite expensive, it is a welcome solution for parents as they juggle childcare and work under COVID-19. For students,



CALIFORNIA: Seventh graders (from left) Mia Friedlander, Ella Kingsrud, Taylor Credle, Hannah Cooper and Bella Rocco follow instructions online by tutor Robin Lorch from an iPad placed on a ladder in a home garage in Calabasas, California. — AFP

especially younger ones not always able to engage in online learning, the pods also provide much-needed socialization and a way to navigate the stress and uncertainty linked to the pandemic.

'Sense of normalcy'

"This will serve a dual purpose for us," said Nicole Friedlander, an employment attorney in the Los Angeles area, whose two kids aged seven and 12 are in pods that will supplement their online education. "One is to help the kids with any additional academic support that they might need, and then to have that social aspect of getting together with other kids... and have a little sense of normalcy with a little in-person interaction."

Naomi Leight-Giveon, the founder of PodSkool,

a company in the Los Angeles area that assists parents looking to form pods, said the reaction to the concept has been overwhelming. "We have had more than 400 families reach out to us so far, and we've done no marketing," she told AFP. "And we have hundreds of teachers we have been vetting over the past month to match them with families." But while experts agree pods can be beneficial for both parent and child, they also acknowledge they are mainly accessible to the wealthy.

"What we're seeing is those with the wealth can invest in and pay teachers on their own, at good rates, even higher than the teachers might get working in schools," said Noguera, who is paying \$10,000 this semester for his daughter's pod. "But what we're also seeing is that poor children, middle-class children even, are left to fend for whatever the schools can provide." Mira Rocca, who has three children in three separate pods intended to supplement their online education, said the classes are costing her about \$1,300 a month. "It's my most expensive public school semester yet," she said.

Still, Rocca said the benefits of an in-person teaching experience for the kids outweigh the cost. "My kindergartener had his first class today at a friend's garage... and he said it was his best day ever," she said. "I think that having social interactions with other kids their age is so much more impactful than what they're learning academically at this point." Experts agree that the pods will help many children experiencing depression, greater anxiety and stress as a result of the pandemic and isolation. But they also warn the pods are likely to further heighten inequalities and leave many kids by the wayside. — AFP



LESBOS: Children among refugees and migrants on a rubber boat on their way from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos as they are rescued by Greek coast guards off Mytilene, Lesbos. — AFP

Spirit of 2015 a distant memory in Lesbos

LESBOS: Five years ago the olive grove of Moria on the Greek island of Lesbos was a sanctuary for asylum seekers. Today it is a jungle, overcrowded, threatening and all too often in flames. Destroying an olive tree in Ancient Athens could lead to banishment, now it is the needs of the banished which have seen constant burning back of the sacred olive trees to make more space for the ramshackle tents and makeshift shelters.

Other fires regularly spring up, sometimes lit by migrants for heating or cooking, sometimes by angry inhabitants prompting the sirens of the firefighters to mingle with the voice of the muezzin, leading evening prayers. Moria is home to nearly 13,000 asylum seekers. Five years ago, the largest camp in Europe was intended to accommodate no more than 2,770. Asylum seekers disembarking on the northern coasts of the island, close to the Turkish shores, were just passing through, registering, before moving their journey on.

Moria was but a stopover on their way to Northern Europe. Back then, Lesbos was the island

of solidarity, a welcoming refuge where fishermen came to the aid of drifting boats loaded with migrants, and grandmothers who bottle-fed migrant babies were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. A year later, Pope Francis arrived with Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, mixing with the migrants and holding a mass to bless those who had died trying to reach Europe. That all now seems a distant memory. "At first, asylum seekers came and went but now the borders are closed," Ilias Pikoulis, who, with his travel agency, hires buses to transport refugees, told AFP.

"The islanders have the impression that they have been facing this migration crisis on their own for years. "And this feeling has created division, even revolt." In 2015, the island of Lesbos and its 85,000 inhabitants saw more than 450,000 people pass through in the space of a year. The EU-Turkey agreement signed in March 2016 aimed to change that. Its objective was to stop the flow coming from the Turkish coasts and send back the Syrians for whom Turkey was considered a "safe country". But the arrivals did not dry up and the Moria camp was quickly overwhelmed.

Ioanna Savva, from the village of Eressos, birthplace of the ancient poet Sappho, took part in rescuing refugees and "cried" when she saw them. "But in everyone's eyes, Lesbos has become the island of refugees," she says. — AFP

Sparking fury, US govt halts election security briefings to Congress

WASHINGTON: The White House has revealed it is to end in-person briefings to congressional intelligence committees about foreign election interference, sparking accusations Saturday that it was covering up Russian help for President Donald Trump's reelection. The move comes two months ahead of the general election, with Trump playing down the threat of foreign interference and accusing Democrats of leaking sensitive information.

"Probably Shifty Schiff, but others also, LEAK information to the Fake News," the president tweeted Saturday, referring to House Intelligence Committee chairman Adam Schiff. He offered no evidence for the claim, which he has made several times during his presidency. "No matter what or who it is about, including China, these deranged lowlives like the Russia, Russia, Russia narrative. Plays better for them," he added.

Congress will still have access to classified written reports, but lawmakers will no longer be able to question officials from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) about what they learn. Democrats in Congress reacted with fury, describing the move as "shameful" and accusing Trump of covering up Russian interference. "As usual, President Trump is lying and projecting. Trump fired the last DNI for briefing Congress on Russian efforts to help his campaign," Schiff tweeted. "Now he's ending briefings altogether. Trump doesn't want the American people to know about Russia's efforts to aid his reelection."

Schiff and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called in a separate statement for the administration and intelligence community to resume the briefings. "If they are unwilling to, we will consider the full range of tools available to the House to compel compliance," they said. DNI John Ratcliffe wrote to the top lawmakers from both parties in the House and Senate intelligence committees explaining the change, in a letter dated August 28, which was circulated in US media Saturday. — AFP

Business

MONDAY, AUGUST 31, 2020

Lockdowns give major boost to e-commerce

International e-commerce grew 41% in only three months

PARIS: While large traditional retailers announce big lay-offs because of the pandemic, sometimes shedding thousands of staff, coronavirus lockdowns have in contrast given e-commerce a major boost. Recent data shows a shift to shopping online—according to Kantar consulting group, international e-commerce grew 41 percent in only three months compared with 22 percent growth for 2020 as a whole to date, as the pandemic “transformed” retail habits. The trend was brought into sharp relief on August 18, when British high street mainstay Marks & Spencer announced it was culling 7,000 staff.

Hours later, in contrast, online behemoth Amazon said it was hiring 3,500 in the United States. The M&S slowdown is only one part of the picture in the UK, with 2,500 more job losses announced at department store Debenhams, which in April entered administration for the second time in a year. Hundreds more jobs are also to be lost at other well-known British high street chains.

By contrast, Britain’s largest supermarket chain Tesco placed a sizeable feather in its online cap by saying it was creating 16,000 permanent jobs to deal with strong growth in its online activities.

“It is very clear that the digitization of commerce, (even) if in place for a long time, is accelerating enormously,” said Herve Gilg, managing director and distribution specialist at Alvarez & Marsal corporate transformation services.

The benefits are being reaped by those companies which were already carrying out a sizeable chunk of their activities online. That troupe is led by Amazon, which doubled its net profits in the second

half of this virus-challenged year. Following was Germany’s fashion and lifestyle e-commerce heavy-weight Zalando, which saw its active customer base rise 20 percent in first half 2020 to 34 million. US giant Walmart, although not an online “pure player”, has also shifted in that direction to benefit from the upswing in virtual commerce in the US and its second-quarter results soared past estimates on an e-sales jump of 97 percent.

Pandemic ‘transforms’ retail habits

E-presence ‘indispensable’

In France, the United Kingdom, Spain and China, the average market share of e-commerce went from 8.8 percent of value (in 2019) to 12.4 percent in second quarter 2020, said Kantar. It added that in China, online shopping already amounts to “a quarter of expenditure on mass consumer products.”

The trend was already under way before Covid-19 began to batter the global economy.

But the brutal falloff in out-of-home spending has had “a major knock-on effect for non-food commerce dependent on physical sale points”, Gilg said. The unprecedented development has “made all retail actors understand or else confirm that it is indispensable to have an online presence and to be as competitive as possible there,” says Stephane Charveriat, senior associate director with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG).

‘Significant investments’

That has meant evolution, which “requires significant means and investments,” observes Charveriat. But that need comes at a time when company coffers are relatively bare and money placed aside for



PARIS: The international e-commerce grew 41 percent in only three months compared with 22 percent growth for 2020 as a whole to date, as the pandemic “transformed” retail habits. — AFP

online purposes is cash which does not therefore flow to the physical business. France’s CDCF trade council asked the government in the summer for a “tax credit or accelerated super-amortization mechanism to support digital investment.” Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire on Thursday responded that “several hundred million euros” would be made available in the form of subsidies and public investment bank support “to help firms digitize” in a bid to compete with the likes of Amazon.

“Clearly, it is a sizeable challenge to confront large platforms,” says Charveriat. He says French firms must define an internet strategy, be it in the

form of alliances with others, in order to compete in the digital marketplace with existing big hitters. Still, Gilg says the existing physical presence of distribution brands can be a major asset in that regard, for example, catering to visiting international tourists who may want to experience what a brand has to offer on-site when post-Covid tourism does eventually take off again. “Apple has shown very effectively how a shop can act as a stage” to show off its wares, Gilg said, adding that while commercial clicks have their value, retail mortar can provide physical brand “authenticity.” —AFP

Brazil environment funding flip-flop triggers alarm

BRASILIA, Brazil: Brazil’s environment ministry triggered an outcry Friday by announcing it was halting all operations against wildfires and Amazon deforestation because of budget cuts, before reversing course and saying it would maintain them. It was the latest awkward moment on the environment for the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right climate change skeptic who has faced scathing international criticism for presiding over surging deforestation and calling for the world’s biggest rainforest to be opened to mining and agriculture.

“As of midnight Monday, all operations to combat illegal deforestation in the Amazon region and all operations against wildfires in the Pantanal wetlands and other regions will be halted,” the environment ministry said in an initial statement. It said the economy ministry had blocked around 60 million reais (\$11 million) in funding to two environmental regulatory agencies, forcing them to suspend operations.

Environmentalists immediately condemned the measure. “This absurd cancellation... comes at a time when deforestation levels and fires are increasing in the Amazon region and there is a record-breaking number of fires in the Pantanal,” the world’s biggest tropical wetlands, the World Wildlife Fund’s Brazil office said in a statement.

Vice President Hamilton Mourao, who was appointed by Bolsonaro to lead a task force against deforestation, soon intervened to say Environment Minister Ricardo Salles had acted “hastily” and that the funding would not be blocked. The environment ministry then did a U-turn, issuing a second statement that said the funds had been released and operations “will proceed as normal.”

Mourao attributed the fray to a request from Bolsonaro’s office for all ministries to make cuts to help fund emergency stimulus payments of 600 reais a month the government has been making to poor Brazilians hit hard by the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

But the cuts are not mandatory, said the vice president.

Political analysts say the stimulus payments have driven Bolsonaro’s approval rating to the highest level since he took office in January 2019. He has been scrambling to find funds to maintain them.

But the president is wary of reviving the international condemnation he faced last year when tens of thousands of fires ravaged the Amazon, raising fears for the future of a resource seen as vital to curbing climate change. — AFP

Reliance to pay \$3.4bn for Future Group’s retail empire

MUMBAI: Indian conglomerate Reliance is acquiring the retail, wholesale and logistics businesses of the Future Group for \$3.38 billion, the oil-to-telecoms giant announced late Saturday, strengthening its presence in the country’s hugely competitive e-commerce sector. Reliance, which is owned by Asia’s richest man Mukesh Ambani, has been locked in battle with US tech behemoth Amazon and Walmart-backed Flipkart for a share of India’s lucrative online market, establishing its digital platform JioMart in May.

After spending years battling local mom-and-pop shops for customers, the online retailers are now trying to work hand-in-hand with the smaller stores that dominate India’s towns and hinterlands to bring them online. Future Group owns some of the country’s best-known supermarket brands such

Spain struggles to put in place basic income scheme

MADRID: Three months after Spain rushed to launch a minimum basic income scheme to fight a spike in poverty due to the coronavirus pandemic, the program is at a dead-end because of an avalanche of applications. The measure was a pledge made by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez’s leftwing coalition government, which took office in January, bringing together his Socialist party with far-left Podemos as the junior partner.

The scheme—approved in late May—aims to guarantee an income of 462 euros (\$546) per month for an adult living alone, while for families, there would be an additional 139 euros per person, whether adult or child, up to a monthly maximum of 1,015 euros per home. It is expected to cost state coffers three billion euros (\$3.5 billion) a year.

The government decided to bring forward the launch of the program because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has hit Spain hard and devastated its economy, causing queues at food banks to swell. Of the 750,000 applications which were filed since June 15 when the government started accepting requests, 143,000 — or 19 percent—have been analyzed and 80,000 were approved, according to a social security statement issued on August 20.

‘Months of waiting’

But Spain main civil servant’s union, CSIF, paints a darker picture. “Nearly 99 percent of requests have not been processed,” a union spokesman, Jose Manuel Molina, told AFP. The social security ministry has only really analysed 6,000 applications while 74,000 households that already receive financial aid were awarded the basic income automatically, he added.

For hundreds of thousands of other households, the wait is stressful. Marta Sanchez, a 42-year-old mother of two from the southern city of Seville, said



Asia’s richest man Mukesh Ambani has been locked in battle with US tech behemoth Amazon and Walmart-backed Flipkart for a share of India’s lucrative online market.

as Big Bazaar but its founder Kishore Biyani, once known as India’s retail king, has struggled in recent years, with the coronavirus pandemic dealing a heavy blow to his empire.

Ambani’s daughter Isha, director of Reliance’s retail subsidiary RRVL, said the deal would give a big boost to India’s retail sector and was “a strong

strategic fit” for her company. “We hope to continue the growth momentum of the retail industry with our unique model of active collaboration with small merchants ... as well as large consumer brands”, she said in a press release.

“This will help Reliance retail to accelerate providing support to millions of small merchants in increasing their competitiveness and enhance their income during these challenging times,” she added. The acquisition will bolster Reliance’s presence, adding another 1,800 stores to its retail portfolio, which already covers some 11,000 stores in more than 6,700 Indian towns and cities, including wholesale operations. “Future group is strong on two front-groceries and apparel—and Reliance can leverage these and add to its strength,” Satish Meena, senior forecast analyst at Forrester Research, told AFP.

The deal will allow Reliance “to combine inventory, stores and customers to deliver an online-offline hybrid experience”, he said. News of the sale comes a month after Reliance’s competitor Flipkart announced that it had purchased its parent firm Walmart’s Indian cash-and-carry Best Price stores, ahead of launching Flipkart Wholesale, its attempt to bring mom-and-pop shops online. — AFP



MADRID: People queue for supplies from a food bank in Madrid. Three months after Spain rushed to launch a minimum basic income scheme to fight a spike in poverty due to the coronavirus pandemic, the program is at a dead-end because of an avalanche of applications.

she applied for the scheme on June 26 but has heard nothing since. “That is two months of waiting already, when in theory this was a measure that was taken so no one ends up in the streets,” she added.

Sanchez lost her call center job during Spain’s virus lockdown while her husband lost his job as a driver. The couple has had to turn to the Red Cross for the first time for food. “Thank God my mother and sister pay our water and electricity bills,” she said, adding their landlord, a relative, has turned a blind eye to the unpaid rent.

‘Rushed everything’

A spokeswoman for the ministry acknowledged that the rhythm “was perhaps a bit slower than expected” but she said the government was working to “automate many procedures” so processing times should become faster from now on. “The launch of a benefit is always difficult ... and this situation is not an exception,” she added. But Molina

said this was a new situation, that was made worse by years of budget cuts to the public service which has lost 25 percent of its staff over the past decade. “The problem is that they rushed everything, did it without training and a huge lack of staff,” he added.

The social security branch charged with the basic income scheme has only 1,500 civil servants, who also process most pension applications, Molina said. These officials are facing an “avalanche” of requests, which already match the number of pension requests received in an entire year, he added.

About 500 temporary workers have been recruited as reinforcements but their assistance is limited because they do not have the status of civil servant, so they cannot officially approve requests for financial aid. Demand is expected to increase. The government has said the measure was expected to benefit some 850,000 homes, affecting a total of 2.3 million people — 30 percent of whom were minors. — AFP

Business

Ooredoo Kuwait celebrates 1000 days of data center services with zero downtime

Al-Babtain: Direct result of an ambitious strategy in digitization journey

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, celebrated 1000 days of launching its state of the art data center with zero downtime since its launch in 2017. This comes to further reiterate the company's commitment to being one of the leading companies in information technology solutions, and the company of choice for prospective clients searching for ICT solutions, catering especially for the needs of corporates and businesses. The data center provides a suite of managed hosting services tailor-made to fit corporate and business needs.



Data center offers a suite of managed hosting services

These services are ideal for corporates and businesses looking to better manage their data, platforms and applications.

In a statement during the celebration, Abdulaziz Al-Babtain, Chief Executive Officer at Ooredoo Kuwait said, "With our proficiency, we were able to achieve 1000 days of data center services with zero downtime and we were able to gain the trust of many companies. This is a direct result of an ambitious strategy which includes providing uninterrupted digital solutions to our customers which stems from Ooredoo's strategy which aims to enrich the experience of its customers".

Al-Babtain reiterated, "We are proud to offer the newest and most modern services, which will definitely benefit and be an asset to various companies and organizations of different sizes. With our continuous dedication we gained the trust of Kuwait's prestigious enterprises.

We aim today to adapt digital technology and to depend on the internet to continuously launch a number of digital projects Solutions. We are at forefront in helping our customers in providing full-

ledged services to support businesses in their digital transformation journey."

Al-Babtain further added that, "The data center provides end-to-end IT solutions to customers in various sectors including financial, healthcare, media, e-commerce, educational and governmental. The center is fully equipped to deliver an exceptional experience in services and solutions such as managed hosting services, managed CPE, cloud services, NOC and SOC, data center consultancy, and much more. This is especially important today, where businesses are faced with growing challenges to respond efficiently to new digital trends in IT, security and control".

Ooredoo strives to be the trustworthy choice among its growing customers as it continuously transforms its services to meet the needs of the digital world, ensuring peace of mind with end-to-end secured solutions and 24/7 NOC/SOC, in addition to opportunities for scalability and maximum return of investment."



Abdulaziz Al-Babtain

New Italy or Spain bonds may be hard to find

AMSTERDAM: Investors may struggle to find new southern European government bonds for the next two years, as the European Union's support programs could cover much of the new funding needs of countries worst hit by the pandemic. Together with ongoing European Central Bank bond buying, the net supply of new sovereign Italian bonds to the open market may even shrink.

Grants and loans from the recovery fund and cash from the so-called SURE jobless scheme could cover around 80 percent of borrowing needs after accounting for redemptions in Italy and Spain across 2021 and 2022 and 70 percent in Portugal, Morgan Stanley reckons.

"This is effectively about providing levels of financing to these countries that they will not need to go out and do themselves in the primary market," said Tony Small, the bank's head of European rates strategy. A source at Spain's economy ministry told Reuters SURE funds will start to affect its borrowing plans from this year and that it expects a "sizeable" impact on the amount of debt it will sell given the amount of funding available.

While the EU funds could directly replace some issuance, the ECB's conventional and pandemic bond purchases would absorb more than the remaining new funding needs. That could cut net supply of Italian government bonds to a negative

60 billion euros in 2021, Morgan Stanley estimates. The premium Italy pays for 10-year debt over Germany could fall some 35 basis points to 115 bps by the end of this year, the bank estimates, with ECB purchases already expected to create net negative issuance from this year.

What's more, many economists expect the ECB eventually to extend its pandemic purchases.. Commerzbank expects a 300 billion-euro extension in the second half of 2021, which could take net supply of BTPs to around negative 130 billion euros next year, head of rates and credit research Christoph Rieger said, implying a much bigger ECB squeeze.

Debt mountains

And yet, despite the level of support available, Italy and Spain's hefty debt will remain much higher than it was before the coronavirus for years to come. Some longer-term investors caution against overstating the size of the direct transfers relative to the scale of the debt building. "The grant part is material for Italy... however, it's not a game changer," said Arnaud-Guilhem Lamy, a portfolio manager at BNP Paribas Asset Management, which manages 428 billion euros.

In Italy, grants will relieve the ratio of debt to gross domestic product by around 6 percentage points, according to Commerzbank. But the extent of the damage Italy's economy is suffering from the crisis - with GDP expected to contract 9.5 percent this year - means the debt ratio is expected to remain high, at 154 percent of GDP, by 2021 even as the economy starts to recover, still 19 percentage points higher than in 2019.

More importantly, EU funds will help debt

all shed around half a percent, while the dollar weakened.

Wither the dollar?

Craig Erlam, senior market analyst with OANDA Europe, said that the Fed's announcement, along with its earlier measures, means "the taps will be on for the foreseeable future as the economy recovers from the wreckage of the pandemic, hopefully aided by a vaccine later this year." Yet the coronavirus is far from over in the United States, where deaths topped 180,000 this week. And climbing cases in Europe have also rattled investors, with Germany and Spain imposing fresh control measures as infections surge following the easing of lockdowns.

Jerome Powell said Thursday the Fed would be in no rush to reel in inflation even if it overshoots the central bank's two percent target, instead opting for an average that takes into account periods of weak price rises with an aim to benefiting lower-income families. Mulling the dipping dollar, ThinkMarkets analyst Fawad Razaqzada warned that "if the Fed allows inflation to overcook by not reacting fast enough, then it may have to tighten its belt more aggressively when it finally does start its hiking cycle in an effort to bring prices back under control."

"Such a policy response will stifle economic growth and will most likely send the dollar soaring higher."

body changed its calculation method.

That means that more than a million people are out of work, leaving 8.1 million employed after the loss of 1.8 million jobs over the last year. However, the unemployment figure doesn't take into account the 760,000 people that took advantage of a government initiative launched in March to protect jobs affected by the coronavirus pandemic by allowing the temporary suspension of contracts and access to unemployment insurance. The institute said that taking into consideration those unemployed, those on the government scheme, and those not looking for work but able to, then the number of people out of employment rises to 30 percent of the



ROME: Police officers stand on the street as they control cars, during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, at the EUR district, in Rome. —Reuters

sustainability by allowing the country to borrow at a much cheaper cost in the long run, BNP's Lamy said.

Italy currently pays around 1.10 percent for 10-year debt, while a comparable EU bond currently yields around -0.05 percent, so EU loans, even though they will be paid back, imply a significant cut to borrowing costs. Lamy added to his overweight position in Italy after the fund was approved, encouraged by the EU's unprecedented show of solidarity, which bodes well for debt sustainability.

That appears to be the consensus view, with Italian 10-year bonds outperforming Portugal and Greece since the agreement, who are set for much more meaningful debt relief.

"The bar to resort to EU debt if problems come up has been lowered, and this is more important than the actual funding relief," Commerzbank's Rieger said. —Reuters



Abe heads for exit

The yen-regarded as a safe haven in times of turmoil-also spiked by more than one percent versus the dollar as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced he would resign. Tokyo's Nikkei 225 ended down 1.4 percent ahead of the official confirmation, which ends a record-breaking tenure at the helm of the world's third-largest economy.

Abe said he is suffering a recurrence of the ulcerative colitis that forced him to cut short a first term in office, and that he no longer felt able to continue. Analysts said there would be concerns about the end of his big-spending, easy money policy-dubbed Abenomics-that has been credited with supporting the fragile economy for years. —AFP

potential workforce.

"These are the most severe figures... that we've had in the history of our country," said Labor Minister Maria Jose Zaldivar. The institute said that of those still employed, a third have reported a drop in their income. "The numbers speak for themselves and show why this has to be the priority," said Finance Minister Ignacio Briones, while asking Congress to approve laws that would reactivate the economy by creating jobs.

Chile is one of the worst-affected countries in Latin America by the coronavirus, with 400,000 cases and close to 15,000 deaths. The Central Bank expects the economy to shrink by 7.5 percent in 2020. —AFP

Argentine govt 'confident' on \$65bn debt deal

Buenos Aires: Argentina's debt restructuring deadline passed Friday after four months of tense talks, multiple delays and amendments since an initial low-ball offer in April, with bondholders expected to strongly back a \$65 billion proposal.

An official source told Reuters the government was confident of high acceptance. Local publication Infobae, citing senior official sources, said the proposal had received support from holders of more than 90 percent of the bonds. "In the government they are confident of high acceptance," an official source told Reuters on Friday afternoon shortly before the deadline, requesting anonymity to discuss the private process.

The person added that the official results would likely not be announced until Monday as scheduled, though that decision lay with center-left President Alberto Fernandez and Economy Minister Martin Guzman. The new bonds are scheduled to be issued on Sept. 4 if a full deal is struck, though it remains to be seen if there are any holdouts on certain bonds.

The Infobae report said preliminary information indicated that the government still had to reach thresholds on some series of older, so-called Exchange bonds, which need higher levels of creditor consent. The main three creditor committees holding a large chunk of the bonds backed a deal earlier this month, bolstering confidence that the government would get the required level of support to allow a full deal to go ahead without holdouts.

A deal is key to pulling Argentina out of default and reviving the economy, already in its third straight year of recession. Guzman's next step will be renegotiating a failed \$57 billion deal with the International Monetary Fund. "After circling around each other for the better part of 2020, we have finally reached 'D-Day'," said Patrick Esteruelas, head of research for Emso Asset Management in New York.

He added it was "highly unlikely" that legal thresholds on the bonds needed for a deal would not be reached. A person with direct knowledge of the negotiations told Reuters this week that participation was "very good," though the final result would only be known once the deadline had passed.

Argentina's government made a breakthrough with its main creditor groups - the Ad Hoc Group, Argentina Creditor Committee and the Exchange Bondholder Group - on Aug. 4, when all three agreed to support an amended offer.

That helped push up Argentina's sovereign bond prices, though they have slipped back over recent weeks in thin trading, affected by broader concerns about the country's tough economic outlook. They dipped an average of 0.3 percent on Friday and 3 percent for the week.

The bonds include so-called "Exchange" bonds, involved in a previous restructuring, which have tougher legal clauses. The other "Macri" bonds were issued during the previous administration of conservative President Mauricio Macri. Argentina needs support from holders of 85 percent of the Exchange bonds, and over 66.67 percent on the Macri bonds, though individual bond series can have lower levels of support. "It is estimated that adherence will be high, but it's still to be seen what percentage is reached in relation to the activation thresholds of the collective action clauses," financial services firm Puente said in a note.

"Investors will pay special attention to this detail, to get an idea on whether the swap can be made 100 percent binding on all the various series of bonds." —Reuters

Chile jobless rate hits new record of 13%

SANTIAGO: Unemployment in Chile has reached a new record high of 13.1 percent, the national statistics institute said Saturday. Unemployment rose by 5.6 percentage points in the rolling May-July quarter compared to the same period in 2019. The statistics institute said it was the highest figure since 2010, when the

Business

NBK Money Markets Report

Fed's inflation strategy negatively impacts the dollar's attractiveness

Second preliminary US GDP reconfirms frail state in economy

KUWAIT: The economic calendar last week was exceptionally light, in spite of it, there was volatility in financial markets. All eyes were focused on the Jackson Hole summit, where the world's most powerful central bank revealed its new strategy on price growth. The Fed is moving towards an "average" 2 percent inflation target rather than a fixed one and to restore full employment. The S&P 500 and the Dow advanced higher as the new strategy will keep interest rates on the low, which equities cherish. The S&P hit a new record high of 3,509.23 on Friday and gained about 2.60 percent in value on a weekly basis. Powell's comments propelled the 10-year US Treasury yield to several months high of 0.7890 percent, while the 2-year barley edged higher. In order to attain higher inflation than it has managed in recent years, the central bank is probably going to hold short-term rates very low for a long time, which limited the advancement of the 2-year yield. The spread between the aforementioned yields widened to 61 basis points, the highest since mid-May. The steeper yield curve pushed financial equities into the green as banks margins improve as the yield curve steepens. JPMorgan Chase and American Express shares were up more than 3 percent on Thursday.

In the FX sphere, higher US yields failed to save the greenback from its negative momentum. Financial markets are factoring in greater tolerance for higher inflation, which is a key element in the current narrative of negative US real yields reducing the dollar's attractiveness. In weekly terms, the dollar index is down by 1 percent against a basket of currencies and is close to the lowest levels since April 2018. The Aussie was one of the best performing currencies supported by a weaker dollar and improving data out of China, which is Australia's largest trading partner. The AUD/USD soared to 0.7368, a near 2-year high.

Fed's pivotal shift

The Federal Reserve made a historic amendment to its inflation objective last week, highlighting the importance of high employment and allowing infla-

tion to overshoot the 2 percent target. It seems the Fed's new strategy is putting higher weight on strengthening the US labor market and less worries about too-high inflation. All 17 policymakers signed on the new strategy. The Fed's dovish shift in strategy, while stating "downward risks to employment and inflation have increased", further reinforces an era of low rates. In details, Fed President of Dallas Robert Kaplan mentioned that he would not feel comfortable allowing inflation to stay at 3 percent for a year and not raise interest rates. Although, he does see 2.25 percent-2.5 percent as consistent with the Fed's new strategy. "This is not a formula, this is not a commitment," Kaplan stated. Overall, the latest strategy is leaning towards an average inflation of 2 percent, under which the Fed would aim to make up for periods when inflation is too low by allowing periods when inflation is too high.

US economic fundamentals

The second reading of US GDP reconfirmed the economic frail state seen back in Q2. US GDP plunged by 37.1 percent on an annual basis from 5 percent in Q1. The latest figure is slightly better than the initial estimate of -32.9 percent, even with that, it was still the worst contraction ever recorded. The drop in GDP was more than triple the previous all-time decline. As for the labor market, demand for unemployment benefits remains elevated. The number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits continues to hover around 1 million for a fourth week in a row and a minimum of 27 million individuals were receiving unemployment benefits under all programs in the week ended August 8. Moreover, the \$600 weekly unemployment supplement expired on July 31 and economists forecast the loss of the \$600 could cut \$50 billion from retail sales in August.

On a more positive note, US orders for durable goods increased 11.2 percent in July, more than double the 4.4 percent expected. Core capital goods orders, which excludes aircraft and military hardware, rose 1.9 percent. Orders have increased for three months in a row mainly driven by the continu-



Sterling remains resilient

Rates – 30th August, 2020

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	Low	High	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.1785	1.1919	1.1761	1.1903	1.1810	1.2085	1.1926
GBP	1.3084	1.3356	1.3049	1.3349	1.3205	1.3530	1.3355
JPY	105.85	106.94	105.18	105.34	103.50	106.95	105.22
CHF	0.9116	0.9127	0.9022	0.9038	0.8840	0.9230	0.9012

ous return of auto production, suggesting the manufacturing sector is continuing on a path of robust recovery. Earlier, the Flash Manufacturing PMI index rose to 53.6 following 50.9 for the previous month, representing growth for a sector that accounts for 11 percent of the US economy. The industry has registered expansions for July and August following contractions at 36.9 and 39.8 for April and May respectively.

Sterling resiliency

The GBP/USD pair remains on an uptrend from the lows seen back in March even as the clock ticks down to the December 31st deadline. EU's Chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier cautioned in the plainest terms that "at this stage, an agreement between the UK and the EU seems unlikely". On the UK side, David Frost UK's Chief Brexit negotiator highlighted that "agreement is still possible, and it is still our goal, but it is clear that it will not be easy to achieve." The unfavorable developments have inflated the risk of a "No Deal" Brexit with time running out.

The pound sterling

has recovered tremendously from the harsh blow it suffered against the dollar back in March, when it fell to a low of 1.1404. The GBP/USD is currently trading at 1.3349 and last week it hit 1.3356, the highest level since December 2019. In the options market, prices suggest GBP faces no big risks in the next six months with only 4 months to go before the Brexit deadline. GBP/USD direction suggests either com-

placency or confidence that neither side in the talks would advocate more instability into economies already impacted by the pandemic.

Chinese yuan rallies

Diminishing tensions between the US and China has paved the way for a rally in CNY. US and Chinese trade officials reiterated their commitment for a Phase 1 trade deal last week, their first official negotiation since early May - amid concern the deal could be on wobbly ground. "Both sides see progress and are committed to taking the steps necessary to ensure the success of the agreement," the US Trade Representative's office mentioned. China's Commerce Ministry confirmed that both sides had a "constructive dialogue" and agreed to continue pushing forward the Phase 1 trade deal's implementation.

According to Bloomberg calculations, China must purchase around \$130 billion of goods and services in the second half of the year to fulfill its terms of the original deal. The developments provide reassurance that the Trump administration still values the "Phase One" trade deal, and will assist to further dampen concerns that it could be ripped up ahead of the Presidential election. The USD/CNY pair depreciated to 6.8604, the lowest level since January this year. Since June, the USD has fallen by 3.51 percent against the CNY.

Kuwait

Kuwaiti dinar
USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30560.

AUB: New updates and features to mobile banking app

KUWAIT: Ahli United Bank (AUB) announced the launch of new updates to its advanced Mobile Banking App as part of the bank digital transformation strategy, providing its clients unparalleled exclusive features in terms of convenience, flexibility, security and the ability to meet and exceed customer expectations in the digital era. These new updates include a set of new services, such as the "Request Payment" service that enables AUB clients to receive funds instantly by sharing KNET link through AUB Mobile App. There is also "Fund my account" service that enables AUB clients to fund their AUB account instantly through KNET payment gateway using other local bank debit card. In addition, the new updates include the "Request Group Payment" service where AUB clients can receive funds from multiple persons by initiating group payment request through mobile banking, then AUB system will send KNET payment links to the selected group.

In addition, AUB clients can initiate cardless cash withdrawal request through mobile banking for self/others to withdraw the requested amount from AUB ATMs without using ATM debit card through "Cardless Cash" service. Additionally, these new updates consist of offering AUB clients the ability to reload their prepaid or credit card through KNET payment gateway. It is worth mentioning that AUB Mobile Banking App consists of a range of integrated banking services that enable clients to apply for credit cards and prepaid cards with the option to freeze/unfreeze these cards temporarily. Clients can also report lost/stolen prepaid/credit cards, in addition to the feature that enables them to activate these cards upon their issuance. Moreover, customers can activate frozen accounts through AUB Mobile App.

AUB clients also can report their lost or stolen prepaid/credit card and view payments details as well, and share transfers and payment receipts. In addition, clients can easily update their registered mobile numbers or e-mails, as well as update the method and frequency of receiving their Bank statements by email or postal mail. AUB clients can also register directly through the Mobile App and quickly login through fingerprints or face recognition feature available in applicable smart phones. Also, the app includes an updated version of the currency converter and enables adding new beneficiaries simultaneously to conduct transfers and pay bills. Customers can also locate the nearest AUB branches available across Kuwait, as well as a list of withdrawal/deposit ATMs. All of that and far more, AUB customers can use such features, at the convenient time and place without having to visit the Bank's branches, which is a quantum leap in easily accessing AUB banking services. Commenting on the launch of the new services, Huda Al-Madani, General Manager of Digital Transformation & Innovation, said: "The success of our successive steps to develop our mobile banking service is a new episode in AUB's digital leadership series that has been achieved through a package of innovative functions which we will continue to increase, develop and deliver to our customers. Al-Madani added: AUB is dedicated to implementing its digital transformation strategy aimed at supporting clients in adapting the radical technological transformations that have taken place in the banking sector. We are pleased that our digital banking services gain increasing recognition as a result of our strategy that places the needs of clients as a top priority, as we understand their contemporary lifestyle and their need for fast, simple and safe banking services.

NBK Mobile Banking App added to Huawei AppGallery

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen on providing top-notch banking services to customers. In this context, the bank announces adding the NBK Mobile Banking App to Huawei AppGallery, enabling Huawei smartphone users to download the app and enjoy a full banking experience in their hands.

NBK Mobile Banking App is now available on Huawei AppGallery, which is the world's 3rd largest app marketplace with more than 400 million monthly active users. NBK Mobile Banking comes at the forefront of services that provides customers with an easy and convenient way to do their banking

Walmart teaming with Microsoft in bid for TikTok

SAN FRANCISCO: US retail giant Walmart said Thursday it had teamed with Microsoft to buy TikTok, the Chinese-owned short-form video app that has come under fire from the administration of President Donald Trump. The app has been at the center of a diplomatic storm between Washington and Beijing since Trump signed an executive order on August 6 giving Americans 45 days to stop doing business with its Chinese parent company ByteDance.

The president claims TikTok could be used by China to track the locations of federal employees, build dossiers on people for blackmail, and conduct corporate espionage. The order effectively set a deadline for a sale of TikTok to a US company, with Trump insisting that the US should get a cut for its role in making the deal happen.

"We are confident that a Walmart and Microsoft partnership would meet both the expectations of US TikTok users while satisfying the concerns of US government regulators," the retailer told AFP.

Walmart is likely interested in TikTok helping it better connect with younger shoppers who turn to the internet for lifestyle trends, according to analysts. Younger people are much less likely to shop at Walmart, whether online or in real-world stores, according to GlobalData Retail managing director Neil Saunders.

"A social platform like TikTok would give Walmart easy access to the very audience it wants and needs to attract," Saunders said. Having access to the social media sensation could help Walmart's marketing campaigns while tapping into "a rich seam of data" or product development and more, according to Saunders.

The potential gold mine of younger users' data could also help Walmart compete more strongly with online retail rival Amazon. Walmart saw its profits jump in latest quarter as e-commerce sales surged during the coron-

quickly and hassle-free from the comfort of their homes. Therefore, NBK continuously works on upgrading this service, with more than 17 new updates added to the app last year, enabling customers to make various transactions by themselves, without the need to do them in branch.

On this occasion, Hala Al-Shoaibi, Head of Digital Service Quality Management, National Bank of Kuwait said: "At NBK, we remain committed to place the best digital banking solutions in the hands of our customers, and strive to provide innovative digital banking options that enhance customer experience and meet all their needs."

Al-Shoaibi added: "We are always keen on upgrading the NBK Mobile Banking App, with the aim of providing top-notch banking service to customers 24/7, thus enabling them to do their banking safely, quickly and easily. Al-Shoaibi pointed out that the bank is working diligently to provide all new services to customers, in addition to upgrading existing services to ensure enriching

avirus pandemic and US government stimulus payments boosted spending, the company recently reported. Walmart teaming with US technology colossus Microsoft was "the final piece of the puzzle that ultimately cements Microsoft successfully acquiring TikTok's US operations for likely \$35 billion to \$40 billion," according to Wedbush analyst Dan Ives.

'High stakes poker'

"While deal negotiations will be complex, with a number of technology and data privacy issues that need to be worked out before an agreement is inked, we believe ByteDance is playing a game of high stakes poker with Microsoft looking like the only true white knight around," Ives said in a note to investors. TikTok CEO Kevin Mayer said Wednesday he had quit the company as tensions soar between Washington and Beijing over the platform.

Former Disney executive Mayer, who has only been in the post since May, said in a letter to staff that the "political environment has sharply changed" in recent weeks.

He added that TikTok expects "to reach a resolution very soon." Mayer's departure was taken by some market watchers as a sign that a deal to sell TikTok is imminent, with Oracle-owned by Trump donor Larry Ellison also said to be in the bidding.

ByteDance confirmed to AFP that current general manager Vanessa Pappas will become TikTok's interim head. According to Pappas' LinkedIn profile, she formerly worked as global head of creative insights at YouTube. "In a nutshell, we believe Mayer leaving at this juncture is more smoke that TikTok (and ByteDance) realizes a sale of its US operations is a matter of when, not if, at this point, despite court challenges," Wedbush analyst Ives said. Mayer's resignation came days after TikTok, which has been downloaded 175 million times in the US and more than a billion times worldwide, filed a lawsuit arguing that Trump's order was a misuse of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. The platform-on which users share often playful short-form videos-is not "an unusual and extraordinary threat," it said. The platform's kaleidoscopic feeds of clips feature everything from dance routines and hair-dye tutorials to jokes about daily life and politics. —AFP

their banking experience.

NBK Mobile Banking allows customers to make various banking transactions quickly and easily, including: local and international transfers, NBK Quick Pay, e-Payments, adding new beneficiaries, increasing monthly transfer limit, viewing transactions, making credit card payments. Furthermore, e-Payments that is available on NBK Mobile Banking is a quick and easy way to avail a variety of advanced services that enable customers to make hassle-free electronic payments at any time, including bill payment for the following companies: Telecom companies, iTunes, Google Play, Amazon, Apple Music, Skype and Spotify.



Hala Al-Shoaibi



In this file photo a Walmart logo is seen outside a store in Washington, DC. US retail giant Walmart said it had teamed with Microsoft in a bid to buy short-form video app TikTok. —AFP

Burgan Bank premier customers to get deal from Marina Hotel

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank presents an exclusive special package of offers for its Premier customers to enjoy the summer vacation at Marina Hotel- Kuwait, one of the most luxurious 5-star hotels located in the heart of the vibrant, up-market shopping district of Salmiya near the beach and Marina shopping Mall.

The luxury package entitles Burgan Bank's premier customers 20 percent off at the "Atlantis" and "Six Palms" restaurants, a 10 percent discount on yearly memberships at the "Coral Reef Marina" Health Club and a special accommodation price per night. To benefit from the offer and enjoy a great summer, customers need to use either their Premier Debit Card (Visa signature), Qatar Airways MasterCard World Credit Card, or the Visa signature Credit Card. Bookings can be made through the Marina Hotel contact center.

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- Specialised in the Diagnosis and treatment of all adult cardiac diseases, including those cases that need urgent intervention in Cath lab (primary angioplasty).



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Lifestyle | Music & Movies



This file picture shows a view of the historic Metro cinema theatre as a man walks past, along the commercial Talaat Harb street in the almost deserted city center Egypt's capital Cairo, on the first day of Eid Al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday which starts at the conclusion of the holy fasting month of Ramadan.



A view of the landmark Miami cinema theatre along the commercial Talaat Harb street in the city center of Egypt's capital Cairo. — AFP photos



This combination of pictures created on August 27, 2020 shows (top left to right) a 1930s portrait of prominent Egyptian theatre and cinema actor Youssef Wahbi (1898-1982); a 1940s portrait of prominent Egyptian (of Assyrian Iraqi extraction) theatre and cinema actor Naguib Al-Rihani (1887-1949); prominent Egyptian theatre and cinema actor Anwar Wagdi (1904-1955); (bottom left to right) a 1940s portrait of prominent Egyptian theatre and cinema actor Mahmoud Al-Meligui (1910-1983); a 1950s portrait of prominent Egyptian theatre and cinema actor Kamal Al-Shennawi (1921-2011); and a 1950s photo of prominent Italian-Egyptian theatre and cinema actor Stefan Rosti (1891-1964).

EGYPTIAN CINEMA HIT HARD BY PANDEMIC

Egyptian cinemas are slowly reopening after months of lockdown, but the huge sector sometimes dubbed "the Hollywood of the Arab world" has taken a severe hit during the pandemic. After movie theatres were shuttered because of Covid-19 from at least March to June, filmmakers and the wider sector are bracing for an uncertain future. "This year has been a great loss to the movie industry in Egypt," actor Sherif Ramzy told AFP. "The industry came to a complete halt for months." Egypt has a long love affair with the silver screen, and usually cinema fans will queue outside movie houses for the latest romantic comedy, drama or action flick.

But this year major summer releases were put on hold indefinitely, and production of many movies was at least temporarily suspended. Only a single film, the sci-fi comedy "Al Ghassala" (The Washing Machine), was released during the Eid al-Adha Muslim celebration, which typically sees six or seven movies premiere every year. In June, the government threw a lifeline to the reeling industry by allowing cinemas to open their doors but keep attendance capped at 25 percent to ensure social distancing. "Even the partial reopening of theatres has not helped get the ball rolling," said Ramzy. Egypt, with over 100 million people, has recorded nearly 100,000 infections and more than 5,000 deaths. Daily new reported cases have fallen but Egypt fears a second wave may hit as lockdown measures are eased.

'Zero income'

For the industry, the public health crisis has dealt a severe blow at a time Egyptian cinema has been struggling to reclaim its past glory as the region's creative powerhouse. Egyptian movies have for decades been popular across the Middle East and North Africa, profoundly influencing popular culture and spreading the

country's vernacular. The Egyptian film industry had its golden age in the mid 20th century when screen star Omar Sharif, the actor Gamil Ratib and director Youssef Chahine achieved world fame.



In this file photo former Egyptian model and actress Ragaa Al-Geddawy is seen during a visit to Beirut.

2011 uprising that unseated longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak, when production slowed and cinema audiences declined. But industry professionals say the novel coronavirus pandemic has been like no other crisis.

Filmmakers have been forced to reduce staff and regularly sanitize locations that are typically teeming with huge crews and frenetic activity. A film set may usually see more than a 100 people at a time, including stylists and make-up artists who are in close contact with actors. Several Egyptian celebrities, including prominent actors, reported testing positive for the virus following the end of filming Ramadan series.

In July, seasoned actress Ragaa Al-Geddawy died after a weeks-long struggle with the illness. The Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies says the industry employs at least half a

million people, 40 percent of whom are on fixed contracts. "We have been paying staff and crew members for months and we had zero income," said Ramzy, who also manages a production company.

Boost to streaming

Last year the Egyptian film industry made 33 movies, earning \$72 million, according to an ECES report. The figure is small by global standards, but "in terms of revenues, it is still the highest in the Arab world," said ECES. "Projections for 2020 are far less, especially as dependence on movie tickets sales has now become too risky," said producer Mohamed Hefzy. "We will have to wait until a full return to normalcy, which may not be this year at all. Perhaps next year." Lockdowns have boosted online streaming services everywhere, and in Egypt Watch iT, which launched last year, became one of the biggest players.

Following the March launch of its #stayhome promotion, "the service saw a huge increase of the subscription base," Moustapha Bekheet, its vice president and managing director, told AFP via email. During Ramadan, the service which already boasts more than 65,000 hours of online content, acquired multiple top series and TV shows. The Ramadan season brought an increase in daily active users to "more than 89 percent," he said. Hefzy, who is also president of the Cairo International Film Festival, said the transition to online platforms is "a natural development, and COVID-19 only hastened it". They serve as a hedge for producers against losses, especially during the pandemic, he added. "But they cannot substitute movie theatres," he said. "The cinema experience remains to be unique and important and it should be preserved." — AFP



In this file photo taken on July 28, 2008 veteran Egyptian actor Gamil Rateb (left) attends the funeral of legendary filmmaker Youssef Chahine at the Roman Catholic Church of the Resurrection in the capital Cairo.



This file photo dated 1964 shows Egyptian comedian Fuad Al-Muhandes (left) and his ex-wife actress Shuikar (center) kissing late veteran theatre and cinema actor Youssef Wahbi, while film star Hind Rustom (right) watches, in a scene from director Fateen Abdel Wahab's movie "Confession of a Husband".



This combination of pictures created shows (from left to right) a 1970s photo of Egyptian film star Faten Hamama (1931-2015) at a Beirut restaurant during the filming of one of her films in the Lebanese capital; a 1950s portrait of Egyptian film star Hind Rostom (1931-2011); a 1960s portrait of Egyptian film star Nadia Lotfi (1937-2020); and a 1973 portrait of Egyptian film star Suad Hosni (1942-2001) during a visit to Beirut. Egyptian cinemas are slowly reopening after months of lockdown, but the huge sector sometimes dubbed the Hollywood of the Arab world has taken a severe hit during the pandemic.



This combination of pictures shows (from left to right) a 1970 photo of Egyptian film star Rushdi Abaza (1927-1980); a 1950s portrait of Egyptian film star Shukri Sarhan (1924-1997); an early 1970s photo of Egyptian film star Ahmed Ramzi (1930-2012); and an early 1950s portrait of international Egyptian film star Omar Sharif (1932-2015).

Beatles fans get back to where they once belonged



A plaque on the wall of the Cavern Club marks the number of times the British rock band The Beatles played in the venue as it reopens to the public with live music to host their annual 'Beatleweek' celebration of music by The Beatles in Liverpool, north west England.

Liverpool's Cavern Club, where The Beatles learnt their trade, has hosted its first gig since it was forced to close due to the coronavirus outbreak. "It's just great to be back," said Peter Naylor, a superfan of the Fab Four, as the city centre venue reopened its doors on Thursday. "Such an iconic club, such great music. We missed it, missed coming down here," he told AFP. Billed as "the most famous club in the world" and the "cradle of British pop music", the Cavern shut its doors in late March as the coronavirus pandemic took hold in Britain. Its reopening coincided with the first day of the seven-day annual International Beatleweek festival, which celebrates the music of the biggest pop band in history.

Most events have been cancelled this year due to restrictions on audience numbers, but the cramped underground venue is hosting gigs and live-stream-

ing them to fans across the globe. Events held across the northwest English city coincide with the 50th year since the band broke up. "It does feel a little bit like a cabaret club rather than the hot and sweaty Cavern which we're used to," said club director Bill Hecke. "But it's just nice to be back and seeing happy smiling faces and the musicians play such amazing music once again." Performer Paul Jones said it was "an honor" and "privilege" to kick off the show. "I can't tell you the feeling to finally be able to open our doors again to the public, to all these Beatles fans who want to come in and celebrate what they should be celebrating, which is live music in such a historic venue," he said.

"It's not quite the live, hot and sweaty, everybody dancing atmosphere that we're used to, but it's a massive step in the right direction." Like many enter-

tainment venues across the country, the club on Mathew Street has been hit hard by the pandemic, with tourists making up a large proportion of its audience. It has lost more than £600,000 pounds (\$788,000, 671,000 euros) in revenue, leading to one in six staff members losing their jobs. Although its famous red brick walls are once more echoing to the sound of music, only 150 people are allowed into the 500-capacity venue. In all, The Beatles-John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr played the club 274 times, between February 1961 and August 1963. They were initially paid £5 — the equivalent of just under £100 today—rising to £300 shortly before they rocketed to stardom on the global stage. — AFP



Musician Paul Jones plays Beatles songs to the audience in the Cavern Club as it reopens to the public with live music to host their annual 'Beatleweek' celebration of music by The Beatles in Liverpool, north west England.



Busts of the members of British rock band The Beatles are displayed in the Cavern Club.



A woman smokes under the neon sign for the Cavern Club as it reopens to the public with live music to host their annual 'Beatleweek' celebration of music.



Beatles merchandise is displayed for sale in the Cavern Club.— AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features

Ready, set, Zoom: India gypsy dancers take their art online

As a blackout plunged her desert dwelling into darkness, Suwa Devi, a dancer belonging to India's Kalbeliya gypsy community, asked her neighbour to turn on his jeep's headlights so she could continue teaching her Zoom class, outside. The coronavirus pandemic has forced many people to go online, but the largely nomadic, marginalized Kalbeliya face bigger challenges than most, with several living in mud huts or tents with patchy electricity and non-existent wifi. "In the beginning, I had no idea how to make this work," dancer Aasha Sapera told AFP, describing her early forays into hosting classes on Zoom. "We had so many internet problems. Lessons would often get cancelled

because the connection was terrible," said Sapera, whose students span the globe from Japan to Brazil.

Virus restrictions wiped out the 26-year-old single mother's livelihood as a performer in tourism-dependent Rajasthan state. Like others in the community, she has received no financial aid from the government. The struggle to survive is not new to the Kalbeliya. Although they have not faced persecution and slaughter on the scale of Europe's Sinti and Roma gypsies, they have long been condemned to living on the fringes of Indian society.

British colonial rulers designated the group as a "criminal tribe" in the 1800s and they continue to be stigmatized as thieves and prostitutes in independent India. A 1972 ban on snake charming—their traditional economic pursuit—pushed them to eke out a living as dancers, with many learning the art from their mothers and grandmothers, as Sapera did.

Sway like a snake

The dance, which is meant to mimic the swaying movements of a serpent, with performers usually dressed in black, was classified as "intangible cultural heritage" by UNESCO in 2010 and has attracted a steady stream of global artists and researchers to Rajasthan. Such access to international collaborators played a key role in their evolution as digital entrepreneurs, said Sapera, who is one of 11 dancers on Kalbeliya World, an online platform offering classes for a \$10 fee that goes directly to the performers.

"They were very enthusiastic. They were also intimidated", said Belgian anthropologist Ayla Joncheere, one of the co-founders of Kalbeliya World, describing the dancers' initial response to the idea. Joncheere and the group's other co-founders Aakansha Maheshwari and Christina Gomes set up a "buddy system", partnering each dancer with an overseas counterpart who could help navigate the administrative and technological challenges.

Since its launch in mid-May, some 600 students from 20 countries including Chile, Morocco, France and Finland have logged on to learn dance from the Kalbeliya. The lessons, and the income they bring in, have been a lifesaver for the women, many of whom are the sole breadwinners for their large

18 films among the approximately 60 presented that would vie for the top award, the Golden Lion. He promised that the festival would preserve the "liveliness of contemporary cinema". Despite its scaled-down size with theatre capacity reduced by about half, La Biennale di Venezia takes on greater importance this year due to the cancellation of rival film festivals across the globe, among them the glitzy Cannes Film Festival on the Cote d'Azur in France.

Unprecedented territory

But just days ahead of the opening, organizers are scrambling to navigate unprecedented territory amid uncertain attendance and last-minute cancellations. Whereas Brad Pitt, Meryl Streep and Scarlett Johansson provided the star firepower at last year's festival, ongoing travel restrictions—especially a travel ban from the United States into Europe—mean that most Hollywood elites will be no-shows, along with actors and directors from China, India and South America.

Those arriving from outside Europe's Schengen zone will have to submit results of a Covid-19 test just before their departure, with a second test carried out in Venice, meaning that some attendees may have to cancel. Earlier this week, the festival announced that American actor Matt Dillon would be a last-minute substitute on the jury for Romanian director Cristian Popescu. No reason was given for Puiu's absence, but industry trade magazines noted he had given a speech earlier this month in which he said it was "inhumane" to watch movies with a mask on. Those confirmed as attending include, among others, British actress Tilda Swinton, Spanish director Pedro Almodovar, US director Oliver Stone and Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen.

More women directors

The uncertain lineup of stars and dearth of top names leaves Australian actress Cate Blanchett, president of the jury, to take up the mantle of celebrity-and social activism-at Venice. Blanchett was the leader of the #MeToo women's march up the red carpet steps at Cannes two years ago that sought to bring attention to the lack of parity and diversity in cinema. The presence of Blanchett helps raise such awareness while the festival seeks to stanch criticism leveled in recent years over the glaring lack of women directors in festivals' top lineups.

The Oscar-winning headliner told Variety magazine on Thursday that this year's eight women directors in the main competition lineup of Venice is "a direct response to the positive advances that have been made this year". Others say it is too early to tell whether a page has turned. "It's all about being consistent and diligent and believing that women make movies as well as men, and using that in the way you program," said Melissa Silverstein, founder and publisher of "Women and Hollywood", which advocates for gender diversity and inclusion in film. Last year's festival opened under controversy after the inclusion in the lineup of French-Polish director Roman Polanski, who fled the United States after his 1977 conviction of rape of a 13-year-old girl. There were also only two female directors in the selection.—AFP



Kalbeliya gypsy dancer Aasha Sapera practices before hosting online dance classes amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic at Jodhpur.



Kalbeliya gypsy dancer Aasha Sapera does her make-up before hosting online dance classes amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in Jodhpur.



In this picture Kalbeliya gypsy dancer Aasha Sapera practices before hosting online dance classes amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in Jodhpur. — AFP photos

extended families. The group's success has prompted other Kalbeliya dancers to follow in their footsteps, but with mixed results.

'Too difficult'

When Binu Sapera-members of the tribe often use the same last name meaning snake-charmer in Hindi-first ventured into the world of online classes, she hosted a few lessons on Instagram, inviting students to pay what they wanted. None of the people who signed up contributed. "It was so upsetting. I had spent so much money getting my mobile data recharged so I could host those lessons, and it was all for nothing," she told AFP. A British backpacker friend then helped her set up classes on Zoom, where she now teaches a small pool of students and earns around 11,000 rupees (\$150) a month, barely half of what she used to make before the pandemic.

The loss of her livelihood coupled with a 20,000-rupee debt has left the 23-year-old mother-of-two, who lives in a mud hut with no electricity, deeply ambivalent about the Kalbeliya's future as rapid change comes to India. "I desperately want my children to study and pursue other jobs, away from



dance," she said. "I used to love our way of life but now I feel that it's all just too difficult. You can't depend on it for anything."

Female breadwinners

Yet other Kalbeliya performers like Aasha Sapera believe dance may well be the key to empowering women and ending widespread discrimination against the community. Dance gave Sapera the confidence to leave an unhappy marriage-divorce is a rarity in the conservative community—because she could easily out-earn her musician husband and raise their six-year-old daughter on her own.

Such financial freedom is a watershed for women in a community that high-profile dancer Gulabo Sapera says used to bury baby girls alive, reflecting India's longstanding gender bias in favor of men. Gulabo, who has spoken of how she was rescued from such a fate, is one of a handful of dancers to enjoy international success—helping to further ease the stigma. Online classes, and the global reach they offer, could expand those possibilities, with Kalbeliya World planning to continue hosting lessons long after pandemic restrictions are relaxed.

With so much uncertainty still in the air, her devotion to dance has kept Aasha Sapera going. "Dance has given me an identity.... I never want it to fade away," she said. "I want my daughter to finish school. But I also want her to learn how to dance."—AFP

Kalbeliya gypsy dancer Aasha Sapera hosts an online dance class amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in Jodhpur.

Venice Film Festival seeks to dodge coronavirus and controversy

What if you threw a film festival and nobody came? That, in essence, is the challenge facing organizers of this year's Venice Film Festival, the glamorous annual competition where stars, critics, photographers and industry executives mingle on the bustling Lido, overlooking sandy beaches and the blue Adriatic. Provided, of course, it's a normal year.



This combination of pictures shows 6 of the 7 jury members of the upcoming 77th Venice Film Festival, Jury President Australian actress Cate Blanchett (top center) in Rome, and (clockwise from top left) Jury members, French actress Ludivine Sagnier in Rome, German director Christian Petzold in Berlin, Austrian director Veronika Franz in Venice, British director Joanna Hogg in Berlin and US actor Matt Dillon in Cannes. Italian writer Nicola Lagioia is missing from this combination of pictures. — AFP

But in 2020, the world's oldest film festival is forced to walk a tightrope between preserving its lustre as the premier launch pad for Academy Award-winning films, while safely navigating the coronavirus crisis and averting the controversy over gender inequality that has dogged it in the past. Opening Wednesday and continuing until September 12, the prestigious event now in its 77th year will be the first international film festival since the pandemic shuttered competitions around the world. It has put in place a host of safety measures—from limited seating to thermal scanners, to a fan-free red carpet—to protect attendees as Covid-19 cases continue to climb in Italy and around the world.

In July, festival director Alberto Barbera declared the event "saved" as he announced the

18 films chasing top prize at Venice Film Festival

The Golden Lion, the top prize at the Venice Film Festival set to kick off September 2, will be awarded to one film among 18 contenders from across the globe. Here are the films in the running:

'Le Sorelle Macaluso' (The Macaluso Sisters): Italy

Five sisters in Palermo reminisce, quibble and recount secrets as they reunite at a family funeral in Emma Dante's film.

'The World to Come': US

In Mona Fastwold's upstate 19th century New York, Abigail (Katherine Waterston) tends a farm with her husband (Casey Affleck) but falls in love with a neighbour.

'Nuevo Orden' (New Order): Mexico/France

A dystopian film from Michel Franco depicts social and economic disparity in Mexico, as a well-to-do family seeks to escape the chaos of daily life.

'Amants' (Lovers): France

Nicole Garcia's film tells the story of Lisa and Simon, lovers who paths cross again three years after Simon fled Paris.

'Laila in Haifa': Israel/France

Five women's stories interweave in the course of one night at a Haifa club. As one of the few spaces where Israelis and Palestinians can mingle, director Amos Gitai turns the venue itself into a protagonist.

'Dorogie Tovarisch!' (Dear Comrades!): Russia

Based on the true story of a 1962 labor strike in Novochoerkassk, USSR, in which 26 protesters were shot by Soviet troops. Andrei Konchalosky's film retells events kept secret until the 1990s.

'Spy No Tsuma' (Wife of a Spy): Japan

Against the backdrop of a looming World War II and the invasion of Manchuria, a wife's love for her Kobe merchant husband is tested when another woman enters the picture in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's film.

'Khorshid' (Sun Children): Iran

Ali and his friends work small jobs and hustle to support their families. Majid Majidi's film explores what happens when Ali learns of an underground treasure.

'Pieces of a Woman': Canada/Hungary

Martha and Sean (Vanessa Kirby and Shia LaBeouf) are a Boston couple whose baby dies during a home birth. Director Kornel Mundruczo shows how grieving Martha navigates her relationships with her husband and mother (Ellen Burstyn), while facing the midwife (Molly Parker) in court.

'Miss Marx': Italy/Belgium

Susanna Nicchiarelli tells the story of Eleanor, the youngest daughter of Karl Marx, who battled for the rights of workers and women and the abolition of child labor.

'Padrenostro': Italy

The life of 10-year-old Valerio is turned upside down when he and his mother witness a terrorist attack against his father. But director Claudio Noce explores how a chance encounter with a rebellious boy changes their lives.

'Notturmo': Italy/France/Germany

Shot over three years on the borders of Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria and Lebanon, Gianfranco Rosi's documentary follows people trying to cobble together an existence despite the violence around them.

'Sniegu Juz Nigby Nie Bedzie' (Never Gonna Snow Again): Poland/Germany

A mysterious masseur from Ukraine, Zhenia becomes a guru for a spiritually barren gated community in this film by Malgorzata Szumowska and Michal Englert.

'The Disciple': India

Director Chaitanya Tamhane tells the story of Sharad, chasing his dream of becoming an Indian classical vocalist amid the chaos of life in the sprawling metropolis of Mumbai.

'Und Morgen die Ganze Welt' (And Tomorrow the Entire World): Germany/France

In Julia von Heinz's film, Luisa and her anti-fascist group question how far they're willing to go to battle hatred after a wave of racist attacks strikes Germany.

'Quo vadis, Aida?': Bosnia-Herzegovina

Based on true events in 1995 Bosnia, Aida is a translator in Srebrenica working for United Nations peacekeepers. When the Bosnian Serb army invades, she and thousands of others seek safety in the Dutch UN camp in Jasmila Zbanic's film.

'Nomadland': US

Director Chloe Zhao tells the story of Fern (Frances McDormand), who sets off from her impoverished Nevada town in her van to scratch out a living as a modern-day nomad.

'In Between Dying': Azerbaijan/US

Davud is a restless young man on a journey of self-discovery through Hilal Baydarov's film, keeping ahead of men pursuing him. When his journey ends at home, Davud finds the love he's seeking—but is it too late? —AFP

Sports

Photo of the Day



Luciano Benavides rides in the Empty Quarter during stage 11 of the Dakar Rally. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Kristoff wins stage one; Pinot crashes

NICE: Alexander Kristoff won the opening stage of the Tour de France while Thibaut Pinot, who is hoping to end the home nation's 35-year wait for a local champion, was one of several riders to take a tumble during a rain-hit ride on Saturday. Norway's Kristoff outsped Danish world champion Mads Pedersen after 156 km around Nice. Pinot trailed by some distance but was credited with the same time as the winner since the massive crash occurred within three kilometers of the finish line on the Promenade des Anglais.

"For the moment he's fine, but you always need to wait a few days to see if there's been consequences or not," Pinot's sports director at Groupama-FDJ, Philippe Mauduit, told Reuters. Dutchman Cees Bol finished third. Colombian Nairo Quintana, twice a Tour runner-up, fell earlier while Pavel Sivakov, one of defending champion Egan Bernal's key lieutenants, hit the ground twice.

"Couldn't have expected a worst start for my first Tour. Two heavy crashes back to back. Hit both my hips and knee pretty bad but still in the mix," said Sivakov. Pre-stage favorites Sam Bennett, Caleb Ewan and Giacomo Nizzolo also crashed on slippery roads as rain wreaked havoc during the stage. Organizers postponed the start of the Tour de France by several weeks due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The race got off to an eventful start as rain made the roads extremely slippery. "There must have been 100 riders crashing. Everyone struggles, everyone got scared," said Pinot's team mate Valentin Madouas. "It was like an ice rink." The multiple incidents had prompted the Jumbo Visma team to ask the peloton to take it slow in a descent, but Astana refused to take the foot off the gas pedal. Their decision backfired, however, as their team leader Miguel Angel Lopez aquaplaned head first into a road sign. The Colombian got back on his bike. — Reuters

Walker sharp in Blue Jays debut

Indians beat Cardinals; Cubs blank Reds

TORONTO: Taijuan Walker pitched six scoreless innings in his Toronto Blue Jays debut and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Cavan Biggio each had two RBIs in a 5-0 victory over the Baltimore Orioles on Saturday night at Buffalo. Walker (3-2), who was acquired Thursday in a trade with the Seattle Mariners, allowed four hits and three walks and struck out four in his first outing in 10 days. It was his 100th career major league start. The Blue Jays have won the first two games of the four-game series and have defeated the Orioles in all five meetings between the teams this season. Orioles right-hander Alex Cobb (1-3) allowed five runs (four earned), eight hits and two walks in four 1/3 innings. He struck out two.

Indians 2, Cardinals 1 (12 innings)

Tyler Naquin ripped a go-ahead RBI double in extra innings to lift visiting Cleveland past St. Louis. Naquin's decisive hit off losing pitcher Alex Reyes (1-1) drove the Indians to their fourth straight victory and 11th in 14 games. Nick Wittgren (2-0) picked up the win after tossing 1 2/3 scoreless innings. Brad Hand earned his 10th save after retiring the side in the 12th.

Rockies 4, Padres 3

Pinch-hitter Daniel Murphy singled home Garrett Hampson with one out in the ninth inning to give Colorado a walk-off win over visiting San Diego. Ryan McMahon singled to open the ninth against Padres reliever Craig Stammen (3-2). Hampson then drew a walk. But Josh Fuentes bunted into a force play. Padres first baseman Eric Hosmer throwing McMahon out at third. But Murphy followed with a line-drive single to center, scoring Hampson as the throw home from Padres center fielder Trent Grisham was up the third base line. Daniel Bard (2-2) got the win with a scoreless ninth inning. Colorado led 3-0 as right-handed starter Antonio Senzatela shut out the Padres on seven hits and a walk with three strikeouts over seven innings. But the Padres scored three times in the top of the eighth against reliever Carlos Estevez.

Yankees 2, Mets 1

Clint Frazier scored on a wild pitch by Dellin Betances with one out in the ninth inning as the host Yankees snapped a seven-game losing streak with a victory over the Mets. The Yankees had runners at first and third after Jordy Mercer singled to left. Erik Kratz appeared to be setting up for a bunt when the 0-1 high fastball from Betances (0-1) deflected off catcher Wilson Ramos' glove. Aroldis Chapman (1-1) pitched a scoreless ninth to get the victory.

Tigers 8, Twins 2 (Game 1)

Matthew Boyd notched his first win of the season and

host Detroit pounded out 16 hits while rolling to a big victory over Minnesota in the seven-inning opener of a doubleheader. Making his seventh start of the season, Boyd (1-4) allowed two runs (one earned) on four hits and struck out six while walking none in six innings. Victor Reyes had four hits and scored a run for the Tigers. Nelson Cruz homered for Minnesota. Starting pitcher Randy Dobnak (5-2) gave up a season-high six runs on 12 hits in 4 1/3 innings.

Tigers 4, Twins 2 (Game 2)

Miguel Cabrera hit a go-ahead two-run homer. Tarik Skubal recorded his first major league victory and host Detroit completed a doubleheader sweep of Minnesota. Cabrera scored two runs and Jeimer Candelario also blasted a two-run homer in the nightcap. That duo combined for four of the team's five hits. Cabrera's long ball was his first extra-base hit since Aug. 8. Skubal (1-1) limited the Twins to two runs on three hits in five innings. He was making his third career start.

Angels 16, Mariners 3

Jo Adell hit the first two home runs of his major league career and drove in three, leading Los Angeles to a blowout win over Seattle in Anaheim, Calif. The 16 runs were a season-best for the Angels and the most since they scored 21 against the Boston Red Sox on July 2, 2016. Adell, the No. 6-ranked prospect overall going into the season, was initially called up to make his major league debut Aug. 4, but struggled. Going into Saturday's game, Adell was hitting just .175 with two extra-base hits and one RBI in 17 major league games. But Adell broke through on Saturday. The first home run was a 437-foot blast off Mariners starter Justus Sheffield in the second inning that snapped a 1-1 tie and sent the Angels on their way to an easy win. Adell homered again leading off the sixth inning off Mariners reliever Aaron Fletcher.

Dodgers 7, Rangers 4

Cody Bellinger and Max Muncy ripped home runs as Los Angeles defeated reeling Texas in the middle of a three-game interleague series between the teams in Arlington, Texas. The victory was the 14th in the past 17 games for Los Angeles, which, at 25-10, has the best record in the Major Leagues. Texas, which won the opener of this series on Friday, lost for the 11th time in its past 13 outings. Dodgers starter Ross Stripling lasted just four innings and faced two batters in the fifth before the Los Angeles bullpen took over. Blake Treinen (3-1), the first of five Los Angeles relievers, hurled 1 1/3 innings to earn the win. Kenley Jansen pitched the ninth for his ninth save of the year.

Nadal, Federer call for 'unity' as Djokovic hails new players association

PARIS: Novak Djokovic shrugged off concerns of Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer and announced the formation of a new men's pro tennis players' association that promises to put him on a collision course with his two elite rivals. Nadal and Federer called for "unity, not separation" after reports their longtime rival was spearheading a breakaway union of tennis professionals. But after a meeting among players at the conclusion of the Western & Southern Open in New York—where Nadal and Federer were absent—Djokovic said the new group was launched.

"After today's successful meeting, we are excited to announce the beginning of the Professional Tennis Players Association (PTPA)," he wrote on Instagram, posting a picture of several dozen players gathered on a tennis court at Flushing Meadows, where the US Open starts on Monday. "The first player only association in tennis since 1972," he wrote. Djokovic had acknowledged after his victory over Milos Raonic in Saturday's ATP final that the group was a work in progress.

"We don't have all the answers right now. We are just trying to get a sense of how many players do really want to join this initiative. Then we will take it from there," he

said. He said there was no minimum or maximum target membership, but that he was focusing on reaching out to the top 500 players in singles and top 200 in doubles. "We're hoping we can get majority of those players. We have to start somewhere," he said. He said the new organization and the ATP "can co-exist, and should co-exist at the beginning." "Now, where that's going to take us, time will tell."

World number two Nadal pleaded with Djokovic to rethink a breakaway. "The world is living a difficult and complicated situation. I personally believe these are times to be calm and work all of us together in the same direction. It is time for unity, not for separation," said the 19-time major winner. "These are moments where big things can be achieved as long as the world of tennis is united. "We all, players, tournaments and governing bodies have to work together. We have a bigger problem and separation and disunion is definitely not the solution."

Federer, a 20-time Slam winner, quickly added his support to Nadal. "I agree @RafaelNadal," tweeted Federer. "These are uncertain and challenging times, but I believe it's critical for us to stand united as players, and as a sport, to pave the best way forward." Djokovic said he accepted the position of his "Big Three" rivals but disagrees. "Of course I would love to have Roger and Rafa on board. Of course I would love to have all the players on board," Djokovic said. "But I understand. I truly understand that some of them have different opinions and they don't think the time is right. Again, I think the time is right." —AFP



ARLINGTON: Mitch White #42 of the Los Angeles Dodgers pitches against the Texas Rangers in the bottom of the eighth inning during his Major League Baseball debut at Globe Life Field on in Arlington, Texas. — AFP

Astros 4, A's 2 (Game 1)

Kyle Tucker and Josh Reddick each hit a home run and Lance McCullers Jr. pitched six solid innings as Houston earned a victory over Oakland in the first game of a doubleheader. It was the Astros' first game since playing a doubleheader against the Los Angeles Angels on Tuesday, while the A's were playing for the first time since Wednesday. The Astros were off Wednesday as a precaution for approaching Hurricane Laura, while both teams declined to play Thursday and Friday to recognize social justice and racial equality. The Astros got things going early Saturday afternoon as Michael Brantley worked a two-out walk in the first inning and Yuli Gurriel doubled to put two aboard. Tucker then lifted his sixth home run of the season to right field off A's starter Chris Bassitt to give Houston a 3-0 lead.

Astros 6, Athletics 3 (Game 2)

Kyle Tucker hit a three-run triple in the first and right-hander Zack Greinke threw five effective innings as host Houston completed a doubleheader sweep of first-place Oakland. Greinke was charged with three runs on six hits in his five innings. He struck out six and did not walk a batter. The Astros have gone 13-5 since leaving Oakland on Aug. 9. A's starter Frankie Montas (2-3) was pulled one out into the fourth, having allowed five runs and six hits. He walked two and struck out five.

Royals 9, White Sox 6

Maikel Franco belted a three-run homer and Kansas City added three solo blasts en route to a victory over host Chicago. Alex Gordon, Ryan O'Hearn and Ryan McBroom had the solo home runs for Kansas City, which scored its last six runs with two outs in an inning. Jake Newberry (1-0) got the win with a scoreless sixth inning after the Royals put five runs on the board in the top of the seventh. Zack Burdi (0-1) sustained his first career loss after allowing five runs in one-third of an inning. The White Sox set a franchise record with 52 home runs in the month, surpassing the 51 in July 2003 and August 2001. They lead the American League with 63 home runs in 2020.

Phillies 4, Braves 1

Rhys Hoskins singled, doubled, homered and drove in three runs to lift host Philadelphia past Atlanta. Andrew McCutchen contributed two hits and two runs for the Phillies, who won their fifth in a row and evened their record at 14-14. Phillies starter Zach Eflin (2-1) tossed seven solid innings before a 38-minute rain delay halted action with one out in the bottom of the seventh. Johan Camargo hit a solo home run for the Braves, who dropped their second straight. Braves starter Josh Tomlin (1-2) lasted only 4 1/3 innings and allowed five hits and four runs, three earned.

Red Sox 5, Nationals 3

Xander Bogaerts belted a three-run homer as host

Boston overcame a five-hit performance from Trea Turner in its victory over Washington. Kevin Pillar added a solo shot and Alex Verdugo had two hits and recorded an out-field assist for the Red Sox, who received 6 2/3 scoreless innings from their bullpen. Ryan Brasier (1-0), who was the sixth of seven Red Sox pitchers on the night, struck out one in one scoreless inning to pick up the win. Howie Kendrick and Adam Eaton each had an RBI single for the Nationals, who stranded 14 runners on base en route to losing for the fourth time in five games.

Cubs 3, Reds 0 (Game 1)

Anthony Rizzo homered twice and Yu Darvish delivered a workmanlike, six-inning effort to win his sixth straight decision as Chicago beat host Cincinnati in the first game of a doubleheader. Rizzo homered early and late to help National League Central-leading Chicago snap a three-game losing streak by taking the seven-inning affair. Darvish (6-1) struck out eight batters and issued a pair of walks. Trevor Bauer (3-2) suffered his second straight losing decision amid a second consecutive subpar outing. The right-hander was charged with all three Chicago runs while yielding four hits, walking two and striking out five over 5 1/3 innings.

Reds 6, Cubs 5 (Game 2)

Nick Castellanos scored the winning run on a wild pitch, as Cincinnati scored twice in the bottom of the seventh for a walk-off victory to earn a doubleheader split against visiting Chicago. Down 4-1 after three innings, the Cubs rallied and took the lead 5-4 on Nico Hoerner's sacrifice fly to right-center field in the sixth. But Cubs closer Craig Kimbrel (0-1) could not make it stand up, issuing three walks and throwing three wild pitches in the bottom of the seventh. Aristides Aquino tied the game with an RBI single to center and Castellanos scored on Kimbrel's third wild pitch—which was strike three to Jose Garcia and would have been the third out of the inning.

Cubs manager David Ross was ejected in the fourth inning for jawing at the umpiring crew after Reds starter Tejay Antone threw over the head of Anthony Rizzo. Warnings were issued, but the benches and bullpens cleared after Chicago's Adbert Alzolay threw high at Cincinnati's Shogo Akiyama in the bottom of the frame. No punches were thrown, but Reds manager David Bell, plus Joey Votto and Jesse Winker were tossed.

Rays 4, Marlins 0

Yandy Diaz had the go-ahead RBI for the second consecutive game and Tampa Bay's pitchers continued to dominate in a shutout win over host Miami. Joey Wendle also starred for Tampa Bay, going 2-for-4 with two RBIs and a pair of doubles. The Rays, who lead the American League East, are on a 17-3 run. Miami, which has lost three straight games, managed just three hits. Only Miguel Rojas, who doubled, had an extra-base hit. —Reuters

Sports

Lightning put Boston Bruins on the verge of elimination

Palat powers Lightning past Bruins after 2-day NHL hiatus

TORONTO: Ondrej Palat scored two goals to lead Tampa Bay to a 3-1 victory over the Boston Bruins on Saturday afternoon in Toronto, putting the Lightning on the cusp of reaching the next round in the Stanley Cup playoffs. Nikita Kucherov collected a pair of assists and goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy made 29 saves for the Lightning, who lead 3-1 in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference semifinal.

The Bruins, outscored 10-2 in the last two games, were guilty of surrendering a couple of prime scoring chances early and paid the price when Palat opened the scoring—the third straight game in which the Lightning forward has scored. After falling behind 3-0 by the end of two periods, the Bruins, the reigning Presidents' Trophy winners for the best regular-season record, got on the board thanks to Jake DeBrusk's power-play goal at 7:04 of the third. But that was close as they could get.

Islanders 3, Flyers 1

Leo Komarov scored the tie-breaking goal in the final seconds of the second period for New York in a win over Philadelphia in Game 3 of an Eastern Conference semifinal series in Toronto. The Islanders lead the

best-of-seven series two games to one. The Islanders scored the final three goals of the game. Matt Martin scored the game-tying goal earlier in the second and Anders Lee added an insurance goal in the third. Goalie Semyon Varlamov made 26 saves. Tyler Pitlick scored in the first for the Flyers. Goalie Carter Hart recorded 26 saves.

Golden Knights 3, Canucks 0

Robin Lehner made 31 saves to record his second shutout in three games and Vegas Golden Knights took a 2-1 lead in their Stanley Cup playoff series against Vancouver in Edmonton. Alex Tuch and Zach Whitecloud netted first-period goals, while Mark Stone added the insurance marker early in the third period for the Golden Knights, who have claimed shutout victories in both wins in this series. Lehner didn't have his busiest night, but he was key during the first period, especially midway through the frame by making big saves on Bo Horvat and Elias Pettersson during a Vancouver five-on-three power play. The Canucks controlled the shot clock in the first period but it was the Golden Knights who did all the scoring, thanks to goals 83 seconds apart by Tuch and Whitecloud.— Reuters



TORONTO: Andrei Vasilevskiy #88 of the Tampa Bay Lightning stops a shot against Ondrej Kase #28 of the Boston Bruins during the third period in Game Four of the Eastern Conference Second Round during the 2020 NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs at Scotiabank Arena. — AFP

Djokovic, Williams chase tennis history in US Open COVID bubble

NEW YORK: The US Open becomes the first Grand Slam of the COVID-19 era when it starts today in a spectator-free bubble at Flushing Meadows following a troubled build-up that saw several top stars withdraw over coronavirus fears. Novak Djokovic and Serena Williams headline a tournament that will be unrecognisable from previous Slams due to strict safety protocols that were still not enough to convince some of tennis's biggest names to travel to New York. Defending champion Rafael Nadal and women's number one Ashleigh Barty are among high-profile absentees at the US National Tennis Center, which just months ago was transformed into an emergency coronavirus field hospital.

Raucous crowds are a hallmark of the US Open, but this the cavernous Arthur Ashe Stadium will be eerily empty to mitigate the risk of infection from the deadly pandemic that has wiped out much of the tennis season, including Wimbledon. The players are being kept in a tightly controlled environment with regular COVID-19 testing throughout the tournament. Any competitor who tests positive once the event has started will be automatically withdrawn. Most competitors are staying at one of two hotels where they will be shuttled the 30 minutes to and from the tennis center.

A few, including Djokovic and Williams, have chosen to stay in private homes where they must pay for 24-hour security approved by the United States Tennis Association (USTA). The security teams are obliged to provide the USTA with information regarding when the player leaves and arrives at the house. No player is allowed to travel anywhere other than between the tennis center and their accommodation. Any player who leaves the bubble without the written consent of organizers will be thrown out of the tournament.

Clijsters faces tough path in bid to reclaim past glory

LONDON: Kim Clijsters will return to Flushing Meadows next week looking to rekindle the magic that saw her emerge from her first retirement in 2009 to win the US Open, but questions about her readiness and a tough draw do not bode well for her chances. The 37-year-old Belgian retired for a second time in 2012 but came back again this year seeking to add to her trophy collection of four Grand Slams, including three US Open titles. The good news for the former world number one is that she will be playing on her preferred hard court surface, which rewards her aggressive style of play.

On the other hand, Clijsters has suffered first-round exits in Dubai and Monterrey and, despite impressive wins as part of the New York Empire in World Team Tennis, she withdrew ahead of this week's Western & Southern Open with an abdominal injury. The US open wildcard will also face a stiff challenge in Russia's 21st seed Ekaterina Alexandrova in the first round on Monday, but she sounded upbeat note on Saturday as she looked ahead to her return to the Grand Slam arena.

"My stomach is feeling much better. I felt in World Team Tennis my level really went up to where I want it to be," she told reporters. "Hopefully I can kind of drag that through here in the matches. I feel like I'm hitting the ball really well in practice. I'm hitting the ball clean." Clijsters initially retired in 2007 and then returned in 2009 as a mum, going on to enjoy the most prolific spell of her career, winning three Grand Slam titles before she quit again.

"Her first comeback was extraordinary when she won as a mom," former US Open finalist and now ESPN broadcaster Pam Shriver told Reuters this week. "This is a much tougher situation because late 30s is a lot different," she said of Clijsters, who is now a mother of three. A factor that could work in the Belgian's favor is the unprecedented nature of this year's Grand Slam. It will be held without fans due to the COVID-19 pandemic and require competitors to stay in a bio-secure bubble, something that may reward more experienced players.

However, her match readiness remains a big question. "If she's healthy and has really been able to train and put in the hours in the last 10 days to get herself to 100%, she can still play at a pretty high level," Shriver said.— Reuters

'Safe'

Temperature checks are mandatory for everyone entering the US Open site, which is dotted with hand sanitizer machines and signs warning everyone to keep six feet from each other. Players are to wear masks when not playing or eating, while ball persons and lines officials will wear face coverings on court on the Ashe and Louis Armstrong stadiums. There will be no lines officials on the outer courts, where Hawk-Eye technology will make line calls. Organizers are limiting the locker rooms to 30 players at one time, with competitors encouraged to shower and then head outside as quickly as possible where activities including basketball hoops have been put up.

Briton Andy Murray, the 2012 US Open champion, said the atmosphere felt "pretty sad," but he praised the precautionary measures. "It feels safe and I'm happy I decided to come," he told reporters in an online press conference. The absence of world number two Nadal due to coronavirus concerns and Swiss legend Roger Federer, who is recovering from knee surgery, hands Djokovic a golden chance to close the gap on his fierce rivals in the records race.

Djokovic has captured five of the past seven men's singles Slam crowns and is overwhelming favorite to capture a fourth US Open title in September 13's final. A win on the hard courts would take the 33-year-old to 18 Grand Slam titles, behind Nadal on 19 and Federer on 20. The Serbian, who overcame a neck injury to lift the ATP Western & Southern Open Saturday, begins his quest against Bosnia and Herzegovina's 107th-ranked Damir Dzumhur today evening.

Asterisk?

He could meet fourth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas or world number seven Alexander Zverev in the semi-finals before a possible championship match against Austrian second seed Dominic Thiem, who pushed Djokovic to five sets before falling in this year's Australian Open final. Djokovic said it will be strange without the "explosive" energy of 22,000 fans packed into Arthur Ashe Stadium

Matsuyama, Johnson deadlocked atop PGA BMW Championship

WASHINGTON: Japan's Hideki Matsuyama opened with an eagle and matched Dustin Johnson in shooting a one-under 69 to share the lead after Saturday's third round of the US PGA's BMW Championship. Johnson, coming off a 30-under par score and an 11-shot victory a week ago at the Northern Trust, shared a two-stroke edge with Matsuyama at 1-under 209 through 54 holes at Olympia Fields in suburban Chicago. "This is pretty much a major championship venue, obviously, and the conditions, the way it's set up, it's playing just like a major," said Johnson.

It was the highest score to lead in the event since 1974. Not since the 1995 Tour Championship has par or higher won a title outside the majors, but it could be in the cards on this former US Open layout. "It really doesn't matter how far away you are, you've just got to be in the fairway," Johnson said. "That's the only way to control the ball and even then it's still difficult to get it close to the hole." The tournament is the second of three tour playoff events, with the top 30 on season points after Sunday's final round advancing to next week's Tour Championship at East Lake in Atlanta.

Matsuyama has not won in more than three years, since the 2017 WGC Bridgestone Invitational, but boosted his chances by blasting out of a greenside bunker into the cup from 37 feet at the first hole. A four-foot birdie putt at the fourth pushed him to 3-under, but bogeys at the par-3 sixth and eighth and par-4 10th dropped him back. Matsuyama and Johnson each birdied the par-5 15th. Matsuyama from 3 1/2 feet and Johnson from eight feet, and parred into the clubhouse to remain atop the leaderboard.

Johnson missed the fairway and the first and the green on his approach at the fifth to set up bogeys, but offset them with a six-foot birdie putt at the third and a nine-footer for birdie at the par-3 eighth. Australia's Adam Scott, Canadian Mackenzie Hughes and Chile's Joaquin Niemann shared third on 211. Four-



NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic of Serbia poses with the winner's trophy after defeating Milos Raonic of Canada in the men's singles final of the Western & Southern Open at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center on August 29, 2020. — AFP

time major winner Rory McIlroy and Spain's Jon Rahm were on 212 along with two-time Masters champion Bubba Watson, Americans Brendon Todd and Kevin Kisner and Colombia's Sebastian Munoz.

McIlroy revealed that his wife, Erica, is due to give birth to their first child, a baby daughter, within days. "We're about to be parents very soon, so we're obviously super excited," the Northern Ireland star said. "It's a private matter, but we're really excited and can't wait for her to get here." His caddie has a beeper and McIlroy has plans to skip the Tour Championship if he gets the call. "I'm going to play in many more Tour Championships and it's only going to be the birth of your first child once," McIlroy said. "That trumps anything else."



ILLINOIS: Hideki Matsuyama of Japan lines up a putt for birdie on the 16th hole during the third round of the BMW Championship on the North Course at Olympia Fields Country Club.— AFP

Rahm matched the week's low round with a 66 despite a one-shot penalty for picking up his ball without marking it on the fifth green. "For some reason I picked up the ball thinking I had marked it already," Rahm said. Tiger Woods fired a 72 to share 55th on 220, well back of the third-place effort he needs to reach next week's season finale. The 15-time major champion found water off the 17th tee on his way to a triple-bogey seven and a third over-par round to start for the first time since 2010. Canada's Corey Connors aced the par-3 sixth hole with a 9-iron from 150 yards.— AFP

News in brief

Sevilla sign Oscar from Real

MADRID: Real Madrid midfielder Oscar Rodriguez has joined Sevilla on a five-year contract, the clubs announced yesterday. Oscar came through Madrid's youth system but never made an appearance for the first team and has spent the past two years at Leganes, scoring 13 goals and making six assists. The Spaniard was one of Leganes' key players last term, even as the club were relegated from the top flight. He has earned a particularly strong reputation as a free-kick taker, after scoring four goals last season from 16 attempts. Sevilla have paid Madrid around 15 million euros (\$17.9 million) to sign Oscar, according to reports in the Spanish press. "The 22-year-old signs with the club for the next five seasons," read a statement from Sevilla, who added he has a "powerful shot and an excellent set-piece".— AFP

Nice thump Strasbourg 2-0

STRASBOURG: Striker Kasper Dolberg netted twice as Nice won 2-0 at Strasbourg to grab the early-season lead in Ligue 1 on Saturday. Nice, who had six players booked during the encounter, top the table with six points after two games. Paris St Germain will begin their bid for an eighth Ligue 1 title in nine years on Sept. 10 after being granted an extended break to recover from last Sunday's Champions League final, in which they were beaten by Bayern Munich. Denmark's Dolberg broke the deadlock with a 37th-minute penalty after Lamine Kone brought down Eddy Sylvestre, and the 22-year-old added a delightful lob in the second half to complete the scoring. Dolberg was also one of six Nice players who were shown a yellow card. Kone and Alexander Djiku from Strasbourg were also booked. In Saturday's early game, Rennes beat Montpellier 2-1 at home as both sides finished with 10 men following a feisty encounter.— Reuters

Ruthless Sale crush Bristol

LONDON: Sale Sharks leapfrogged play-off rivals Bristol Bears into second place in the English Premiership with an impressive 40-7 win at the AJ Bell Stadium on Saturday. The thumping victory puts the Sharks two points ahead of the Bears, who have now suffered back-to-back defeats after a long winning run. The hosts flew out of the blocks and a clinical opening half-hour from Steve Diamond's side set the tone for a ruthless display from his experienced team. Luke James, Denny Solomona and Faf de Klerk crossed for converted tries inside 20 minutes. Sale wrapped up their bonus point just after the half-hour mark when Solomona capitalized on another Bristol handling error, slipping in Sam James for an easy try. The Bears gave themselves a lifeline just before the break. AJ MacGinty's risky pass was cut out by Alapati Leiua and the Samoa centre sprinted clear for a try, with Tiff Eden slotting over the conversion.— AFP

Rangers equal clean-sheet record

GLASGOW: Rangers eased to a 2-0 win over 10-man Hamilton on Saturday, recording a sixth consecutive clean sheet in the Scottish Premiership to equal a 114-year-old record. Steven Gerrard's side missed a host of chances after early goals from Ianis Hagi and James Tavernier. The run of six clean sheets at the start of a top-flight campaign matches the feat of Celtic in 1906. "We're happy with the result," Gerrard told Sky Sports. "I thought we were a little bit wasteful. I think we need to be more clinical. I can't complain too much - three points, clean sheet. "We'd certainly have taken this position at the start of the season." He praised his players for their feat in equaling Celtic's record. Colombian Alfredo Morelos was back in Gerrard's squad after being dropped for last week's Kilmarnock victory. But despite redoubling his efforts in training after having his focus questioned by Gerrard, the Lille target was left on the bench.— AFP

14 Walker sharp in Blue Jays debut; Cubs blank Reds



15 Lightning put Boston Bruins on the verge of elimination



15 Djokovic, Williams chase tennis history in US Open COVID bubble



LONDON: Arsenal's Gabonese striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang lifts the trophy after winning the English FA Community Shield football match between Arsenal and Liverpool at Wembley Stadium in north London on August 29, 2020. — AFP

Arsenal win Community Shield

Aubameyang underlines value; Gunners beat Liverpool 5-4 on penalties

LONDON: Mikel Arteta claimed Arsenal captain Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is close to signing a new contract after the Gunners beat Liverpool 5-4 on penalties following a 1-1 draw in the Community Shield on Saturday. Aubameyang put Arteta's side ahead in the first half at Wembley with a typically eye-catching strike. Japan's Takumi Minamino equalized with his first goal for Liverpool late in the second half of the annual pre-season friendly between the Premier League champions and FA Cup winners.

In the shoot-out, Liverpool's young striker Rhian Brewster was the only player to miss, hitting the bar with their third penalty before Aubameyang calmly dispatched the decisive spot-kick. As if Arteta needed any reminding, it was another sign of the influence wielded by his captain Aubameyang, who is yet to commit his long-term future to the club as he enters the final year of his contract. Gabon forward Aubameyang has kept Arsenal waiting nervously

during protracted talks and he demurred when asked in a post-match interview if he was ready to sign the club's contract offer.

"We are going to see, today we will just take the trophy and that is it," he said. Arteta has remained confident the 31-year-old will stay and he insisted his talisman's status will be resolved to his satisfaction before the Premier League season starts on September 12. "We are close," Arteta said of the contract. "He was magnificent in the FA Cup final and again today. 'I try do my job, which is convince him that he is in the right place, that he has the environment here to produce the moments like he's done today and he's done here three weeks ago."

"I am very positive that he's going to sign but a lot of time there's a lot of things involved in a contract deal and we are trying to show him." For Liverpool, it was the second successive season they have lost the Community Shield on penalties after being beaten by Manchester City last term. That is

unlikely to concern coach Jurgen Klopp too much given the champions' lack of rest and preparation since winning the title for the first time in 30 years.

"For these type of games you need the final punch. We created enough, had the ball quite a lot, but had to be careful of their counter-attack," Klopp said. "A penalty shoot-out is always a little bit of a lottery and we were unlucky there, so congratulations to Arsenal." The Community Shield traditionally serves as the curtain-raiser to the new English season. But Liverpool and Arsenal were back in action just 34 days after the end of the coronavirus-delayed Premier League campaign and only six days after the Champions League final concluded the entire 2019-20 season.

Tactically astute

After only one week of pre-season training, it was a more encouraging result for Arteta, whose team emulated their FA Cup final win over Chelsea with

another determined, tactically astute display. Liverpool were without the injured Trent Alexander-Arnold and the naivety of his teenage replacement Neco Williams was exposed by Aubameyang in the 12th minute. Cutting in from the left to reach Bukayo Saka's pass, Aubameyang was given too much time and space by Williams.

Aubameyang made him pay with a superb curler into the far corner from the edge of the penalty area, celebrating the goal by crossing his arms in tribute to "Black Panther" actor Chadwick Boseman, who died Friday aged 43. It was Aubameyang's fifth goal for Arsenal at Wembley, making him the club's joint highest scorer at the national stadium with Alexis Sanchez. He scored a brace in each of his previous two Wembley appearances against Manchester City and Chelsea. Liverpool equalized in the 73rd minute when Minamino slotted home from close range for his first Reds goal in his 15th appearance since his January move from Salzburg. — AFP

Barcelona's Messi fails to attend COVID-19 test

BARCELONA: Lionel Messi missed a coronavirus test at Barcelona's training ground yesterday morning, club sources have confirmed to AFP, raising the possibility he will now boycott pre-season to force a transfer. Without passing a coronavirus test, Messi will be unable to join team-mates for new coach Ronald Koeman's first training session today, with the start of the La Liga season less than two weeks away.

Messi was due to report for testing at 10:15am yesterday but according to sources at Barca, he failed to show up at the Ciutat Esportiva. The club's captain and greatest ever player could now be punished with a fine and even a reduction in salary if the strike continues. Luis Suarez-his best friend and strike partner-and Arturo Vidal were among players seen arriving for tests, despite both being told they should find new teams as part of a planned clear-out this summer.

The meet-up was a chance for Messi to make his first public appearance since the burofax stating his intention to leave arrived in the offices of Camp Nou on Tuesday. Instead, his absence offers a clear indication

of his determination to secure a move and how ugly this dispute could now become. Taking part in the team's pre-season program could damage his legal case if his departure ends up being settled in court.

Barcelona insist a clause included in Messi's contract that allowed him to go for free this summer had to be activated by June 10 and is therefore no longer valid. The only way the 33-year-old will be allowed to depart, the club argue, is through his release clause, set at 700 million euros (\$833 million) until his contract expires on June 30, 2021. But Messi's side believe the clause refers not to a specific date but to 10 days after the end of the season, which this year was extended into August due to the pandemic, with the Champions League final only played last weekend.

Supporters still hoping

His absence suggests he is prepared to do whatever it takes to quit the club he joined as 13-year-old boy, and where most expected him to continue all the way through to retirement. Supporters, some of whom stormed Camp Nou in protest last week, remain hopeful Messi might still be persuaded.

Outside the training ground yesterday morning, a young boy wearing a Messi shirt sat with his head in his hands, hoping his hero could yet return. Mundo Deportivo, the Barcelona daily with close links to the board,

reported on Saturday that the club is defiant, even if every stance now could be a negotiating ploy. "The more the days go by, the firmer the board and president Josep Maria Bartomeu are in not moving from their position," it read. "Which is not to sell and, if possible, to renew the contract of Messi."

Bartomeu made it known through the Spanish press on Thursday that he would resign if Messi said publicly that he was the problem and agreed to change his mind. But Messi has remained steadfast. His snub yesterday comes after he asked for a meeting, not to negotiate, but to begin facilitating an amicable and dignified departure. "Messi's decision to leave Barca irreversible," read Diario Sport on Saturday. Manchester City remain favourites to sign the 33-year-old, whose basic annual salary alone amounts to around 60 million euros.

If Barcelona and Messi decide to avoid a lengthy legal process, a compromise selling price of around 100 million euros could be within reach for Abu Dhabi-owned City, while eliminating their less wealthy rivals. Messi has reportedly spoken to City coach Pep Guardiola already but others remain in the running, including Paris Saint-Germain, Inter Milan and Juventus. The Italian sides would likely require a much-reduced price to afford any deal. Juve might view the chance to combine Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as an historic sporting and commercial opportunity too good to pass up. — AFP

Neymar and Nike part ways after 15 years

RIO DE JANEIRO: Nike said Saturday it had parted ways with Neymar, ending one of its most high-profile sponsorship deals a decade and a half after signing the star striker as a 13-year-old prodigy. "I can confirm Neymar is no longer a Nike athlete," a spokesman for the US sports-wear giant, Josh Benedek, said in an email to AFP, without giving details. Media reports said the 28-year-old Paris Saint-Germain and Brazil talisman was in talks with Nike's German rival Puma. Brazilian news site UOL said Neymar and Nike had failed to reach a deal on how much money he would be paid for renewing his contract. It said negotiations between the company and the footballer's agents had run into trouble months ago.

Neymar's communications team did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Puma likewise did not immediately respond to questions about reports the company was in talks to sign him. Brazilian newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo said Neymar's last deal with Nike was an 11-year contract that was only set to expire in 2022, worth a total \$105 million. Neymar,



Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar

who is fresh off the heartbreak of narrowly losing the Champions League final to Bayern Munich, holds the record for the most expensive football transfer in history.

PSG paid 222 million euros to bring him from Barcelona in 2017. Forbes magazine, which ranks him the world's seventh highest-paid celebrity, estimates his earnings for this year at \$95.5 million, including endorsement deals. Neymar signed his first deal with Nike as a youth standout at Brazilian side Santos, which sold him to Barcelona in 2013. With his skinny good looks, tattoos, ever-changing hairstyles and huge following on social media, the player soon exploded onto the international scene, dazzling the football world with the skills he honed playing five-a-side "futsal" on the mean streets of suburban Sao Paulo. — AFP