

5 COVID-19 wrecked 2020. Will 2021 be different?



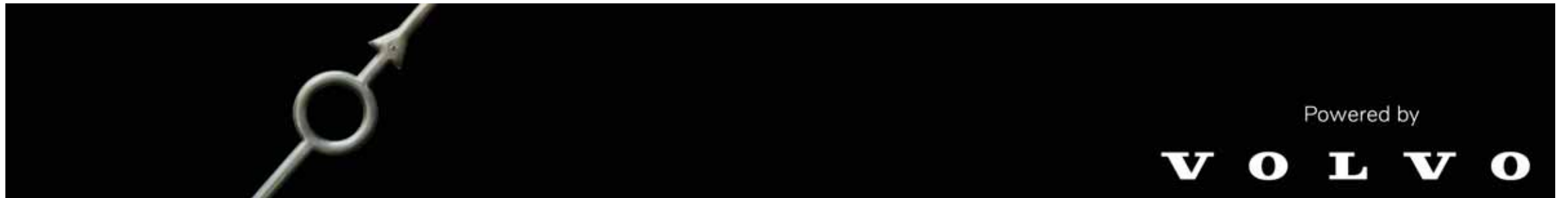
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Coronavirus vaccine will be free for citizens and expats

Government showcases achievements amid challenges



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah is seen with his Cabinet during a forum called "Achievements Despite Challenges" to showcase the government's achievements yesterday. — KUNA

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah yesterday said Kuwait was among the first countries to order the coronavirus vaccine and "it will be available to citizens and expatriates free of charge and on a voluntary basis". The premier was speaking during a forum called "Achievements Despite Challenges", where ministers showcased their achievements, stressing they have made significant achievements during a short period.

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled said the government plan during the short duration focused on "strengthening integrity", "digital transformation" and "developing government performance". He said the government has referred 57 cases of corruption involving public funds to the public prosecution, in addition to 1,042 misdemeanor cases and encroachment on public properties, adding that digital transformation will block the way of corruption.

He said during the beginning of the pandemic, the government conducted the state's largest repatriation operation, in which 12,000 employees and volunteers took part. People were brought back aboard 185 flights from 58 destinations. The flights covered one million kilometers in 1,750 hours.

Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh said 70 percent of the ministry's services are offered online, adding that 960,000 people are using the Kuwait Mobile

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News in brief

Britain OKs COVID vaccine

LONDON: Britain yesterday became the first Western country to approve a COVID-19 vaccine for general use, while Italy and Japan promised free inoculations for all even as the global death toll ticked towards 1.5 million. A mere 12 months after the pandemic began in China, the UK's independent medicines regulator gave its green light to the BioNTech-Pfizer drug in double-quick time but insisted safety had come first. — AFP

WHO recommends masks indoors

GENEVA: The World Health Organization yesterday recommended wearing facemasks when indoors with other people, if the ventilation has been deemed inadequate, in an update to its COVID-19 guidance on masks. The UN health agency also urged people not to wear masks during vigorous physical activity, and not to use masks with valves. — AFP

2020 second hottest year ever

GENEVA: This year is on course to be one of the three warmest ever recorded and could even top the record set in 2016, the United Nations said yesterday. The past six years, 2015 to 2020, are set to make up all six of the hottest years since modern records began in 1850, the UN's World Meteorological Organization said in its provisional 2020 State of the Global Climate report. — AFP

Judge blocks rules on tech visas

SAN FRANCISCO: A US federal judge on Tuesday blocked rule changes ordered by US President Donald Trump making it harder for people to get skilled-worker visas. The US Chamber of Commerce, the Bay Area Council and others had sued the Department of Homeland Security arguing that the changes rushed new restrictions through without a proper public review process. — AFP

Civil society rejects foreign poll observers

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Kuwait's National Integrity Society said yesterday it rejects allowing foreign observers to

monitor the Dec 5 general elections and enter polling stations. Authorities have invited around 200 Kuwaiti observers from civil societies, in addition to 11 observers from several Arab countries to monitor the elections.

Head of the National Integrity Society Mohammad Al-Otaibi said Kuwait's well-established constitutional system is more qualified than testimony by foreign observers. He said the Cabinet has not given observers authorization to enter polling stations, adding that a team from his society is ready to take part in the polls.

Meanwhile, the court of cassation yesterday

delayed until today its ruling on the disqualification of a number of candidates, including leading opposition member and former MP Bader Al-Dahoum. Dahoum and 33 other candidates were disqualified by an interior ministry commission supervising the elections.

The candidates were barred from running in the polls mostly over financial issues, but also over political issues. A number of opposition candidates were gathering at the house of Dahoum as a token of support for him. More than 20 candidates, including former MPs, have signed a statement condemning

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Kushner eyes Gulf crisis on trip to region

DOHA: US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner was expected to tackle the Gulf crisis and push for progress toward ending the spat during a visit to Qatar yesterday. The official Qatar News Agency reported that Kushner met with the country's ruler Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, saying they discussed "developments in the region".

Few details have been made public about Kushner's trip, which could be his last chance to press diplomatic issues in the region that has been a focal point for the outgoing Trump administration. Analysts expect Kushner will focus on efforts to resolve the three-year-long Gulf

crisis, which has pitted a Saudi-led alliance against Qatar, suggesting it could result in limited confidence-building measures.

Cinzia Bianco, a research fellow at the European Council for International Relations, said Saudi Arabia was "considering a transitional trial phase to see if they can start resolving the dispute". Riyadh, along with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, cut all ties with Qatar in June 2017 over allegations Doha was too close to Iran and backed radical Islamists. Qatar denies the charges.

The boycotting countries have closed their airspace, land borders and sea channels to Qataris and vehicles registered there. That has forced Qatar Airways aircraft to fly over Iran, Riyadh's archrival and long-time adversary of Washington, paying significant overflight fees to Tehran in the process. Royal United Services Institute analyst Tobias Borck said he expected "some kind of confidence-building measure to emerge from this - per-



DOHA: Senior Advisor to US President Jared Kushner meets with Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani yesterday. — AFP

haps the opening of Saudi airspace for Qatar Airways".

US national security advisor Robert O'Brien said in November that allowing Qatari planes to fly over Saudi Arabia via an "air bridge" was a priority for the out-

going Trump administration. In return, Qatar could agree that its media, including Al Jazeera, would tone down its coverage of Saudi Arabia, according to another analyst, who declined to be named due to the issue's sensitivity. — AFP

Trump mulls 2024 White House run

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump - who finds himself more and more isolated, with his quixotic quest to overturn Joe Biden's election victory

squashed at every turn - is openly musing about a second run at the US presidency in 2024. "It's been an amazing four years. We are trying to do another four years. Otherwise, I'll see you in four years," he told guests at a White House Christmas party on Tuesday. The event, attended by several Republican Party power brokers, was closed to the media, but a video of the outgoing president's speech quickly went public.

Nearly a month after the Nov 3 election the 74-year-old Trump still refuses to acknowledge that he lost and has not conceded to his Democratic rival, who is busy building his incoming administration. Shuttered in the White House, Trump has limited his public appearances to the bare minimum but has not shied away from spewing furious tweets about alleged election fraud - which his own attorney general says is not evident.

"To date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election," Bill Barr told the Associated Press on Tuesday. Barr's statement was all the more powerful because he is a staunch Trump ally. Given the curious political climate, in which the president-elect is busy introducing his cabinet nominees while the current president spreads conspiracy theories, speculation in the nation's capital is running wild. — AFP

Local

Amir, Crown Prince meet Kuwait anti-corruption authority chief



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets head of Kuwait's Public Anti-Corruption Authority Abdulaziz Al-Ibrahim. — Amiri Diwan and KUNA photos



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets head of Kuwait's Public Anti-Corruption Authority Abdulaziz Al-Ibrahim.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-

Sabah, and Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received head of Kuwait's Public Anti-Corruption Authority Abdulaziz Al-Ibrahim. Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received Speaker Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour and

Ibrahim yesterday at Bayan Palace. His Highness the Crown Prince also received Chairman of the Board of Directors, Director-General of Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) Sheikh Mubarak Duaij Al-Ibrahim Al-Sabah. Furthermore, His Highness the Crown Prince received Kuwait's Ambassador to Spain Eyad Al-Saeedi. — KUNA

Health ministry successful during pandemic despite challenges

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said his ministry has been successful in providing adequate healthcare to the public in spite of the many challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Laws on medical practices and related professions and the rights of patients and healthcare facilities are other important achievements, the minister said at a public government briefing. He referred to a separate law on mental health, which aims to protect the medical and human rights of the psychiatric patient, and gives healthcare professionals the right to intervene to prevent the patient from inflicting potential danger to themselves or society. This law addresses the matters of confidentiality and examination and evaluation procedures for entering the healthcare facility along with the conditions for their stay, he explained. This is important, the minister said, because it targets the matter of families, who seek to get rid of their relative for inheritance rights or other reasons.

Separately, the ministry has increased the capacity of health facilities and hospitals in the calendar year to a number higher than the target stated in the country's development plan despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. These include changes made at the new Amiri Hospital, Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital and the New Jahra Hospital. Regarding health indicators, the minister said that there is a noticeable decline in death rates from chronic and non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes, stress and heart disease. This is a direct result of increased health awareness, the provision of health services and easy access to healthcare, which allowed Kuwait to rank first in the region in regards to comprehensive healthcare coverage.

In regards to healthcare services provided during the pandemic, he said the capacity for hospitalization increased by 50 percent, with increases to outpatient and virtual clinics. Digitization has also improved services, as several applications and e-platforms have been launched, including the COVID-19 platform, which provides the public and medical staff with figures and test results, efficiently and transparently. Another is the Shlonak app, which serves those under state-imposed self-isolation, developed locally in record speed. The ministry also provides medical reports, clinic appointments, blood test results, prescription prices, health insurance payment and medical licensing services for state and private bodies along with individuals online.

Students' health

Maintaining the health and safety of pupils and teaching staff during the COVID-19 pandemic is the main challenge for the Ministry of Education, minister Saud Al-Harbi said. "Among our priorities is also continuing to provide the right to education and pre-



KUWAIT: Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah speaks during the briefing. — KUNA

serving the structure of the educational system," Harbi said during the public government briefing which was broadcasted on Kuwait TV. The academic 2019-2020 year was completed thanks to long distance education, as the ministry trained more than 10,929 teachers for the matter. With the start of the new school year, some 1,243 video lessons were prepared, in addition to the activation of 457,222 online accounts for learners, 73,721 for teachers and 29,902 for senior school staff. The ministry also employed the use of indicators for the effectiveness of this strategy. Most schools and departments have been linked to the Ministry of Education through an online network, he added in reference to another achievement under his watch, with 250 schools so far and others in the pipeline. Meanwhile, in regards to higher education, a ministry which also falls under the minister, he said that the number of students sent to pursue their academic learning abroad in 2020-21 has increased by 44 percent compared to a year prior, while student applications for medical studies rose by 12 percent.

Trade environment

Reforming the trade environment requires legislative developments to organize the business operation, said Minister of Commerce and Industry Khaled Al-Roudhan. During his speech in the Ministerial Forum for Government Achievement 'Achievements Despite Challenges,' Roudhan affirmed that the ministry launched a legislative reform program resulted in 11 laws, most notably the Bankruptcy Law and the Law on Protection of Competition. He pointed out that the ministry launched an integrated program to

help transforming Kuwait into an attractive commercial environment in light of traditional government work, to achieve combating administrative corruption and preserve the time of initiators and employers. He emphasized that the ministry had worked to help Kuwait enter for the first time among the 10 most reforming countries in the world, among 190 countries, and Kuwait jumped 51 steps in the index of starting commercial activity, and surged 21 steps in the index of protecting minority investors.

Kuwait Stock Exchange was classified into an emerging market, which resulted in an influx of foreign capital, which exceeded \$8 billion, and an increase in liquidity of 30 percent over last year, including 20 percent of foreign investments, he added. Furthermore, Roudhan said that during COVID-19 crisis, a national support program was launched to confront the repercussions of the pandemic, which resulted in enhancing food security through logistical support with more than 90 flights, resulting in the provision of approximately 2.3 million tons of refrigerated meat, fish, vegetables and fruits.

Road projects

The Public Authority for Roads has been able to relay twice as many roads as were planned for 2020, Minister of Public Works and the State Minister for Housing Dr Rana Al-Faris said. The inner roads of 48 areas, encompassing 53kms, were relayed, she said, mentioning that the focus was the most badly-affected areas, such as Sabahiya and Sabah Al-Nasser. In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Public Authority for Housing Welfare has also been able to complete several projects, namely East Taima and

Southern Abdullah Al-Mubarak along with Al-Mutlaa City, the largest housing project implemented in the history and South Khaitan, which will benefit 1,448 Kuwaiti families.

Demographic imbalance

Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of State for Economic Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel shed light on the efforts made to address the demographic imbalances through a digital transformation of facilities management. Aqeel stated that the general strategy for the people with disabilities affairs is based on supporting all groups in society, improving the quality of their lives, equality in education, entertainment, health and vocational rehabilitation for the labor market, in addition to the approval of Law 73 of 2020 regarding the rights of persons with disabilities. Within the general strategy for people with disabilities affairs, the national initiative to support mental health was launched and it aims to provide support to families of people with disabilities, she added. Furthermore, the minister also emphasized the efforts exerted to protect and preserve Kuwaiti families, including the introduction of a program that serves 32,000 families in need, and the adoption of a law on protection from domestic violence and international participation in the campaign to combat violence against women. She pointed to the preparation of the Third Development Plan, which includes five axes, seven pillars, nine programs and 51 policies, which were prepared by hundreds of researchers and participants. The minister affirmed the government managed to appoint 12,924 candidates out of 15,680, providing online training to 500 trainees in coordination with the General Secretariat for Planning and Development.

60,000 prescriptions

Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said that the Kuwait Fire Force has distributed more than 60,000 medical prescriptions during the pandemic to nationals and has finalized more than 80 percent of health and safety standard certifications electronically. On the achievements of the Public Authority for Civil Information, Saleh said that its most prominent is the launch of the contactless digital identification system, Hawyati, which has so far attracted more than 960,000 users, including individuals, government institutions and private businesses. The body also continues to deliver civil ID cards to homes, with some 2,500 cards delivered a day. On the other hand, the Central Agency for Information Technology has created several digital platforms which serve nationals and residents alike, including the coronavirus platform, which has received more than 2.25 million visitors, among others. — KUNA

Coronavirus vaccine will be...

Continued from Page 1

ID application. He said the ministry has referred to the public prosecution 417 companies suspected of trading in visas. He said the ministry has also increased traffic fines. The interior ministry also introduced residence permits for foreign investors, Saleh said, adding that the cost of deporting expat violators will be paid by the party that caused the violation.

Minister of Social Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel insisted on the ministry's efforts to amend the population structure, which is heavily tilted in favor of expats. She said Kuwaitization of jobs in

the private and public sectors coupled with the "smart recruitment" of foreign labor has helped in the efforts to amend the population structure.

Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said his ministry has been successful in providing adequate healthcare to the public in spite of the many challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The ministry also increased the capacity of health facilities and hospitals in the calendar year to a number higher than the target stated in the country's development plan, despite the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi said maintaining the health and safety of pupils and teaching staff during the COVID-19 pandemic is the main challenge for the ministry. "Among our priorities is also continuing to provide the right to education and preserving the structure of the educational system," he added.

Civil society rejects foreign...

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attempts to prevent Dahom from contesting the elections. The higher election commission said yesterday that 1,185 judges will supervise the election. Judges will head all principal and secondary polling stations, both for men and women. Over 100 schools have been prepared as polling stations, spread all over the five constituencies.

Candidates have called for deep political reforms in the government and the National Assembly as well. Islamist candidate Waleed Al-

Ghanem, running from the third constituency, called for wide-scale reforms at the National Assembly, saying it should start by changing the speaker following a bad experience over the past eight years.

"We need the speaker of the assembly to represent the people and to speak on their behalf," he said. In addition, the Assembly office must be reformed and the government should stop interfering in the election of Assembly panels, he said.

MP Thamer Al-Suwait, bidding for re-election from the fourth constituency, said Kuwait is passing through a series of dangers including rampant corruption and the penetration of the "deep state" into all institutions. He said the country has seen a retreat in almost everything including education, infrastructure, housing and others, and "now we are facing a chronic budget deficit amid a lack of proper planning by the government".

Local

As Kuwait prepares to return stranded domestic helpers, challenges remain

Pandemic crisis tested employer-employee trust relationship

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Kuwait has a plan to allow the return of domestic helpers stranded abroad as of December 7. The government has set up 58 buildings in Kuwait where 80,000 workers who are expected to arrive within a four-month period on direct flights will stay for their mandatory 14-day quarantine period. The plan will begin with India and the Philippines, two out of 34 countries from which flights to Kuwait remain suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Citizens of these countries with valid visas can return to Kuwait only if they spend a 14-day quarantine period at a country not included in the ban list and have a negative PCR test result. Among the thousands waiting to return, however, there are also those who face challenges that may result in never coming back to Kuwait.

Kyra, not her real name, had received an elated voice message via WhatsApp from her female employer in Kuwait, informing her the government will soon allow the return of stranded domestic helpers from all countries. But Kyra was unimpressed; in fact she did not even bother answering her message. According to her, this was because her boss did not keep her promise to send her money while she was stuck in Manila.

"She said she will send me at least 3,000 pesos (around KD 20) a month while I waited for the ban to be lifted by the Kuwaiti government. I have three

kids and they are all studying. We need to send them to school, eat and pay our bills - so when my employer promised to send a minimum amount so we could survive, I trusted her. But all I got from her when I messaged her twice was 'inshallah'. So I stopped messaging her and now that her government wants us to return, she is happy to send me a message that I can come back? Not anymore!" Kyra exclaimed.

"She did not send me even one fils! And now she has the guts to message me that I can come back by December? I am not going at all - in fact I am now applying for Hong Kong and will leave by next week to work there," she said. Her Kuwait visa will expire in April 2021. She said after working four years straight without vacation, she took her annual leave on Feb 8, 2020. "At that time, we didn't know about the coronavirus. My employer told me to stay in the Philippines for 45 days, for which I was very grateful. She did not give me one month's salary as mentioned in the domestic labor law, but I didn't demand it either," said Kyra.

In order to curb the spread of coronavirus in the country, Kuwait banned passengers from 34 coun-

tries from arriving directly to Kuwait, including the Philippines, which has recorded over 434,000 infections in a population of more than 100 million, against around 143,000 cases in Kuwait with a population of 4.2 million.

Quarantining in Dubai

Cathy, another domestic helper, is quarantining in Dubai in order to rejoin her employer in Kuwait.

"I went on holiday on Feb 6, 2020 and was expected by my employer to return on March 6, 2020. But the pandemic prevented me from coming on time. I was stuck for 10 months in the Philippines, but I am happy that I received my monthly salary from my employer - KD 120 - every month. I was really embarrassed that I was getting the full salary even when I was staying at home in Bicol," she said.

"So I told my employer to arrange for my immediate return. Now I am quarantining in Dubai. I arrived here on Nov 16 and my quarantine period will end on Dec 4. I am happy that I was not abandoned by my boss during the entire pandemic. I am happy to be coming back to my employer of nine years," Cathy told Kuwait Times.

"During my entire time in the Philippines, it was a huge challenge for my family, especially after my husband's company closed down. But it was a great opportunity for us to enjoy life together. We created a vegetable garden in the yard, then sold the produce to our neighbors. It helped us, and we survived because of the KD 120 I was receiving monthly from my employer. As much as I wanted to stay in the Philippines, the kindness of the Kuwaiti family cannot be set aside and I owe much gratitude to them," she noted.

Marissa, also a housemaid, has another story to share. Her employer pleaded with her to come back via Dubai immediately, but her expired passport is preventing her from returning. "Before I left for vacation to the Philippines, I renewed my passport. Based on my receipt, I should've received my new passport by March. I thought I would be back in Kuwait by then to collect it. But we were overwhelmed by the pandemic and my supposed return in March did not happen," she said.

"My passport expired in September, and I am not allowed to leave the country. I also cannot apply for a new passport in Manila because I have a new one ready in Kuwait. My boss coordinated with the Philippine Embassy, but they said only the applicant can collect it. So I was advised to send a request letter to my town of Legazpi in Albay province to allow the Philippine Embassy to send my passport to Legazpi, but I am waiting for it until now," she said.



80,000 workers expected in 4 months

Kuwait signs deal to store 3.14 million crude barrels in Japan

KUWAIT/TOKYO: Japan and Kuwait will create a joint petroleum reserve for energy-hungry Southeast Asia, which lacks sufficient buffers against oil supply instability. Japan's Agency for Natural Resources and Energy and the state-run Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) signed an agreement Tuesday on the project, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) said in a statement.

For Japan, the roughly 500,000-kiloliter stockpile on its own soil will help ensure that the nation's companies operating in Southeast Asia keep their supply chains functioning during an oil supply disruption. The reserve will contain about 3.14 million barrels, or roughly 1.5 days of Japanese petroleum consumption, according to METI. It will be housed at Japanese refiner Eneos' Kiire storage yard in southern Japan's Kagoshima Prefecture, in tanks loaned to KPC, Nikkei Asia reported.

For Kuwait, the agreement comes in line with KPC's 2040 strategy to secure the storage of crude oil out-

side of the country, as well as enhancing its plans and marketing share in the Far East region as a major supplier, Deputy Managing Director of International Marketing Operations KPC Ghadeer Al-Qadfan said. "With this deal, Kuwait joins Saudi Arabia and the UAE in storing its oil in Japan for strategic and commercial purposes, taking into account the priority of supplying Japan with crude oil in case of an emergency," she said in a statement to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).

In the event of terrorist attacks or other emergencies that disrupt the oil supply, Japan will have priority access to the reserve, which can be shared with Southeast Asian and other countries. The oil for the reserve is due to arrive from Kuwait by the end of March. Southeast Asia's energy demand is forecast to continue rising, and, like Japan, the region relies heavily on Middle Eastern oil. Many Southeast Asian nations lack ample oil reserves, putting companies operating there at risk of interruption.

Heroin, shabu found in air cargo shipment

KUWAIT: Airport customs men discovered a shipment containing 2.4 kilograms of heroin and 500 grams of shabu (methamphetamine), the General Administration of Customs announced yesterday. The drugs were found hidden in an electronic device's shipment that arrived to Kuwait yes-

terday. An investigation was opened.

Farwaniya fires

Four fire teams battled a blaze reported in a Farwaniya house yesterday. Firemen managed to contain the flames which covered an area of 750 square meters, before extinguishing the blaze, Kuwait Fire Force said. No injuries were reported and an investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire. Meanwhile, firemen put out a fire reported in three traditional Arab-style homes, and another one in a carpentry in Farwaniya. No injuries were reported in either case.

Interior Ministry sets up voting panels for COVID patients

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The interior ministry yesterday announced setting up five voting committees for men and five for women to deal with COVID-19 patients and those in quarantine who will be voting on election day on Dec 5, 2020. According to ministry decree no. 1058/2020, these committees are prepared to receive voters in accordance with health requirements. The decision aims to ensure safety and prevent the spread of diseases.

The committees are divided according to the constituencies in the following schools: First constituency - Abdullah Adullatif Al-Omar School in Mishref; second constituency - Ibn Rushd School in Faiba; third constituency - Al Adailiya School in Adailiya; fourth constituency - Al-Andalus Elementary School in Andalus; fifth constituency - Akifa bin Abdulmuttalib High School in Jaber Al-Ali.

Although it wasn't specifically mentioned that these committees are for COVID-19 patients in the post on the interior ministry's official social media accounts, Brig Gen Tawheed Al-Kandari, Director General of Relations and Security Media, confirmed this to Kuwait Times.



KUWAIT: A fireman battles a blaze in Farwaniya.

Kuwait sees 268 new COVID-19 cases, one death

KUWAIT: Kuwait listed 268 new coronavirus infections yesterday raising the total to 143,260, while one death recorded over the past 24 hours upped its death toll from the outbreak to 882, the health ministry said. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood yesterday at 4,244, with 79 of them in intensive care units, according to ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad, who revealed that some 4,244 swab tests were conducted over the same period taking the total to 1,107,581. The ministry had earlier yesterday reported that 509 patients had recovered over the previous 24 hours, raising the total of those to have overcome the disease to 138,134. —KUNA

Public works ministry terminates 80 expats

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Public Works has decided to terminate the service of 80 expatriate employees, as the country is seeking to curtail hiring of migrant workers, a local Arabic daily reported yesterday. The ministry's undersecretary Esmail Al Felakawi has issued the decision to end the service of the 80 as of March, Al-Anbaa reported. The ministry aims at implementing a Kuwaitization plan, empowering national employees, the official said. The terminations comprise advisers, accountants, engineers and other expatriates working on temporary or special contracts, the official elaborated. Foreigners account for nearly 3.4 million of Kuwait's over 4.8 million population.

In recent months, there have been increasing calls in Kuwait for curbing foreigners' employment to redress a demographic imbalance amid accusations that migrant workers have strained the country's infrastructure facilities. Several state institutions in Kuwait have recently disclosed plans to limit hiring foreigners, prioritizing Kuwaitis' employment.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Traditional fishing boats near the fish market in Fahaheel. — Photo by Sito Mirah Ayu (Instagram: @sito_ayu)

Young Writers

'Twenty twenty'

By Layan Abdullah Al-Qenaei

The year of 'twenty twenty' is like no other. It had started like any other year, until COVID-19 showed up around February. The miserable COVID-19 spread around the world, moving from one country to another, and from a person to another like a walking zombie, as if it was fantasy. Alhamdulillah: Kuwait, our beloved country, took excellent care with the pandemic, health services, etc. The year of 2020 is a year of personal and psychological development. Personal development happens in acts such as practicing your hobbies, learning new things, building up confidence, reading and writing more often, and many more. Psychological development is the act of detoxing your brain from toxic habits and friends, thinking positively, and basically improving your mind. Do not put someone else's comfort over yours, unless you are 100 percent sure the comfort is coming back to you, like the case with family. Do not underestimate your learning abilities by listening to jealous people. Remember, it is always more people congratulating you rather than supporting you in the first place. Once my mathematics teacher told me that in order to be better in math "do the five P's: proper practice prevents poor performance." Since then, the five P's got stuck in my mind with every single detail in my life. If you did not pass or accomplish anything today, you will tomorrow. In order to be successful, you must fall. Stay positive and kind in your journey. Kindness will come back to you. It is December now. There around 30 days left. Make them count before 'twenty twenty' ends!

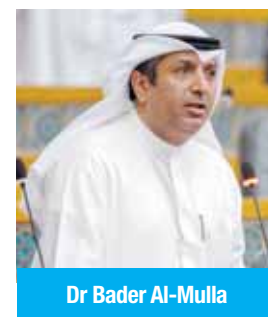
Candidate Mulla presents his working program ahead of elections

KUWAIT: Former MP and candidate Dr Bader Al-Mulla spoke about a working program he will present to voters to help him evaluate the priorities of an MP, monitor their performance and hold them to account. Mulla said the program is titled "Seriousness of Supervision and Quality Legislation", pointing out that this slogan is not just a campaign promise that came out of the blue; rather it is an affirmation of an approach he adopted and implemented in reality inside the Abdullah Al-Salem hall when he was elected during the complementary election in March 2019.

Mulla stressed the necessity to achieve integration between the two parts of the program - seriousness of supervision must reflect on developing and upgrading legislations and predicting the need for them in a way that guarantees the enhancement of government performance and preserving rights. Legislations must keep in mind flexibility and wise governance that guarantee the best performance in service of Kuwait's developmental priorities, bearing in mind the study of the practical effects of implementing those legislations.

Mulla summarized the first part that is related to

serious supervision into main points, including parliamentary questions, investigation committees, grillings, the Audit Bureau, adopting transparency in declaring the country's financial status and fighting corruption. Mulla said he will use parliamentary questions as a serious supervisory tool, away from media and political blackmail in order to follow up the extent of the agreement of the executive authority's work with the laws, making sure the government implements the legal duties mentioned in issued laws, and follow up what was done and whether it agrees with those duties.



Dr Bader Al-Mulla

they cannot monitor the basis of managing of state funds and the future generations' reserves. It should be learned from previous experience when public opinion was absent from monitoring the investment mechanism at the Public Institution for Social Security, which led to the deterioration of retirees' funds through investment in "poisoned" investments during the previous administration of the institution.

Fighting corruption

Mulla said the size of financial and administrative corruption that is rampant in Kuwait is not hidden from any person, as a result of the absence of public and private deterrents through the laxity of government bodies in strictly monitoring implementation of laws and rules, apart from the weakness of supervisory authorities in having strict financial supervision on systems. This resulted in corruption issues in the past and present, and the clear evidence is in the military scandal, the Eurofighters commissions and finally the Malaysian sovereign fund scam. Mulla said fighting financial and administrative corruption will only be possible through courageous decisions and imposing a sense of the law's clout in the state without any differentiation in dealing with society members.

Mulla said the quality of legislation depends on two elements - Assembly committees and legislation of laws. He said he will also run for the financial and economic affairs as well as the legislative and legal affairs committees.

As for legislation, Mulla said he wishes to participate in presenting new legislations that serve and organize the current needs of the Kuwait society, adding that lack of patience in legislation and inability of the National Assembly led to issuing some laws that are full of grave mistakes, and they must be amended.

Mulla said he will propose the upgrading and development of the law related to organizing the population structure in a timely and gradual form to correct the structure without affecting the marketplace, housing care laws in order to guarantee the right of benefiting from housing care for those who are past the marrying age (men and women) who were not married before, as the laws that regulate housing care did not pay attention to this group, as well as the social security law to increase the maximum insurance limit in a way that guarantees pensioners a dignified living.

Grillings

Dr Bader Al-Mulla insisted that it is not acceptable to strip the grilling tool of its powers under any pretext, affirming that he refuses striking out grillings. If a grilling has any constitutional discrepancies, then MPs should rule whether to drop it after allowing the griller to present the grilling. It is also not acceptable to send the grilling to the constitutional court to explain constitutional texts related to it because the interpretation of the constitution must be free of any practical events, in addition to not accepting the referral of the grilling to the legislative affairs committee to discuss its constitutionality because this is not in its jurisdiction.

Mulla said the Audit Bureau is one of the most important supervision tools over the government's performance. The bureau's reports were previously used by the investigation committees he chaired or was the rapporteur of due to their accurate financial content. Based on this, Mulla declared that he will seek the removal of any difficulties that the bureau may face, be they legal, administrative or otherwise, in order to enable it to continually develop and upgrade its systems and its supervisory indicators in a way that guarantees supervision that it more methodological and objective and which produces more transparent reports.

Mulla said no one disagrees that the state treats the citizen in a way that is mysterious in explaining the state's financial status, as the state's financial condition is totally absent from public opinion, as

Kei restaurant commended for promoting Japanese culture

KUWAIT: Masato Takaoka, Ambassador of Japan to Kuwait, awarded a certificate of commendation to Keiko Mutoh, the Managing Director and owner of Kei Japanese Restaurant, the very first Japanese restaurant in Kuwait. The award was given in recognition of Mutoh's many years of contribution in promoting Japanese cuisine and

culture to the people of Kuwait. Kei Japanese Restaurant is named after Keiko Mutoh, and was initially opened by her father in 1981. The restaurant has since been serving authentic Japanese cuisine and genuine hospitality. Keiko Mutoh took over operation and management of the restaurant since 2003, and has played a key role in making the Japanese cuisine popular in Kuwait. Moreover, this year marks the 20th year anniversary since the restaurant started operations at its current location. Since the location will be renovated in the coming months, the Japanese restaurant informed their valued customers that they will bid goodbye temporarily but, are looking forward for the next reopening once the hotel where they are currently located (JW Marriott) reopens. They will serve their last recipes menu on Dec 31, 2020 before the temporary closure.



KUWAIT: Masato Takaoka, Ambassador of Japan to Kuwait, presents the certificate to Keiko Mutoh, the Managing Director and owner of Kei Japanese Restaurant. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

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COVID-19 lockdowns drive spike in online child abuse

For young Senegalese, perilous journey to Europe worth the risk

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LONDON: Swimmers enjoy a 'dawn dip' in the West Reservoir outdoor swimming lake yesterday as England emerges from a month-long lockdown to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Will 2021 be different amid COVID?

Disease specialists cannot rule out more resurgences in cases and deaths

PARIS: 2020 was a year turned upside-down by the novel coronavirus. But with the prospect of several vaccines coming online and less stringent restrictions, experts say it's possible 2021 will return to a semblance of normality. With a second COVID-19 wave currently battering Europe, the United States battling its third, and Hong Kong facing a fourth, disease specialists say they can't rule out more resurgences in cases and deaths as 2021 gets underway.

'Surgical strikes'

France's scientific council, which guides government policy on the pandemic, envisages "several successive waves" of COVID-19 over the winter and well into next year. Flavio Toxvaerd, lecturer at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Economics, told AFP the question of how many waves the world still faces depends on a variety of factors. These include "seasonal changes in contact patterns as well as how well the disease is managed through a combination of social distancing and vaccines," said Toxvaerd, who specializes in the economics of infectious diseases and economic epidemiology.

Lessons learned from past interventions could allow countries to fine-tune their counter-virus measures, implementing modified restrictions while avoiding total lockdowns. Governments will seek to

administer "the minimal effective dose" of measures, such as bans on large gatherings or high-risk activities, according to Anne-Claude Cremeux, an infectious diseases expert at Paris' Saint-Louis hospital. She referred to a strategy of "surgical strikes" against the virus. That would require full knowledge and control over the transmission chain, with an effective "test, trace, isolate" system and particular care taken over protecting vulnerable and elderly individuals.

Vaccine barriers

"We need to hold on until relief arrives, and the relief is a vaccine," said Cremeux. She however cautioned that "it's clear we're not going to vaccinate the entire world in six months". Even if several vaccines are made available, they alone will not be enough to return to normal. Arnaud Fontanet, an epidemiologist at the Pasteur Institute told RMC/BFM TV television that normality could be restored "only by Autumn 2021" - and even then only if 80-90 percent of the population are vaccinated.

Universal coverage would be "an extremely ambitious goal given the hesitancy that exists today towards vaccines," he said. Fontanet echoed concerns expressed by fellow experts that a massive effort is needed to overcome anti-vaccine sentiment

worldwide. With some countries debating making COVID-19 vaccinations mandatory, Toxvaerd sounded a note of caution.

"In the current climate, making vaccines mandatory may backfire and cause even more resistance to the vaccine," he said. "Instead, positive incentives to vaccinate should be considered." He pointed to certain business and social practices - such as some airlines refusing to admit non-vaccinated passengers - that would be more likely to bring success than enforced vaccination programs.

And the logistics of mass vaccination remain dizzying. Even as results from trials need verifying in peer-reviewed papers, little still is known about how long the immunity they render will last. Fontanet said that even the most effective vaccines could not be treated as a magic wand guaranteeing protection. "There will be people who have been vaccinated who still get sick," he said. But he stressed that didn't mean that "the vaccine doesn't work".

With at least two candidate vaccines undergoing review by health authorities ahead of use authorization, the safety data from trials is also being pored over. "This can provide important additional and more precise information on longer-term safety and efficacy of a vaccine against COVID-19," the European Medicines Agency said recently. Different

vaccines will need to be distributed differently, too, with some candidates that have proven to prevent severe illness likely prioritized for at-risk individuals.

Moncef Slaoui, head scientist with the US's Operation Warp Speed vaccination program, told CNN last month that around 70 percent of the population would need inoculating in order to achieve "true herd immunity". This level is unlikely to be reached before May 2021, he added.

Masks: not just for 2020

This year has seen an unprecedented change in personal behavior prompted by COVID-19, from hand washing and social distancing to the now almost ubiquitous mask wearing. Experts say these behaviors are unlikely to be limited to 2020 alone, as protective measures will still be needed until everyone is out of the woods. Leading US scientist Anthony Fauci told AFP in a recent interview he foresaw "a considerable degree of normality" by the third quarter of next year. Successful vaccination programs could see for example the Olympic Games, delayed from last summer, take place in Tokyo in late July. Meanwhile China, where COVID-19 emerged late last year, has largely resumed business as usual, while developing its own vaccine and reacting swiftly to any hint of new cases. — AFP

Lab developing device to help Earth dodge asteroids

RIGA, Latvia: In a corner of the campus at Riga Technical University, a team of scientists is working on technology that could one day stop asteroids from smashing into Earth. The high-precision timers being built by hand in the lab of Latvian start-up Eventech are currently being used to track satellites. This year, the company won a European Space Agency (ESA) contract to develop timers that will study the possibility of re-directing an asteroid before it comes too close to our planet for comfort.

NASA plans to launch the first part of the Asteroid Impact and Deflection Assessment (AIDA) mission - known as the Double Asteroid Redirection Test (DART) - on July 22, 2021 on a Falcon 9 rocket belonging to tech tycoon Elon Musk's Space X. The 500-kg camera-equipped probe will fly to an asteroid named Didymos and smash into it, trying to

blow it off its current course that will see it pass near Earth sometime in 2123. Eventech's deep space event timers are being developed for the follow-up HERA mission, which is planned to launch five years later, to determine if the first mission succeeded.

'To boldly go'

"Our new technology that will follow on the second ESA spacecraft named HERA will measure if the first impact steered the kilometer-sized Didymos off its previous course, avoiding harm to humanity," Eventech engineer Imants Pulkstenis told AFP at the lab. "It's much more interesting to boldly go where no man has gone before than to manufacture some mundane consumer electronics for huge profit," he added, borrowing the famous slogan from Star Trek, the cult 1960s sci-fi television series.

Eventech's timers are part of a space technology tradition in the Baltic state stretching back to Soviet times when Sputnik - the first man-made satellite to orbit the Earth - was launched in 1957. They measure the time needed for an impulse of light to travel to an object in orbit and back. Eventech devices can record the measurement to within a picosecond - or



RIGA: Imants Pulkstenis (left), Research Assistant, and Pavels Razmajevs, Chief Operating Officer of the Latvian company Eventech, work on Nov 27, 2020 at the Technical University. — AFP

one trillionth of a second - which allows astronomers to convert a time measure into a distance measurement with up to two millimeters of precision. — AFP

Cold, hard mission for US warehouse: Help stop COVID

BALTIMORE: A warehouse in the US city of Baltimore may seem an unlikely place to help save the country from the COVID-19 pandemic, but Brian Gallizzo is prepared to do just that. "We are ready, we have our tanks full," Gallizzo, chief financial officer for the six-decade-old family firm Capitol Carbonic, told AFP. How his company will help is by keeping things cool - extremely cool.

Capitol produces dry ice, a necessary component to distribute pharmaceutical giant Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, which could receive government approval soon. Pfizer called Capitol because it was on the hunt for the quarter-inch pellets it spits out of a machine resembling a giant spaghetti maker in its Baltimore warehouse. The dry ice pellets are needed to keep Pfizer's vaccine at just the right,



BALTIMORE: An employee makes dry ice pellets at Capitol Carbonic, a dry ice factory, on Nov 20, 2020. — AFP

very chilly, temperature.

US regulators will decide next week whether to allow Pfizer to become the first major drugmaker to deploy its vaccine, and manufacturers like Capitol Carbonic are already finding themselves involved in one of the most important medical supply chains in history. The vaccines from Pfizer and others nearing

approval appear to be the United States' best chance for ending the world's largest COVID-19 outbreak, which is again surging to alarming levels nationwide.

But getting shots to people nationwide will be a logistical undertaking that will test the capabilities of the world's largest shipping firms, the small businesses that undergird the US dry ice supply and the many other companies in between. "We've never experienced anything like this before in the history of vaccine administration in the US, let alone globally," said Omar Chane of PricewaterhouseCoopers' life sciences management consultancy.

Not unlike Antarctica

Anticipation for a vaccine's approval is particularly high in the US, where COVID-19 has killed some 270,000 people and infected more than 13.6 million. Several vaccines are under development, but the candidate from Pfizer and German firm BioNTech is nearest to approval and at the center of the US government's immunization plan. Assuming it's approved, 6.4 million doses could be distributed starting soon after Dec 10, with 40 million available by the end of the month. — AFP

China lunar probe gathers samples after landing

BEIJING: A Chinese space probe yesterday began drilling on the surface of the Moon hours after landing, in an ambitious attempt to bring back the first lunar samples in four decades. Beijing has poured billions into its military-run space program, with hopes of having a crewed space station by 2022 and of eventually sending humans to the Moon. The Chang'e-5 spacecraft - named for the mythical Chinese moon goddess - touched down on the near side of the Moon on Tuesday, and is now gathering samples from the surface, the China National Space Administration said.

Chang'e-5's goal is to collect lunar rocks and soil to help scientists learn about the Moon's origins, formation and volcanic activity. If the return journey is successful, China will be only the third country to have retrieved samples from the Moon, following the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s. This is the first such attempt since the Soviet Union's Luna 24 mission in 1976.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying yesterday described the mission as "revolutionary in increasing human understanding of the history of the Moon" The probe had finished drilling for samples by yesterday morning and is now "gathering surface samples as planned", China's National Space Administration said. The spacecraft was launched from the country's southern Hainan province last week and entered lunar orbit on Saturday after a 112-hour journey.

State broadcaster CCTV showed rows of scientists at mission control, wearing blue jackets emblazoned with Chinese flags, monitoring the probe then clapping after it successfully touched down. A huge screen at the front of the room displayed images sent by the probe of the grey lunar surface. A separate state media video released later showed the probe drilling into the moon's surface. — AFP

International

For young Senegalese, perilous journey to Europe worth the risk

IOM says some 18,000 people have landed on the Canaries this year

MBOUR, Senegal: Djiby Dieng packed just a tiny backpack when he boarded a brightly colored wooden boat at the Senegalese port of Mbour to seek his fortune in Europe. The 21-year-old left on October 18, without telling his mother, hoping to reach Spain's Canary Islands-embarking on a perilous ocean journey of about 1,500 kilometers (about 930 miles) made by thousands in recent months. He was lucky to escape with his life. Fuel and water shortages, and a faulty engine, forced Dieng's boat to beach in Morocco. "There were people of all ages, young and old. Fifteen people were dehydrated," he said.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), some 18,000 people have landed on the Canaries this year—surging from just over 2,600 last year—in a huge movement of mostly West African migrants attempting to reach the archipelago and escape poverty. But the crossing is treacherous. Migrants often leave from Mbour, some 100 kilometers south of the capital Dakar, in crammed traditional fishing canoes, known as pirogues. Over 500 people have died this year—most in October and November—according to the IOM, more than double last year's figure. The official death toll is also thought to be conservative.

In one harrowing case in October that caused outrage in Senegal, a 15-year-old boy, aiming to enrol in a football training center in Italy, fell ill and died during the crossing, and was thrown overboard. "There's nothing left here," said Dieng, a fisherman, explaining why he decided to risk the ocean route. Locals cite dwindling fish catches in the poor nation as one of the reasons behind migration, but economic difficulties linked to the COVID-19 crisis are also playing a role in forcing people to go overseas. The sudden exodus has turned into a political problem too, highlighting questions over Senegalese government promises to create hundreds of thousands of jobs.

'Suddenly impoverished'

Senegal's roughly 50,000 local fishermen have long complained that collapsing stocks and competition from foreign factory ships are ruining them. Fishing is a tradi-



A woman carrying a baby in a sling on her back waits to buy fresh fish at the fishing port in Mbour. Mbour has in the recent months been a popular departure site for illegal migrants wanting to reach Europe. — AFP

tional occupation in the country, which has a 700-kilometre-long Atlantic coastline, and which indirectly employs some 540,000 people, according to the United Nations. It also accounts for 1.8 percent of the country's GDP. Mustafa Fall, an official at a local migration NGO, said that the current surge of people leaving from fishing communities was unprecedented.

The pandemic forced wharves to close for part of the week and the heaving seaside fish markets to shut early. "People suddenly became impoverished," Fall said. "There are departures every day, thousands of people in all." Fishermen can hope to earn between 100 and 200 euros (\$120-\$240) a month in Senegal, but often pay small fortunes to migrate. Khalifa Samb, a 22-year-old fisherman, said his mother Benny helped him pay the roughly 600-euro (\$700-) fee to secure his place on the pirogue to the Canaries.

His attempt ended in failure after the boat's engine encountered trouble, and food and drink began to run low. "We decided to come ashore in Mauritania, otherwise we would have died," he said.

'Panic'

Others are less lucky. Saliou Diouf, a 22-year-old fisherman with a wrestler's build, told AFP that he was en route to the Canaries with about 200 other people in October when the engines failed and jerry cans on board caught fire.

"There was panic," he said, describing how he and other passengers leapt into the water to escape the flames. "Some of them couldn't swim and grabbed onto me. I told myself that I wouldn't die if God hadn't decided it," he said.

The IOM said that more than 140 people died in that accident, although Senegal's government disputes the figures. Diouf told AFP that rescue boats pulled about 50 people from the water, suggesting, in line with IOM figures, that around 150 people drowned.

Fishermen such as Samb, Diouf or Dieng are often accomplished sailors, accustomed to the trials of long sea journeys. But many others who risk the crossing, such as the women and children, cannot swim and are in greater peril when disaster strikes. —AFP

US lawyer: Trump using executions as a 'political tool'

WASHINGTON: "Tragic" and "political" is how Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who is to receive the Right Livelihood Award, describes the frenzy of federal executions scheduled by US President Donald Trump before his departure from office. "For every nine people we've executed in the United States, one innocent person on death row has been identified," Stevenson told AFP in an interview.

The 61-year-old African-American attorney is to be honored with three other rights activists on Thursday with the Swedish foundation award established in 1980 which has been described as the "Alternative Nobel Prize." The founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, Stevenson has been able to prove the innocence or commute the sentences of 130 condemned prisoners, a fight which is recounted in his book "Just Mercy" and a movie of the same name starring Michael B. Jordan.

For Stevenson, mistaken convictions should have resulted in an immediate "shutdown" to executions.

"Like in aviation," he said. "When a plane crashes, we have to figure out why. We don't allow planes to fly. In health and food and safety we do the same thing, but somehow in our justice system, not only do we continue executing people, we don't even try to figure out why it is the rate of error is so high," he said.

The Trump administration resumed executions of federal prisoners in July after a 17-year hiatus. There have been eight since then and five others are scheduled, including one on January 15, just five days before President-elect Joe Biden is to be inaugurated. Until July, there had been only three federal executions in the past 45 years.

"It think that's tragic," Stevenson said of the

Baby among 5 killed as car runs down German shoppers

TRIER, Germany: A baby was among five people killed when a car tore through a pedestrian shopping street in the southwestern German city of Trier on Tuesday, police said, after arresting the driver.

Prosecutor Peter Fritzen said the driver, a 51-year-old Trier native, appeared to be suffering from "psychiatric problems" and had been under the influence of alcohol during the incident, in which 14 other people were hurt. Police said they had "no indications of a political motive" after questioning the suspect, and



Eight federal prisoners have been executed in the US since July

resumption of federal executions under Trump. "I actually would love to see the federal death penalty abolished. It's clearly being used in a political way," he said. "And the last few months have shown that it is a political tool, at a minimum."

'Hopeful'

Biden has pledged to work towards abolishing the death penalty at the federal level but he will need the approval of Congress to do so and Democrats will need to take back the Senate. For Stevenson, the death penalty embodies some of the shortcomings of the US judicial system including the criminalization of mental illness and incarceration of minors, but above all discrimination against African-Americans. Orlando Hall, a Black man who was executed last month, "was convicted by an all-white jury after 80 percent of the African-Americans were excluded by a prosecutor with a history of racial bias," Stevenson said. "Our courts refused to address that issue."

The nationwide "Black Lives Matter" protests following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in May focused attention on police brutality in the United States towards African-Americans. But Stevenson said prosecutors and judges can also exhibit racial bias. —AFP

Fritzen said prosecutors were considering requesting he be placed in psychiatric care. At the same press conference, Trier mayor Wolfram Leibe said those killed when the man drove his SUV into the shoppers included a nine-month-old and a 73-year-old woman.

"I think this is Trier's darkest day since World War II," he said. Also killed were a 25-year-old woman and a 45-year-old man. Police have not yet released details on the fifth victim. Malu Dreyer, premier of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate where Trier is located, expressed shock that a baby was among those killed by the driver's "insane act" and shared her condolences with all the affected families.

The baby's mother was being treated in hospital for injuries sustained in the rampage. Witnesses had earlier described seeing people being flung into the air as the car struck them.

The incident started around 1250 GMT and ended within four minutes of the first emergency calls arriving, with police intercepting the driver after he turned off a main shopping street. Police said he had ploughed through the streets for between 600 meters and a kilometer, leaving behind a trail of destruction. Officers sealed off the area and cleared people from the center of the city of about 110,000 people. Smartphone footage from an eyewitness showed the arrest of the driver, handcuffed and lying face down on the street being pinned down by several officers next to the damaged vehicle. In the evening, the cathedral bells were rung and a memorial service held for the victims. Joachim, accompanied by his teenage daughters Helena and Sophia, attended the service expressing their sadness. "We wanted to show our sympathy for those who lost their lives and those who lost a loved one," Joachim said. —AFP



TRIER: Rescuers push an injured person into an ambulance after a car drove into pedestrians in Trier, southwestern Germany, on Friday. — AFP

Karabakh rivals adjust to life along new borders

BERDASHEN, Azerbaijan: Pomegranate harvest is in full swing on a field Zhorik Grigoryan nearly lost in the recent fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Azerbaijani forces were just 50 meters (150 feet) away from the farmer's land in the eastern Martuni district when a Moscow-brokered peace deal halted weeks of clashes over the restive region and saw the deployment of Russian peacekeepers there. "There is no fear. (Armenian) soldiers are positioned on the ceasefire line, Russian troops are present," Grigoryan tells AFP, adding: "But we are concerned about the future".

The 73-year-old farmer keeps a watchful eye over a dozen young men from the village of Berdashen as they fill large sacks with the dark red fruit that will be sent to the Armenian capital Yerevan to make juice and wine. A short distance from the pomegranate field, Azerbaijani and Armenian soldiers are standing guard close to a road that runs from Martuni to Aghdam, a district in the north that Armenian separatists ceded to Azerbaijan.

In late September fresh clashes broke out between the ex-Soviet rivals over Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave that broke from Baku's control in a war in the 1990s. Under the truce signed on November 9, Azerbaijan reclaimed swathes of territory that for three decades were controlled by Armenian separatists.



LACHIN: Azerbaijani soldiers ride in the back of a truck through the town of Lachin on Monday. — AFP

New borders

Not far from the road to Aghdam, an Azerbaijani flag attached to a utility pole flutters above a makeshift guard post with only a tent and stacked tyres to protect a handful of soldiers on duty. On the opposite side, 15 Armenian soldiers have also set up an equally simple camp. The soldiers watch each other without allowing tensions to take hold. "There is no problem," says officer Mishik Grigoryan, 45, who is in charge of the post. "We are ready to defend our land."

Some 200 meters away on a strip of concrete, Russian peacekeepers are guarding a checkpoint flanked by armored vehicles. The new border is marked by one-metre high wooden stakes, their tips painted in red and white. Like many Armenians, Grigoryan did not welcome the ceasefire agreement that saw separatists lose control of several districts surrounding Karabakh and the historic town of Shusha.

"I am not satisfied with the outcome of the war because we have lost so many people and territories," Grigoryan says bitterly. His three grandchildren were serving in the military when the war broke out. One of them died, another is in a Yerevan hospital with injuries. The third is still on duty. —AFP

News in brief

Israel releases \$1bn in withheld funds

RAMALLAH: Israel has released more than \$1 billion in funds withheld from the Palestinian Authority, a Palestinian minister said yesterday, weeks after coordination was renewed between the two sides. "The #Israeli government transfers all financial dues of the clearance to the account of the #Palestinian Authority, amounting to three billion and 768 million shekels," civil affairs minister Hussein al-Sheikh wrote on Twitter, referring to taxes, including customs taxes, that the Jewish state collects on behalf of the PA. In May, the Palestinians stopped coordination with Israel, with PA leader Mahmud Abbas saying it was in response to Israeli plans to annex parts of the West Bank. —AFP

Nike anti-racism ad sparks big response

TOKYO: A Nike advert highlighting racism and bullying in Japan has caused a stir on social media, with some users even calling for a boycott of the company. Nike, which sponsors biracial Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka, released the two-minute commercial on Monday and it has since racked up more than 14 million views on Twitter. The Japanese-language clip, titled "Keep Moving: Yourself, the Future", shows three teenage girls of mixed or non-Japanese heritage being bullied at school before finding confidence through their football prowess. It had been liked more than 50,000 times on Nike Japan's YouTube channel yesterday, but also disliked by over 30,000 viewers—many of whom accused the sportswear firm of anti-Japanese sentiment. —AFP

10 rescued from Nigeria 'baby factory'

LAGOS: Police in Nigeria have rescued 10 people, including four children, four pregnant women and two other women from an illegal maternity home, a spokesman said yesterday. The operation was carried out at the so-called "baby factory" in the Mowe area of the southwestern Ogun state on Tuesday. "Acting on a tip-off, our men stormed the illegal maternity home and rescued 10 people, including four kids and six women, four of whom are pregnant," police spokesman Abimbola Oyeyemi told AFP. He said the women told police that the owner hired men to impregnate them and then sell the newborns for profit. —AFP

900 Syrian fighters return from Karabakh

BEIRUT: More than 900 pro-Turkish Syrian fighters have returned to Syria after the end of fighting in the disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh, a Britain-based Syrian war monitor said yesterday. A November 9 truce ended more than a month of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the ethnic Armenian enclave that broke away from Baku's control in a war in the 1990s. Turkey has been accused of sending hundreds of Syrian mercenaries to fight alongside Azeri forces in the conflict, though Ankara has denied this. More than 2,580 Syrian combatants have been sent to back Baku in total, of whom 293 have died, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group. —AFP

Israel's coalition government inches towards collapse

JERUSALEM: Israel's precarious coalition government was set to move closer towards collapse yesterday with lawmakers expected to approve a preliminary measure to dissolve parliament, raising prospects of elections next year. In a primetime televised address on Tuesday, Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz, the key coalition partner of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said his centrist Blue and White party would back a bill to dissolve the Knesset, Israel's parliament. But yesterday's parliamentary vote on an opposition proposal marks only a first step.

A bill to dissolve the Knesset will require three additional successful readings before new elections must be called. But Gantz's decision to side with the opposition, at least for now, highlights the widening cracks in Israel's center-right coalition, imperiled from the start by mistrust, infighting and public recriminations.

"I had no illusions about Netanyahu," Gantz said in his Tuesday speech. He reminded Israelis that he battled the prime minister in three consecutive inconclusive elections that did not allow either leader to form a majority government. Gantz said he decided to agree a unity government with Netanyahu, who he knew to be a "serial promise-breaker", because he wanted to spare Israelis "an ugly and costly" fourth election, especially as the coronavirus pandemic was accelerating.

"Netanyahu didn't lie to me," Gantz said. "He lied to all of you." The Netanyahu-Gantz coalition, agreed in April, included strict power-sharing arrangements. Netanyahu, who heads the right-wing Likud party, was to serve as prime minister for the first half of the three-year arrangement. —AFP

International

COVID-19 lockdowns drive spike in online child abuse

Offenders reach children either in person or via social media sites and dark web

BRISBANE: Out-of-school kids and adult predators spending more time at home and on the internet during the coronavirus pandemic is the "perfect storm" driving a spike in online child sex abuse around the world, activists and police say. From slums in the Philippines to Australia's suburbs, the cross-border crime has mushroomed as offenders take advantage of school closures and lockdowns to reach children—either in person or via social media, gaming sites and the dark web.

In Australia, federal police received more than 21,000 reports of child sex abuse in the 12 months to June 30, an increase of over 7,000 cases in the previous year. Their investigators also recorded a 136 percent increase in online child sex exploitation material.

"Some of those dark web sites are actually crashing because they're not coping with the amount of traffic," Australian Federal Police detective superintendent Paula Hudson said.

She said police "directly attribute" the "incredible influx" to offenders and children spending more time at home because of lockdowns and school closures, with youngsters often left unsupervised as parents juggle work and care responsibilities. "COVID-19 lockdowns created the perfect storm for increases in online sexual exploitation of children," explained John Tanagho of the International Justice Mission in Manila.

The Philippine government saw a 260 percent increase in reports of online child abuse materials from March to May—when the country was in a strict lockdown, UNICEF said.

Investigators are even "seeing COVID-specific child exploitation forums where (offenders) are discussing the opportunities that have arisen during the COVID period", Hudson revealed, including one with 1,000 members.

Live-streaming sexual abuse

Online sexual exploitation of children is a "crime of opportunity" driven by demand from sex offenders, said Tanagho. The abuse is often repeated regularly to create new material.

With jobs and income lost and more time spent at home as a result of strict virus measures, in the Philippines many of the victims are first abused by their own parents, who livestream the sexual violence for predators in wealthy Western nations. "The sexual abuse is directed, it's paid for and it's consumed live by child sex offenders around the world who don't need to leave the comfort of their home," Tanagho said.

Children are abused for an average of two years before being rescued, he added, but the trauma is long-lasting. Mellanie Olano, lead social worker with the International Justice Mission in Manila, told AFP: "It is a bit chaotic whenever we enter the house where the abuse is happening, the children are all crying." Young victims are often on high alert, experience hyperarousal, suffer sleep issues, difficulty concentrating and struggle to control their emotions. "Of course, because most of the perpetrators are the parents... they are separated from their parents," she added.

Predators pounce in minutes

In Indonesia—which along with the Philippines has become a global hotspot for child sex abuse—around 20 percent of children surveyed by ECPAT, an international NGO working to end child exploitation, reported predatory behavior online. Police in West Java province recently uncovered a group on popular messaging app LINE that facilitated "live nude shows" including several minors.

Among them was a 14-year-old girl who was convinced to do a strip show while her parents thought she was doing homework online in her room. The group's membership has tripled to 600 since the pandemic began. "Parents must be even more careful to monitor their children's online activities because it can take just minutes for them to become a perpetrator or a victim in online crimes," criminal division head Teuku Rasya Khadafi said. "Everything is there on the internet."

Former Australian cop Glen Hulley at anti-trafficking organization Project Karma said paedophiles are also bypassing parents by using



BOGOTA: Dolls are placed at the Bolivar square during a demonstration against child abuse in Bogota. A thousand cuddly toys were scattered around Bogota's main square on Monday with a message denouncing the sexual violence that punishes 37 children in Colombia every day. —AFP

gaming platforms. "What mostly we found during this lockdown period is that perpetrators are trying to reach the kids in a popular app for kids, such as online gaming platforms with chat features," he said.

Activists have reported adults pretending to be peers, famous YouTubers or even celebrities like Justin Bieber. "Once the initial interaction started, they asked them to chat in other platforms so that they could be in contact without any disturbance from the game," Hulley said.

It is not only children in developing countries that are being sexually abused. In recent months, Australian police arrested 15 men accused of pro-

ducing or sharing child abuse material online and identified 46 alleged victims, including 16 at a single childcare center. They ranged from 16 months to 15 years, with an average age of eight years.

Tackling the issue has been further complicated by the pandemic. Before Australia closed its international borders to stop the spread of the virus, police regularly arrested suspected child abusers as they returned home on flights from Southeast Asia. But as offenders have moved online in greater numbers, Hudson says police have followed them, working more closely across with international counterparts by using virtual tools such as video conferencing. —AFP

Second cyclone in a week threatens Sri Lanka, India

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka and southern India batted down the hatches for the second time in a week yesterday ahead of the scheduled arrival of another cyclone from the Bay of Bengal.

Burevi will pack gusts of up to 100 kilometers (60 miles) an hour when it makes landfall late on Wednesday in Sri Lanka before moving west and hitting India around 24 hours later, forecasters said.

Warning of a storm surge of a meter, and 20 centimeters (8 inches) of rain in places, Sri Lanka ordered a three-day closure of schools in the north and east and told fishermen to stay on land.

India's National Disaster Response Force

(NDRF) said late Tuesday it had deployed 26 teams across the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. "Ready for cyclone," tweeted the NDRF director general yesterday. The Indian Meteorological Department issued a red alert in several areas across both states and suspended fishing activity in some areas until Friday.

Last Thursday, a more powerful cyclone skirted northern Sri Lanka but hit Tamil Nadu with full force, uprooting trees and delivering 30 centimeters (12 inches) of rain in some areas. But more accurate forecasting and the timely evacuation of several hundred thousand people were credited with keeping the number of people reported killed to three, a fraction of the death tolls in previous years.

Seven people were killed and some 20,000 lost their homes three years ago in Sri Lanka's north-east following a similar cyclone during the monsoon season. Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh depend on the monsoon for power generation as well as irrigation, but excessive downpours and



TRINCOMALEE, Sri Lanka: Residents prepare sand bags to protect their homes ahead of cyclone Burevi landfall in Sri Lanka's north-eastern coast, in Trincomalee yesterday. —AFP

storms cause casualties and destroy property almost every year. —AFP

Joshua Wong leads young HK trio jailed for protests

HONG KONG: Leading Hong Kong dissident Joshua Wong was jailed alongside two other young activists yesterday for taking part in last year's huge democracy protests as the crackdown on Beijing's critics gathers pace. Wong was prosecuted alongside close friends and fellow campaigners Ivan Lam and Agnes Chow over a rally outside the police headquarters. "It's not the end of the fight," the 24-year-old said on Twitter in a message conveyed by lawyers shortly after his sentencing. "We're now joining the battle in prison along with many brave protestors, less visible yet essential in the fight for democracy and freedom for (Hong Kong)," he added.

The trio—some of the city's most visible and vocal critics of Beijing's rule—pleaded guilty to inciting an unlawful assembly and other charges. Magistrate Wong Sze-lai said prison was "the only appropriate

option" for a protest that besieged the police headquarters as she handed Wong a 13.5 months sentence. Chow, who turns 24 today and burst in tears in court, received 10 months. Lam, the 26-year-old son of a former policeman, got seven months.

Hong Kong was convulsed by seven straight months of huge and often violent rallies last year in which millions took to the streets. Beijing has refused demands for universal suffrage and authorities have pursued democracy supporters with criminal cases and a tough new security law. The tactics have stifled the movement and restored a semblance of calm. But the finance hub remains deeply polarized with many still seething against Beijing's growing hold on the semi-autonomous city.

Teen origins

Wong and Lam have already spent time in jail for leading democracy protests. For Chow prison is a first. "I don't believe prison will bring them down," Nathan Law, a former jailed student leader fled Hong Kong for Britain earlier this year, told AFP.

"I believe they will continue to be very important people to Hong Kong in the future," Amnesty International criticized the sentences as criminaliz-



HONG KONG: Activists Joshua Wong (center) and Ivan Lam (left) board a police van at Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre in Hong Kong yesterday before going to court to be sentenced over a protest which took place outside the police headquarters in 2019. —AFP

ing political views. "Once again, the government has used the politically motivated charge of 'inciting others to protest' to prosecute people who have merely spoken out and protested peacefully," regional director Yamini Mishra said. —AFP

China's #MeToo movement gets its moment in court

BEIJING: A sexual harassment case against a powerful Chinese media figure began in Beijing yesterday, with his accuser calling it a major moment in the country's still-young #MeToo movement. Zhou Xiaoxuan, now 27, sparked a social media storm in 2018 after accusing prominent television host Zhu Jun of groping and forcibly kissing her when she was an intern at state broadcaster CCTV. China's first-ever civil code—passed in May—expanded the definition of sexual harassment, but many women are still reluctant to come forward and it is rare for cases like this to make it to court. "I'm very nervous," she told AFP yesterday ahead of the hearing. "But whether we win or lose the case, it has meaning."

"If we lose, it allows the questions we raised at

least to remain in history. Someone will have to give us an answer." Zhou said she found herself alone in a dressing room with Zhu in 2014, and that he groped her after asking if she wanted to continue to work for the channel after her internship.

Zhu is a former host of the country's annual Spring Festival Gala—one of the world's most-watched television shows—and other major broadcast events. He has denied the allegations, and launched his own court case accusing her of damaging his reputation.

There were around 100 supporters outside the court yesterday, some holding banners reading "#MeToo" or "We oppose sexual harassment". One supporter, Lucy Lu, told AFP: "No matter what happens, we think she is very brave."

Zhou broke down in tears as she addressed her supporters ahead of the trial, telling them: "We may be joyous or we may run into setbacks. But please don't take my setbacks to heart."

"We have to believe that even if history repeats itself, things will definitely progress," she said. But there were violent scuffles outside the courtroom as



BEIJING: A supporter of Zhou Xiaoxuan, a feminist figure who rose to prominence during China's #MeToo movement two years ago, has a #MeToo penned on her forehead in front of the Haidian District People's Court in Beijing yesterday in a sexual harassment case against one of China's best-known television hosts. —AFP

supporters protested when police moved in, told the crowd to put down their banners, and dragged away and detained foreign reporters, including AFP. —AFP

News in brief

Japan residents to get free vaccine

TOKYO: Japan will give free coronavirus vaccines to all of its residents under a bill passed yesterday, as the nation battles record numbers of daily cases. The bill, which says the government will cover all vaccine costs for Japan's 126 million residents, was approved by the upper house of parliament, having cleared the powerful lower house. The country has secured Covid-19 vaccines for 60 million people from pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, and for a further 25 million people from biotech firm Moderna. It has also confirmed it will receive 120 million doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine.

Ardern declares 'climate emergency'

WELLINGTON: New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared a "climate emergency" yesterday, telling parliament that urgent action was needed for the sake of future generations. Ardern said the science on climate change was clear and New Zealand had to acknowledge the threat. The center-left leader said the challenges posed by global warming meant parliament's declaration—an act undertaken by more than a dozen other countries—was warranted. "In those cases where we do issue declarations, it is often where there is a threat to life, a threat to property, and civil defense emergencies," she told parliament. "If we do not respond to climate change, we will continue to have these emergencies on our shores." —AFP

Indian man paraded naked

AHMEDABAD: Five brothers have been arrested in India after a man was paraded naked in the streets allegedly in punishment for a social media post, police said yesterday. Police said that the 38-year-old victim was kidnapped on Tuesday by the brothers, assaulted and made to walk for 45 minutes around the western town of Khambhaliya with no clothes on. "An investigation revealed that the victim... used to do Facebook live videos on regular basis," police spokesman Hirendra Chaudhary said. The brothers were charged with illegal confinement, assault, use of criminal force with intent to dishonor person, criminal conspiracy, obscenity and other offences. —AFP

Ink activist posts tearful video

BEIJING: A Chinese activist who filmed herself defacing a poster of President Xi Jinping has published a tearful video saying she is heavily surveilled by authorities and "on the brink of collapse". Since taking power in 2012, Xi has put himself at the center of a personality cult and authorities have fiercely stamped out opposition from activists and other critics. Dong Yaoqiong, now aged 31, live-streamed herself in 2018 splashing ink on a Xi poster in central Shanghai, which was viewed tens of thousands of times on Twitter. In the latest video—the first time she has spoken out since then—Dong claims she was allocated a job in the local government upon her release from a psychiatric unit earlier this year. —AFP

Business

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2020

Biden: Help 'on the way' for economy

President-elect says no quick rollback of Trump's China tariffs

WILMINGTON: President-elect Joe Biden presented his economic team on Tuesday and pledged they would lead the charge on a plan to provide more relief for the faltering US economy, which his nominee for Treasury secretary called an "American tragedy."

The diverse group, featuring women and minorities in key roles, is set to inherit the fallout from millions of job losses-including an ongoing wave of corporations laying off workers and small businesses shutting their doors as the number of virus cases spikes.

Even with good news on possible vaccines, economists warn they may not come soon enough to prevent further damage as an initial sharp recovery loses steam. "I know times are tough, but I want you to know that help is on the way," Biden said at the event to introduce the "tested and experienced" team led by former Fed chief Janet Yellen, his pick for Treasury secretary.

He called on Congress to rapidly approve a "robust" new relief package, but said anything accomplished by the lame-duck legislature will not be enough. "We need to act now and we need to work together," Biden said, promising to "build a new American economy that works for all Americans." He said his team already is working on a new plan that can be launched "on day one" to revive the economy and create more than 18 million jobs through investments in infrastructure, clean energy and manufacturing. The world's largest economy shed more than 20 million jobs in the early weeks of the pandemic, and has regained only about half of those.

Tariffs

Joe Biden will keep Donald Trump's trade-war tariffs on China for the time being when he moves into the Oval Office next month, the president-elect

has told US media. Rancor and recrimination have defined the relationship between the world's two biggest economies over the last four years, with Trump slapping import fees on billions of dollars' worth of Chinese goods with tariffs.

Biden meanwhile has been a strident critic of China's human rights record and analysts have predicted his administration will maintain a hawkish posture towards Beijing. "I'm not going to make any immediate moves, and the same applies to the tariffs," Biden told the New York Times in an interview published yesterday.

"I'm not going to prejudice my options." Since winning last month's presidential election, Biden has hinted at a trade policy that would mend Washington's alliances with Europe and the Asia-Pacific.

He has said the United States must join forces with other world democracies to present a united front in global trade policy as a counterweight to China.

Biden has targeted Beijing on several fronts and singled out Chinese President Xi Jinping during a debate with other presidential candidates in February. "This is a guy who doesn't have a democratic - with a small d - bone in his body," he said then. "This is a guy who is a thug."

His campaign also referred to the crackdown on the Muslim Uighur minority in China's Xinjiang province as a "genocide," provocative language to Beijing with potential ramifications under international law.

American tragedy

Yellen previously made history as the first woman to lead the Fed, and would score another first if confirmed as Treasury secretary, a job that has never been held by a woman. She is well regarded for navigating the central bank through

TBI was established in a 2003 decree issued by the Coalition Provisional Authority, which managed Iraq post-invasion. "TBI was meant to help Iraq develop and rebuild, but it was affected by sectarian power-sharing and financial corruption," said Ghanem.

Now, the bank is the Iraqi government's main conduit for international transactions but provides few loan options or other services.

Businesses shun banks

The top trio have been used mainly for paying salaries and pensions to eight million Iraqis. But after collapsing oil prices this year drained state coffers, the government had to borrow from state-owned banks for those wages, increasing its domestic debt.

And of the 60 private banks in Iraq, most are domestic and operate primarily as exchange houses. Iraqi businessmen say the banks' unappealing profiles are hampering the development of the private sector.

"Iraq's public banks don't have the mechanisms for global transactions and don't seek to draw in entrepreneurs," real estate developer Adel Salhi told AFP. "TBI is the only one that allows investors to open lines of credit, but it does not offer professional services and it demands enormous guarantees-sometimes as high as 110 percent to deliver a letter of guarantee," he said.

Salhi and his Al-Akhiar group have opted to use a foreign bank, like many other Iraqis who turn to Jordan, Turkey, Iran or Lebanon to facilitate their



WILMINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden leaves the Queen Theater after he named his economic team on Tuesday in Wilmington, Delaware. — AFP

the aftermath of the global financial crisis, and said the country is facing another "historic" crisis that is hitting the most vulnerable people the hardest.

Yellen warned that "inaction will produce self-reinforcing downturn causing yet more devastation."

"So many people struggling to put food on the table and pay bills and rent. It's an American tragedy," she said. Outgoing Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on Tuesday reiterated his support for forging a compromise, although he said it should

be a limited package. "I will continue to work with Congress," Mnuchin said. "I urge Congress to pass something quickly."

The goal is to enact a successor to the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act after its main provisions expired earlier this year, and with more Americans losing aid just after Christmas. But the negotiations remain at an impasse and, without support from Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell, the two sides face a tough fight for approval in the final weeks of Donald Trump's presidency. — AFP

Trust a rare asset for Iraqi banks

DIWANIYAH, Iraq: The bustling streets of Iraq's biggest cities are lined with private and public banks that promise investment and credit. But businesses barely use them and individuals don't trust them.

"Iraqi banks today are still so far away from global standards," said Abbas Anid Ghanem, an Iraqi economist and lawyer based in the southern city of Diwaniyah. The problems date back decades, Ghanem told AFP.

In the 1990s, Iraq was isolated from the outside world by crippling sanctions on then-dictator Saddam Hussein that blocked financial transactions with the country. Following the US-led invasion in 2003, widespread looting saw bank vaults emptied of any cash, even as businesses from around the world were flying into Iraq to sniff out reconstruction deals.

More than 70 banks have popped up since, but the sector as a whole remains underdeveloped.

The three largest-Al-Rafidain, Al-Rasheed and the Trade Bank of Iraq (TBI) — are state-owned and hold around 90 percent of the entire sector's assets, the World Bank said in 2018. The first two suffer from "capital deficiencies and asset quality problems", the World Bank said, meaning they are short on deposits and have risky credits.

Americans are staying jobless for longer

WASHINGTON: Eleanore Fernandez lost her job as an executive assistant when the coronavirus pandemic struck in March, and things have only grown worse in the months since.

Her husband, a professional musician, was also put out of work, and she is just weeks away from losing the US government unemployment benefits that have helped sustain Fernandez and her teenage daughter. "I've never been in a situation where it's like, this hairy," Fernandez told AFP, noting she is "taking more out of my savings account."

"I'm going to run out soon if nothing happens," she said. The coronavirus pandemic caused the US economy to shed more than 20 million jobs, and though some people have been rehired, data shows the jobless are remaining out of work for longer as the virus again surges nationwide.

With the extra unemployment benefits approved by Congress set to lapse at the end of the year, economists warn the US labor face is facing long-term damage ahead of Joe Biden's inauguration as president in January. "We've been concerned about longer run damage to the productive capacity of the economy," Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said last month.



The coronavirus pandemic caused the US economy to shed more than 20 million jobs, and though some people have been rehired, data shows the jobless are remaining out of work for longer as the virus again surges nationwide. — AFP

"Workers who are out of work for long periods of time, they may lose their contact with the labor market. They may lose their skills."

'Take anything'

Labor Department data for October showed nearly 3.6 million people in the United States have been unemployed for at least six months. That is equivalent to about a third of the total unemployed population, and is a sign a significant share of people who lost their jobs in the early weeks of the



BAGHDAD: An Iraqi holds out a banknote in downtown Baghdad. Following the US-led invasion in 2003, widespread looting saw bank vaults emptied of any cash, even as businesses from around the world were flying into Iraq to sniff out reconstruction deals. — AFP

transactions. Most companies in Iraq still operate in cash: only 26 percent use the formal banking system, the World Bank said.

All but two percent pay their employees in hard currency and nearly half even pay their suppliers that way. Less than five percent of Iraq's small and medium-sized businesses have a domestic bank loan, with most borrowing from family and friends instead. Ghanem said that's because business loans come with exorbitant interest rates up to 10 percent. — AFP

pandemic, in March and April, have not been able to find work.

The figure is 1.2 million higher than in September, making it "the highest month-over-month increase in history," Michele Evermore, senior policy analyst at the National Employment Law Project, told AFP.

Fernandez has spent fruitless months applying for work and is left to wonder what will happen when extended unemployment payments authorized by Congress in March run out on December 26.

"I'm going to have to take anything or deliver groceries, too, or something," she said. That dilemma is exactly what the central bank chief warned of and what analysts say will make the pandemic damage linger even after the virus is brought under control.

When "people lose attachment to the workforce, particularly once they fall off of unemployment insurance, they stop looking for work, they start figuring out something else, you know, turning to the informal economy," Evermore said. The government is scheduled to release the November employment report on Friday, and Evermore predicted that, with the economy far from fully healed, the ranks of the long-term jobless will swell further.

Before the crisis, the US had a historically low unemployment rate of 3.5 percent, but most economists believe returning to that level is years away. And the pandemic could change the labor market in other lasting ways, as more jobs shift away from service industries towards the tech sector, requiring costly and time-consuming re-training to prepare unemployed workers for these new opportunities. — AFP

Barnier says no guarantee of Brexit trade deal

BRUSSELS: Chief EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier warned yesterday he cannot guarantee he will strike a trade deal with Britain, diplomats said, and the next few days will be crucial. "We are quickly approaching a make or break moment in the Brexit talks," Barnier told a video meeting of European envoys, a diplomat said, in an account of the video talks confirmed by other sources.

"Intensive negotiations are continuing in London, but as of this morning it is still unclear whether negotiators can bridge the gaps on issues like level playing field, governance and fisheries," Barnier said. Diplomats said Barnier thought the outcome of the eight months of talks would be decided in the next few days, possibly late today or tomorrow. UK officials do not recognize a formal deadline, but privately agree the next few days could be crucial.

One European diplomat said there was "frustration" among the member state envoys and that "for the moment, we're still not there." "As of today we're not able to say whether there will be an agreement or not," the diplomat added.

Barnier's early morning briefing to envoys came after certain member states-notably France and the Netherlands-expressed concerns that the EU negotiation team was giving in too much to UK demands. "This was mostly an exercise to calm nerves in Paris and elsewhere and to reassure member states that team Barnier will continue to defend core EU interests, including on fisheries," a third diplomat said.

Bridging the divide

A diplomat from a country with concerns that Barnier might give too much ground, said: "I am not sure what Barnier said managed to assuage concerns. Bridging the divide would require too big a leap."

Barnier spoke to the EU27 officials by video-link from London, where he has been locked in intense talks with his UK counterpart David Frost and their teams. Failure to clinch a deal would cause deep economic disruption between the two sides at a time when the European economy is already deep in a downturn due to COVID-19. The main source of discord is over how to establish some sort of EU-UK alignment on health, labor and environmental regulations, while also ensuring Britain's newly found sovereignty. In addition, a few countries are especially worried about the fate of fishing access to British waters for European fishermen, with the UK wanting to keep tight control. — AFP

Business

Second wave of coronavirus crisis pushes jobless into survival mode

World Bank estimates 150m could fall into extreme poverty by 2021

PARIS: Thousands of workers around the world who suddenly lost their jobs in sectors hit hard by the pandemic such as air travel, hospitality and tourism, said they had to find out how they have coped during the second coronavirus wave. Forced to skip meals, weighed down by debt or having to move back in with parents, most of them described being in survival mode, worse off than when AFP journalists first interviewed them five months ago when they suddenly lost their jobs. Several have avoided the worst, but none has escaped feelings of deep anguish. Due to the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the World Bank estimates that by 2021, 150 million people could fall into extreme poverty, with a rising share of them in urban areas.

Eight out of 10 of the 'new poor' will be in middle-income countries.

Here are some workers' stories:

Debts and 'survival mode'

"I'm in survival mode, one meal a day for the family and that's it," said Frenchman Xavier Chergui, 44, who used to be able to earn up to 4,000 euros (\$4,800) in a really good month as a temp maitre d', filling in at Paris restaurants when they were short-staffed. His situation was already precarious after France's first lockdown but the married, father of two banked on things picking up again from September. Apart from "a few days" of work that has not happened, due to November's partial lockdown. "I'm behind on the rent, the electricity bill... I also have the car loan to pay," he said. His family survives on state aid and benefits which come to 1,400 euros. The rent is 1,000 euros but most of the money goes towards "filling the fridge", said Chergui, whose son had wanted to study graphics at university but has changed to history as it's less expensive.

Scrimping and saving

Domestic worker Sonia Herrera is getting by without resorting to the food bank again, an experience that made her feel "a bit ashamed" she told AFP earlier this year. The 52-year-old Honduran, whose employers in central Madrid let her go the day after Spain's lockdown began, has since managed to pick up a few hours of cleaning. Her daughter Alejandra, 33, who lost her job as a cook, does the same—their household of four lives on a little over 1,000 euros a month.

But they scrimp and save, hanging around town at lunchtime to avoid paying the three-euro bus fare to come home to eat. With schools having reopened, Herrera's grandson Izan can have lunch in the school canteen which helps. The few savings that helped Herrera, a single mother, scrape by earlier are now gone and she

says the idea of another lockdown is "terrifying". As an undocumented migrant, she doesn't qualify for a new minimum wage scheme introduced in May.

Moving back home

Colombian Roger Ordenez, 26, said he had no choice but to move back in with his parents in the northeastern city of Bucaramanga after losing his job as a flight attendant for Avianca. He was open to relocating or retraining but couldn't find another job in the airline industry and can't pay rent. Applications to Bogota call centers were just as futile. He worries that his previous career may put prospective bosses off. "From the salary that I used to have, people think that I'm going to leave as soon as I get another job," he said.

From having earned a monthly salary of 1,000 euros at Avianca, Ordenez said he'd now be happy with minimum wage, which is about 210 euros. "But there's nothing," he said. He used to enjoy travelling and was studying to become a pilot. "You get used to living alone, being independent, buying yourself things... Now, I have to live with my family in their space... it's cramped," he said.

'Better than nothing'

Marie Cedile was relieved to learn the shop where she works was among those being taken over, after French shoe company Andre went into receivership earlier in the year. Half the staff lost their jobs. "Everything is OK for me, for now," said Cedile, 54, who has worked for Andre for 30 years and had told AFP previously that, if necessary, she would clean houses if laid off.

Her husband, who was unemployed in the spring, has found a job in car rentals. "Let's hope it's all going in the right direction. We are scared nevertheless," she admitted. Andre shops were closed under the recent partial lockdown—they reopened at the weekend—and Cedile was on partial unemployment, meaning she got about 1,000 euros a month. "But it's still better than nothing, there are countries like Portugal, where they don't get anything," Cedile, who is of Portuguese origin, said.

Jesus Yopez, 60, has lost everything—the tourists he used to take around the famed Templo Mayor Aztec pyramid in the heart of Mexico City, his home, health and hope. Months after the tour guide entered a homeless shelter in the capital as work dried up due to the pandemic, the once-rotund Mexican is a shadow of his former self. Yopez's cheekbones protrude from his sunken face and he has dark circles under his eyes from insomnia. Every night, instead of falling into a restful sleep, he prays that he will die soon. "My God, come and get me. I can't stand this anymore," he said in a broken voice. — AFP



MADRID: Honduran domestic worker Sonia Herrera is now managing to avoid the food banks in Madrid which made her feel 'a bit ashamed'. — AFP

W Sahara flare-up spells gloom for buffer zone businesses

GUERGUERAT: Kamal Zerfi has long run a junkyard in a no-man's land on the far edge of the Sahara desert. Then government soldiers came and things took a turn for the worse. Zerfi lives in a remote outpost of the Western Sahara region claimed by both Morocco and Polisario Front pro-independence rebels who recently revived their three-decade struggle.

His auto- and scrapyards is located at the desolate truck stop of Guerguerat in a UN-patrolled buffer zone along the Mauritanian border, where the deployment of Moroccan soldiers has now put paid to his lucrative business. "They've stripped me of my goods!" protested the 42-year-old who said he had been doing good-and, he insists, legal-business selling cars on to Mauritania until Rabat sent in the troops on November 13. Western Sahara has been disputed since the end of Spanish colonial rule. Morocco claims all of it as its own, while Polisario rebels, backed by Algeria, want independence.

Trouble flared again when Rabat recently accused the rebels of blockading the road which links the desert region with Mauritania and the rest of Africa at Guerguerat. The pro-independence movement, which says the road was built in violation of a 1991 UN-spon-

sored ceasefire deal, declared the truce null and void and insisted it had no choice but "to intensify the fight for national liberation".

'Apaches in Kandahar'

Zerfi said the rebels, whom he calls "Apaches", would often block the road link, harming business in the region locals dub "Kandahar" after the city in southern Afghanistan. No UN forces could be seen by a visiting AFP team in the region, known as a hotspot for smuggling of all kinds. Zerfi, from Marrakesh in southern Morocco, insists his trade is entirely legitimate due to the special status of the demilitarized zone, even if the Moroccan customs service may disagree.

License plates buried in the sand identify the origins of cars that have passed through the junkyard: France, Italy, Spain—and Germany, the most sought after among Mauritanian buyers, the dealer said. Now that Moroccan troops have asserted control, tow trucks have taken away the cars that were in decent condition. Spare parts and loads of rubbish, meanwhile, have been set on fire, with acrid black smoke swirling into the sky.

Some businesses in the border outpost "have lost everything", said Zerfi, since Moroccan forces arrived to secure the road. The Polisario has since declared a "state of war" that put an end to its 30-year-old ceasefire with Rabat in the disputed territory.

Rabat has also built a sand wall to secure the road to the border post where Moroccan flags are now displayed. The "parking lots" in Guerguerat have long served as a depot for various goods from Mauritania, providing significant income for locals.—AFP

Enabling collaboration on a higher level AI-Yousifi partners with Huawei in launching the latest cutting-edge productivity tool IdeaHub office master in the Kuwait market



Group photo for AI-Yousifi and Huawei Executives



Mr. Aref Easa Al-Yousifi, CEO of Yousifi Group & Mr. Liam Zhao, CEO of Huawei Gulf North signed remote 3-party-MOU through Huawei IdeaHub together with Mr. Edward Zhang, VP of Cloud & AI, Huawei Middle East, who is located in Dubai

Easa Husain Al-Yousifi & Sons Company along with their partner Huawei, the leading service provider of information and communications technology (ICT) for infrastructure and smart devices, has officially launched its IdeaHub product series in Kuwait that can create an all-scenario smart office for the cloud era, and boost production efficiency for enterprises, and help business, governments and individuals settle into the next normal and change the working & learning style during Covid19- pandemic.

This ceremony took place at Huawei Innovation & Training Center in Al-Hamra Tower with the presence of executives from both organizations, Meanwhile plus all system integrators, and resellers attended the live broadcast of the

event from their stations / offices, as to abide with health measures and social distancing required at these times.

Huawei IdeaHub—a productivity tool for the smart office—bundles intelligent writing, high definition (HD) video conferencing and wireless sharing. A Red D Award 2020 winner, IdeaHub is designed to suit any environment. Effortlessly turn conference rooms, executive offices, and open areas into smart spaces.

The new product offers the three unique features to users looking for an ultra-modern smart workplace for different scenarios: innovative and simple product design instead of traditional complex hardware, an open ecosystem for cloud video conferencing, and integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology.

All-in-one Innovative and simple product design:

First, Huawei IdeaHub integrates various communication



devices – such as a projector, whiteboard, microphone, speaker, tablet, PC, TV and video conferencing device – and incorporates everything you need in one smart solution, while doing away with complicated cable connections

Open ecosystem simplifies cloud video conferencing: Second, Huawei IdeaHub supports Huawei Cloud Meeting and 3d party mainstream cloud video conferencing services and platforms, which greatly simplifies the complex process of cloud video conferencing.

Hi-tech, intelligent features & functions:



Third, IdeaHub comes with AI-features, such as sound pick up, virtual acoustic baffle, Auto Frame, Speaker-tracking. At the same time, Idea hub has intelligent features, such as gestures, drag and selecting, zooming in and out as well as erasing the whiteboard; in addition, whiteboard co-authoring capability, which can support remote contract signature possible.

"Collaborative smart ecosystems are essential in a modern,



connected office," leverages cloud capabilities to deliver a seamless, user-centric experience, designed to enhance the way teams work together, wherever they may be in the office. This is a key component of our new smart office strategy, which will guide Huawei's innovation in the years to come as we seek to deliver superior products to our customers, enabling them to take full advantage of our increasingly digital world."

To find out more about IdeaHub, you can call AI-Yousifi Co. on 1833433 or 65909493.

Business

DHAMAN continues innovation in developing healthcare through over 800 training courses

Bourisly: DHAMAN initiatives will help achieve 'New Kuwait' healthcare goals

KUWAIT: Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) launched a number of initiatives aimed at the continuous development of its human resources to ensure achieving 'Healthcare for New Kuwait.'

As part of its 2020 plan, DHAMAN introduced a campaign for its staff to participate in online training courses by using virtual communication technologies, which are in line with preventive measures enforced around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this regard, DHAMAN HR Director Ahmad Bourisly said, "DHAMAN pays great attention to innovation in seizing all

opportunities to develop and advance its human resources. Along these lines, we have launched a number of training courses for the company's staff to use more than 45 websites accredited in professional training by a number of international organizations. This was done through virtual online training in accordance with the standards and measures stipulated by the Ministry of Health (MoH) as part of prevention and exemplary handling of the impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic."

Bourisly added, "As part of encouraging and supporting DHAMAN's employees,

tokens of appreciation were allocated for employees to participate and benefit from those qualified training organizations. Such a step targeted achieving the objectives of each department as per its effective role to achieve DHAMAN's Vision to provide quality integrated healthcare services".

The overall participation of employees was truly a record as they completed over 800 training courses and the employees who received the highest number of programs received token of appreciation based on a comprehensive and accurate report for each training. The participation included all med-

ical, administrative and technical divisions at DHAMAN based on the needs of employees and in line with development opportunities at DHAMAN.

Bourisly expressed overall appreciation to all staff at DHAMAN for their dedication and tangible role in realizing the Company's objectives and aspirations as the "Prime Provider of Quality Integrated Healthcare Services" that are based on best professional practices to develop staff, as well as continuing to attract qualified human resources to join DHAMAN as per the approved standards.



Ahmad Bourisly

News in brief

Xiaomi trade halted in HK

HONG KONG: China's number two smartphone maker Xiaomi briefly suspended trading of its shares in Hong Kong yesterday after failing to disclose a multibillion-dollar top-up placement in time for the market to open. The unusual halt came just after business began with a brief statement to the stock exchange and remained in place throughout the morning. Trading began again in the afternoon once a full disclosure of a share and bond sale was published, though shares were down more than six percent. In that later filing to the stock exchange Xiaomi said it plans to sell 1 billion shares at HK\$23.70 a piece, raising \$3.1 billion. It also proposed the sale of convertible bonds, raising a net \$855 million. —AFP

Eurozone jobless rate dips

BRUSSELS: Unemployment in the euro area fell slightly in October, with the jobless rate slipping to 8.4 percent in seasonally-adjusted terms from 8.5 percent in September, the EU's statistics agency said yesterday. On a 12-month basis, however, the unemployment rate was substantially higher than the 7.4 percent recorded in October last year as the fallout from the coronavirus takes its toll on the economy, Eurostat said in a statement. With the pandemic dealing a devastating blow to global activity, there have been a wave of lay-offs in recent months, despite the mammoth rescue package put in place by Brussels to help keep firms afloat. —AFP

French rail operator sees huge loss

PARIS: Hit hard by economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, French state rail operator SNCF said yesterday it expected to end the year as much as five billion euros (\$6.0 billion) in the red. "We are in the red this year. We are going to end the year with a big loss," chairman Jean-Pierre Farandou told a senate committee, saying "we shan't be far from double" the 2.5-billion-euro loss recorded in the first six months. "I would not have said that before the second lockdown," said Farandou. SNCF would have to keep borrowing on financial markets, he continued, suggesting the company would seek to raise some 2.5 billion euros from selling off railcar hire fleet Ermewa. —AFP

Choose what suits with Mazda from KAICO (Al Shaya and Al Sagar)

KUWAIT: Kuwait Automotive Imports Company "KAICO Al-Shaya and Al-Sagar", the exclusive distributor of Mazda vehicles in Kuwait, announced a collection of offers for the end of year period as part of its goal to provide the best services, financing solutions and special offers to suit the needs of its customers who want to own the 100 percent Japanese vehicles.

Mazda cooperated in presenting its offers with a group of local banks to provide exclusive benefits to customers, including, for example, the National Bank of Kuwait, Kuwait Finance House KIB. While KAICO offers special promotions to its customers directly, including cash gifts and a service package that contains of free maintenance and free warranty. Mazda offers allow customers to choose between the 0 percent profit offers, the 7 benefits offer from KIB or operational lease offers from Aayan or Kuwait Finance House. These unique offers allow customers to purchase one of the CX-9 models, the CX-5, and the elegant Mazda 6 sedan.

On this occasion, Ashish Tandon, General Manager of Kaico stated, "Kaico has always been proactive in providing the strongest offers and facilities in the Kuwaiti market, which comes within the company's strategy to co-operate with the leading local banks such as KIB, NBK & others."

Nader Salmeh, Sr. executive Manager, added "We know that customers have great knowledge of the market and are closely following all offers from different brands, so we made sure to satisfy them by presenting the most competitive offers local automotive market."

Mazda6, CX5, CX9... fulfills your family needs

While Mazda maintains its long-established tradition of being among the few cars still entirely manufactured in Japan, the company has managed to

develop its CX-9 to become one of the best SUVs that combines the feature of seven-seater and sculpted sporty design, in addition to a full range of SKYACTIV TECHNOLOGY which now includes the GVC Gravity Steering Control System. The offer includes the CX-9, which combines outstanding safety, sporty styling and a 12.5 turbo engine with SKYACTIV TECHNOLOGY and 231 horsepower.

The Mazda CX-9 is a three-row family-sized SUV that challenges the traditional design and driving features expected of cars in its class. Other cool features of the CX9 include ABSM, Lane Departure Assist System (LAS), Lane Departure Warning System (LDW), Smart City Brake System (SCBS) and many more. Its interior is breathtaking and driving an experience like no other. From the moment you step one step closer to the CX9, you are greeted with an atmosphere of beauty and subtle detail. Detail is scrutinized even in door handles with a level of sophistication that shows sophistication.

Mazda 6... the most elegant

The "Mazda 6" is the leading model in the lineup of Mazda models. It has always been the most elegant thanks to its dynamic design and typical three-dimensional wings. It is also a sports saloon equipped with everything needed in the cockpit, which has been customized to help you enjoy your trip. The Mazda 6 is equipped with a highly efficient SKYACTIV-G direct injection petrol engine, which achieves fuel efficiency of up to 15 Percent.

The car is also equipped with an advanced set of safety systems that include the Lane Keeping Assist system, the lane departure alert system and the blind spot monitoring system to ensure the safety of your loved ones while driving, while the interior is equipped with the MZD CONNECT system that gives you superior inter-



net connectivity and an advanced navigation system.

While Mazda maintains its established traditions of being among the few cars that are still entirely manufactured in Japan, where the company was able to develop its "Mazda 6" to become one of the best sedans that combines the advantage of luxurious appearance and sculpted sporty design, in addition to a full range of SKYACTIV TECHNOLOGY now includes Gravity Steering Control.

Mazda CX-5... Driving pleasure

The new Mazda CX-5 features many updates, including standard cylinder deactivation technology that can close the outer cylinders when there is no need to increase fuel efficiency. The all-new Mazda CX5 comes with the SKYACTIV-G engine, a 4-cylinder, 2.5-liter 185-horsepower engine mated to a 6-speed automatic transmission.



And the stunning KODO design of the all-new Mazda CX-5 infuses pure vitality and solidity that raises it to the status that it deserves and which defines an SUV. The new CX-5 offers a well-thought-out cabin that makes life in the driver's seat - and passenger seats - enjoyable and easy. From the perfect placement of the dashboard and reclining on the back seats, to the many features such as HMI Control Switch, Noise Reduction and High Vibration (NVH), a human-centered cabin that's ideal for long distances and every day.

Greece's undeclared workers hit hard by virus lockdown

ATHENS: Every time Elisa drives to a client's house for a hairdressing job, she makes sure to pack a bag of groceries in the car in case she is stopped by Greek police. Skirting the country's strict lockdown rules to put food on the table, she is among thousands of undeclared Greek workers facing additional hardship during the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

"I write out a declaration that I'm going shopping, and I mainly work in my neighborhood," says the 32-year-old. "The city center is more risky as police checks are more frequent," she told AFP.

Greece went into a second nationwide lockdown on November 7 after a dangerous spike in infections accompanied by scores of daily fatalities. Anybody found by police venturing outdoors without a valid reason faces a 300-euro (\$359) fine. Company workers may commute with a written declaration from their employer. But that's not an option for the self-employed-mainly native Greeks and long-established immigrants-and especially those hiding their full income from tax authorities.

Greece's black economy has historically been one of the biggest in Europe, accounting for over a quarter of the country's output. Now, after a decade-long economic crisis that wiped out a quarter of the country's wealth and sent unemployment soaring, many Greeks facing job precarity say they cannot afford to keep up with taxes and living costs. The hairdressing salon that employed Elisa was among thousands of small businesses that did not survive the 2010-2018 crisis.

'We're not stealing'

"I'm forced to break the law. It's a matter of survival," says Vangelis, a plumber in his 40s who takes jobs in his neighborhood and declined to give his real name. "I can't stay at home and earn nothing... I'd rather take the risk. This way, I can at least make 50 euros a day and pay my rent and supermarket bills," he adds. Vangelis says his earnings fell by half during the first six-week Covid-19 lockdown in the spring. But thankfully, police are more tolerant now, he says. "It's not like we're stealing."

Vangelis insists that "everybody knows how the economy works in Greece, the money must circulate; the



Greece's black economy has historically been one of the biggest in Europe, accounting for over a quarter of the country's output.

majority of delivery men have no social security and the police turn a blind eye".

According to estimates the mobility rate-how many people are going out to work-rose by 35 percent during the second lockdown compared to the first, says Panagiotis Petrakis, a professor of economics at the University of Athens. The mobility rate is one of the indirect indices used to track the underground economy.

The overall losses to the economy as a result of the first lockdown totalled nearly 2.5 billion euros (\$3 billion), according to official figures, but the real amount is probably double that according to Petrakis.

'Living in anguish'

Greece's jobless rate is expected to reach 18.9 percent this year according to the government. And national output is set to fall by 10.5 percent before recovering by over four percent next year. As in many countries, the lockdown has mainly hit tourism, Greece's main money earner, but also personal and entertainment services, sectors where moonlighting is common.

The crunch is expected to hit hardest those outside the official fabric of the economy who are not entitled to state benefits during the pandemic-low income, unemployed or undocumented workers. Anna, a housekeeper from Georgia, says she lives "in anguish of being arrested." Though she has lived in Greece for more than ten years, she still has no residency papers.

"I have a certificate saying that I am helping a vulnerable person. But I have lost a lot of clients, especially among the elderly, who are afraid of bringing in someone like me who uses public transport," she laments. —AFP

Australia exits first recession in almost 30 years

SYDNEY: Australia has exited its first recession in almost 30 years, after official figures yesterday showed the economy grew 3.3 percent in July-September compared with the coronavirus-hit previous quarter. With local transmission of Covid-19 largely under control, official data showed businesses have begun to rebound and consumer spending has surged.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics said household spending largely drove the economic bounce, rising 7.9 percent compared with the previous quarter. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said the figures "can give Australians cause for optimism and hope", declaring that Australia "has performed better on the health and on the economic fronts than nearly any other country in the world".

However, central bank governor Philip Lowe warned that positive economic indicators masked lingering difficulties. "These figures... cannot hide the reality that the recovery will be uneven and bumpy and that it will be drawn-out. Some parts of the economy are doing quite well, but others are in considerable difficulty," he told lawmakers.

Australia's central bank has predicted the economy will not return to pre-pandemic levels until the end of 2021. The economy has yet to fully recover from the coronavirus-fuelled recession, recording a 3.8-percent slump for the year to September.

The return to economic growth followed a record seven-percent decline in the June quarter and a 0.3-percent dip in the first quarter of 2020. A recession is generally defined as two successive quarters of economic contraction. The return to growth comes despite Victoria state-which accounts for about 25 percent of Australia's economic output-spending much of the September quarter in one of the world's strictest lockdowns, curtailing economic activity.

In a pattern repeated across the globe, economic shutdowns to curb the spread of the coro-



SYDNEY: Workers load containers on a cargo ship at Port Botany in Sydney yesterday. —AFP

navirus sent Australia tumbling into recession as whole industries ground to a halt.

Around a million people lost their jobs and many more were forced to take pay cuts or saw their hours slashed. In response, the government and the central bank have embarked on a vast stimulus spending program, pumping billions into the economy to avert a full-blown depression.

Last month, the Reserve Bank of Australia also cut interest rates to a record low of 0.10 percent as it attempted to help hasten the recovery. "There is a lot of ground to make up and many Australian households and many Australian businesses are doing it tough-very tough," Frydenberg said.

"Many challenges do remain," he added. "The global economic environment remains uncertain as many nations experience an increase in COVID-19 cases and new lockdowns."

Higher unemployment is expected to linger in Australia, with the jobless rate rising to seven percent in October. Closed borders continue to drag on the economy, with exports falling due to weaker demand for Australian mining commodities and travel restrictions.

Wednesday's figures were roughly in line with economists' expectations, coming as Australia continues to roll back virus restrictions and open domestic borders after largely containing major outbreaks.

The country has been relatively successful in its pandemic response, recording just under 28,000 cases and 908 deaths. —AFP

CLINIC PAGE



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Lifestyle | Features

'Juno' star Elliot Page comes out as transgender

The Oscar-nominated star of "Juno" has come out as transgender, introducing himself as Elliot Page on Tuesday in social media posts that voiced joy at sharing the news-but also fear over a possible backlash. In a landmark move for a top Hollywood actor, the performer formerly known as Ellen Page thanked supporters in the trans community for helping him on his journey to "finally love who I am enough to pursue my authentic self." "I love that I am trans. And I love that I am queer," wrote the Canadian-born Page, who has recently starred in Netflix superhero series "The Umbrella Academy." His statement identifying as trans won swift praise across Hollywood and beyond, with LGBTQ charity GLAAD calling Page "remarkable" and "an outspoken advocate for all LGBTQ people."

"He will now be an inspiration to countless trans and non-binary people," said the group's director of transgender media Nick Adams. "All transgender people



In this file photo Director/actor formerly known as Ellen Page attends the premiere of the documentary "There's Something in the Water" during the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival Day 4 in Toronto, Ontario. — AFP

deserve the chance to be ourselves and to be accepted for who we are." Netflix tweeted: "So proud of our superhero! We love you Elliot!" Page, 33, burst onto the Hollywood scene with an Oscar-nominated role as a pregnant teenager in 2007

sleeper hit "Juno." The actor also appeared in the 2010 science fiction hit "Inception" opposite Leonardo DiCaprio, and the 2012 Woody Allen comedy "To Rome with Love." Page came out as gay in 2014, quickly become a flagbearer for Hollywood's LGBTQ community, and married dancer Emma Portner in 2018. While largely absent from big-budget Hollywood blockbusters since 2014's "X-Men: Days of Future Past," Page has repeatedly shrugged off suggestions of being typecast or shunned by Tinseltown. Page joins a small group of prominent Hollywood transgender figures, alongside "The Matrix" series writer-directors Lana and Lilly Wachowski, "Transparent" creator Joey Soloway and actor Laverne Cox.

'I'm scared'

On Monday, Cox described being the victim of a recent transphobic attack in Los Angeles, underlining the hostility facing many transgender individuals in the

entertainment industry and beyond. "The truth is, despite feeling profoundly happy right now... I'm scared of the invasiveness, the hate, the 'jokes' and of violence," wrote Page. Page also railed against politicians who "criminalize trans health care and deny our right to exist," as well as influential public figures who use "a massive platform who continue to spew hostility towards the trans community."

"You have blood on your hands. You unleash a fury of vile and demeaning rage that lands on the shoulders of the trans community," added Page, noting high rates of attempted suicide among the community. Alphonso David, president of LGBTQ advocacy group Human Rights Campaign, thanked Page for "sharing your truth with us, and for shining a bright light on the challenges too many in our community face." Although Page did not name any specific individuals, President Donald Trump's administration has attempted to roll back Obama-era anti-

discrimination protections for transgender people in the health care system, and also banned transgender Americans from serving in the military.

Harry Potter author JK Rowling has been at the center of a firestorm in recent years over comments deemed insulting to transgender people. Rowling sparked controversy in June for tweeting about the use of the phrase "people who menstruate" instead of women-prompting some former fans and activists to call for a boycott of her works. "You aren't being 'cancelled,' you are hurting people. I am one of those people and we won't be silent in the face of your attacks," wrote Page, addressing transphobia in general. GLAAD provided a "tip sheet" for journalists covering Page's statement, advising reporters to "use he/they pronouns when referring to Elliot Page." — AFP



In this file photo a school teacher helps a pupil reads a text in Amazigh, an ancient tongue in Rabat. —AFP photos



In this file photo young Amazigh (Berber) women pose for a selfie photograph during the annual "Engagement Mousseem" festival near the village of Imilchil in central Morocco's high Atlas Mountains.



In this file photo a man waves the Amazigh flag as thousands of mourners attend the funeral procession and burial of Hocine Ait-Ahmed, one of the fathers of Algeria's struggle for independence and a key opposition figure, in the Algerian village of Ait Ahmed.

LAB-GROWN MEAT TO GO ON SALE IN SINGAPORE IN WORLD FIRST

Lab-grown chicken will soon be available in restaurants in Singapore after the country became the first to green-light meat created without slaughtering any animals. US start-up Eat Just said Wednesday that its meat had been approved for sale in the city-state as an ingredient in chicken nuggets. The news marks a "breakthrough for the global food industry," said the company, as firms increasingly try to find less environmentally harmful ways of producing meat. "I'm sure that our regulatory approval for cultured meat will be the first of many in Singapore and in countries around the globe," said Josh Tetrick, co-founder and CEO of Eat Just. Consumption of regular meat is an environmental threat as cattle produce methane, a potent greenhouse gas, while logging forests to make way for animals destroys natural barriers against climate change.

Demand for sustainable meat alternatives is rising due to growing pressure from consumers about the environment and animal welfare, but other products in the market are plant-based. There were concerns that lab-grown varieties would be too expensive, but a spokesman for Eat Just said the company had made "considerable progress" in lowering the cost. "Right from the start, we will be at price parity for premium chicken at a high-end restaurant," he told AFP.

He did not reveal the price of the nuggets but said they would be launched soon at a Singapore restaurant before other products including chicken breasts with lab-grown meat-are rolled out. Eat Just hopes to bring down the cost to below that of conventional chicken in the coming years, the spokesman added.

Soaring meat consumption

The company conducted more than 20 production runs in 1,200-litre bioreactors to make the chicken alternative, and checks on safety and quality showed that its "cultured" product-the term for meat grown in labs from animal cells-met food standards. Meat consumption is projected to increase more than 70 percent by 2050, and lab-grown alternatives have a role to play in ensuring a secure food supply, Eat Just said. "Working in partnership with the broader agriculture sector and forward-thinking policymakers, companies like ours can help meet the increased demand for animal protein as our population climbs to 9.7 billion by 2050," said company CEO Tetrick.

The Singapore Food Agency, the city-state's regulator, confirmed it had approved the sale of Eat Just's lab-grown chicken in nuggets after concluding it was safe for consumption. The high-tech city-state has become a hub for the development of sustainable foods, with start-ups producing goods ranging from lab-grown "seafood" to dumplings made with tropical fruit instead of pork. William Chen, a Singapore-based scientist and member of an expert panel that advises the regulator, said food security was a key concern in the city-state's drive for developing meat alternatives.—AFP

EGYPT'S BERBER SPEAKERS CLING TO LANGUAGE IN ISOLATED OASIS

Youssef Diab drives his truck through the Egyptian oasis of Siwa, singing catchy songs in a local Berber dialect that clings to life despite the dominance of Arabic. The UN has classified Siwi, the easternmost dialect of the Tamazight language spoken across North Africa as far as Morocco, as "endangered". But few adults in the oasis speak Arabic as their main language, and the children playing at the foot of the ancient local fortress talk and shout in Siwi. Diab, a 25-year-old tourist guide with a colorful Berber flag in his back window, is convinced that the tongue will

survive. "Everyone uses it here," he said. The Berbers of Siwa are one of the main linguistic minorities in Egypt, the most populous Arabic-speaking country with some 100 million inhabitants and long the flag-bearer of Arab nationalism.

Located some 560 kilometers (350 miles) from Cairo, their oasis only came under state control when it was occupied by Mohammad Ali, the founder of modern Egypt, in 1820. Its isolation "allowed Siwa and its inhabitants to keep their specific traditions and a language that sets them apart from mainstream Egyptian culture", said sociolinguist Valentina Serrelli, who

wrote her PhD thesis on the language in the oasis. It wasn't until the 1980s that Arabic became more common, due in large part to "tourism, mass media and mobility for higher education or for working purposes".



In this file photo, a young Amazigh (Berber) woman waits for her wedding ceremony during the annual "Engagement Mousseem" festival near the village of Imilchil in central Morocco's high Atlas Mountains.

Language still 'dominant'

The UN in 2008 estimated that 15,000 people in the oasis, half the population, speak Siwi. But Serrelli estimates that the real figure is around 20,000. "UNESCO considers the language 'definitely endangered' because 'children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home'", she said. But "as far as I can tell, this is not true". "The language is dominant in... conversations, even between young peers." Ibrahim Mohamed, an elder of one of the region's 11 tribes and a respected figure in Siwa, said Siwi was central to the "Amazigh identity" of the oasis. And despite an influx of tourists in the last few decades, the oasis remains relatively isolated, accessible by a single road from the Mediterranean coast. "Siwa is to the Siwis what water is to fish-they wouldn't leave it for anything in the

world," said Mehdi Al-Howeiti, the head of the local tourism office. A son of the oasis, he studied elsewhere, but returned to Siwa to live.

Preservation efforts

Despite that devotion to their roots, Siwa residents face several challenges in protecting their language, including the cultural dominance of Arabic and the fact the tongue is only transmitted within families. "In the past, our parents only spoke Siwi, which had nothing in common with Arabic," said tribal elder Mohamed, who wore a black Libyan-style skullcap on his head. "Today, the language is becoming closer and closer to Arabic." And while Egyptian curricula feature foreign languages, neither of the country's main minority languages-Siwi and Nubian-is taught at schools. "The language should be formally taught so it doesn't disappear," Mohamed said. The local organization "Children of Siwa" has led efforts to preserve the language.

Working with Moroccan and Italian partners, in 2012 it published a collection of songs, poems and proverbs in both Siwi and Arabic. It was the product of two years work with 60 young local people and elders. But despite those efforts, the book is now out of print and there isn't enough money for another edition, said the association's vice-president Yahya Qenaoui. "We need to do more to preserve our heritage," he said. "We can't do 10 percent of what we'd like to do... the association doesn't get any funding." But Diab remains hopeful that the dialect will survive. "At school, my son Ibrahim learns Arabic, he reads and writes it," he said. "But at home, he needs to speak Siwi." — AFP



Ibrahim Mohamed, a sheikh of the Haddadin (blacksmiths) tribe and a respected figure in Siwa, speaks at his workshop in Egypt's western desert oasis.



Craftsmen work on traditional palm wicker baskets at their shop in Egypt's western desert oasis of Siwa.

Berbers: North Africa's marginalized indigenous people

The Berbers are descendants of pre-Arab populations across North Africa, from the extreme west of Egypt to the countries of the Maghreb. The Berbers, who refer to themselves as the Amazigh meaning "free man", have long fought for greater recognition for their ancient ethnic group, their culture and language. Here is some background on Berber communities that have stretched across North Africa since long before the Arab conquests:

Morocco

On Africa's northwestern tip, Morocco is home to the largest Berber community in the region. Their language-of which there are three main dialects-was only given official status alongside Arabic in a new constitution in 2011. One of the major consequences of this recognition has been the appearance of their Tifinagh alphabet on public buildings next to Arabic and French. Since 2010 the Tamazight TV channel has been dedicated to promoting Berber culture. Some years ago lawmakers created a major stir by talking in the Berber language in parliamentary sessions. Despite advances, the Moroccan authorities still sporadically refuse to register Berber names on the official registry. The Amazigh flag was a major symbol in protests that hit the depressed Rif region in the north of the country in 2016, where the group is a majority.

Algeria

The Berber comprise about 10 million people in Algeria, making up roughly a quarter of the country's total population of 40 million. They live mainly in the mountainous northern region of Kabylie, and as in Morocco, they have led a long fight for their rights. After some progress, such as the recognition of Tamazight as the country's second official language in 2016, the Berber were the target of much repression in the crackdown on anti-government protests. Several dozen demonstrators were sentenced

to jail for having brandished the Amazigh flag, banned from rallies by the army.

Libya

Persecuted under dictator Moamer Kadhafi, who denied their existence, the Berbers of Libya have called for their language to be given official status alongside Arabic and for greater political representation. They make up around 10 percent of the 6.4 million and live mainly in the mountains west of Tripoli or in the vast southern desert regions. Their demands have become more vocal in the turmoil-wracked country since Kadhafi's ouster and death in 2011. The Berber flag can now be seen on administrative buildings. Textbooks in their language have also been produced, but they have not been officially approved by the internationally backed government. Under a draft constitution endorsed by parliament, but still awaiting ratification, the languages spoken by the various communities, including Tamazigh, are recognized as part of Libyan cultural heritage but not given official status.

Tunisia

In Tunisia estimating the number of Berbers is tough as official statistics based on ethnicity are prohibited. Outside their traditional heartland in the south, Berbers are mainly found in the capital Tunis following an exodus from the countryside. They complain of marginalisation and exclusion in a state that recognises only Arabic in its constitution. Jallol Ghaki, the head of the Tunisian Association of Amazigh Culture, estimates that while some half of Tunisians may be of Berber origin, the vast majority have been fully Arabised and only one percent speak the local Chelha dialect. While activists complain that the state takes no efforts to preserve or educate children about Berber culture, there have been some improvements since Tunisia's 2011 revolution. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



The Galata Tower is seen after its restoration in Istanbul.



Archaeological artifacts found in Istanbul are on display as people visit after the restoration of the Galata Tower.



People look at a 3D Istanbul map after the restoration of the Galata Tower in Istanbul. — AFP photos

Turks bristle at botched heritage renovations

With sloppy restoration work and damaged or disfigured historical monuments, experts say a race for profits, ideological considerations and favoritism are leaving sensitive upkeep of cultural heritage by the wayside in Turkey. In August the Galata Tower—an emblematic 14th-century Istanbul landmark—became the latest monument at the heart of a dispute. Criticism from residents managed to narrowly block the demolition of one of its walls with a jackhammer as part of a restoration, only after a video of workers using the power tool leaked on social media. Culture Minister Nuri Ersoy tried to smooth things over, saying that the destroyed section was not an original part of the tower and announcing “sanctions” against the construction chiefs for using the heavy-duty equipment.

But in recent years, the list of poorly renovated monuments has grown, ranging from Roman mosaics damaged by a botched restoration to concrete piled up in the middle of an ancient amphitheatre or unrecognisable mosques and citadels. For Osman Koker, founder of the gallery “Birzamanlar”—a venue to display the country’s cultural diversity—a “harshness” toward ancient buildings has always existed in Turkey, aimed especially at erasing traces of non-Muslim minorities. The picture was much brighter in the early 2000s, when Recep Tayyip Erdogan—now president—first became prime minister. “Restoring buildings with high symbolic value was

prioritized back then, as part of efforts to join the European Union,” Koker said. In 2011, the highly successful restoration of the 10th-century Armenian church on Akdamar island in Lake Van in eastern Turkey received praise from many experts.

‘Profit above all’

But Ankara’s estrangement from the EU in recent years and a hardline turn in Erdogan’s policies have transformed the situation, said Korhan Gumus, an architect specializing in preservation of cultural heritage. “Tenders for renovations are awarded to favored companies which have established a monopoly. And the projects are above all aimed at making profits,” he lamented. “The renovations are managed entirely by construction calls for tenders, without prior reflection on their history,” Gumus said.

Rather than preserving “parts added by different civilizations” over the centuries or millennia, project specifications often call for “a restitution of the original, which leads to grotesque results,” he added. The culture ministry—in charge of maintaining historic monuments—did not respond to the criticism when contacted by AFP. It was Mahir Polat, cultural heritage director for Istanbul’s municipal government, who raised the alarm on the use of the jackhammer during the restoration work at Galata Tower. The municipality, run by the main opposition CHP party since 2019, lodged an immediate complaint, only for the culture min-

istry to reject its appeal to inspect the project. “When restoration is seen only as a construction activity and when we forget that the monument reflects the centuries it has passed through, we miss the objective of preservation. We then have brand-new reconstructions,” Polat said.

“Arbitrary decisions” sometimes bypass those in charge of cultural heritage protection, Polat complains. He said he discovered in July that a historic fountain in Uskudar on the Asian side of Istanbul had vanished overnight as part of a road-widening project. The district municipality led by Erdogan’s ruling party, he said, had decided to “trans-

port” the fountain without any authorization. “The historical value attributed to a monument only makes sense in the place it is located. You cannot transport it like any other object,” Polat said. “We’ve heard nothing about this fountain since then.”

Tugba Tanyeri Erdemir, researcher at

for Muslim worship.

The decision came just a month after a similarly controversial conversion to transform the UNESCO World Heritage-recognized Hagia Sophia into a mosque for the first time since 1934. With the erasure of cultural heritage, Polat fears the memory of Istanbul will disappear.



Archaeological artifacts found in Istanbul are on display as people visit after the restoration of the Galata Tower.



A woman walks upstairs after the restoration of the Galata Tower.

‘Arbitrary decisions’

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Director of “Piguet Hotel des Ventes” auction house Bernard Piguet poses with a rare sabre-toothed cat’s skeleton during a preview of the sale in Geneva. — AFP photos

‘SABRE-TOOTHED TIGER’ SKELETON UP FOR AUCTION

A nearly 40-million-year-old skeleton belonging to what is popularly called a sabre-toothed tiger is going under the hammer next week in Geneva, a year after its discovery on a US ranch. The skeleton, some 120 centimeters (nearly four feet) long, is expected to fetch between 60,000 and 80,000 Swiss francs (\$66,560 to \$88,750; 55,300 to 73,750 euros) at auction on December 8 in the Swiss city. “This fossil is exceptional, above all for its conservation: it’s 37 million years old, and it’s 90-percent complete,” Bernard Piguet, director of the Piguet auction house, told AFP on Tuesday. “The few missing bones were remade with a 3D printer,” he added, with the skeleton reconstructed around a black metal frame.

Piguet said he was fascinated by the merger of “the extremely old with modern technologies”. The original bones are those of a Haplophoeus. Not strictly a true member of the cat family, they are an extinct genus of the Nimravidae family and stalked around North America. Such extinct predatory mammals are commonly called sabre-toothed tigers. “It was found in South Dakota during the last excavation

season, towards the end of summer 2019,” Swiss collector Yann Cuenin, who owns the dozens of paleontology lots on auction, told AFP. “As in most finds, erosion had unearthed part of the skeleton. While walking around his property, the ranch owner saw bones sticking out of the ground.” While the skeleton is the star of the show, there are plenty of other treasures from the past up for grabs, including ammonite, an opal-like organic gemstone, in shades of red and orange. Measuring 40 cm long by 36 cm wide, the fossil from the Cretaceous period is 75 million years old and hails from the Canadian Rocky Mountains. It is estimated to fetch between 20,000 and 30,000 Swiss francs. Jurassic Park enthusiasts can also buy a Tyrannosaurus Rex tooth (2,200 to 2,800 francs), or, for 5,000 to 7,000 francs, an impressive 85-cm long fin from a mosasaur—a marine reptile that in the Cretaceous period was at the top of the submarine food chain.

History versus art

Though dinosaur-mania began in the United States, it has grown in Europe in recent years. Next week’s sale is the second time such an auction has been held in Switzerland. In September 2019, the skeleton of a dinosaur (Thescelosaurus Neglectus), 66 million years old and three metres long, was purchased by a Swiss-resident collector for 225,000 francs. Debate rages as to the balance between the scientific value of such items and their worth on the open market.

Some paleontologists insist animal or plant fossils are not decorative objects for collectors, but witness to the evolution of life on Earth and therefore scientific objects that ought to be studied and then shared with the public in museums. But Cuenin said: “If we’re talking about the sabre-toothed tiger, for example, it’s not a skeleton which is of major scientific interest, in the sense that it’s something which is already known to science. —AFP



A rare sabre-toothed cat’s skeleton is displayed at “Piguet Hotel des Ventes” auction house.

‘Don’t leave trash in the desert’: Utah monolith removal explained

The mystery of how a metal monolith appeared in the Utah desert remains, but the riddle of its removal seems to have been solved—and sadly, has nothing to do with aliens. Images emerged Tuesday of four men working in the dead of night to remove the strange, triangular pillar that has garnered global attention from its remote resting place in the western United States desert. Photographer Ross Bernards, who visited the monolith Friday, described in an Instagram post accompanying the photos how four men suddenly appeared that night, pushed the object over and dismantled it before carrying it off in a wheelbarrow.

“One of them looked back at us all and said ‘Leave no trace.’ That was at 8:48,” wrote Bernards. Later Tuesday, a 34-year-old slackline performer and adventure sportsman called Andy Lewis posted a video on YouTube titled, “We removed the Utah monolith.” It featured near-identical images and a short clip of the monolith seemingly being wheeled away, but no further explanation was provided. The shiny pillar, which protruded some 12 feet from the red rocks of southern Utah, was first spotted on November 18 by baffled local officials counting bighorn sheep from the air.

Alien or art?

News of the discovery quickly went viral around the world, with many noting the object’s similarity with strange alien monoliths that trigger huge leaps in human progress in Stanley Kubrick’s classic sci-fi film “2001: A Space Odyssey.” Some observers pointed out the object’s resemblance to the avant-garde work of John McCracken, a US artist who lived for a time in nearby New Mexico and died in 2011. But McCracken’s representatives have given ambiguous and at times conflicting responses to this theory, prolonging an international guessing game that intensified further with the monolith’s sudden removal Friday.

The local San Juan County sheriff’s office, which is reportedly investigating alongside the federal Bureau of Land Management, saw the lighter side in a Facebook post Saturday featuring lineup images of nine suspects—all extraterrestrials. It is still not known if the men who removed the object were the same ones who installed it, or even if the two accounts of Bernards and Lewis mesh together. According to Bernards, one of the men removing the monolith said, “This is why you don’t leave trash in the desert.”

Bernards said the men “were right to



This video grab image shows a mysterious metal monolith that was discovered in Utah after public safety officers spotted the object while conducting a routine wildlife mission.

take it out,” noting that “at least 70 different cars (and a plane)” had converged on the “the delicate desert landscape.” Officials who found the monolith did not disclose the object’s location out of fear that hordes of curious sightseers would flock to the remote wilderness, but amid the growing fascination, dozens of explorers quickly tracked it down. A resident of nearby Moab, Sylvan

Christensen, also claimed to have been among those dismantling the monolith, telling The New York Times he was concerned about “human impacts” upon the land and its ecosystem. “Mother Nature is an artist, it’s best to leave the art in the wild to her,” concluded Bernards.

Mystery over metal monolith found on Romanian hilltop

A metal monolith which mysteriously appeared on a hilltop in northern Romania has sparked curiosity—and mockery—online, coming just days after a similar object was found in the Utah desert. Images of the four-meter tall metal object were first published last week by local news outlets in the Neamt region. The Jurnal FM radio station went to investigate the monolith after an email about it arrived on Thursday. “We were surprised to say the least when we found a... metallic structure which had spirals engraved on its sides”, the station said in a story posted on its website. Local news outlet ziariatraneamt.ro also published a video taken by a man who went to the hilltop to see the object for himself. In a video posted to Facebook, the man says the object is “just some old scrap metal that somebody placed here”.

Fellow Facebook user Alexandru was similarly scathing, commenting: “We’re not even capable of doing a proper copy-cat”. Others noted the object had obvious welding marks. Asked about the reactions to the structure, reporter Ciprian Solomon of Jurnal FM says the attention it has garnered “has a lot to do with Utah”. “There are a lot of unanswered questions,” Solomon told AFP, adding: “Why in Neamt? Why now?” — AFP



A handout picture shows a metal pillar on Batca Doamnei hill in Piatra Neamt, Romania. — AFP photos

Sports

Photo of the Day



Bryce Menzies competes at the Baja 1000 in Baja, Mexico in November. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Surgeon responds tearfully to Maradona's death probe

'I did everything, up to the impossible'

BUENOS AIRES: Diego Maradona's surgeon responded to the launch of an investigation for involuntary manslaughter by saying he did "everything he could, up to the impossible" for an "unmanageable" patient. Earlier in the day prosecutors in San Isidro, near Buenos Aires, said they were investigating Leopoldo Luque while Argentine television showed police raiding the doctor's surgery and home. A statement from the prosecutors' office later said they had begun analyzing material gathered and clarified that "no decisions have been made at the moment regarding the procedural situation of any person."

The probe was triggered by concerns raised by Maradona's daughters Dalma, Gianinna and Jana over the treatment he received for his heart condition at his home in Tigre, north of Buenos Aires, judicial sources said. Maradona died of a heart attack on Wednesday aged 60, and was buried on Thursday at the Jardín de Paz cemetery on the outskirts of the Argentine capital. "Our investigations are ongoing, we are talking to witnesses including members of the family" of Maradona, a source close to the San Isidro inquiry said.

"The clinic had recommended that he go elsewhere to be hospitalized, but the family decided otherwise. His daughters signed for him to be discharged from the hospital," said a family member,

on the condition of anonymity. Later in the day, Luque, who is no relation to Maradona's former Argentina team-mate of the same name, gave an emotional televised news conference. "You want to know what I am responsible for?" the 39-year-old doctor asked between sobs. "For having loved him, for having taken care of him, for having extended his life, for having improved it to the end."

Luque said he did "everything he could, up to the impossible" and considered himself a "friend" of Maradona and saw him "as a father, not as a patient". Luque had posted a photograph of himself with Maradona when the former player left hospital on November 12, eight days after the doctor operated to remove a brain blood clot. Maradona returned home to Tigre where he received round-the-clock medical care and could remain close to his daughters. "He should have gone to a rehabilitation centre. He didn't want to," said Luque who called Maradona "unmanageable".

'Nothing to hide'

Luque said he did not know why there was no defibrillator in case of a heart attack in Maradona's home in Tigre, and made clear that the home care was not his responsibility. "I am a neurosurgeon," said Luque. "I am the person who has been taking care of him. I'm proud of every-

thing I've done. I have nothing to hide. I am at the disposal of justice."

Maradona's lawyer, Matias Morla, had called for an investigation into claims that ambulances took more than half an hour to reach the football star's house in response to an emergency call on the day of his death. Luque said an ambulance should have been parked outside. "A psychiatrist had asked that there should always be an ambulance in front of his house. I don't know who is responsible for the fact that there was no ambulance," Luque said. Diego "was very sad, he wanted to be alone, and it's not because he didn't love his daughters, his family, or those around him," Luque said. "He was brave." A judicial source told AFP that no official complaint has yet been filed.

"The case was initiated because he is a person who died at home and no one signed his death certificate. It does not mean there are suspicions or irregularities," the source said, requesting to remain anonymous. A preliminary autopsy report established that Maradona died in his sleep at noon on Wednesday of "acute lung oedema and chronic heart failure". The prosecutor's office is awaiting the results of toxicological tests on Maradona's body. The three prosecutors working on the case have requested his medical records, as well as recordings from neighborhood security cameras. — AFP

News in brief

Sounders beat Dallas in playoffs

WASHINGTON: Seattle defender Shane O'Neill nodded home a header in the 49th minute as the defending champion Sounders defeated FC Dallas 1-0 on Tuesday in a Major League Soccer quarter-final. The Sounders advanced to Monday's Western Conference final against the winner of today's matchup between Sporting Kansas City and Minnesota United. That winner will claim a berth in the December 12 MLS Cup final against Sunday's Eastern Conference final winner - either the New England Revolution or Columbus Crew. After a scoreless first half, the Sounders struck quickly in the second off a corner kick by Uruguayan midfielder Nicolas Lodeiro. — AFP

COVID rocks Pakistan cricketers

WELLINGTON: An eighth member of Pakistan's cricket squad has tested positive for COVID-19 as the team undergoes quarantine in Christchurch, New Zealand health authorities said yesterday. The health department said there was one new confirmed case among the squad and a further two members were being investigated, adding to the seven who previously tested positive over the past week. The department said the team would not be allowed to train together until doctors were confident it would not lead to more coronavirus cases. Director-general of health Ashley Bloomfield issued the team with a "final warning" last week for flouting social distancing protocols at their hotel. — AFP

Fi's Grosjean leaves hospital

SAKHIR: Formula One driver Romain Grosjean left hospital yesterday, three days after escaping a fiery high-speed crash in the Bahrain Grand Prix with just burns to his hands, his team said. Grosjean was treated in a military hospital in Bahrain for the burns he suffered while jumping out of his blazing Haas car following a collision with Daniil Kvyat on the first lap of Sunday's race. In a video posted to Twitter on Tuesday, Grosjean said: "I'm getting better and better, obviously a few parts are a bit painful but it's OK. After what happened I guess the pain is not too bad. I'm happy to be alive and talk to you." — AFP

NBA camps open amid COVID

WASHINGTON: Two players for the Golden State Warriors and another for the Washington Wizards have tested positive for COVID-19, the NBA clubs announced Tuesday as individual 2020-21 pre-season workouts began. Warriors general manager Bob Myers said his club delayed the start of individual player workouts, with group sessions to start next week. Wizards coach Scott Brooks said an unidentified player on his roster has tested positive and will be unable to participate in training camp this week. The NBA's health-and-safety protocol says any player who tests positive, even if not displaying symptoms of the virus, must wait 10 days or test negative twice at least 24 hours apart and then be monitored in individual workouts for two more days before he can return to the club. — AFP

GAZOO Racing wins 2019-2020 FIA WEC

KUWAIT: GAZOO Racing (GR) claimed the 2019-2020 FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) title with a stunning one-two victory in the 8 Hours of Bahrain recently. Mike Conway, Kamui Kobayashi and Jose Maria Lopez took first place in the No 7 TS050 Hybrid Electric Vehicle (HEV) during the eighth and final race of the season, which also marked the last WEC championship appearance for Toyota's three-time Le Mans-winning vehicle.

The No 7 TS050 HEV crew overturned a points deficit going into the season finale to win from pole position, earning a well-deserved major title. Meanwhile, the outgoing World Champions Sebastien Buemi and Kazuki Nakajima delivered a perfect result for the GR team alongside Brendon Hartley in the No 8 TS050 HEV to earn second place, 64.594 seconds behind.

The race brought the curtain down on the LMP1 era in endurance racing, in which GR has participated since 2012. During its 64 races, the team has won 29, earned 26 pole positions and set 24 fastest laps, winning both the teams' and drivers' World Championship in three of its eight seasons. GR has managed to reduce fuel consumption by 35% since 2012, while maintaining the outstanding performance of its vehicles.

Since its 2016 debut, the TS050 HEV has been raced by 11 different drivers in 34 races, winning Le Mans three times as part of 19 WEC victories, earning 16 pole positions and setting 15 fastest laps in the process - including at the legendary Circuit de la Sarthe. The final WEC race of the season was a straight fight between the two TS050 HEVs for victory and the world title, with No 7 TS050 HEV holding a theoretical 0.54-second success handicap advantage over the No 8 TS050 HEV as a result of the standings going into this event. Conway started from pole position and established a lead that Kobayashi and Lopez extended consistently throughout the next eight hours.

The success handicap proved challenging for the No 8 TS050 HEV crew, and, despite a valiant effort, the gap expanded to 75 seconds soon after the half-distance mark. Going into the final quarter of the

race, the lead was reduced to around 30 seconds, leaving no margin for error. But the No 7 TS050 HEV crew rose to the challenge and established a one-minute lead during the final hour, with Kobayashi crossing the line to win after 263 laps, taking the World Championship title in the process.

"Congratulations to Conway, Kobayashi and Lopez on winning the final round and winning the championship! Buemi, Hartley and Nakajima also performed strongly in the last race of the TS050 HEV. Thank you for driving well and achieving a one-two finish!" commented Akio Toyoda, President, Toyota Motor Corporation. "In 2018, we were able to reach our goal of being on top at Le Mans. And in 2019 and 2020, we achieved three straight victories at Le Mans. We were able to develop the car so that drivers could push to the limit."

Toyoda continued: "The TS050 HEV competed in 34 races, took 16 pole positions, and we were able to win 15 fastest laps and 19 victories. And with a one-two finish at the last race, the smiles of Conway, Kobayashi and Lopez give us the best motivation for our next car. Then, we are able to happily move into the battle with our upcoming Hypercar. To the drivers, engineers and mechanics who drove this car, to all the supporters and fans who supported us, I sincerely thank you. The desire to make ever-better cars will not change. We hope that all the fans will continue to support and be part of GAZOO Racing. Thank you!"

Mike Conway, Driver of the No 7 TS050 HEV, said: "It's a great feeling to be standing here as a World Champion at the end of a tough but fantastic season. I want to say a big thanks to the team for giving Lopez, Kobayashi and me the chance to achieve this. The No 7 crew and my team-mates did a perfect job throughout the season so this feels really good. I am a bit sad that this was the last race for the TS050 HEV, but it finished perfectly for us."

Sebastien Buemi, Driver of the No 8 TS050 HEV, said: "Congratulations to vehicle No 7 and congratulations to the team who did a race without mistakes. In our vehicle, the success handicap was quite strong, but I am happy with the race we did: we did a perfect job. Now that's it for the TS050 HEV; I thought about this in my last laps of the race and enjoyed it."

Over the years, Toyota has been participating in many different forms of motorsports, including Formula One, the World Endurance Championship (WEC), and the Nurburgring 24 Hours endurance race. Toyota's participation in these events was



overseen by separate entities within the company until April 2015, when Toyota established GR, to consolidate all of its motorsports activities under one in-house brand. Representing Toyota's belief that 'the roads build the people, and the people build the cars,' GR highlights the role of motorsports as a fundamental pillar of Toyota's commitment to making 'ever-better' cars.

Harnessing years of experience gained under the extreme conditions of various motorsports events, GR aims to forge new technologies and solutions that bring the freedom, adventure, and joy of driving to everyone. While the desert dust is settling on the 2019-2020 season, preparations for the six-race 2021 campaign are already underway with endurance tests for the GR team's new Hypercar planned in the coming months, prior to its race debut in the 1,000 Miles of Sebring on 19 March.



Sports

Yokohama dump out big guns Jeonbuk to advance

Sydney thrash SIPG in Asian Champions League



AL WAKRAH, Qatar: Sydney's goalkeeper Thomas Heward-Belle (center left) punches the ball ahead of SIPG's forward Li Shenglong (center right) during the AFC Champions League group H football match between China's Shanghai SIPG and Australia's Sydney FC on December 1, 2020. —AFP



AL WAKRAH: Yokohama's midfielder Teruhito Nakagawa is carried by teammates after scoring during the AFC Champions League group H football match between Japan's Yokohama F Marinos and Korea's Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors on December 1, 2020. —AFP

DOHA: Yokohama F Marinos cruised into the knockout phase of the Asian Champions League for the first time in their history on Tuesday, hammering two-time champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 4-1 in their Group H clash. Yokohama's Thai defender Theerathon Bunmathan thundered in a shot from the edge of the box in the 17th minute to set the tone, before three goals in the second half sent the 2006 and 2016 winners Jeonbuk crashing out of the tournament.

"It's a great performance and a credit to the players, because it's the first time the club has got out of the group stage," said Yokohama coach Ange Postecoglou. "We started really well and put pressure on them, scored a goal - a good goal from Bunmathan. "We missed some chances in the first half which always keeps the opposition in the game, but in the second half we were a bit smarter, worked our counterattacks really well and scored three good goals.

"It's a fantastic achievement and we are proud

of everyone involved." Besides being the first team from eastern Asia to win the Champions League when it was launched in its current format in 2003, Jeonbuk are also eight-time K League winners, a South Korean record, which includes four consecutive titles starting in 2017.

Sydney thump SIPG

But at the Al Janoub Stadium on Tuesday, their only bright moment came in the 54th minute when Gustavo Junior had put Yokohama 2-0 ahead. Teruhito Nakagawa's 71st-minute strike and an own goal by Song - whose attempted headed clearance found his own net seven minutes from close - confirmed Jeonbuk's exit. "The team gave what it was possible to do with the contingent that we have," lamented Jeonbuk coach Jose Morais.

"In the first half, strategically, we went in terms of containing the offensive game of Yokohama,

which is a big game and a quality game." "In the second half, the result as it wasn't enough to take us forward, so we took more risks." Sydney FC were left wondering why they couldn't hit their groove earlier in the tournament after a morale-boosting 4-0 thrashing of Shanghai SIPG.

Already eliminated from Group H without a single win from their four previous matches, Sydney salvaged some pride against SIPG, who qualified in second place before Tuesday's match following Yokohama's win over Jeonbuk Hyundai. Alex Wilkinson and Nathan Brattan put the A-League champions 2-0 ahead in the first half before a brace from Trent Buhagiar sealed their victory at the Al Janoub Stadium. "They are going through, we are not, but we are proud of what the players have achieved tonight," said Sydney coach Steve Corica.

Evergrande baffle Cannavaro

In Group G, Chinese giants Guangzhou

Evergrande and South Korea's Suwon Samsung Bluewings played out a 1-1 draw at the Khalifa International Stadium. Lim Sang-hyub put Suwon ahead in the 53rd minute but Wei Shihao restored parity in the 72nd for Guangzhou with the help of an assist from Ai Kesen. The result means the second qualifying spot from the group will be decided on Friday with the Bluewings needing at least a 2-0 victory to join Vissel Kobe of Japan in the round of 16.

Guangzhou coach Fabio Cannavaro was once again at a loss to explain his team's showing. "I am not happy because the performance of my team in the first half was not so good," said the Italy great. "We didn't control the game and we didn't even try to play football. Even in defense we did not play well. I don't want to find excuses." Suwon's Park Kun-ha lamented the fact that his team didn't make the most of the chances they got. "We got the first goal and then unfortunately conceded the equalizer. We had many chances at the end but we could not win." —AFP

Schumacher's son Mick 'exploding emotionally' at F1 breakthrough

SAKHIR: Mick Schumacher, the son of seven-time world champion Michael Schumacher, will drive in Formula One for the first time with Haas next season, the team announced yesterday, leaving their new recruit "emotionally exploding" at the realization of a dream. Schumacher junior, 21, long tipped for a Formula One spot, will partner Russian driver Nikita Mazepin, also 21, in the Haas lineup.

Haas team principal Guenther Steiner welcomed the two F1 debutants in a tweet: "Super excited about having two rookies in our team for next year! Welcome, Mick!" They replace Haas's current driver pairing of Romain Grosjean—who escaped a fiery crash in Sunday's Bahrain Grand Prix—and Kevin Magnussen. "I'm really looking forward to next year's challenge...it's really been a dream that I've always dreamed about and now it's finally coming true," Schumacher said in a video posted on Twitter.

"So I'm just really really happy and emotionally exploding." Mick Schumacher currently heads the Formula Two drivers' standings with one race to go in Bahrain this weekend. Haas's new signing will get a taste of what is in store when he takes part in free practice ahead of the 2020 season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix on December 11 before taking part in testing a few days later. Confirming the news 24 hours after Mazepin's appointment, Haas announced that they had signed Schumacher "in a multi-year agreement".

'Excelled'

Schumacher leads the F2 standings by 14 points after achieving 10 podium finishes and feature race victories at Monza and Sochi. Steiner said the Formula 2 championship had long served as a proving ground for talent to showcase their credentials. He added: "Mick has won races, collected podiums and excelled against some pretty exceptional talent in 2020. "I firmly believe he's earned the opportunity to graduate into Formula 1 based on his performances. "We are putting in place our building blocks for the continued long-term growth of the team and I look forward to Mick's contributions both on and off the track in that process." Schumacher's father was seriously injured in a skiing accident in December 2013 and has not been seen in public since. Michael Schumacher's wife Corinna, the mother of Mick, issued a rare statement on the Formula One legend's 50th birthday in January 2019, saying the family were doing "everything humanly possible" to help her husband.

In a statement on the Haas team's website Schumacher wrote: "I want to acknowledge and extend my love to my parents - I know that I owe them everything." British driver Lewis Hamilton this year won his seventh Formula One world title to equal Michael Schumacher's all-time record. Haas will be counting on their 2021 pairing to prove their mettle on the track after Grosjean and Magnussen's frugal haul of just three points between them this campaign with two races to go. —AFP

Racing end Flamengo's Copa Libertadores title defense in a shootout

RIO DE JANEIRO: Flamengo's defense of their Copa Libertadores title has ended at the last 16 stage after the Brazilian giants crashed out on penalties at the hands of Argentine outfit Racing. The Rio de Janeiro team came into Tuesday night's second leg level at 1-1 following the first match in Buenos Aires, but another draw by the same scoreline at the Maracana took the tie to spot-kicks, where Racing prevailed 5-3. The match only went to penalties after a last gasp leveller in normal time from the home side's Willian Arao after Leonardo Sigali had put Racing ahead in the 65th minute.

Flamengo should have already been out of sight when extra time came to an end, with Racing's goalkeeper Gabriel Arias pulling off a host of top-class saves to keep his side in the tie. Chilean Arias then made a stop from Flamengo goalscorer Arao in the subsequent shootout to see Racing through. Flamengo were reigning champions after an incredible triumph in 2019, in which they snatched the final in Lima from previous holders River Plate thanks to goals from Gabigol in the 89th minute and second minute of stoppage time. —AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil's Flamengo Gustavo Henrique (right) and Argentina's Racing Club Walter Montoya vie for the ball during their closed-door Copa Libertadores round before the quarterfinals football match on December 1, 2020. —AFP

Players should keep taking the knee in racism fight: Kane

LONDON: England captain Harry Kane says Premier League players should carry on taking the knee in support of the fight against racial injustice, using their profile to raise awareness of the issue. Clubs began making the symbolic gesture before kick-off when football resumed after the coronavirus hiatus last season, and it has continued into the current campaign. "I think we are a huge platform to share our voices across the world, to be honest," Kane told the BBC. "Obviously we have done a lot with Black Lives Matter and taking the knee before games. "I hear people talking about taking the knee and whether we should still be doing it, and for me I think we should."

Kane said regular supporters were seeing the same gesture repeated every week but it was important to educate new fans. "I think if you look around the world, you see children watching the game for the first time, seeing us all take a knee and asking their parents why-I think it's a great chance for people to explain why," he added. "I think education is the biggest thing we can do. Adults can teach generations what it means, and what it means to be together and help each other, no matter what your race." —AFP

Arsenal boss backs temporary subs for head injuries

LONDON: Mikel Arteta yesterday backed calls for concussion substitutes after Arsenal's David Luiz was involved in a sickening clash of heads with Raul Jimenez that left the Wolves striker with a fractured skull. Luiz played on until half-time of Sunday's match, with Arsenal insisting concussion protocols were followed, but was replaced as blood continued to seep through his head bandage.

He has been ruled out of Thursday's Europa League match against Rapid Vienna but could be fit for Sunday's north London derby at Tottenham. "Maybe it is a moment that we can think to give these people a little bit more time and use a temporary substitution, for example, if we don't want to find ourselves in those positions," Arteta told reporters ahead of the Rapid match. Arsenal faced fierce criticism for not replacing the Brazilian defender immediately after the collision, which occurred just five minutes into the Premier League match with Wolves at the Emirates. But Arteta said that Arsenal's club doctor Gary O'Driscoll had followed the rules. "He knows exactly what to do," said the Spaniard. "He did all the testing, he followed all the protocols and we were very comfortable for him (Luiz) to carry on playing.



LONDON: Arsenal's Brazilian defender David Luiz is bandaged after clashing heads with Wolverhampton Wanderers' Mexican striker Raul Jimenez during the English Premier League football match between Arsenal and Wolverhampton Wanderers. —AFP

"But obviously you have to make a decision in one minute, when somebody is bleeding, when you have someone with a massive concussion next to you-whose life is under threat." Arteta said it was impossible to avoid accidental clashes in football and that sometimes they would lead to serious injuries. "Obviously, it's never happened in football," he added,

referring to concussion substitutes. "It happens and it's very common in other sports. "And it's just a suggestion. You know I want to be extra protective, which I think we have to be in certain moments when we really are considering the welfare of the players and have a fair competition while the game is still running." —AFP

14 GAZOO Racing wins
2019-2020 FIA WEC



15 Arsenal boss backs temporary
substitutes for head injuries



15 Sydney thrash SIPG 4-0 in
Asian Champions League



Liverpool advance; Atletico frustrated

Real Madrid defeat heaps pressure on Zidane



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah is tackled by Ajax's Argentinean defender Nicolas Tagliafico during the UEFA Champions League 1st round Group D football match between Liverpool and Ajax at Anfield on December 1, 2020. — AFP

PARIS: Curtis Jones sent a depleted Liverpool through to the Champions League last 16 on Tuesday, while Zinedine Zidane dismissed suggestions he might walk away from Real Madrid after another defeat by Shakhtar Donetsk left their European hopes in the balance. Liverpool were without a host of key players for the visit of Ajax to Anfield in Group D, with 22-year-old Irishman Caoimhin Kelleher starting in goal in the absence of Alisson.

Teenager Jones scored the only goal just before the hour, tucking the ball in after Ajax' keeper Andre Onana thought he could afford to let a Neco Williams cross sail over his head. The result was vital for the Premier League champions after their home loss to Atalanta a week ago, and it allowed them to secure a spot in the knockout phase.

"Honestly since I was at Liverpool that feels like one of the biggest Champions League nights. Without supporters in, it was the most important, most difficult, most exceptional," Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp told BT Sport. They will go through as group

winners after Atalanta had to come from behind to draw 1-1 at home to Midtjylland. Cristian Romero heading in a late equaliser in response to Alexander Scholz's thumping opener for the Danes. Atalanta are a point clear in second from Ajax, with the sides meeting in Amsterdam in their last game next week.

Two-time former European champions Porto also sealed a last-16 spot after drawing 0-0 at home to Manchester City, who were already through and are now guaranteed to top Group C. Porto would have qualified regardless, because Olympiakos lost 2-1 to Marseille in France, with Dimitri Payet scoring two penalties in the second half to turn the game around after Mohamed Mady Camara fired the Greeks in front. The result ends Marseille's Champions League record run of 13 straight defeats and means they could yet pip Olympiakos to third place and the consolation of a Europa League berth.

Lukaku double, Atletico held
Real Madrid could yet be consigned to a similar

fate after they went down 2-0 to Shakhtar in Kiev, their second defeat this season by the Ukrainians. Substitutes Dentinho and Manor Solomon scored second-half goals in Kiev as Shakhtar stunned the 13-time European champions again, having won 3-2 in Madrid in October. Shakhtar had lost their last two Group B matches against Borussia Moenchengladbach by an aggregate score of 10-0, but now move above Real into second place with one game remaining.

Gladbach are top by a point, while Shakhtar have the upper hand on Real thanks to their superior head-to-head record. However, the damage was limited for Real after Inter Milan won 3-2 away to Gladbach to keep their own hopes alive. Matteo Darmian put Inter ahead and Romelu Lukaku scored twice for Antonio Conte's side. Alassane Plea netted a brace for Gladbach but was denied a hat-trick, and a late equaliser, because of an offside call.

It means Inter are bottom of the group but could still qualify, while Real will definitely qualify as long

as they win at home to Gladbach. Madrid have made it out of their group in every year since 1997 and so failure to qualify would be seen as a disaster, but Zidane is not considering stepping down. "I am not going to resign, not at all. We are always going to have difficult moments, and we are on a bad run, but we need to keep going," said the Frenchman.

Real's city rivals Atletico Madrid will also still have it all to do in their final group game after being held to a 1-1 draw at home by a weakened Bayern Munich. Joao Felix gave Atletico the lead against a Bayern side who had already won Group A. Thomas Mueller won and then converted a late penalty to earn the defending champions a draw. Salzburg can snatch a last-16 place if they beat Atletico at home next week, after the Austrians won 3-1 away to Lokomotiv Moscow. Mergim Berisha scored twice in the first half for Salzburg, and Karim Adeyemi got their third goal after Anton Miranchuk converted a penalty for the railway-backed side. — AFP

Less contact, short trips: New rules for COVID-hit Olympics

TOKYO: Athletes at the coronavirus-postponed Tokyo Olympics will face regular testing, restrictions on mingling and potential punishment for non-compliance with health rules, organizers said yesterday as they outlined plans for holding the Games. After months of talks, officials issued a 54-page report outlining how they believe the Games can go ahead, even if the pandemic is not under control by the new start date of July 2021. Quarantine requirements will be waived for overseas spectators, who will also be able to use public

transport, but they will have to observe rules ranging from mask-wearing and a ban on cheering to keeping their ticket stubs to help contact-tracing.

Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto acknowledged strict safety measures will make the games "different", but expressed hope they can still be held in a celebratory atmosphere. "It will be simple rather than festive, but I hope it will be something moving that encourages people through the power of sport," he said. Athletes will be screened on arrival in Japan and then undergo regular tests every four to five days during their stay at the Olympic Village.

An infection control centre will also be set up to deal with positive cases, which organizers say they presume will occur. However officials have not yet announced how competition rules would be affected if an athlete contracted coronavirus during the Games. All athletes must sign up to a code of conduct that includes avoiding speaking loudly, avoiding physical contact with others and wearing masks when not training or

competing. They will also be asked to leave Japan as soon as their events are over, rather than stay on in the country for sightseeing.

Fan quarantine 'impractical'

Penalties for non-compliance have yet to be determined and will be drawn up in conjunction with the International Olympic Committee. "This is not a law, but we need to be careful and ask people to lay out precautions," said Muto. "We will create a system that allows team leaders or athlete representatives to provide cautions." Concrete measures to determine how many fans will be able to attend will be decided in the spring, with infection rates around the world at the time taken into account. Organizers have decided that imposing a two-week quarantine on visiting fans is "impractical" given the time constraints, and will instead ask them to download tracking apps and abide by rigorous safety guidelines. — AFP



TOKYO: A man walks along a corridor past an official Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics advertisement board in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo. — AFP