

Friday Times

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Local

Us vs them



SCRIBBLER'S NOTEBOOK

By Jamie Etheridge

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Writing opinions or editorials about life in Kuwait as an expatriate can be a tricky business. On the one hand, we earn our bread and butter here. Most of us have chosen to be here, boarded a flight, taken a job, built a life. We owe our livelihoods and in some cases our families and friends to Kuwait. On the other hand, Kuwait is no easy place for expatriates. Over the last several years, the government has grown more unwelcoming. We are constantly reminded of the 'burden' we place on the healthcare system, on the roads, on society itself. Rarely do locals speak up for expatriates, for the business they bring, for their contributions to the economy.

And this dichotomy arises: Us vs them. Locals vs expats. Even in the newspapers, in reporting, stories mention citizens and residents. The divide is real and substantive. Citizens have rights and privileges expats do not. We might all live under the same blue sky, drink the same filtered water and suffer the same summer heat, but we are segregated and divided.

This is, of course, an oversimplification. There are Kuwaitis married to expatriates and Kuwaiti women with children without citizenship. There are many families with citizens and residents and their lives are as intermingled and as interconnected as humanly possible. But on the whole and certainly in mediaspeak, there are citizens and there are residents.

This division makes it difficult to discuss almost everything in the press. The division sets up one side against the other. Instead of addressing the continued problems of environmental damage and littering as a community issue affecting us all, it becomes a matter of teaching residents to pick up after themselves or reminding citizens to take care of their home. When discussing school closures, the first division is public vs private, but after that, there are stories that mention 'citizens and residents', as if all our children haven't been impacted negatively by the coronavirus pandemic, the closure of schools in Kuwait since March and the online/virtual school situation.

The language we use to separate not only describes public life but seeps into our mindset, our attitudes toward one another. There are very real and fundamental differences between citizens and expatriates and these differences affect not only our interactions, but the way we experience life in Kuwait.

It also makes it harder to speak out, to speak up or to offer ideas on how to make things better. To say both what is true and also challenging. I have lived in Kuwait for much of the last 16 years and this country is my home. I love Kuwait. I love the people, the culture, the food and the way of life.

There are things I don't love about Kuwait, but as an expat, I always hesitate to say this. To say what I don't love, to offer up any criticism of the system or the way things work here, to point out the injustices - even the most blatant ones - and inequalities are certain to provoke a well-trodden out response: "Go home if you don't like it here."

It is difficult to argue with that. Except it isn't.

Because anyone who bothers to criticize usually does so from a desire to see things better. I work and contribute to Kuwait and I want to see Kuwait thrive, flourish, develop and grow. But who am I, a resident, to offer ideas?

Visions are funny things. When they are open and inclusive, they can blossom and prosper. But when they are narrowed, when they are exclusive, they also, by default, limit the potential.

Photo of the day



View of a mosque and high-rises in Kuwait City on a clear winter day. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Why aren't women elected to parliament?



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

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Across five electoral districts in Kuwait, 395 candidates competed for the 50 seats in parliament last Saturday. Thirty-three of the candidates were women - the highest number of female candidates in Kuwait's history since women were granted the right to vote and run for office in 2006. Out of 567,694 eligible voters, 273,940 were male (48.3 percent) and 293,754 female (51.7 percent), according to official interior ministry statistics. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, voter turnout was impressive this year. However, not one woman candidate managed to win a seat in Abdullah Al-Salem hall.

These numbers raise the question of why not one woman was able to make it to the parliament—despite the fact that female educational achievement now surpasses that of men in many fields. Is it because we are living in a male-dominated society, where men are still viewed as more capable to manage, take the right decisions and lead? While women are thought to belong to the kitchen and are seen as housewives? Or is it because of previous experiments where women did not prove that they were capable of changing or adding anything in the parliament? Did female candidates fail to spread awareness to female voters that they are capable to speak up for their rights?

Unfortunately, throughout history, women are constantly obliged to work and toil harder in order to prove themselves and earn their place in governance, in busi-

ness, in science, in academia, in every realm of public life. Women in male-dominated environments face more challenges to make their voices heard, gain acceptance in leadership roles and be recognized for their expertise.

Regrettably, there is a belief that female candidates need to live up to a higher standard compared to their male rivals to prove themselves to be considered worthy, which is totally unfair to women and puts extra pressure on them. Why do women have to be compared to be recognized and not be simply elected based on their merits and qualifications?

However, what happened in this election proved that women did not have only men to convince about their competencies. Unfortunately, they need to convince their fellow women first in order to win. This proves that women do not trust each other. Women need to put their faith in each other to be heard. After all, who is better to talk about a woman's struggle and injustice and inequality in society better than a woman, and stand up for her? Women should rejoice other women when they see them succeed and prosper, and not the other way around. Women should empower and support each other and celebrate every woman's achievements and strength.

Historically, women have seen each other as competitors for scarce resources (male support). But nowadays women are more than capable of building their own lives, businesses and communities. It is time we started supporting and trusting each other.

I am not trying to say that women are better than men or vice versa, as each have their own role in society to maintain the balance in this world. Women tend to be empathetic, more collaborative and transformational. Women should not give up and must have more of a presence in the parliament in the future. Maybe this year was not a lucky one, but hopefully they will achieve more success in the future.

Kuwait Times

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An aerial view of Dasman Palace circa 1930. Kuwait's wall can be seen in the background.



This picture taken in 1924 shows Kuwait pearl diving boats in April prepared for the start of the pearl diving season in mid-May.

Life in Kuwait in the Thirties

By Mahmoud Zakaria

The sounds of crashing waves, chainsaws, hammers, porters, boats coming and going, carpenters, blacksmiths and workers was the daily soundtrack of the coast of Kuwait in the 1930s, which did not stop except when the call for noon prayer was made.

The coast of Kuwait was the lifeblood of a quiet city on the shores of the Gulf. In the thirties, there was no oil, no high-rise buildings and no luxury cars - nothing except the sea. The sea is the key word here; the economy of the country depended on the sea. The sight of boats and men coming and going brought the heart of the city to life. Divers, sailors, merchants and craftsmen were heroes.

The old gates stood as if they were challenging time. Everyone passed through them until their doors were closed in the evening at an appointed time. Wherever one looked, one could find large numbers of donkeys carrying water in goatskins on their backs in the narrow streets, announcing the arrival of water, for which everyone waited.



Sheikh Mubarak Kiosk, one of the most important historical places in Kuwait, founded in 1897 by the seventh ruler of Kuwait Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah (1840-1915).



This photo taken in 1924 shows Bedouin men at ease in Safat.



The American Hospital, considered one of the most important cultural sites of Kuwait, as seen in 1939.

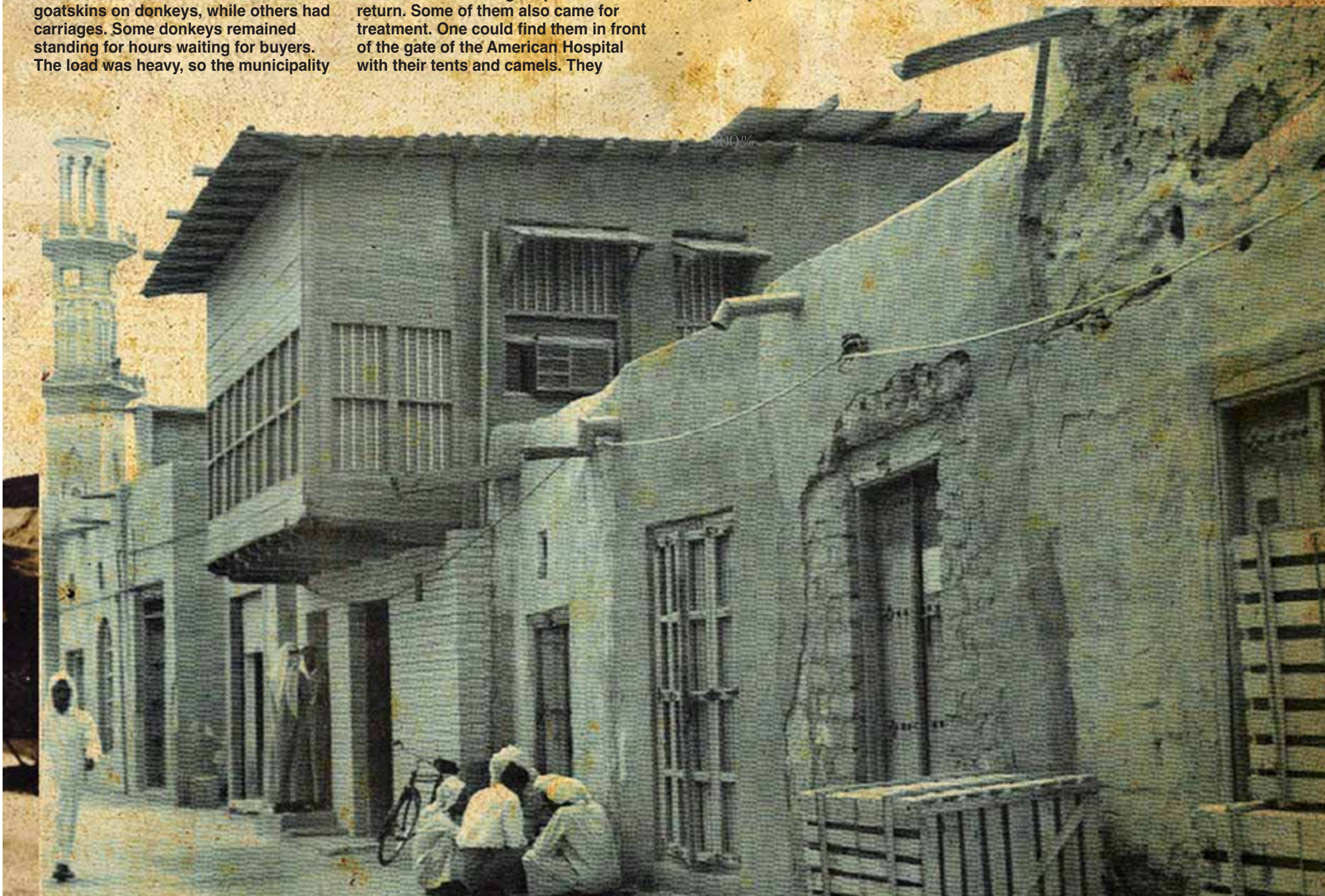
The three-walled city was always looking for water. Water meant life for Kuwait. Sometimes the water came by sea, other times by land. Water vendors entered the old gates with water from some nearby wells outside the walls, while large boats came by sea with water from Basra. Water sellers gathered near Sheikh Mubarak Kiosk with goatskins on donkeys, while others had carriages. Some donkeys remained standing for hours waiting for buyers. The load was heavy, so the municipality

issued a decision that goatskins should be on the ground not on the donkeys' backs.

Bedouins come from the desert loaded with ghee, honey and milk. After they sold their goods, one could see them in the market buying lanterns to light their way as they passed through the dark desert at night upon their return. Some of them also came for treatment. One could find them in front of the gate of the American Hospital with their tents and camels. They

received treatment at the hospital for a week or two, then returned where they came from.

The scenes of old Kuwait are colored in black and white. We feel nostalgia for the days of the past and its memories, ancient Arab houses and wonderful traditional crafts. We lost all of this when modernity arrived.



Local

Signing in Kuwaiti



By Nawara Fattahova

Sign language is different in different countries, and is not a universal language as most people believe. Kuwait Times interviewed two Kuwaiti sign language trainers to learn more - Jaber Al-Kandari, Chief Operating Officer at DIFA Kuwait, sign language expert and trainer; and Bader Al-Doukhi, a former educator of the deaf and Kuwaiti Sign Language interpreter and trainer. Doukhi has published books about Kuwaiti Sign Language and education of the deaf. Some excerpts:

Kuwait Times: Why and how did you learn sign language?

Jaber Al-Kandari: I learned sign language in school and from deaf friends because I have to communicate. I was born deaf.

Bader Al-Doukhi: I learned sign language because I was planning to teach at a deaf school after graduating from university. I learned American Sign Language at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. I learned Kuwaiti Sign Language after I got a job at Al-Amal school for the deaf and from my students.

KT: What are the differences between the Arabic and Kuwaiti sign languages?

Doukhi: There is no such thing called Arabic Sign Language; every Arab country has its own language according to the name of the country. There are Unified Arabic Signs, which is a collective of signs gathered from Arab countries. If want to talk about the difference between UAS and KSL, there is a big difference - one is a language with all the characteristics of a language such as grammar, origin, use among users and structure. Unified Arabic Signs do not have these characteristics.

KT: What is the role/importance of Kuwaiti Sign Language vs Arabic, American, Indian, Asian or European sign languages?

Kandari: Kuwaiti Sign Language is an important part of the national pride of Kuwaitis and is a good expression of who we are. The other sign languages are good for other countries and for speaking to their deaf populations.

Doukhi: KSL is important for deaf people of Kuwait; it's their mother language and its role is to communicate with each other socially and academically. Other sign languages can be learned as a second or third language.

KT: How many Kuwaiti sign language speakers are in Kuwait?

Kandari: 7,000 persons.

KT: How long did it take you to learn sign language?

Kandari: It was my first language, so I learned it in a few years.

Doukhi: Learning any language never ends - I have been with the deaf for over 30 years and am still learning. But to become competent and skilled in sign language, I would say it takes 3-5 years of constant practice.

KT: What are the challenges to learning sign language, and how did you overcome these challenges?

Kandari: The biggest challenge is teaching others to learn sign language and to have people who don't know how to speak it to learn it.

Doukhi: Since I had learned American Sign Language, it helped me tremendously in learning Kuwaiti Sign Language. The challenge I faced at that time was a lack of resources and low academic level and Arabic vocabulary of deaf individuals. Also, there's a difference in sign language between generations of deaf people, so Kuwaiti Sign Language constantly changes.

KT: When you travel, which sign language do you use? Do you use other sign languages besides Kuwaiti Sign Language in Kuwait or the region? Are there sign languages in the Qatari, Saudi, GCC or other dialects?

Kandari: When I travel outside the Gulf, I use American Sign Language because many people speak it. In the region I use Arabic Sign Language, and all local Gulf dialects.

Doukhi: When I travel to Gulf countries, I use Kuwaiti Sign Language, because all GCC countries are very close to each other with little difference between them. Also, most of the older generation of deaf individuals in these countries studied in Kuwait before 1990. When it comes to other Arab nations or countries around the world, I use Kuwaiti Sign Language

with what we call 'contact signs'. Sign languages are not dialects, nor are they derived from any main spoken language, whether it's Arabic, English or others. Sign Languages are languages in their own right.

KT: Does your family speak the same sign language as well, and how was their experience learning it?

Kandari: My family does not sign.

Doukhi: My family does not use sign language, but my wife is hard of hearing and uses sign language when she has to, in certain situations. Her experience is the same as any deaf person. The language identifies her as a deaf person and she is proud of who she is and takes pride in her language. She communicates with her friends using Kuwaiti Sign Language.

KT: What would you tell the parents of a deaf child in Kuwait?

Kandari: I would tell the parents of a deaf child in Kuwait to teach them to sign and learn sign language as quickly as possible, especially Kuwaiti Sign Language, so they are proud of who they are.

Doukhi: Parents of a deaf child need to learn their son's or daughter's language in order to communicate with them. It is very important to learn the language and teach them everything instead of having a stranger teach their child the facts of life.

Also, the child would feel happy and proud of their parents.

KT: As a deaf person living in Kuwait, what are the challenges you face and what do you think are some changes that could/should be made to improve the lives of deaf people living here?

Kandari: Kuwait needs to provide 24/7/365 communication access to the deaf through Malka Communications, an American company. They are very talented and want to provide better training to interpreters in Kuwait and provide more



Jaber Al-Kandari

interpreters, so that we can always have them available. They also want literacy and a great education for the deaf, which they do not always have here in Kuwait.

Doukhi: The biggest challenge facing a deaf person is communication. A lack of understanding of sign language by hearing people and a lack of understanding of Arabic by deaf people makes communication very hard. Deaf people struggle in order to express their needs, wants and demands. They are the most ignored special needs people in Kuwait. The small number of interpreters makes it hard to serve all deaf people in Kuwait. The other issue is education - deaf education is way behind in terms of sign language. Teachers of the deaf lack competency in sign language, which in turn affects their education. A majority of deaf individuals are not competent readers due to the fact that teachers lack competency in sign language.



Bader Al-Doukhi

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Local

UN agencies applaud Kuwait's anti-corruption cooperation

Government promoting transparency and combating graft

KUWAIT: Representatives of the United Nations, the UN Development Program (UNDP) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) appreciated efforts of the Kuwaiti government to promote transparency and combat corruption in collaboration with their agencies. Kuwait is one of the countries that have taken important measures to manage the ongoing pandemic by mobilizing the necessary resources to face the health crisis, avoid global economic collapse and ward off a potential recession, they said a joint statement.

The statement, marking International Anti-Corruption Day, was issued on Wednesday by the Office of the Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Resident Coordinator to Kuwait Dr Tarek El-Sheikh. "In taking such emergency measures, some states may have relaxed safeguards by trading off compliance, oversight and accountability for quick response and achievement of rapid impact, thus creating unprecedented great opportunities for corruption," according to the statement.

Corruption associated with the public health sector disrupts all stages of an effective healthcare system: Procurement and distribution, management of food supply chains and sanitation, as well as research and development. Therefore, this year's International Anti-Corruption Day campaign will focus on measures to reduce the risks of mismanagement and corruption without compromising the speed and flexibility required by the health crisis, while ensuring a comprehensive recovery,

the statement noted.

"The lack of oversight, transparency and stakeholder participation due to the urgent responses required during the pandemic has exposed areas of weakness as well as weakness in governance systems and the provision of public services in all states of the world. States need to address these weaknesses by harmonizing their national legal frameworks with the UNCAC. Kuwait participated in preparing the agreement in 2001 and it has been ratified by the Kuwaiti National Assembly in 2006," Sheikh affirmed.

"A general authority for anti-corruption was also established in 2016, it is considered a major Kuwaiti achievement towards adopting transparent, serious and fair practices. This year's slogan 'Recover with integrity' focuses on recovery through the mitigation of corruption and emphasizes that a comprehensive recovery from COVID-19 can only be achieved with integrity," he added.

Hideko Hadjialk, the UNDP Resident Representative in Kuwait, said, "Transparency and integrity are essential in the prevention of corruption that occurs in different forms in terms of size and scope." "The United Nations is here to support countries' efforts to prevent and address corruption through capacity development, awareness-raising, financial management and reporting. "The recent International Anti-Corruption Conference in South Korea offered innovative ways to enhance anticorruption efforts, which member states can adapt to each

country context," she pointed out.

Judge Hatem Aly, Regional Representative of the UNODC for the Gulf Region, said, "The International Anti-Corruption Day 2020 comes at a time when our world suffers from the spread of a global pandemic that continues to unfold." "People have lost jobs and social protection during the crisis. At times like these, corruption fuels more instability. "Now more than ever, governments need to use the tools provided by the United Nations Convention against Corruption to further strengthen anti-corruption bodies, improve oversight over stimulus investments, and increase transparency and accountability," he noted.

"I commend the continuous commitment shown by the government of the State of Kuwait, represented by the Kuwait Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha), in its long-standing partnership with the UNODC and the UNDP in development of the national anti-corruption strategy in preparation for the solid implementation of this strategy at the sectorial level. To fight corruption this year, let us commit to recovering better by recovering with integrity," he added.

Meanwhile, UNODC Executive Director Ghada Wali said, "As guardian of the Convention, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime has supported 179 countries to date to implement this global framework, and we are working with governments to promote anti-corruption action in the COVID-19 response and recovery. A world made poorer and more fragile by the



نزهة Nazaha

pandemic cannot afford to let corruption compromise our efforts to build forward, or our hopes for a fairer future. We need to stand up for justice and stand united against corruption."

"Countries of destination and origin need to work as partners, to deny safe haven to the corrupt, stop illicit financial flows and return stolen assets. "Together, we can unleash the power of diversity and inclusion by engaging all actors - women and youth, the private sector, civil society and academia - to protect our systems against corrupt networks and practices, and end impunity," Wali underscored. "In advancing anti-corruption action, we can build more resilient societies, and get back on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. On this year's International Anti-Corruption Day, let us commit to recovering better by recovering with integrity," she concluded. —KUNA

Dasman Diabetes Institute wins Al-Maktoum Award

KUWAIT: The Dasman Diabetes Institute won the award of HH Sheikh Hamdan Al-Maktoum for the best medical institution in the Arab world. "The institute had been selected for the award of His Highness Sheikh Hamdan Al-Maktoum as the best institute among many medical and research centers and institutions in the Arab world," said Director General of Dasman Institute Dr Qais Al-Duwairi.

In a press statement yesterday, Duwairi and all employees of the institute expressed their pride in this honorable achievement. They granted the award to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who is also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, which established Dasman Diabetes Institute.

The winner of this award was announced on Wednesday, presented and approved by Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Deputy Governor of Dubai, Minister of Finance and

patron of the award, Duwairi explained. On the occasion, the Dubai famous Burj Khalifa was fully illuminated in the name and logo of the institute in honor of winning this award, which came due to its achievement over the past years.

Duwairi explained that Dasman Institute recently accomplished many achievements, especially in the field of research, in addition to publishing a large number of studies in prestigious journals. As the institute directs most of its attention to scientific research, it also provides other services, such as treatment of various types of diabetes, education and training at an advanced and integrated level.

Duwairi expressed his sincere gratitude for this award, saying: "The Sheikh Hamdan Award is a medal that everyone can appreciate and be proud of." He thanked Sheikh Hamdan for his support for science, medicine and research, and his keenness to advance peoples through this award "that we are extremely proud of".

The award is one of the most important and highest awards that support and appreciate medical and research bodies in the Arab world, and it is a very prestigious award, established in 1999. It aims at honoring scientists from all over the world who strive for distinguished medical research that serves the great interests of mankind. The objectives of the award include several aspects, including honoring outstanding achievements in the medical field and encouraging the establishment of spe-



cialized institutions to develop curricula and methods of scientific research in the Arab world. It also supports distinguished medical research and encourages the publication of research in local and international medical journals. —KUNA

Local

Kuwait posts KD 108m current account surplus for Q2: CBK

Drop in expat remittances, travel expenditure by Kuwaitis

KUWAIT: Kuwait recorded a current account surplus of KD 108 million (\$357 million) in the second quarter of 2020, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said on Wednesday. The surplus fell by KD 112 million (\$369 million) from KD 220 million (\$726 million) recorded in the earlier quarter, representing a 50 percent drop, according to a press release.

The drop is due to a dip of KD 2.2 billion (\$7.2 billion) in the value of total earnings on the credit side of the current account, and a fall of KD 2.1 billion (\$6.9 billion) in the value of total payments on the debit side, it added. The

commodity balance surplus also dropped by KD 318.6 million (\$1 billion) to KD 1.6 billion (\$5.2 billion) compared to KD 2 billion (\$6.6 billion) in the first quarter. The balance of services dropped 78.5 percent by KD 1.2 billion (\$1.9 billion) to KD 354.9 million (\$1.1 million).

Meanwhile, remittances by expats to their home countries dropped by 21.96 percent during the second quarter of the current year compared to the first quarter to 1.056 billion from KD 1.35 billion, while it increased during the first half of 2020 by nearly 12.13 percent compared to the same period last year from

KD 2.15 billion to 2.41 billion.

Preliminary data of the balance of payments for the second quarter published by the Central Bank of Kuwait showed precautionary measures to face the coronavirus caused a drop in Kuwaitis spending on travel by nearly 93.14 percent during the second quarter, as spending reached KD 81.7 million compared to KD 1.19 billion during the first three months of 2020. Total travel spending during the first half of 2020 was nearly KD 1.27 billion, a drop of 56.35 percent from the same period last year.



Vaccine drive awaits global regulatory approval: Minister

KUWAIT: Kuwait will start administering shots of a coronavirus vaccine to its population as soon as the jab is given the green light by regulatory agencies around the world, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said yesterday. Hoping the vaccine gets the regulatory go-ahead before the end of the year, the minister told the press that Kuwait's vaccination campaign would be a multi-phased approach likely to last for a year, starting with "priority groups" first.

Kuwait has clinched deals with drug manu-

facturers AstraZeneca and Pfizer for the delivery of their respective COVID-19 vaccines, in addition to some nine others to be chosen shortly, Sheikh Basel revealed. He cited the International Fairground in Mishref as the country's designated vaccine center, where an estimated 10,000 people could be given their COVID-19 shots in a single day. A digital certificate would be given to show who has been vaccinated for the coronavirus, the minister added, promising a "smooth and seamless" process. —KUNA



Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George called on Chairman of Kuwait Society of Engineers Faisal Alatel Wednesday and discussed issues related to Indian engineers in Kuwait. They also discussed means of enhancing institutional cooperation between India and Kuwait in the engineering field.

Al-Nouri Charity opens school for Syrian refugees



SANLIURFA, Turkey: Abdullah Al-Nouri Charity opens a school for Syrian refugees yesterday. —KUNA



ANKARA: Sheikh Abdullah Al-Nouri Charity Society announced opening an intermediate school for Syrian refugees in Sanliurfa city in southern Turkey yesterday. In a speech at the school's opening ceremony, head of the society Jamal Al-Nouri said that HH the late Amir and Kuwaiti charity societies played a big role in easing the suffering of

Syrian refugees everywhere.

The society has been aiding Syrians with food, tents, educational programs and medical care since the beginning of the crisis, he noted. Head of the education department at Ataa Relief Abdulrahman Al-Shardoub said the school has a capacity for 816 students and has 24 classes. —KUNA

Two Kuwaiti oil officials ranked in Mideast top 50

KUWAIT: Two Kuwaiti petrochemicals industry officials have been ranked amongst the Middle East's top 50 most influential downstream industry personalities in 2020. Mutlaq Al-Azmi, CEO of Petrochemical Industries Company, a subsidiary of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, was ranked 19, while Deputy CEO Nadia Al-Hajji was ranked 35 on the 2020 RPME Power 50, compiled by Refining and Petrochemicals Middle East magazine.

The magazine said in its December edition that Azmi's career began after his graduation as an industrial engineer from the University of Miami. He joined Kuwait National Petroleum Company in 1989 and gained more than 30 years of experience in the refining industry, managing refineries in Kuwait. It also reviewed Hajji's career, which began as a process engineer at Kuwait National Petroleum Company, after which she rose to several positions, including chief operations engineer and head of the clean fuel project design team, in addition to the new Al-Zour refinery. She has held many positions in the oil companies of Kuwait National Petroleum Company for 28 years. —KUNA



Burying the dead:
 Myanmar Muslim
 COVID volunteers

Erdogan hails Azerbaijan ‘glorious’ victory over Armenia

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DOHA: File photo shows Saudi King Salman (left) and the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani during a ceremony in Doha. Saudi Arabia is pushing for a compromise to end a damaging three-year Gulf dispute, but a full resolution remains out of reach despite its offer of concessions. —AFP

Saudi pushes to end Gulf feud

Full resolution remains out of reach

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia is pushing for a compromise to end a damaging three-year Gulf dispute, but a full resolution remains out of reach despite its offer of concessions, sources close to the negotiations say. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan told AFP last week that the kingdom and its allies Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE - who imposed a blockade on Qatar in June 2017 - were “on board” to resolve the crisis, with an agreement expected soon.

The potential thaw comes as Gulf states position themselves for the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who will welcome the resolution of a row which has undercut US efforts to rein in arch-enemy Iran. The blockading countries accused Doha of being too close to Tehran and funding radical Islamist movements - charges it staunchly denies. They originally presented Qatar with a list of 13 demands including shutting down Al Jazeera, a popular regional broadcaster which has rankled Gulf rulers with its high-decibel criticism, and downgrading links with their rivals Turkey and Iran.

Doha flatly turned them down. And after a bitter standoff, the Saudi-led bloc is willing to substantially water down their demands in the final deal, sources familiar with the negotiations say. A figure close to the Saudi government indicated the kingdom was ready to make concessions by reopening its airspace to Qatari aircraft - saving them from fuel-guzzling detours - if Doha stops funding its political opponents and restrains its media. “Saudi is pushing (for) it - and Saudi holds the key card which is its airspace for Qatar,” the source told AFP.

The impasse snapped transport links, separated families, and cost billions of dollars in lost trade and investment, damage which the Gulf economies can ill afford as they try to power

out of the coronavirus slump. On Tuesday, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates officially threw their support behind efforts to heal the rift. But the Saudi source said the UAE, a staunch rival of Qatar, had been resistant. “Emirati anger cannot be allowed to keep this fire burning... (It’s) time to put this issue to bed.”

‘Limited scope’

Another Gulf-based source close to the negotiations told AFP that the Saudi-driven process could result in a peace of sorts but not fully resolve the underlying issues. The final deal will likely be a joint document setting out the terms, they said, possibly a reformatted version of the 2014 Riyadh agreement between Qatar and Gulf states — a secret pact believed to promote non-interference in each other’s affairs. According to a Western diplomat in the Gulf, mediators from Kuwait are pushing to get the three main leaders on board — Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Qatar’s ruler Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani.

“Those three men will have to agree,” the diplomat told AFP, adding that despite the Emirates’ resistance, Abu Dhabi’s leader was “closely involved” in the process. “We’re looking at a possible interim solution within a few weeks... I don’t think anyone expects a complete resolution. Everyone will be looking at how warmly the communique is worded.” Doha-based diplomats cited a senior Qatari official as saying that the final deal had been “agreed in principle” but was “limited in scope”.

The official, they said, suggested Saudi Arabia was unwilling to announce the deal before the end of Trump’s term, possibly to strike a positive tone with Biden who has pledged

a tough stance towards Riyadh over its human rights failings. The US is keen to lift the air embargo which has prompted Qatar to use Iran’s airspace, contributing to the approximately \$133 million that Iranian media says Tehran receives annually for overflights, undermining US efforts to squeeze it economically.

‘Existential’ differences

There are already signs that media in both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have begun softening their shrill rhetoric. Writing this week in the pro-government Okaz daily, which typically lambasts Qatar, Saudi columnist Tariq al-Homayed hailed the “optimistic” mood and called for “unity and cohesion” in the Gulf.

But the real bellwether will be the level of Qatari representation at an upcoming Gulf Cooperation Council summit expected before the end of the year. The attendance of Qatar’s emir would signal a rapprochement is well underway. The Saudi-led blockade was designed to choke Qatar and force it to align with Gulf interests, but it only propelled a self-sufficiency drive, and pushed the deep-pocketed emirate closer to Iran and Turkey, observers say.

In an embarrassment for Riyadh in July, a UN court ruled in favor of Qatar over the airspace dispute. Despite Riyadh’s de-escalatory stance, mistrust between both sides runs deep, with Homayed warning the “differences are fundamental and existential, and do not end only with a handshake.” “It will take a lot of time and sustained effort by all parties to rebuild ties,” said Kristian Ulrichsen, a fellow at Rice University’s Baker Institute in the United States. “Any agreement will be the start of a longer process of reconciliation rather than an endpoint or a return to a pre-2017 status quo ante.”—AFP

International

Nobel-winning food agency warns of 'hunger pandemic'

'Hunger pandemic' worse than COVID-19: WFP

OSLO: Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in a ceremony held online because of the coronavirus, the World Food Program (WFP) warned yesterday of a "hunger pandemic" it said could be worse than COVID-19. "Because of so many wars, climate change, the widespread use of hunger as a political and military weapon, and a global health pandemic that makes all of that exponentially worse, 270 million people are marching toward starvation," WFP executive director David Beasley said.

"Failure to address their needs will cause a hunger pandemic which will dwarf the impact of COVID," he said, removing his facemask to make his remarks broadcast from the WFP's headquarters in Rome. The largest humanitarian organization fighting famine, the UN agency founded in 1961 feeds tens of millions of people each year - 97 million in 2019 - across all continents. The WFP was honored with the Nobel for its efforts "to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict", committee chairwoman Berit Reiss-Andersen said when she announced the winner on October 9.

With nationalist tendencies taking hold across the globe, the WFP "represents exactly the kind of international cooperation and commitment that the world is in dire need of today," Reiss-Andersen said yesterday, speaking from a deserted Nobel Institute in Oslo. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Nobel officials to scale back the traditional festivities to a bare minimum,

both in Oslo where the Peace Prize is announced and presented, and in Stockholm, which hosts the prizes for medicine, physics, chemistry, literature and economics.

Cancellations hit the lavish banquets and glittering ceremonies attended by distinguished guests and royals in tiaras, replaced by more austere events mostly online. Because of the exceptional circumstances, the Nobel gold medal and diploma were sent to Rome in a diplomatic pouch.

'Call to action'

"This Nobel Peace Prize is more than a thank you. It is a call to action," Beasley said. "Famine is at humanity's doorstep", he said, and "food is the pathway to peace." In recent weeks, the agency has expressed alarm about the risk of famine in Burkina Faso, South Sudan, northeastern Nigeria and Yemen. Already at record levels, malnutrition in Yemen is expected to get even worse due to the pandemic and lack of funds.

"We stand at what may be the most ironic moment in modern history," Beasley said. "On the one hand, after a century of massive strides in eliminating extreme poverty, today those 270 million of our neighbors are on the brink of starvation." "On the other hand, there is 400 trillion dollars of wealth in our world today. Even at the height of the COVID pandemic, in just 90 days, an additional 2.7 trillion dollars of wealth was created. And we only need 5 billion dollars to save 30 million lives from famine," he added.

Representatives needed two-thirds majorities to override him. The White House in a statement said that the weapons would enable the UAE to "deter increasing Iranian aggressive behavior and threats issued in the wake of that peace deal." Robert Menendez, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, agreed that Iran posed risks but said: "We have yet to understand exactly what military threat the F-35s or armed drones will be addressing vis-a-vis Iran."

He noted that Qatar—a fellow US ally which is under a blockade by the UAE and Saudi Arabia—has already been pushing for its own F-35s. "Do we really think that we can sell this just to the UAE and not have those other countries come knocking on our door and starting a very sophisticated arms race in the tinderbox of the world?" Menendez asked on the Senate floor. Menendez also voiced concern both over the discovery of Emirati arms shipments to war-ravaged Libya, which is under a UN arms embargo, and on signs the United Arab Emirates has sought military ties with China.

The two Democratic senators from Arizona, Kyrsten Sinema and Mark Kelly, both joined Republicans on the drone sales, which involve Raytheon, a major employer in their state, and Sinema also rejected the bid to stop the F-35s. Senator Rand Paul, a Republican who usually backs Trump but is critical of foreign military interventions, was the sole crossover to team up with Democrats. "It is not clear that dropping advanced military technology into the region is in fact encouraging peaceful relations," Paul said. —AFP



GUMDHUM, Bangladesh: A Rohingya Muslim refugee carries a rice bag along a road near Balukhali refugee camp. Adjusting to a world where travel is hampered by the pandemic, this year's Nobel laureates will receive their prizes at home this week following the cancellation of the traditional Stockholm and Oslo ceremonies. — AFP

Nobel festivities in Stockholm have also been cancelled, replaced by events mostly pre-recorded for an online broadcast later. "The pandemic has subjected us all to difficult obstacles," Nobel Foundation director Lars Heikensten said yesterday. "We have been reminded of the importance of cross-border cooperation in resolving humanitarian crises and that, with the help of science, we can find solutions to the chal-

lenges we face," he added.

The 2020 Nobel literature laureate, US poet Louise Gluck, was first to receive her medal and diploma in a private ceremony at her home in Massachusetts on Sunday, followed by separate events for the other winners in their cities of residence in recent days. This year's laureates will be welcomed to Oslo and Stockholm at a later date, probably in 2021. — AFP

US senators fail to block Trump sale of F-35 jets to UAE

WASHINGTON: Democrats failed Wednesday to block the United States from selling top-of-the-line fighter-jets to the United Arab Emirates, with most senators dismissing fears that President Donald Trump was setting off a dangerous arms race. In one of the largest arms deals of its four-year term, the outgoing administration has approved \$23 billion in stealth-capable F-35 jets, unarmed drones and other weapons to the Gulf ally after it agreed to recognize Israel, a major cause for Trump.

Splitting mostly on party lines, opponents failed to convince a threshold of 50 senators in two procedural votes that Trump was acting hastily before President-elect Joe Biden takes over next month to bolster a nation that was part of Saudi Arabia's devastating offensive in Yemen. Republican Senator Roy Blunt said that selling weapons to the UAE supported US jobs and provided "reinforcement of our friends who see common enemies and are working directly to move their country and their region in a much better direction."

Trump had already threatened to veto the resolutions if they passed, meaning both the Senate and House of

'My ambition? Another Nobel prize': Chemistry laureate Charpentier

STOCKHOLM: Winning the Nobel prize is often the peak of professional achievement, but chemistry laureate Emmanuelle Charpentier, who received the coveted award this week, has her sights set on repeating her success. Speaking ahead of the live-streamed ceremony crowning the Nobel awards week, replacing the usual lavish royal banquet in Stockholm, the 51-year-old French geneticist described winning the prize as "life-changing" but said she still had many ambitions.

"One ambition would be to win another Nobel prize, of course!" she told AFP. "But if I want to one day make another discovery, I know I'll need to isolate myself for some years, and I think that's pretty much impossible at the moment," Charpentier said. Another medal would see Charpentier echo the achievement of scientist Marie Curie, whose 1911 chemistry prize made her the first person in history to be awarded a second Nobel, eight years after her award for physics. Along with Jennifer Doudna of the US, Charpentier won the Nobel chemistry prize for the gene-editing technique known as the CRISPR-Cas9 DNA "scissors", a tool that allows scientists to snip DNA and edit the genetic code of animals, plants and microorganisms. The discovery has huge implications for creating new medicines and for scientists' understanding of the role of genes in biology and disease. —AFP

International

Ghana's president re-elected as opposition rejects results

Akufo-Addo receives 51.59%; opposition leader 47.36%

ACCRA: Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo has won a second term in office, the electoral commission announced Wednesday, a result his rival John Mahama's party said it would appeal. The West African country is known for its stable democracy, but tensions rose over Monday's presidential and legislative vote after Mahama claimed to have won a parliamentary majority and warned Akufo-Addo against stealing the vote.

In the presidential race, Akufo-Addo received 51.59 percent of the vote, beating opposition leader and former president Mahama's 47.36 percent, the electoral commission said. The announcement was greeted with chanting and dancing by a crowd of supporters in the seaside capital Accra. But the opposition has called the election "flawed." "Overwhelming evidence available makes it impossible for us to accept this spurious and hurried conclusion," Haruna Iddrisu, a member of parliament for the National Democratic Congress (NDC) party said at a press conference.

"We intend to take decisive and concrete steps, both with the presidential and parliamentary results, to overturn this brazen and shameless attack on our democracy." In a victory speech on Wednesday, the president-elect leader of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) addressed his jubilant supporters, calling for peace. "Now is the time, irrespective of political affiliations, to unite, join hands and stand shoulder to shoulder," 76-year-old Akufo-Addo said. Ob-

servers viewed polling as generally free and fair but police said five people were killed and 19 injured in election-related violence.

The political climate soured late Tuesday when Mahama accused his rival of showing "credentials that are very undemocratic". Mahama, 62, charged that Akufo-Addo had harnessed the military in a bid to sway the outcome, a claim the government said was false. "You cannot use the military to try and overturn some of the results in constituencies that we have won. We will resist any attempts to subvert the sovereign will of the Ghanaian people," the former president said. Mahama - who has twice before lost to Akufo-Addo by a narrow margin, the last time in 2016 - has yet to comment on the results. The full count of the 275 parliamentary seats has not been announced and are expected to be very close.

'Prosperous and progressive'

Ghana has recorded high levels of growth during Akufo-Addo's first term as he worked to diversify an economy largely dependent on cocoa exports and more recently oil and gold. On education in particular, he is considered to have done well, which matters in a country where 18- to 35-year-olds account for more than half of all eligible voters.

But while Ghana has made large strides in recent years, many still live in extreme poverty with scarce access to clean water or electricity. "There



ACCRA: Nana Akufo-Addo gives a speech after being declared president of Ghana by the Electoral Commission (EC) in Accra on December 9, 2020. Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo has won a second term after a tightly contested presidential election. —AFP

could be a tendency for an incumbent, who has just secured a second term, to take it easy and relax," Akufo-Addo. "I am of a different character. I give you my word that I will continue to work very hard to build a prosperous and progressive Ghana, for which we yearn." Former Ghanaian president John Kufuor was one of the first to congratulate Akufo-Addo, saying on Twitter: "you deserve it."

Ghana has had seven peaceful transitions of

power since the return of democracy more than 30 years ago, as post-electoral grievances have always been pursued through the courts — a rarity in the troubled region. Hoping to retain that reputation, Akufo-Addo and Mahama on Friday signed a symbolic peace pact, which the 15-nation regional bloc ECOWAS urged "all political parties and their leadership to respect." —AFP

'Organized crime' hit in German police raids

BERLIN: Several hundred police carried out raids in Berlin and Hamburg yesterday targeting organized crime, the authorities said in a statement. "More than 500 police officers are currently executing 27 search warrants and three arrest warrants in Berlin and Hamburg," the Berlin public prosecutor's office said on Twitter. The raids began at 6 am and were aimed at two so-called "family clans" suspected of illegal property transactions, according to a report in the Tagesspiegel newspaper.

In Berlin, officers searched sites in the Charlottenburg, Mitte and Spandau districts, the newspaper said. Connections to the biker scene are also being investigated, it said. The raids led to "traffic disruptions throughout the city" yesterday morning, the Berlin state transport ministry said. Media reports named the Arab Abu-Chaker clan and the Turkish Surer clan as the targets of the raids. Berlin in particular has seen several large operations targeting family clans in recent months. In November, more than 1,600 police officers carried out major raids against a family known as the Remmo clan over a spectacular jewelry heist in the city of Dresden a year ago. Three members of the family were arrested over the crime, in which more than a dozen pieces of diamond-encrusted jewelry were snatched from a state museum. The family of Arab origin is notorious for ties to organized crime and its members were in February convicted in another high-profile museum break-in in central Berlin. —AFP

Tailor of Tigray mends Ethiopian refugees' clothes and hearts

UM RAQUBA, Sudan: Thousands of people fled war in Ethiopia with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Now in Um Raquba camp in neighboring Sudan, dozens of destitute refugees from the fighting in the northern Tigray region flock each day to Omar Ibrahim's makeshift tailor shop. Using a foot-powered sewing machine he rents from a local villager, Ibrahim helps fellow refugees recover from the horrors of war and forced flight - by making them new garments and mending the holes in their old ones. "I came here a month ago" from the Tigray town of Humera, Ibrahim tells AFP as he sews a new red and white cotton dress. "I had nothing with me, and nothing to do. Sitting idly would never have helped improve my situation, so I decided to do the only thing I know: sewing."

'Came here with nothing'

Ibrahim explains that he struck a deal with a Sudanese villager in Um Raquba. In return for the use of the rusty sewing machine, he hands half of his profits to its owner. "Now, I am happier than when I arrived," says the 25-year-old tailor, who owned a shop in Humera equipped with three sewing machines. In his hometown, he specialized in making clothes for women.

In Um Raquba camp, a sprawling refugee settlement that the UN says currently houses some 13,000 refugees, he mends and sews new clothes for men, women and children.

"When I give people new clothes to wear, they feel happy, because they came here with nothing," says Ibrahim, who keeps a tailor's white measuring tape around his shoulders. Despite the pain and loss he has suffered, he remains driven by a belief in self-reliance and the importance of serving his community. "When you do good things for people, you receive good things from the world," he says.

'One people'

Some 49,000 Ethiopians have fled into Sudan since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government launched a deadly offensive against the Tigray region's ruling party on November 4. Living in a string of camps dotted along Sudan's border with Ethiopia, most of the refugees must rely on aid to survive. Many simply do not have the means to pay Ibrahim for his services, so he charges according to their means. "If they can afford to pay me, I charge them. But if they don't have any money I help them free of charge," he says. "We are all one people."

As he uses the pedal to power his sewing machine, Ibrahim describes his final days in Humera. "There was so much bombing, and there were many dead we couldn't bury," says the tailor. Now, in Um Raquba, he worries for his elderly parents who decided to stay behind in Humera. His work as a tailor helps him both to earn a living and to fight his sadness. "I am no better than anyone else. I have to work to earn a living. Thank God I am alive. I saw so many dead bodies," he says.

'He helps people'

Ibrahim's attention turns to Salam, a 25-year-old mother of three who arrives at the shop with a pair of jeans for her nine-year-old son Emmanuel that needs mending. The shop's entrance is through a curtain made from an old grey cloth. Like many of the shelters the refugees live in, the ceilings and walls are built from plastic sheeting and brush. With her younger son Eyoub strapped to her back in a cotton scarf, Salam tells AFP that the jeans are her eldest son's only trousers. —AFP

International

In Baku, Erdogan hails Azerbaijan 'glorious' victory over Armenia

Bloody conflict leaves more than 5,000 dead

BAKU: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on a visit to Azerbaijan yesterday that Baku's struggle with Armenia was not over as he hailed his close ally's "glorious victory" in a bloody conflict with Yerevan. Erdogan arrived in Baku to attend nationwide celebrations marking Azerbaijan's military triumph over Armenia in six weeks of fighting over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Turkey backed Azerbaijan during a conflict that erupted in late September and left more than 5,000 people dead. Azerbaijan's win against Armenian separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh last month was an important geopolitical coup for Erdogan who has cemented Turkey's leading role as a powerbroker in the ex-Soviet Caucasus region the Kremlin considers its sphere of influence.

Azerbaijan's army paraded military hardware and weapons seized from Armenia, and Turkish drones were also on full display. Hailing the parade, Turkish television announced that Turkish drones "turned the tide" of the Karabakh war. "We are here today to... celebrate this glorious victory," Erdogan said during the parade in Baku, the culmination of festivities marking Azerbaijan's victory. "Azerbaijan's saving its lands from occupation does not mean that the struggle is over," he added. "The struggle carried out in the political and military areas will continue from now on many other fronts."

National anthems of Azerbaijan and Turkey were performed ahead of the military display that was reviewed by Erdogan and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev. Erdogan's attendance "shows to the



BAKU: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev attend a military parade marking Azerbaijan's victory against Armenia in their conflict for control over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.— AFP

whole world the unbreakable friendship of Azerbaijani and Turkish peoples," Aliyev said. More than 3,000 troops took part in the parade which has also been attended by 2,783 Turkish military—a symbolic equivalent of the number of Azerbaijani servicemen killed in clashes. A Turkish commando unit was also in attendance.

'Turkey's backing'

Ankara was accused of dispatching mercenaries from Syria to bolster Baku's army, but denied the charge. "Azerbaijan would not have been able to achieve military success in Karabakh without Turkey's open political backing," analyst Elhan Shahinoglu of Baku-based think-tank, Atlas said. The

clashes ended with a peace deal brokered by Moscow after Baku's army overwhelmed separatist forces and drew closer to Karabakh's main city Stepanakert. The deal sparked fury in Armenia, where Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has faced large demonstrations calling for his resignation. Under the agreement, Armenia ceded control over parts of the enclave it lost during the fighting and seven adjacent districts it had seized during a war in the 1990s.

The deal also leaves Karabakh's political status in limbo. The enclave will see its future guaranteed by nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeepers deployed for a renewable five-year mandate and the truce will be monitored in Azerbaijan by Turkey's military. Sepa-

ratists in Karabakh broke away from Baku in a war in the early 1990s that left some 30,000 people dead and displaced tens of thousands of Azerbaijanis. Their claim of autonomy has not been recognized internationally, not even by Armenia.

'One nation, two states'

Yesterday, Amnesty International said Azerbaijan and Armenia must urgently probe "war crimes" committed by both sides during the clashes. Amnesty said it had analyzed 22 videos depicting "extrajudicial executions, the mistreatment of prisoners of war and other captives, and desecration of the dead bodies of enemy soldiers". Armenia accused Turkey of direct involvement in the fighting, claims dismissed by Baku and Ankara. Their shared border has been closed since 1993 when the two countries cut diplomatic ties.

Armenia fights to recognize as genocide the World War I massacres of some 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman empire. Turkey has rejected the label. Erdogan in 2009 dismissed internationally mediated reconciliation efforts with Armenia and said ties could only be restored after Armenian forces withdrew from Karabakh. Referred to as "one nation, two states," Turkey's alliance with Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan was forged following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 and has deepened under Erdogan's tenure. Turkey has helped Azerbaijan train and arm its military. Azerbaijan for its part links NATO member Turkey with ex-Soviet nations in Central Asia and China.— AFP

Manmade materials now outweighs life on Earth

PARIS: For the first time in history manmade materials now likely outweigh all life on Earth, scientists said Wednesday in research detailing the "crossover point" at which humanity's footprint is heavier than that of the natural world. The weight of roads, buildings and other constructed or manufactured materials is doubling roughly every 20 years, and authors of the research said it currently weighed 1.1 teratons (1.1 trillion tons).

As mankind has ramped up its insatiable consumption of natural resources, the weight of living biomass - trees, plants and animals - has halved since the agricultural revolution to stand at just 1 teraton currently, the study found. Estimating changes in global biomass and manmade mass since 1990, the research showed that the mass of human-produced objects stood at just three percent of the weight of biomass at the start of the 20th century.

But since the post-World War II global production boom, manufacturing has surged to the extent that humans now produce the equivalent of the weight of every person on Earth every week on average. 2020 likely marked the moment when manmade mass tipped higher than biomass, according to the study published in Nature. "This study pro-

vides a sort of 'big picture' snapshot of the planet in 2020," said co-author Ron Milo of the Plant and Environmental Sciences Department at Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science.

"We hope that once we have these somewhat shocking figures before our eyes, we can as a species take responsibility." Drawing on a host of industrial and ecological data, the study estimated human production accounts for roughly 30 gigatons annually. At the current growth rate, manmade material is likely to weigh as much as three teratons by 2040. At the same time, overall biomass is decreasing, mainly because of deforestation and land use changes making way for intensive agriculture.

Buildings and roads account for most of the manmade mass, and a number of construction trends - including shifting from bricks to concrete in construction in the mid-1950s - contributed to the accelerated weight accumulation. Lead author Emily Elhacham told AFP that the study provided an indication of humanity's outsized impact on the natural world. "We can no longer deny our central role in the natural world," she said. "We are already a major player and with that comes a shared responsibility."— AFP

Israel unveils parts of Herod's palace buried by Judean king

HERODIUM: Israeli authorities are set to unveil previously off-limits structures within King Herod's palace-fortress Herodium, which the tyrannical Roman-era leader interred as his enormous burial plot. Herodium, a hugely popular tourism destination, is near Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank but falls in an area where Israel exercises full military and civilian control.

Archaeologists say Herod decided towards the end of his life to bury his palace, using ground from below the hill it was perched upon, until the outline of the structure was no longer visible. Israel's Nature and Parks Authority plans to open the revamped site on Sunday, allowing visitors to see for the first time Herodium's arched stairway, foyer and private theatre. The Judean desert complex was built by the Roman-appointed king known both for his brutality and the magnificent structures built during his reign over Judea from 37 to 4 BC.

The hilltop palace, its main entrance facing Jerusalem, was Herod's favorite. It was the only one he named after himself and where he chose to be buried, said Roi Porat, the Hebrew University archaeologist in charge of the excavations. A mere burial plot, however, would not have satisfied Herod,

who wanted his final place of rest to overshadow his palace. "That's why he covered the mountain, including the palace, to emphasize it," said Eran Krugel of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

'Unparalleled'

And while burying the palace during his lifetime provided Herod with the satisfaction of knowing his grave would stand out, it also helped preserve and protect the site for 2,000 years. "This is an unparalleled archaeological laboratory," Porat said, comparing it to Pompeii's preservation in lava. A broad staircase leads up the graveside to the palace's main foyer. There are three tiers of support arches above the foyer, from when Herod decided to bury his palace but still needed access while he was still alive. The foyer itself contains striped frescos in their original auburn, green and black, creating patterns mimicking marble panels, in line with the Judean royal style. At the bottom of the stairs on the other side of the grave is the theatre with around 300 seats, and the private booth and royal visiting room overlooking it. Herod hosted Marcus Agrippa, the second-in-command to Caesar Augustus, in that room in 15 BC, according to Porat.—AFP

International

Son of President-elect under investigation for tax affairs

Longshot Texas election lawsuit keeps Trump hopes alive

WILMINGTON: Hunter Biden, the son of US President-elect Joe Biden and a frequent target of Republican attacks, said Wednesday he was under federal investigation about his taxes. The revelation about the probe included no details, but it promises to rekindle Republican rage about the Biden family, including Hunter Biden's business dealings and the elder Biden's anti-corruption push in Ukraine when he was US vice president. It also presents a series of thorny issues during the president-elect's transition into the White House in just over one month's time, including the possibility his son will still be under investigation by the US Department of Justice.

"I learned yesterday for the first time that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware advised my legal counsel, also yesterday, that they are investigating my tax affairs," Hunter Biden said in a statement released by his father's presidential transition team. "I take this matter very seriously but I am confident that a professional and objective review of these matters will demonstrate that I handled my affairs legally and appropriately, including with the benefit of professional tax advisors."

Hunter Biden, 50, is a lawyer who has founded consulting and investment firms, worked in private equity, and served on the board of various organizations including national railroad corporation Amtrak. Biden's sec-

ond son Hunter was born in Wilmington, Delaware, where his father lives and the presidential transition operation is based. His brother Beau Biden, the former Delaware attorney general, died of cancer in 2015.

Trump attacks on Biden

The transition team said in the statement that included Hunter's remarks that "President-elect Biden is deeply proud of his son, who has fought through difficult challenges, including the vicious personal attacks of recent months, only to emerge stronger."

The investigation was disclosed just five days before the Electoral College is expected to formally select Joe Biden as the next president, following the November 3 election in which he defeated President Donald Trump. The New York Times, citing unnamed sources familiar with the inquiry, said the probe was opened in late 2018 and has included inquiries into "potential criminal violations" of tax laws.

During his reelection campaign Trump launched repeated accusations that the Bidens were a "corrupt" family and a "criminal enterprise." From 2014 to 2019, while his father was vice president, Hunter Biden, a lawyer and lobbyist, served on the board of Burisma, a Ukrainian gas company. Trump has accused Joe Biden, when he was president Barack Obama's deputy,



WILMINGTON: In this file photo, US President-elect Joe Biden (right) embraces his son Hunter Biden on the stage after delivering remarks in Wilmington, Delaware. —AFP

of seeking the removal of Ukraine's top prosecutor to protect Burisma—and his son—from a corruption investigation.

Joe Biden has acknowledged publicly that he did indeed push for the dismissal of the prosecutor but the European Union and IMF had also sought his removal—not because of a Burisma probe but because he was seen as not

being aggressive enough in pursuing corruption. Since 2019 Trump and his Republican allies have assailed Hunter for his dealings with Ukraine and China, and there were unconfirmed reports that a Hunter Biden laptop was dropped off at a Delaware repair shop and contained incriminating data. No evidence of wrongdoing emerged. —Agencies

Biden defends Pentagon pick

WILMINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden defended his barrier-breaking pick for defense secretary Wednesday before what could be a tough confirmation process, arguing that retired general Lloyd Austin will combine military experience and civilian oversight at the Pentagon. At a press event in Wilmington, Delaware, Biden described Austin as "the definition of duty, honor, country" as he called on the Senate to make an exception to the law requiring any officer who heads the department be out of military service at least seven years.

Austin, a 67-year-old four-star general, was US commander in Iraq and then head of the US Central Command covering all of the Middle East from 2010 to 2016. "I believe in the importance of civilian control of the military. So does the secretary designate," said Biden, who worked with Austin in Iraq when he visited the country as vice president. "I would not be asking for this exception if I did not believe this moment in our history didn't call for it. It does call for it," he added. "So just as they did for secretary Jim Mattis, I ask the Congress to grant a waiver for Secretary-designate Austin." The law has been waived only twice before, including in 2017, when President Donald Trump nominated Mattis as defense secretary. Overcoming that barrier will require a waiver from Congress, but a handful of Democrats including senators Richard Blumenthal, Tammy Duckworth and Jon Tester have already said they would vote against the waiver. —AFP

Trump Tower? No, think Biden municipal swimming pool now

WILMINGTON: Donald Trump has high-rise towers named after him around the world. And Joe Biden? A municipal swimming pool in Delaware. A visit to the president-elect's modest — some would say dull — hometown of Wilmington illustrates the intense shift in atmosphere coming to the White House with the change of power this January. After four years of Trump, a fan of gold faucets and self-declared "greatest" at just about everything, in comes a man whom local resident Shelly Baker calls "great" mainly because he's a lot like other people in down-to-earth Wilmington. "Everyone here just calls him Joe. 'Regular Joe,'" Baker, 63, said admiringly as she waited for a glimpse of the president-elect following one of his daily transition team events downtown. Trump has emblazoned his name in huge capital letters — often in gold for good measure — on buildings and swanky properties all the way from Las Vegas to Scotland. In New York City alone there's Trump Tower, Trump World Tower, Trump Plaza, The Trump Building, Trump Parc, Trump Park Avenue and Trump International Hotel and Tower. Then there are the Trump books, like "Trump: How to Get Rich," the Trump golf courses, Trump casinos and more. So enamored is the Republican with his own name that he has a habit of referring during speeches to "Trump" in the third person, as if standing back to admire himself.

So what about Biden?

He's been a US senator for nearly four decades and vice president under Barack Obama, so he's hardly unknown. But in the self-promotion stakes, the

vibe couldn't be more different. Take the three most prominent Biden landmarks found in Delaware: Joseph R Biden Jr Aquatic Center (the Wilmington swimming pool where he worked as a lifeguard in his youth). — Joseph R Biden Jr Railroad Station (Wilmington's Amtrak stop, which the soon-to-be 46th president used every day while in the Senate to get back to his family at night). — And last but not least, the Biden Welcome Center, a stopoff with toilets and fast food for motorists on the Interstate-95 motorway.

Town resembles president-elect

Wilmington, population less than 71,000, mirrors the man promising to deliver Americans a soothing rest after four years of Trump turbulence. The town isn't famous for much — most people just drive by on their way along I-95 between Washington and New York. Its principal economic role as a tax-friendly destination for companies to incorporate doesn't exactly translate into excitement. Efforts are underway to revitalize the depressed downtown, but much of the area remains gloomy and dangerous. Pawn shops, bail bond agents and boarded-up windows are a common sight around The Queen Theater, which Biden's transition team has made the center of its operations. The wealthier side of town features a seemingly endless succession of churches, traffic lights and car dealerships, before merging into neighborhoods of leafy, winding lanes where Biden's residence is located. "It's not like Miami or like New York," said downtown clothing store manager Toya Darcey. But, the 32-year-old added: "It feels good that he's from here."

Grounded

To say that Biden is grounded in Wilmington is no exaggeration. His son Beau, who died of brain cancer in 2015, is buried at Saint Joseph on the Brandywine Catholic church. So are Biden's first wife Neilia and their infant daughter, Naomi, killed in a 1972 car crash. Over the years, the cemetery and church, where Biden regularly attends Mass, have become as much part of the incoming president's identity as glitzy Manhattan and Florida are to Trump. —AFP

International

Deadly pandemic surges in US; regulators meet on vaccine

US records worst-ever daily COVID death tolls

WASHINGTON: American regulators met yesterday to assess the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine for emergency approval, as the country logged one of its worst-ever daily COVID-19 death tolls with more than 3,000 people lost to the pandemic. Other northern hemisphere countries were also grappling with a winter virus surge, as the number of global infections raced towards 70 million with more than 1.5 million deaths.

It is not confirmed when the US Food and Drug Administration will issue the emergency authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, but Health Secretary Alex Azar indicated that officials have early next week in mind. "Now we actually get to do something that hopefully will bring this... pandemic to an end," said Terri White, a nursing education specialist at UW Health in the state of Wisconsin, where staff are being trained to administer the vaccine.

"I know our whole team is really excited about that prospect... to help our lives return to normal." Top US government scientists said, however, that people with a known history of severe allergic reactions would be asked not to take the Pfizer vaccine, following a similar warning in Britain. The United States is the worst-hit nation in the world, with more than 15 million known infections and close to 290,000 deaths.

US Army General Gus Perna, who is oversee-

ing logistics nationwide, said he had given the order Wednesday to begin distributing syringes, needles, alcohol wipes and dilutants required for the Pfizer vaccine, a process expected to be completed by Friday. The next vaccines to receive approval might be those made by Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and AstraZeneca, most likely in that order. The US hopes to vaccinate 20 million people this month, with long term care facility residents and health care workers at the front of the line. The goal is to reach 100 million by the end of February and the whole population by June.

'I'm really excited'

After Britain gave the first approved vaccine shots in the Western world, Canada also approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on Wednesday. The first shipments to 14 sites across Canada are scheduled to arrive Monday with people receiving shots a day or two later, according to Major-General Dany Fortin, the commander put in charge of coordinating distribution. Healthcare workers and vulnerable populations including the elderly are to be the first to receive it.

"I'm really excited. I want to get vaccinated as soon as possible, because I have a new baby," Michelle, a Toronto resident said. "She's under six



LONDON: Lorna Lucas, 81, receives the first of two Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines shortly before her husband, Winston at Guy's Hospital, in central London. — AFP

months old, and so obviously my main concern through the whole pandemic has been to protect her." Israel accepted its first shipment of the Pfizer vaccine on Wednesday, targeting a rollout on December 27, with Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu promising to be the first to be injected - although the vaccine has yet to pass regulatory hurdles there. Both Russia and China have already begun inoculation campaigns with domestically produced vaccines. — AFP

Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine documents accessed in EU hack

WASHINGTON: Documents relating to the regulatory submission for Pfizer and BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine candidate were "unlawfully accessed" during a cyberattack on the European Medicines Agency (EMA), Pfizer said Wednesday. "It is important to note that no BioNTech or Pfizer systems have been breached in connection with this incident and we are unaware of any personal data being accessed," a statement said. "We await further information about EMA's investigation and will respond appropriately and in accordance with EU law.

"Given the critical public health considerations and the importance of transparency, we continue to provide clarity around all aspects of the vaccine development and regulatory processes." The Amsterdam-based EMA has said the incident was being investigated, but did not specify when it took place or whether its work on Covid-19 was targeted. The Dutch national police high-tech crime team was involved in the probe into the cyberattack, but police gave no more information, the Dutch news agency ANP reported.

The EMA's role as the drugs regulator for the 27-nation EU means it has access to data on the safety and quality of medicines from clinical trials and lab tests from companies that apply for authorization. The agency has said it will give a decision on conditional approval for Pfizer-BioNTech's Covid-19 vaccine at a meeting that will be held by December 29 at the latest, while a ruling on Moderna's version should follow by January 12. The

Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, BNT162b2, has received emergency approval in Great Britain and Canada.

Canada approves vaccine

Meanwhile, Canada has approved the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, days after Britain became the first country to greenlight and roll it out. "At last we have a reason to feel optimistic and excited about returning to the lives we led pre-COVID," Canadian deputy chief public health officer Howard Njoo told a news conference, adding that Ottawa was "bringing vaccines to Canadians earlier than hoped." Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a tweet called the announcement good news, but warned: "It doesn't mean we can let our guards down" against the spread of the COVID-19 illness as a second wave forced several regions to reintroduce restrictions.

The government's chief medical advisor Supriya Sharma said the authorization of the Pfizer-BioNTech shot "marks a critical milestone in our efforts to bring Covid-19 under control." She said additional vaccines would become available and be rolled out throughout 2021, with three other vaccine candidates-including one developed by US-based Moderna, which could be delivered later this month-currently being evaluated by health authorities. These, she said, will provide "every Canadian with the opportunity to be immunized."

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine had undergone a fast-tracked review while it was still in clinical trials, which concluded that it met "stringent safety, efficacy and quality requirements for use in Canada," said the country's health department, Health Canada. The Gulf kingdom of Bahrain has also approved the vaccine. Marc Berthiaume, director of Health Canada's bureau of medical science, said its evaluation found "strong evidence that the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the risks." The regulator advised, however, that it should be used only in people 16 years of age and up, for now.— Agencies

Inmates mysteriously escape S African jail

JOHANNESBURG: South African police were on Wednesday hunting for two prisoners who inexplicably escaped in the early hours from a high-security facility in the capital Pretoria, a correctional services spokesman said. The two on the run escaped before dawn from Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre prison, where the likes of paralympic athlete Oscar Pistorius and apartheid death-squad leader Eugene de Kock, nicknamed "Prime Evil" have been held. Local media reported that the inmates had escaped by digging a hole in the wall of their cell.

In a statement correctional services spokesman Singabakho Nxumalo identified the pair as Thabo Zacharia Muyambo from Mozambique, who is serving a life sentence for 21 counts of various crimes including rape and kidnapping, alongside Zimbabwean national Johannes Chauke who is serving 20 years for housebreaking offences. The spokesman declined to comment on the details of the escape from the high-wall facility which has layers of cell bars and boom gates.

But he confirmed to AFP that a hammer had been found inside the cell and a small hole was discovered high up on the wall of the cell. The Sowetan newspaper said inmates had confirmed to the publication that the escapees used a sharp object, believed to have been stolen from the prison's workshop, to dig a hole through the wall of their cell. Images carried by the publication show a visible hole dug out of a wall said to be that which the inmates used to make their getaway. — AFP

International

Burying the dead: Myanmar Muslim COVID-19 volunteers

Myanmar records 100,000 infections, with over 2,000 deaths

YANGON: Sweating under his protective gear, volunteer Sithu Aung lays another coronavirus victim to rest - offering crucial funeral rites to his Muslim community in Myanmar's virus-ravaged commercial capital. For the past few months, the 23-year-old father and his fellow volunteers have been living in a cemetery, isolated from their families, as they spend their days collecting the bodies of the deceased from Yangon's overflowing hospitals and quarantine centers.

Without the team's efforts, the bodies would be cremated - a practice that is usual in the majority-Buddhist nation but strictly forbidden under Islamic law. Thanks to them, the dead instead receive a short funeral conducted by a local imam at a Muslim cemetery, in the presence of a handful of socially distanced immediate relatives. "I get satisfaction from the happiness of their families and knowing that Allah sees what we're doing," former shopkeeper Sithu Aung said. "That's why we're risking our lives to do this job."

Yangon's Muslim community numbers about 350,000 - seven percent of the city's population - and various Muslim associations have provided the volunteers with three ambulances, two cars and supplies of food. The stigma attached to the virus means renting an apartment to isolate from their families is not

an option, so the team of 15 have commandeered shacks inside the cemetery compound. Clad in full protective suits, rubber gloves, goggles and plastic face shields, they work shifts around the clock, beating a path through Yangon's traffic-choked streets with flashing emergency lights and sirens.

'Crying under our goggles'

For months, Myanmar remained relatively unscathed by the pandemic, registering fewer than 400 cases nationwide by mid-August. But that all changed when case numbers started to surge in a country with one of the weakest healthcare systems in the world. There are now over 100,000 infections, with more than 2,000 deaths. Myanmar's teeming commercial hub Yangon became a virus hotspot and Sithu Aung's team now collects three or four bodies every day.

They work a rotational shift: two weeks on, then a week's self-isolation that allows Sithu Aung to spend a few days with his wife and one-year-old son before he returns to his macabre work. When the city first went into lockdown in April, he chose not to tell his family about his plans to volunteer.

"If I'd have let them know, my mum and my wife wouldn't have let me do it," he admits, adding his family sometimes visit him at the

Dust, stoves, traffic

Air-quality maps of Sofia have once more been going viral on social media, angering people in the European Union's poorest country. Environment ministry data confirmed that in November, on the days IQAir recorded its worst readings, the 24-hour concentration of (PM10) fine dust particles was four times the World Health Organization recommended limit.

Last week, the European Commission referred Bulgaria to the European Court of Justice, over what it said was its systematic failure to meet the PM10 limits. It had already failed to respond to a 2017 court judgment against it, the Commission noted. A recent Sofia city council study identified the main culprits as dust, wood- and coal-burning stoves and car traffic. In poorer neighborhoods, car tyres, old furniture or plastics are still burned for heating. Several recent studies have shown that long-term exposure to air pollution combined with coronavirus makes Bulgarians extremely vulnerable, say experts.

Record mortality

"Practically there isn't any organ or system in the body that is not impacted by fine-particle air pollution," lung specialist Alexander Simidchiev said. The pollution can not only undermine the immune system's response to the Covid-19 virus but also aggravate the illness, he said. Air pollution could even help spread the virus, attaching itself to the particles, he added. "If you



YANGON: Volunteers wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) carry the body of a person suspected to have died from the COVID-19 coronavirus for his burial in the Hteinbin Muslim Cemetery in Yangon. —AFP

cemetery, although they keep their distance. Sithu Aung helped bury Myanmar's very first coronavirus victim, a 69-year-old Muslim man, and remembers his fear of touching the body. After helping to bury dozens of coronavirus victims, however, he says he is no longer afraid of

death. But he admits the emotions can still be overwhelming. "I feel sorry that family members can't see the faces of their loved ones," he says, soaked in sweat after peeling off layers of protective gear. "Some days we also cry under our goggles." — AFP

COVID-hit Bulgaria faces compound risk: Pollution

SOFIA: As the winter smog season in Bulgaria arrives, experts are concerned over a "perfect storm" of health risks: the country's high air pollution and the coronavirus - in a country with one of Europe's highest Covid-19 death rates. The danger is particularly acute given that several times last month the Bulgarian capital Sofia ranked as the world's most polluted city according to the Swiss IQAir air quality monitoring website.

As the temperature drops, the air above the capital Sofia has acquired its usual winter-time smoky grey hue, thanks in part to the surrounding mountains, which trap the air. "When you look down at the city from Mount Vitoshka it resembles a greyish lake of dirt and we are reluctant to go back down," says 39-year-old IT specialist Georgy Pavlov. Long before the pandemic, he says, he started wearing a mask with a filter simply to walk his dog. Ina Hristova, a 28-year-old biology researcher also dons a mask for a stroll in a Sofia park: not just because of the virus, but all the dust in the air, she says. A gauze cloth covers her baby's pram.



SOFIA: In this photo taken on Nov 27, 2020, a woman crosses a street early in the morning amid the smog covering Sofia. — AFP

look at the air pollution map of Europe, there are two or three real hotspots of air pollution, and those were also hotspots for COVID. "So it's very difficult to fail to notice the association between the air pollution map and the COVID severity map." Between November 27 and December 3 the country suffered its deadliest week since the start of the pandemic with 980 deaths for a population of under 7 million: one of the highest Covid-19 death rates.

"If air pollution has made people vulnerable

through chronic illnesses, the virus tends to get rid of them," said Simidchiev. The government, initially reticent to impose harsh anti-virus measures, finally imposed new restrictions on November 27, closing restaurants, schools and shopping malls. But already, between 15,000 and 18,000 people die every year because of air pollution, says Simidchiev. A high smoking rate and underfunded and understaffed pulmonology departments have helped create "a perfect storm around lung health in our country", laid bare by the virus. — AFP

International

India's Modi launches grand redevelopment of New Delhi

PM's decision to perform a Hindu ceremony drew fire

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the groundbreaking ceremony yesterday for a huge new Indian parliament, the centrepiece of a grand but contentious redevelopment of New Delhi's colonial-era core. Critics say the 200 billion rupees (\$2.7 billion) that the Hindu nationalist government is reportedly spending on the vast project could be better directed to fighting COVID-19 and repairing the pandemic-battered economy. Modi performed Hindu rites to Sanskrit chants in a ceremony that was largely symbolic as India's top court has banned any construction work until a raft of legal petitions against the mega-project are dealt with.

The prime minister's decision to perform a Hindu ceremony drew fire from some critics as India's parliament is meant to safeguard the officially secular traditions of the multi-faith democracy of 1.3 billion people. It also came as tens of thousands of farmers angry at new agricultural laws blockade the capital, in a major challenge to the authority of Modi and his reform agenda. Due for completion in 2022 when India marks 75 years of independence, the much larger new parliament will replace an old building that Modi said yesterday "needs rest".

Designed by British architect Edwin Lutyens in the early 20th century as the commanding centrepiece of the Raj, the area also comprises the grand Rajpath boulevard, the president's residence, government offices, the national museum and the India Gate war memorial. Modi's root-and-branch overhaul of the sweeping, tree-lined and lawned vista will see it enclosed by rows of imposing new government buildings and the prime minister's office shifted and enlarged.

Some of the old parliament will be "retrofitted" and continue to be used for government business, while other buildings will reportedly be turned into museums. Some will be demolished. "Today is a historic day. It is a milestone in India's democratic journey," Modi, 70, said in a speech. "The old parliament building has seen India's journey from colonial times to an independent nation... It is our responsibility to give 21st-century India a new parliament building."

But there has been a chorus of criticism, not just against the price tag, which is expected to be 9.7 billion rupees (\$130 million) for the triangular parliament complex alone. Tikender Singh Panwar, an opposition politician and an expert on urbanisation, told AFP the redevelopment was a "big scandal in the making". "Curiously, for



NEW DELHI: A general view of the illuminated Presidential Palace (left) and Parliament building is pictured in New Delhi ahead of India's Republic Day celebrations. — AFP

a project of this significance, size and cost, the details are sketchy... I see this as a fascist leader wanting to leave an imprint of his glory on Delhi," he said.

'One man's dream'

Political commentator Arati Jerath said the redevelopment signalled the "making of a new India that will bear Modi's imprint". "This money could have been well spent on healing and repairing the economy (and) creating jobs but instead of which it is being spent on fulfilling one man's grandiose

dreams of what a new India should look like." There have also been allegations the new parliament's architect was chosen because he is a close friend of Modi, accusations the government denies. Some opposition parties criticized Modi's participation in a Hindu ceremony, flanked by saffron-robed priests chanting in Sanskrit, the classical language that his government wants to revive. Hindus form the majority of India's population and many religious minorities, in particular the 200 million Muslims, fear that Modi wants to remould India as a Hindu nation. — AFP

Lebanese PM Diab and ex-ministers indicted over blast

BEIRUT: Lebanon's lead investigator into the catastrophic Beirut port explosion charged outgoing premier Hassan Diab and three ex-ministers with negligence yesterday, a judicial source said. They are the first politicians to be indicted over the devastating August 4 blast that killed more than 200 people, disfigured the heart of the capital and stoked a wave of public anger against Lebanon's ruling elite. The four were charged with "negligence and causing death to hundreds and injuries to thousands more" in the first such official indictment against a prime minister in office in Lebanese history, the judicial source said.

After the blast, it emerged top security officials and politicians had known for years about hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer stored haphazardly at the Beirut port but had failed to take precautionary measures. The decision by judge Fadi Sawan came after the investigation confirmed the suspects had received "several written notices warning them against postponing the disposal of ammonium nitrate fertiliser," the source said.

"They also did not take the necessary measures to avoid the devastating explosion and its enormous damage," added the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorised to speak on the issue. Diab's office said the outgoing pre-

mier's conscience was clear. "He is confident that his hands are clean and that he has handled the Beirut Port blast file in a responsible and transparent manner," it said in a statement. "This surprising targeting goes beyond the person to the position per se, and Hassan Diab will not allow the Premiership to be targeted by any party."

Judge to question suspects

The other senior officials charged are former finance minister Ali Hasan Khalil and the ex-ministers of public works Yusef Fenianos and Ghazi Zaiter. The United States in September slapped sanctions on Khalil and Fenianos, for alleged corruption and support of the powerful Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement. In a letter to parliament late last month, judge Sawan asked lawmakers to investigate several outgoing and former ministers over the explosion. These included Khalil, Fenianos and Zaiter. The letter came after Sawan's own investigations raised "certain suspicions about the responsibility of those ministers and their failure towards addressing the presence of the ammonium nitrate at the port".

The judicial source yesterday said parliament had not responded to Sawan's request, prompting him to press charges unilaterally. Sawan will begin questioning the suspects from Monday, the source said. The investigation has so far triggered the arrest of 25 people, including top port and customs officials. Lebanese officials have rejected an international probe, despite demands both at home and abroad for an impartial investigation. Experts from France and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation took part in the preliminary investigation. — AFP

YouTube bans new videos claiming US election fraud

SAN FRANCISCO: YouTube on Wednesday banned new videos with bogus claims of election fraud, saying enough states have certified Joe Biden as the next US president to make it official. Meanwhile, YouTube parent Google said it will lift a moratorium on election-related advertising on Thursday given the outcome in the US has been decided.

Google, as well as Facebook, temporarily stopped taking election-related ads to prevent being used to spread misinformation or confusion among US voters. "To protect users, we regularly pause ads for a discrete period over unpredictable, 'sensitive' events when ads can be used to exploit the event or amplify misleading information," Google said in reply to an AFP inquiry.

"While we no longer consider this post-election period to be a sensitive event, we will continue to rigorously enforce our ads policies, which strictly prohibit demonstrably false information that could significantly undermine trust in elections or the democratic process." Google-owned YouTube, however, has been hammered with criticism for continuing to host videos spreading misinformation aimed at undermining the results of the election.

The position changed on Wednesday with a ban being rolled out at the leading video-sharing platform. A "safe harbor deadline" for the election passed on Tuesday, with enough states certifying election results to make former vice president Biden the winner, the platform said. "Given that, we will start removing any piece of content uploaded today (or anytime after) that misleads people by alleging that widespread fraud or errors changed the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election," YouTube said in a blog post.

The move is in keeping with YouTube practice during previous US elections, according to YouTube. Videos removed will include those with claims of software glitches or counting errors affecting the outcome of the vote. "As always, news coverage and commentary on these issues can remain on our site if there's sufficient education, documentary, scientific or artistic context," YouTube said. Only a small portion of YouTube viewing has been election-related content, with the bulk of that generated by authoritative news sources, according to the company.

The US Supreme Court dealt the latest blow Tuesday to Donald Trump's effort to overturn his election loss when it denied his allies' attempt to block the certification of votes in key state Pennsylvania. More than a month since the November 3 election, Trump still refuses to concede to Democrat Biden — who has a seven million-vote lead — and continues to make baseless claims of fraud. — AFP

International

China 'vaccine diplomacy': A global charm offensive

Wealthy countries scramble to buy up the limited supply

BEIJING: As wealthy countries scramble to buy up the limited supply of big-name coronavirus vaccines, China is stepping in to offer its homegrown jabs to poorer countries. But the largesse is not entirely altruistic, with Beijing hoping for a long-term diplomatic return. The strategy carries multiple possible benefits: deflecting anger and criticism over China's early handling of the pandemic, raising the profile of its biotech firms, and both strengthening and extending influence in Asia and beyond. "There is no doubt China is practicing vaccine diplomacy in an effort to repair its tarnished image," Huang Yanzhong, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), told AFP. "It has also become a tool to increase China's global influence and iron out... geopolitical issues." Stung by criticism of its handling of the emergence of the coronavirus in Wuhan, China has made much of its own ability to get its own outbreak under control, with state media carrying pictures of life-as-normal at pool parties and sporting events.

In the early months of the pandemic, Beijing hurried to export millions of masks and gowns, and sent medical teams to help strained healthcare systems in Europe and Africa. Now, with major Western pharmaceutical companies beginning to bring their vaccines to market, China is rolling out its own versions - signing agreements to supply millions of doses, including to countries that have a sometimes-prickly relationship with Beijing.

Seizing the mantle

Chinese diplomats have inked deals with Malaysia and the Philippines, both of which have previously complained about Beijing's expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. In August, Premier Li Keqiang promised priority vaccine access to countries along the Mekong river, where a devastating drought has been worsened by Chinese dams built upstream. "China's 'vaccine diplomacy' is not unconditional," Ardhitya Eduard Yerima and Klaus Heinrich Raditio said in a paper published this month by the Singapore-based Yusof Ishak institute. "Beijing may use its vaccine donations to advance its regional agenda, particularly on sensitive issues such as its claims in the South China Sea," they added. The move by President Xi Jinping to offer up a Chinese vaccine worldwide as a "public good" also allows Beijing to paint itself as a leader in global health, said the CFR's Huang, seizing a mantle left untended as the US retreated under Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine.

Female Afghan activist, TV journalist shot dead

JALALABAD: A female Afghan news anchor and activist was shot dead by assailants yesterday, her employer said, the second journalist killed in a month in Afghanistan. Malalai Maiwand, in her 20s, was killed along with her driver Mohammad Tahir in the eastern city of Jalalabad as they travelled to work, said Enekaas TV, the private television channel she worked for.

The journalist, whose activist mother was also killed by unknown gunmen five years ago, had previously spoken out about the difficulties of being a female reporter under Afghanistan's ultra-conservative patriarchal system. Maiwand's death comes as targeted killings of prominent figures becomes increasingly common as violence surges, despite ongoing peace talks between the government and the Taliban.

No group has claimed the attack. Attaullah Khogyani, spokesman for the Nangarhar provincial governor, and the local hospital both confirmed the deaths. "Who has problems with women working in the Afghan society?" deputy spokeswoman to the president Fatima Murchal tweeted. She added: "These coward culprits will not be forgiven,

Washington is notably absent from a global alliance of 189 countries that have pledged to distribute vaccines equitably. Beijing signed up in October as its drugmakers launched final stage trials. But this program has only secured enough doses to cover 20 percent of the population of low- and middle-income countries by the end of next year - offering a commercial opportunity. China is ramping up production facilities to make one billion coronavirus shots next year - and, having largely tamed the outbreak at home, it will have a surplus to sell.

If China can capture just 15 percent of the market in middle and low-income countries, it would net around \$2.8 billion in sales, according to an estimate by Essence Securities, a Hong Kong-based brokerage firm. "Everyone is clamoring for a vaccine and Beijing is in a good position to tap gold at the bottom of the pyramid," said an analyst at the company, who declined to be named. The global inoculation drive also requires storage facilities and cold chains to transport the doses. Such projects dovetail nicely with Xi's \$1 trillion infrastructure push - the Belt and Road Initiative - which has otherwise taken a hit because of the pandemic, said Kirk Lancaster of the CFR. E-commerce giant Alibaba has already built warehouses in Ethiopia and Dubai that will serve as vaccine distribution hubs for Africa and the Middle East.—AFP



LIMA: A health worker prepares a syringe to inoculate a volunteer with a COVID-19 vaccine produced by the Chinese Sinopharm during its trial at the Clinical Studies Center of the Cayetano Heredia University in Lima. — AFP

not even after peace." Daily life for women has improved from a nadir under the Taliban, but the United Nations noted there were widespread levels of violence against women in the war-ravaged nation.

The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee, a group that oversees journalists' security in the country, warned the continued violence was threatening to undo years of progress. "If the killing of journalists does not stop, Afghanistan will lose one of its greatest achievements which is press freedom," the committee tweeted and called for an investigation. Top US envoy in Kabul Ross Wilson condemned the "assassination" and called for the violence to stop. President Ashraf Ghani's spokesman Sediqqi Sediqqi also condemned Maiwand's murder. "The terrorist attack on Malalai Miwand is shocking and utterly despicable," Sediqqi tweeted. "The current senseless violence against our people must end". Nangarhar province and its capital Jalalabad have seen regular clashes between government forces and the Taliban. The extremist Islamic State group has also claimed several deadly attacks there.

The murder of Maiwand comes just weeks after Radio Liberty reporter Aliyas Dayee was killed in a car bomb attack in Lashkar Gah. Human Rights Watch said Dayee had previously been threatened by the Taliban. A former television presenter in Kabul, Yama Siawash, was killed in a similar car bomb attack near his home last month. No group has so far claimed those murders. Afghan forces are battling an increase in violence, much of it unleashed by the Taliban as they attempt to gain leverage in peace talks in Qatar, which opened in September.—AFP

Pompeo urges US universities to scrutinize Chinese students

ATLANTA: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday urged US universities to scrutinize China's assistance and students, warning that Beijing was set on stealing innovation. The outgoing top US diplomat, known for his hawkish views on China, made the speech on a visit to Georgia, a state with a growing Asian-American community and which next month holds two elections that will determine which party controls the Senate.

Pompeo said that the United States should welcome Chinese who "genuinely" want to study in the country but pointed to two cases of Chinese students who were charged with spying and other examples of Beijing harassing its students abroad. "If we don't educate ourselves, if we're not honest about what's taking place, we'll get schooled by Beijing," Pompeo said in a speech at Georgia Tech. "The Chinese Communist Party knows it can never match our innovation," Pompeo said. "That's why it sends 400,000 students a year to the United States of America."

He renewed calls for US universities to close all Confucius Institutes, the Beijing-funded institutions that offer Chinese-language instruction but are careful to toe to Beijing's line on politically sensitive topics. "We need administrators to close Confucius Institutes and investigate what so-called student groups backed by the CCP money are actually up to on their campuses," Pompeo said. "We cannot allow this tyrannical regime to steal our stuff, to build their military might, brainwash our people or buy off our institutions to help them cover up these activities."

In language sure to be welcomed by his Republican Party's right wing, Pompeo alleged that China has made inroads on left-leaning universities as they are "rife with anti-Americanism." He criticized several universities by name including the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, saying he had hoped to deliver his remarks there but was told by its president, Rafael Reif, that his comments "might insult their ethnic Chinese students and professors." MIT denied his account, saying it was contacted in August about being the venue for the speech by Pompeo and was "honored to be considered."

Reif told him that MIT was restricting gatherings to a maximum of 10 people to protect public health during the Covid-19 pandemic and conveyed his "deep regrets." "MIT turned down a number of other high-level guests for the same reasons," it said in a statement. Pompeo has described China as a central threat to the world and declared that President Donald Trump has turned the page on decades of US engagement with Beijing that have failed. President-elect Joe Biden has broadly agreed on the challenge from Beijing but has taken a less bellicose tone, with his aides seeing areas of cooperation such as fighting pandemics and climate change.—AFP

Friday Times Lifestyle

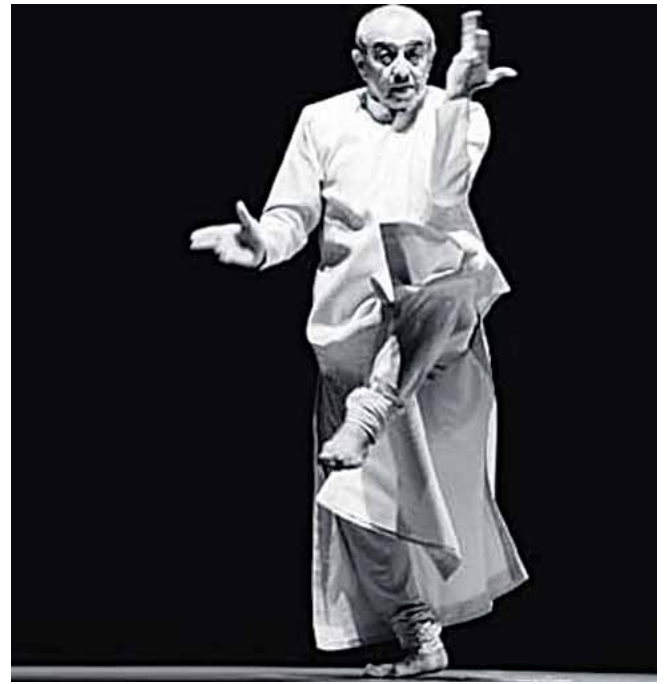
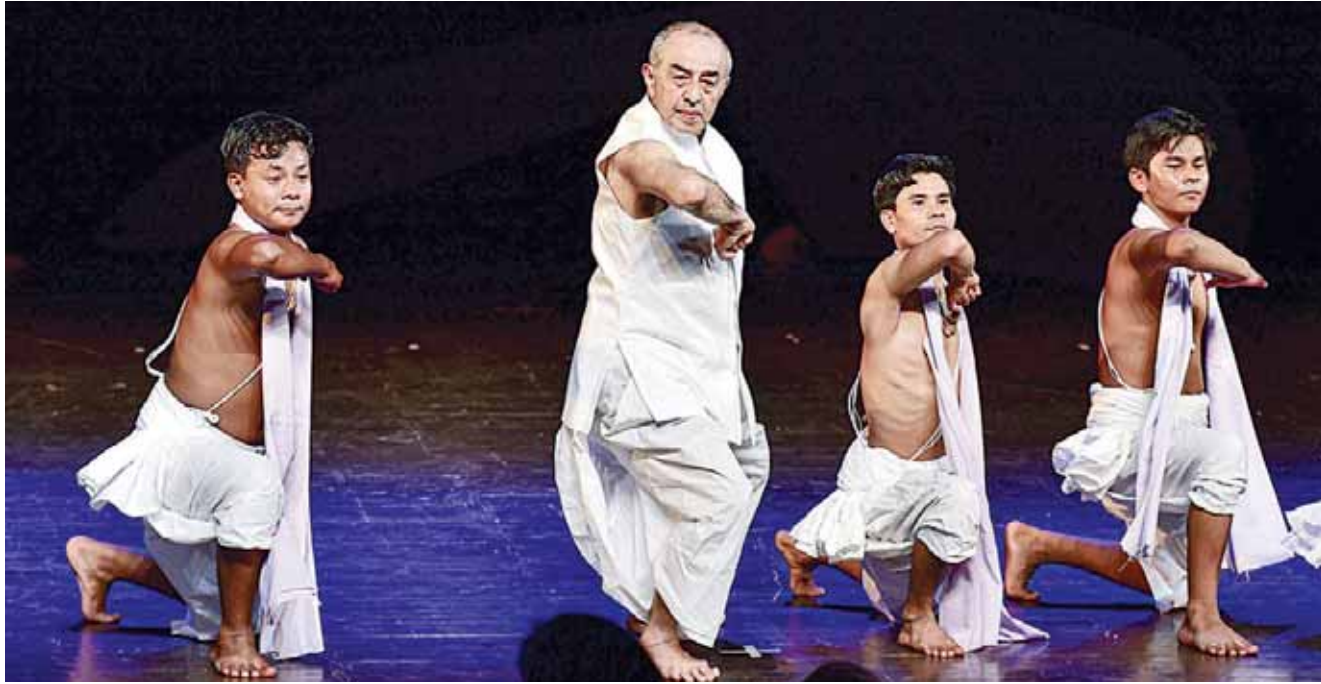
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2020

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Volunteer Fatima Sanson, dressed up as Mrs Claus, embraces a needy child in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais state, Brazil. — AFP

Covid, cancer can't stop Mrs Santa Claus in Brazil

See Page 23



Photos show Indian dance pioneer Astad Deboo.

Indian dance pioneer Astad Deboo dies at 73



Indian dance pioneer Astad Deboo, who was famous for celebrating fusion and collaborating with international artists like Pina Bausch and Pink Floyd, died aged 73 yesterday, his family said. "He left us in the early hours of December 10, at his home in Mumbai, after a brief illness, bravely borne," Deboo's family announced on Facebook. "He leaves behind a formidable legacy of unforgettable performances combined with an unswerving dedication to his art, matched only by his huge, loving heart that gained him thousands of friends and a vast number of admirers," the statement added.

During a career that spanned half a century, Deboo consistently pushed boundaries, combining Indian classical dance forms such as Kathak and Kathakali with Western techniques to create a style that was indisputably modern. He performed with artists ranging from British rock band Pink Floyd,

German dancer Pina Bausch and choreographer Alison Becker Chase, and appeared on stage in over 70 countries according to local media reports.

He also collaborated with Indian artists including painter M.F. Hussain, Bollywood filmmaker Vishal Bharadwaj as well as Tamil director Mani Ratnam. He was awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth highest civilian honor, in 2007. The Astad Deboo Dance Foundation, established by him in 2002, provided free training to poor and disabled students while Deboo himself worked with deaf students in India, Mexico and Hong Kong since the 1980s. Despite his success, Deboo felt financial sponsors were hard to come by for modern dance. "My journey has been full of ups and downs. Even today after 50 years, or 40 years, its difficult to get a sponsor for contemporary dance," he told Indian newspaper The Hindu in 2018. "You are always dancing on the edge." —AFP



Depp lodges appeal over 'wife-beater' ruling in UK

Hollywood star Johnny Depp has applied to the Court of Appeal in London to try to overturn a ruling that he assaulted his ex-wife Amber Heard, court documents showed on Wednesday. The "Pirates of the Caribbean" actor lost a high-profile libel claim against the publishers of The Sun newspaper over a 2018 article that branded him a "wife beater". The 57-year-old actor was last month ordered to pay News Group Newspapers £628,000 (\$840,000, 705,000-euro) in legal costs from the High Court battle earlier this year.

Judge Andrew Nicol, who heard the case, refused him grounds to appeal but said he could apply directly to the Court of Appeal to overturn his judgment, and had until December 7 to do so. Depp's application is listed on a publicly available website of pending appeal cases. The exact grounds for appeal or when a decision will be made were not given. The actor took

action against NGN and the author of The Sun article for claiming he repeatedly assaulted the 34-year-old actress and model during their turbulent relationship.

He strenuously denied the allegations but judge Nicol ruled that 12 of the 14 claims of domestic violence relied upon by the tabloid did occur and he put Heard "in fear for her life". The case laid bare Depp's chaotic lifestyle and battles with alcohol and drug addiction in detail. After the ruling in November, he said he had been asked to step down from his role in the "Fantastic Beasts" film franchise based on the book by Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling. His lawyer called the High Court ruling "as perverse as it is bewildering" and that it would be "ridiculous" for him not to try to overturn it. Depp is also suing Heard in the United States over a 2018 Washington Post article in which she claimed to be a victim of domestic violence.—AFP



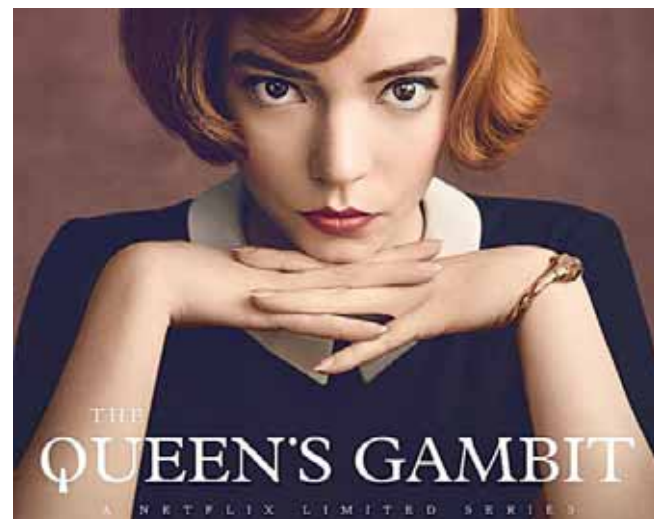
Hollywood star Johnny Depp



In this file photo Indian grandmaster Vishwanathan Anand plays during a FIDE World chess championship match in State Tretyakovskiy Gallery in Moscow. —AFP photos



In this file photo Indian grandmaster and World Chess Championship runner-up Vishwanathan Anand (right) receives a trophy from the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu J. Jayalithaa during an award ceremony in Chennai.



Lockdown, Queen's Gambit 'spectacular' for chess, says Indian grandmaster

Mass lockdowns and "The Queen's Gambit" have brought unexpected gains for chess during the coronavirus, Indian grandmaster Vishwanathan Anand told AFP, praising the hit TV show's "accurate portrayal" of the game. Anand, who spent three months stranded in Germany waiting for a flight back to India, said chess has enjoyed a surprise boom during the pandemic, with millions more people playing and following games online. It has been helped by the runaway success of "The Queen's Gambit", which follows the rise of a troubled chess genius-based on America's Bobby Fischer—and has set new viewing records for Netflix.

"People sitting at home seem to have discovered the game of chess," Anand, a five-time world champion, said in a phone interview from his home in Chennai. "There are now 13 million people playing online. And then during the pandemic there was also a Netflix show about chess, 'The Queen's Gambit', and that is also a bit spectacular." While many sports have suffered during the pandemic, chess has thrived. Online platform Chess.com last month said it had added 2.5 million new members since the release of "The Queen's Gambit". "Just like other sports have TV audiences, our audiences are principally online. So all that happened was that the chess players moved online to join the spectators," said Anand, 50. "That's not to say there were no adjustments to be made. It was quite complicated and there was a learning curve, but yes chess has done very well."

'Federer, Maradona in your room'

Anand, acclaimed as the greatest player India has produced, said technology had brought about deep changes for chess, with the internet now providing the platform to take it to a mass audience. "Almost anyone, even someone who doesn't know the rules of chess can follow online," said Anand. "A spectator-friendly experience is being created." Anand won his first world title aged 30 in 2000, three years after super-computer Deep Blue's epochal defeat of Russian world champion Garry Kasparov. "I was the crossover generation. I was 17 when the first chess database came along. I have pretty much worked with computers from that time onwards till today," said Anand.

"I think computers have changed the way you study the game. Every person no matter how weak, how isolated, has the world's strongest chess player sitting in the room with them always willing to answer any question. 'Think of it, you have a Roger Federer and Diego Maradona in your room and saying, 'Ask and I will give you any answer'. That's been the impact of chess computers." Anand enjoyed great rivalries with the likes of Kasparov, Russian grandmaster Vladimir Kramnik and Soviet-born Israeli Boris Gelfand. He said there are still muscular showdowns such as Magnus Carlsen against Fabiano Caruana—the current leading players—and tipped teenage sensation Alireza Firouzja, who was

born in Iran but plays for France, for future stardom.

'You need that tension'

He said Russian domination is increasingly being challenged, with Ding Liren and Wang Hao leading a wave of Chinese players and Caruana at the forefront of a growing US onslaught. "China may have peaked recently in terms of having two really strong players stand out but they have had considerable depth for a while," said Anand. "And the other thing is that they are very good in chess Olympiads, so they play well as a team. So we aren't surprised by good Chinese results any more." Anand, who became a grandmaster at 18 and remains in the world top 20, was playing in a chess league in Germany when most international travel came to a halt in February.

He kept himself busy following his favorite football team Real Madrid, doing commentaries and leading India in the Online Nations Cup before finally returning home in May. But despite the advances in technology, he said it was impossible to replicate the tension and atmosphere of a live game. "If you want to play, you need that sense of being sitting there in the hall feeling that tension," he said. "All those things, I think I need to remember again. It has been a very, very long break. "We never had the world grind to a halt like this. —AFP



The entrance to the Egyptian avenue is pictured in Highgate Cemetery in north London. — AFP photos



Tombs in the Circle of Lebanon are pictured in Highgate Cemetery.



Overgrown vegetation surrounds gravestones in Highgate Cemetery.

Climate change threatens London's Karl Marx cemetery

Global warming is threatening London's historic Highgate Cemetery, an overgrown oasis housing graves of notable figures from Karl Marx to pop star George Michael, its custodians say. Concerned at rampant fungi, freak storms and shifting graves, the cemetery's custodians are now seeking expert help to ensure its survival. They have launched a competition for landscape designers to come up with a strategy to help the north London cemetery withstand the warming climate in the next decades. "The plan has got to stretch out for the next 20-plus years and during that time global warming is going to continue," said the chairman of the Friends of Highgate Cemetery, Martin Adeney.

The hillside cemetery has graves of famous figures including the novelist George Eliot and "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" author Douglas Adams. It is still being used for burials. The British pop singer George Michael, who died in 2016, has an unmarked grave there, according to his family's wishes. The cemetery attracts some 100,000 visitors annually, up 30 percent in the last seven years, though they were banned during the coronavirus lockdown.

'Pests and diseases'

Despite the cemetery's charm, there is visible damage to the gravestones and catacombs, caused by a period of neglect and the rising temperatures. Some graves have warning tape tied round them and signs saying they are unsafe. Others are leaning or are flat on the ground. Lids of above-ground tombs are skewed off and self-seeded trees are growing in narrow gaps between tombstones.



A gravestone damaged by tree roots is seen in Highgate Cemetery.

Chief gardener Frank Cano pointed to a 19th-century stone tomb whose top is gradually being pushed off the base by a nearby tree, causing fresh chips in the stonework. A greater degree of shrinking and expanding of London's clay soil is causing the elaborate stone tombs to shift, said Cano, who has worked at the cemetery for six years. In turn this affects the roots of the trees growing wild between the graves, making them more unstable.

"The threat to the cemetery is from our trees, from the ivy, from the brambles. It's basically nature trying to take the cemetery

back." Winds have got stronger, too, Cano said, and warmer temperatures are causing fungi to thrive and trees to suffer "many more pests and diseases". The cemetery last year had to fell its centrepiece, a great Cedar of Lebanon, as it was afflicted by a bad fungus infestation. In addition, increased rainfall is washing away gravel paths and overflowing antiquated drainage systems.

Cost of millions

The landscape plan will include planting trees that cope better with climate change. Cano says he hopes the new plan will "keep the history running alongside nature" so that "the cemetery can still be here in hundreds of years to come." This is not the first crisis for the cemetery, which dates back to the 1830s, and has no public funding.

By the 1970s, the original owners had abandoned it as unprofitable and it lay derelict in a shocking state. Graves and vaults were broken into and skeletons exposed, until local residents took over to run it as volunteers. The new planned renovations will "undoubtedly" be the biggest since then, said Adeney, with the final cost unknown. "We're into the millions, of course," he said, adding that the National Lottery Heritage Fund was a potential source. The Friends are also seeking proposals from architects on ways to make the site more visitor-friendly while still respectful of the dead. These could include a visitor centre, new toilets and possibly a cafe. "Some areas will become clearer", said Adeney, "but we will be very careful." —AFP

Our Spaces without the clutter

By Engineer Yousef AL-Samhan

Can we live in a space without the clutter?

Clutter is a compulsive collector who cannot bear to put worthless things in the bin (garbage) or throw anything away that is broken. They have to have all their possessions on show, and hence they always have a dusty house because it is so difficult to clean. At first glance, their home looks like a tip, but it is often ordered, just very busy and full. So, can we cure the clutter? Yes, we can, we just have to want to change. With the little pushing and some heartache, it can be done listed here some simple steps we can follow to cure the clutter-bug.

Step 1

Act as if you are about to move house. Take everything out of the room. (Do this one room at a time)

Step 2

Bring back the most important things for the room. For example, a living room, the sofa, couch, chairs, TV, stereo, side tables, or the bedroom, bed side tables.

Step 3

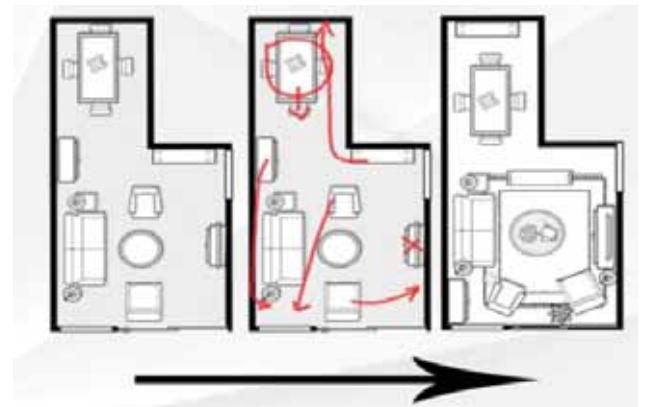
Work out where all the important things sit in the space. Move them so the space flows and that you can move freely around the room. Then sit down and have a look around, breathe in, how do you feel? You should feel liberated. You will find that your chest feels lighter; the air seems to flow better.

Step 4

Select a few things at a time to bring back into the room to decorate with. Paintings, pictures, a vase, a rug, lamps. Do it slowly and feel how the space is changing. Pick out the best items that you want to show, do not use all of them.

Step 5

Stop! Yes, do not keep going. Less is better in a room. Put all the remaining items in storage until you are happy with the new space. Later sort through it all, keep what is reusable, and



donate the rest to a good charity or sell it. So, you can cure the clutter-bug. You can do this: we can cure the clutter and create a potential interior decorator out of you now.

Note: Interior design consultant and CEO of MY12 Creations Interior Design and contracting Co.



A needy child touches volunteer Fatima Sanson, dressed up as Mrs. Claus, in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais state, Brazil.— AFP photos



Volunteer Fatima Sanson, dressed up as Mrs. Claus, embraces a needy child.

Covid, cancer can't stop Mrs Santa Claus in Brazil



A needy child kisses volunteer Fatima Sanson.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic and her recent battle with cancer, Fatima Sanson was determined to keep her Christmas tradition of dressing up as Mrs. Claus and giving out toys and hugs to impoverished kids. So the 61-year-old made herself a plastic “hug curtain,” found an assistant to disinfect it between embraces, dressed up in her bright red suit, and set up her annual toy and food giveaway in a poor neighborhood in Belo Horizonte, in southeastern Brazil. “It felt so good to be able to give hugs again during the pandemic,” said Sanson, who has spent nearly five decades doing charitable work in impoverished areas. She was all too aware of the risk involved this year.

Not only does her age put her in the high-risk group for Covid-19, but the pandemic began just as she was coming off a fight with breast cancer. Brazil has the second-highest Covid-19 death toll worldwide, after the United

States, with more than 178,000 people killed. But neither the virus nor the protective layer of plastic got in the way as Sanson spread her Christmas cheer to her young public. “I really liked getting a nice, warm hug from Mrs. Claus,” said one of the children, Daphne Victoria. Parents for their part took home baskets full of food—especially welcome this year, given that low-income workers have been hit hard by the economic fallout of the pandemic.

“I hope better days are coming and that next year we’ll be able to give real hugs, be able to feel that human warmth that everyone’s been missing,” said one mother at the charitable event, house cleaner Valmira Pereira. Sanson was happy to be able to give hugs at all. “It’s so good to hug and be hugged. We’re ‘infecting’ each other with our hugs, our affection, our love,” she said. — AFP

Sony to buy US anime giant Crunchyroll for \$1.17 billion

Japan’s Sony said yesterday it has agreed to buy US anime streaming giant Crunchyroll, which has more than three million paying subscribers, in a deal worth \$1.17 billion. By purchasing the anime, games and manga distributor from AT&T, Sony’s entertainment division is hoping to strengthen its position in the global video streaming market and compete with the likes of Netflix and Hulu, which also offer anime titles. Crunchyroll, founded in 2006, is the world’s largest on-

line library of Japanese animation.

Tony Vinciguerra, CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment, said the firm had already developed “a deep understanding of this global artform” through its own anime streaming service Funimation, which it will combine with Crunchyroll. “Together with Crunchyroll, we will create the best possible experience for fans and greater opportunity for creators, producers and publishers in Japan and elsewhere,” he said. “We look forward to continuing to leverage the power of creativity and technology to succeed in this rapidly growing segment of entertainment.” Sony has recently seen massive success in Japan with the popular “Demon Slayer” anime series made by its Aniplex studio. A film based on the series has been a huge hit during the pandemic, becoming Japan’s second-highest-grossing film of all time and taking 27.5 billion yen (\$265 million) at the box office. — AFP



The logo of Japan’s Sony is displayed on the wall of the company’s headquarters building in Tokyo. — AFP



SWEDISH GINGERBREAD HOUSE FOCUSES ON 'DISTANCE'

Gingerbread house models are pictured at the ArkDes, Sweden's national center for architecture and design, during this year's Gingerbread House 2020 competition with the theme 'Distance' in Stockholm, Sweden. — AFP photos

Since 1990 Gingerbread House Exhibition has been marked as a yearly event at ArkDes, Sweden's national center for architecture and design in Stockholm, Sweden. However, amid coronavirus this year's incarnation of Gingerbread House set to be different as staff at the

museum have made up an imaginatively designed and constructed gingerbread houses in 3D and the houses are stored at the museum and fans can visit ArkDes's website to view the entries.



Gingerbread house models are pictured at the ArkDes, Sweden's national center for architecture and design.



A gingerbread model with the shape of Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, is pictured at the ArkDes.



A gingerbread house model is pictured at the ArkDes.

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A gingerbread house model is pictured at the ArkDes.



A gingerbread house model is pictured at the ArkDes.



A gingerbread model with the shape of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, is pictured at the ArkDes.



A gingerbread model with the shape of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg.



A gingerbread house model is pictured at the ArkDes.

With more than one hundred entries from members of the public based around the theme of distance, staff at the museum have produced 3D scans of every entry. While members of the public would usually come to visit the exhibition in the Swedish capital, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the gingerbread houses are stored at the museum and fans can visit ArkDes's website to view the

entries, which include models of Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, climate activist Greta Thunberg, gnomes wearing surgical masks and families making the video calls that have become a more common way to stay in touch since the pandemic's start.

The theme 'distance' for this year's competition revealing: "Some distances can be measured, like

a meter, a light year, or the path that you travel every morning on your way to work or school. Other distances are just a sensation, like feeling close to someone or the feeling of living in separate worlds," according to ArkDes. — www.albawaba.com



Visitors look at bags on display during a press preview for the forthcoming exhibition 'Bags: Inside Out' at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) museum in London. — AFP photos

CARRY ON: BRITISH EXHIBITION DELVES INTO HANDBAGS

Whether touted by Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher or “Sex and the City” actress Sarah Jessica Parker, handbags pack a powerful punch, a British exhibition reveals. The Victoria and Albert Museum is showing some 300 items at the exhibition called “Bags: Inside and Out” that opens on Saturday. They range from a 16th-century embroidered purse to a contemporary plastic rucksack by British designer Stella McCartney. The decorative arts and design museum has chosen to focus on the accessories for its first exhibition since England’s lockdown was lifted in early December.

It looks at the “It bag” craze that kicked off in the 1990s, with women flocking to buy a certain designer style, influenced by celebrity images. One such bag on show is a purple sequined Fendi baguette bag once carried by the Sex and the City character Carrie Bradshaw, played by Parker in the hit HBO show. There is also a formidable leather handbag once carried by Thatcher, known as her “secret weapon”. Thatcher’s assertive armoury of bags even led to the creation of a new verb: “to handbag”, or browbeat into submission. “These portable, yet functional accessories have long fascinated men and women with their

dual nature that combines private and public,” said Lucia Savi, the exhibition’s curator.

From the Hermes Kelly to Lady Dior

Bags are a connecting link between the home and the outside world and allow people to carry money or important documents out of sight. The exhibition’s first part looks at the different uses bags are put to. An imposing Louis Vuitton trunk from the early 20th century was made for long voyages while a tiny leather bag measuring just 16 centimeters can squeeze in a purse, an opera glass, a notebook and a mirror: all you need for a night at the opera. The sec-

ond part of the exhibition looks at bags and identity: what a bag says about the owner and their aspirations. Some have become closely associated with celebrity owners, such as Hermes’s “Kelly”, a bold trapezoid-shaped bag. It was renamed after the icily stylish actress Grace Kelly was photographed carrying it.

Others include the Lady Dior, known as a favorite of Princess Diana, and the Hermes’ Birkin bag created after the fashion house’s head Jean-Louis Dumas met the British-born actress Jane Birkin on a plane. These days it is social media that fuels desire for the latest bag.

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A picture shows a Bao Bao Issey Miyake Lucent Metallic tote bag.



A visitor uses a phone to take a selfie with bags bearing slogans exhibited in a case behind during a press preview.



A picture shows a 'Lady Dior' handbag by designer Christian Dior.



A picture shows an 18th century French painted marriage purse.

"Instagrammable"

On video, Chinese influencer Tao Liang, known as Mr Bags, talks about the designs he has collaborated on with top luxury brands such as Burberry and Chanel. All of them are "very instagrammable," he says. "Who doesn't want a picture of themselves with a nice bag?" says the fashion blogger who claims to have 5 million followers on China's Weibo. Sometimes a bag can carry a political message, however, such as the bag bearing the slogan "My Body My Business," created by US-Swedish artist Michele Pred.

A final section of the exhibition examines the techniques used to make bags, including quirkier designs such as the US designers Thom Brown's handbag from last year in the shape of a dachshund,

inspired by his dog Hector. As fast fashion falls out of favor, designers are looking at new technologies and recycling to reduce environmental impact. A pioneer in this area, Stella McCartney, used plastic waste taken from the sea to make a rucksack on display.

The contents of a handbag remain sacrosanct, especially in the case of Queen Elizabeth II, who has remained loyal to the conservative Laundry brand and has several of its bags. Visitors to the show can see one from her collection, known as the Traviata, but the contents remain firmly off bounds. — AFP



A picture shows the ministerial despatch box that belonged to Winston Churchill when he was Secretary of State for the Colonies 1921-22.



A picture shows a 'Calavera' skull clutch bag by Charlotte Olympia.



A visitor looks at bags on display during a press preview.

Word Search

Budgeting

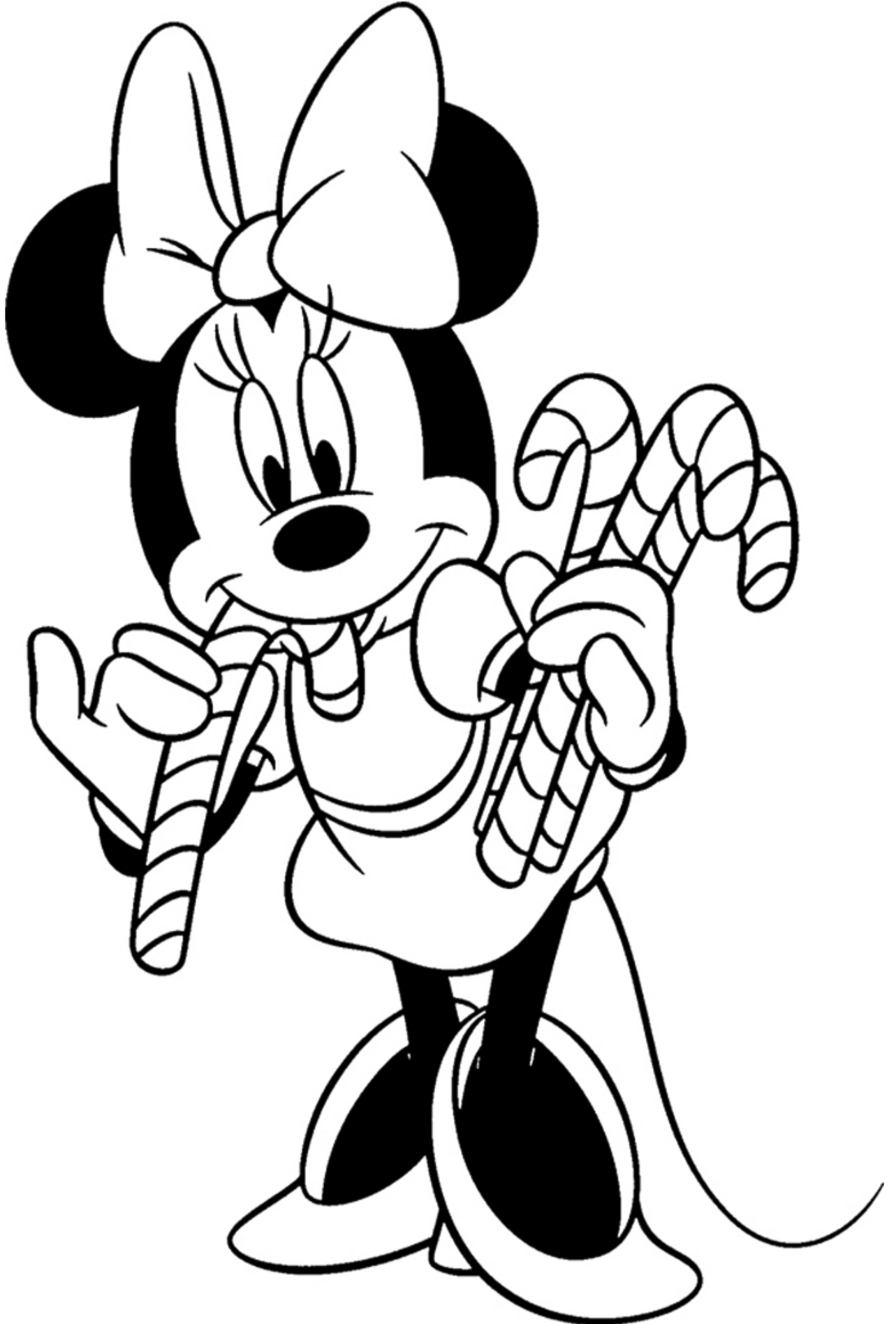
DIRECTIONS: Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

AGKIYZBGPADJUSTMENTWN
 QEXUCCOSTOFLIVINGTEAW
 LIQUIDITYFWVHICFEEWGI
 IVFGFNKRAGPEVWOWLPGEW
 AKLMORTGAGEARDMDBBGSF
 BUDGETFCWYLZEYMYAJGCL
 IHYNKKILQUBTCTIOSSPAG
 LHFDDPQAEAEAYDISCOEPSA
 ITVFDMONEYIUYUSAPMNHG
 TIRZSEEMSCRCNOQIPSO MFA
 IQUAOCXFJNAYKEOICZLR
 EBSWNGPITEVJQLNTDNWON
 SIUAULEXFGNALPCAUIGW I
 TBLNMSNLD RXQTULLWANTS
 ZAFVARSSAEPNDSDEENBEH
 BTPLJEESJMIEZFFXFKZPLM
 ASAWJKSBHEDGUBXQVEZRE
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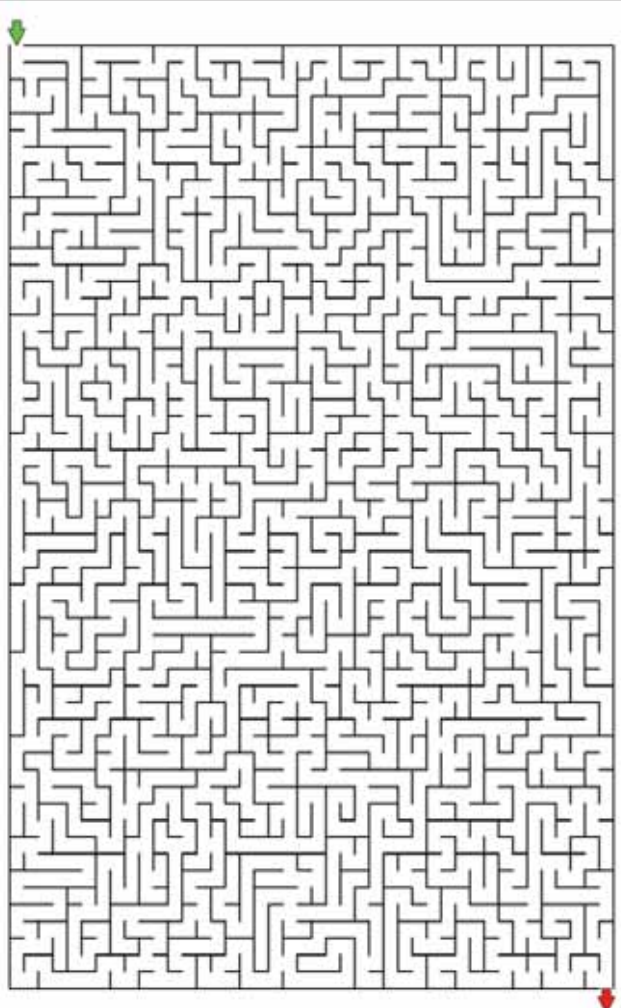
- ADJUSTMENT
- ASSETS
- BALANCE
- BENEFITS
- BUDGET
- CAPITAL
- CASH FLOW
- COMMISSION
- COST OF LIVING
- DEDUCTIONS
- DISPOSABLE
- EMERGENCY
- EQUITY
- EXPENSE
- FIXED
- GARNISHMENT
- INCOME
- LIABILITIES

- LIQUIDITY
- MONEY
- MORTGAGE
- NEEDS
- NET WORTH
- PLAN
- POWER
- PURCHASING
- SALARY
- STATEMENT
- VALUE
- VARIABLE
- WAGES
- WANTS

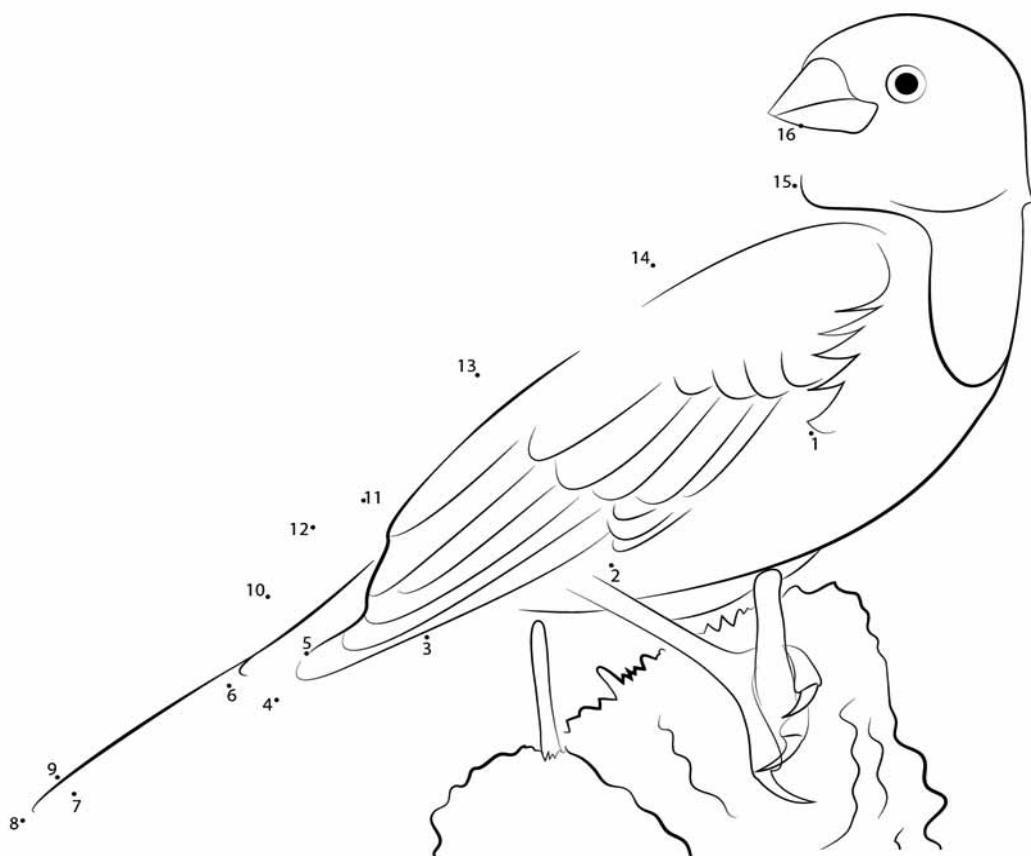
Color It



Kids Mazes



Join the dots



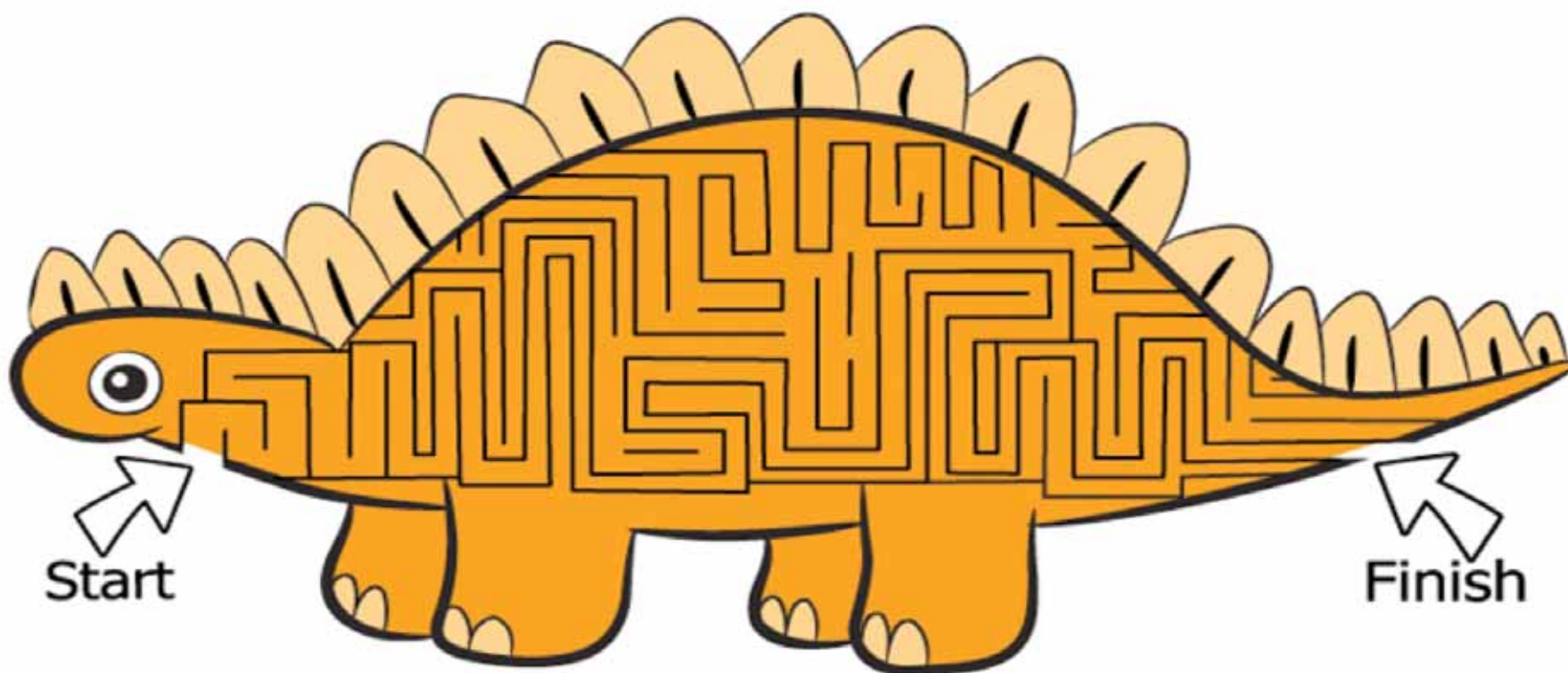
Word Scramble

MY PETS
Word Scrambles

DIRECTIONS: Write the name for each picture on the dotted line using the SCRAM letters.

		
act	btirba	fhsi
		
erosh	ankes	gpi
		
eretr	idbr	telrut

Find the way



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- Surgery for morbid obesity (sleeve, gastric bypass)
- Hernia repair
- Surgery for reflux disease
- Minor surgeries (lipoma, sebaceous cyst, ingrowing nail)
- Hemorrhoids, fistula & anal fissure surgeries
- Breast surgeries
- Thyroid & adrenal surgeries
- Cholecystectomy & laparoscopic appendicectomy
- Liver, pancreas & bile ducts surgeries

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DR. FAHAD AL-MUKHAIZEEM
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DR. WALEED S BUHAIMED
Consultant of General Surgery
Laparoscopic and Bariatric Surgery

Academic Certificates – Training

- Kuwait Board of General Surgery.
- (IFSO) member .
- Faculty member of (BEST).
- Member of Kuwait Surgical Association.

Scope of clinical Practice.

- Bariatric surgeries.
- Gallbladder stones surgeries.
- Abdominal wall and hernia surgeries.
- G.I. surgeries.
- Thyroid and para - thyroid surgeries.
- Anal surgeries.

email: wbuhaimed@gmail.com Tel.: 965 22269411/ Mob.: 965 99212228
Jabriya, 4th Ring Road, Block 1A Floor 9 - Clover Center Mazaya Building

Stars

STAR TRACK

**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

Regardless of how much the storm seems to be raging out of control, you will be able to handle it, Aries. Have confidence in your grounded nature. There's a reason why you take the time to address the details and carefully plan your moves. Today is one day when you will see the rewards of your diligent actions, especially in love, beauty, and your deepest emotions.

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Hold on to your hat, Taurus, and be ready for some action. You're coming to a critical point in your emotional cycle when your heart feels heavy. You may feel pinned down by a huge weight, like you're being sucked into quicksand. Grab a branch and pull yourself out. Rise above the current situation with the help of a lofty perspective.

**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

In a string of intense emotional dramas, the last thing you need is one more, Gemini. Unfortunately, it looks like you're going to get just that. Once again, an incredible romantic scenario is coming to a head, and your emotions are in turmoil. Hold still, wait for the hit, and then proceed. If you have the feeling that you're going to blow up at someone, simply walk away from the situation.

**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

There's a great deal of grounding energy in your world today, Cancer, which might work to smother your fire. Whatever happens, don't let the embers burn out. One of the assets you bring to the group is a strong dynamism that gives people the courage to change. Be a fighter in the ring. Remember that at the end of the day, you need only be satisfied with the performance of one person - you.

**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

Take pressing matters to the hilt today, Leo, especially when it comes to romantic issues and emotional needs. You have all the data you need to make a valid point. You have a whole battalion of facts to back you up, so fire at will. Your feelings are strong and intense. Don't ignore them under any circumstances. Go with your gut instincts before you trust anything else.

**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

As you try to express your opinions today, you may have the feeling that someone is kicking sand in your face, Virgo. Like a kid on the beach, you have nothing but the raw elements to use to defend yourself. Use one of your greatest gifts - the power of your mind - to combat the opposing force. Your ability to outsmart others will be your most powerful tool.

**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

Your boat is likely to be rocked today, Libra, to the point where you and all of your belongings could go overboard. Be prepared to swim ashore. Grounding and stability are the keys to maintaining a healthy attitude, especially when it comes to ever-fluctuating emotions. Issues regarding the home and people's possessions are likely to surface in a dramatic manner. Listen to your heart for the answers.

**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

Calm down and get centered, Scorpio. This is an extremely sensual day that's likely to pique your emotions. You're apt to receive input from each one of your senses, so keep these channels open and available for new information that's trying to break through. Don't be hasty. You're better off taking a reserved, receptive approach today.

**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

Today is your day to shine in every way, Sagittarius. There's a concentration of energy in your favor, so act boldly and without hesitation. Your emotions are leading the way, and your heart is barely a half a step behind. Follow these forces like the Pied Piper. Let this be the start of a wild ride on a whole new roller coaster of adventures. The time is right for you to lead.

**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

Your heart and emotions are on the same page, Capricorn, but they may not be on the page you want them to be. It could be that you're reminiscing about an event from the past. What was once a happy set of encounters now leaves you feeling like there are thorns in your side. Focus on the present and let the past become history.

**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**

Let your sensual, nurturing instincts shine through, Aquarius. Rely on your sixth sense. If things start to get rough, remember that you have the ability to keep your cool. Not only is this an extremely important tool but it's also essential to maintaining any sort of stability in the situation. Keep your footing at all times. Your sanity depends on it.

**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

A solid grounding is apt to be extremely important to you today, Pisces. Hearts may be broken or won, depending on how well you play your cards. Keep in mind that the slow and steady contender is most likely going to win this race. All the talk in the world will get you nowhere. Today is about quality and action. Shoddy efforts will yield shoddy results.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina Faso	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027

Business

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US govt, states sue Facebook

Antitrust suits seek to divest Instagram, WhatsApp

WASHINGTON: US federal and state antitrust enforcers filed suit against Facebook on Wednesday claiming the social media giant abused its dominant position and seeking to unwind its acquisitions of messaging services Instagram and WhatsApp. Separate suits filed by the Federal Trade Commission and a coalition of state officials called for the divestment of Instagram and WhatsApp, services which are part of the Facebook "family" of applications.

"Facebook's actions to entrench and maintain its monopoly deny consumers the benefits of competition," said Ian Conner, director of the FTC's Bureau of Competition. "Our aim is to roll back Facebook's anticompetitive conduct and restore competition so that innovation and free competition can thrive." A separate legal action was filed by antitrust enforcers from 48 US states and territories.

"For nearly a decade, Facebook has used its dominance and monopoly power to crush smaller rivals and snuff out competition, all at the expense of everyday users," said New York state Attorney General Letitia James, who leads the coalition. The suits allege Facebook sought to squelch competition by acquiring the messaging applications - Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014.

The action presages a fierce court battle seeking to force Facebook to divest the apps which have become an increasingly important element of the business model of the California giant and integrated into its technology. Facebook said it would "vigorously" defend its actions and denied abusing its position.

"Antitrust laws exist to protect consumers and promote innovation, not to punish successful businesses," Facebook general counsel Jennifer Newstead said in a statement. "Instagram and WhatsApp became the incredible products they are today because Facebook invested billions of dollars, and years of innovation and expertise, to



develop new features and better experiences for the millions who enjoy those products." Newstead added that these deals had been approved years ago by the FTC, which she said meant "the government now wants a do-over, sending a chilling warning to American business that no sale is ever final".

Consumer harm?

Some analysts argued the antitrust cases would have difficulty proving Facebook harmed consumers since its services are largely free. Jessica Melugin of the Competitive Enterprise Institute libertarian think tank called the actions "political theater dressed up as antitrust law" and argued that "a billion consumers worldwide have benefited from Facebook's purchase of Instagram and WhatsApp."

Cleveland State University law professor

Christopher Sagers said the case may have merit because Facebook "has been an unabashedly predatory and exclusionary bully in every sector it's been involved in". But he also noted that "American antitrust law is now so hard to enforce in all cases, especially in cases like this, involving no conspiracy among competitors, and rather involving only one big firm's unilateral conduct."

The case is likely to hinge not only on Facebook's share of social media users but the vast troves of data it collects from some three billion users worldwide including two billion on WhatsApp and a billion on Instagram. Tiffany Li, a Boston University law professor who studies the sector, said that while Facebook has rivals bidding for internet users' attention it has a big advantage because of its access to data. "One company having exclusive ownership of vast amounts of user data, with no potential for inter-

operability or access to competitors, can be anti-competitive," she said.

The FTC announced earlier this year it would review acquisitions made by five Big Tech firms over the past decade, opening the door to a wave of potential antitrust investigations. The consumer protection agency said it would review deals made by Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and Google parent Alphabet since 2010 amid growing complaints about tech platforms which have dominated key economic sectors.

The US Justice Department, which shares antitrust enforcement with the FTC, in October sued Google parent Alphabet, accusing the Silicon Valley giant of maintaining an "illegal monopoly" in online search and advertising and opening the door to a potential breakup. Eleven US states joined that case. — AFP

Business

China's foreign coal push risks global climate goals

Carbon-belching power stations to have lifespan of decades

BEIJING: China's plan to fund dozens of foreign coal plants from Zimbabwe to Indonesia is set to produce more emissions than major developed nations, threatening global efforts to fight climate change, environmentalists have warned. Under the Paris climate deal signed in 2015, China positioned itself as a leader on climate change, and in September President Xi Jinping pledged the country would become carbon neutral by 2060.

But Chinese state-owned firms are investing billions in coal power abroad, which are not counted in the domestic carbon neutral calculations, and which environmentalists say put at risk the Paris accord's goal of keeping global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius. "New plants that would potentially be operating for many years beyond 2030 are fundamentally incompatible with global efforts to contain climate change," said Christine Shearer, head of coal research at the Global Energy Monitor.

The new carbon-belching power stations already under construction will produce 19 gigawatts of power and emit 115 million tons each year, data from Boston University's Global Development Policy Center showed. China has nearly three-times more in the pipeline abroad, meaning its overseas plants would emit more than the current emissions of major economies

such as Britain, Turkey and Italy, according to figures in British Petroleum's annual review of global energy.

Each of the dozens of plants are expected to have a lifespan of decades. If completed and operated for 30 years, these plants would emit the equivalent of almost three years of emissions from all coal-fired power plants in China, according to Lauri Myllyvirta, lead Asia analyst with Helsinki-based Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air.

China is making the overseas coal play as part of its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, a plan to fund infrastructure projects and increase its sway overseas. Xi has promised to "pursue open, green and clean co-operation" under the Belt and Road plan, yet Chinese banks have continued their financing of coal projects regardless. Between 2000 and 2018, 23.1 percent of the \$251 billion invested by China's two biggest policy banks on overseas energy projects was spent on coal projects, according to Boston University's database on China's global energy financing.

The foreign plants the Chinese firms are currently building include the \$3 billion Sengwa power plant in Zimbabwe - one of the largest in Africa. There are also at least eight projects in Pakistan, including a \$2 billion plant in the



SINGARAJA, Indonesia: This picture taken on Oct 29, 2020 shows the Celukan Bawang 2 power plant on the resort island of Bali. — AFP

restive region of Balochistan. The new projects are all in countries that have signed up to the Belt and Road plan, locking them into a coal-consuming energy future. The flood of coal cash is "hampering efforts by developing nations to switch to cleaner alternatives," said Li Shuo from Greenpeace China, and that risks "derailing the Paris accord".

At home, China has about 96 billion tons of

untapped coal reserves - the fourth largest in the world. The surplus has pushed Chinese power companies into energy hungry nations in South and Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America. "It is a way to provide markets for companies and services that the country itself increasingly does not need," said Lauri Myllyvirta, China analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA). — AFP

UK inks Singapore trade deal as EU talks falter

SINGAPORE: Britain yesterday signed a free-trade deal with Singapore, giving it a key foothold in Asia as it seeks to forge its own path after leaving the European Union, while talks on a post-Brexit deal stumble. The agreement largely replicates an existing EU-Singapore pact, with the city-state saying it will cover more than £17 billion (US\$22 billion) in trade.

It removes tariffs, gives both countries access to each other's markets in services and cuts non-tariff barriers in electronics, cars and vehicle parts, pharmaceutical products, medical devices and renewable energy generation, the ministry said. Duties will be eliminated by Nov 2024, the same timeline as the agreement between the EU and Singapore, a former British colony that maintains close links with London.

As the deal was signed in the city-state, Britain's International Trade Secretary Liz Truss praised Singapore for its leadership on free trade. "Now the United Kingdom is back as an independent trading nation, we are free to join this campaign," she said. "Singapore is already the UK's largest trade and investment partner in ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), while the UK is Singapore's top investment destination in Europe."

Her Singapore counterpart, Chan Chun Sing, said the deal "provides British businesses a platform to access opportunities in the region through Singapore". Truss said the agreement will take Britain a step closer to joining a massive free-trade zone, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific



SINGAPORE: Britain's International Trade Secretary Liz Truss and her Singaporean counterpart Chan Chun Sing sign a free-trade deal yesterday. — AFP

Partnership, of which Singapore is a member.

The pact groups 11 Pacific Rim nations, among them Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, Mexico and Vietnam. A previous version of the deal was once championed by the US, but President Donald Trump abandoned it. Britain signed its first major post-Brexit trade deal with Japan in October, but Thursday's agreement is its first with a member of ASEAN. The 10-country bloc is home to 650 million people and - prior to the pandemic-induced downturn - had enjoyed rapid economic growth in recent years.

Yesterday's signing came after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen gave themselves until Sunday to decide on the future of post-Brexit negotiations, following a three-hour dinner that left the two sides "far apart". Britain and the EU are running out of time to reach an agreement on a future trading relationship before a post-Brexit transition period finishes at the end of the year. — AFP

France imposes €135m in fines on Google, Amazon

PARIS: France's CNIL data privacy watchdog said yesterday it had fined two Google units a total of €100 million and an Amazon subsidiary €35 million over advertising cookies. The regulator said the fines were "for having placed advertising cookies on the computers of users ... without obtaining prior consent and without providing adequate information". A cookie is a small piece of data stored on a user's computer browser that allows websites to identify users and remember their previous activity.

The CNIL said when a user visited the website google.fr, several cookies used for advertising purposes were automatically placed on his or her computer, without any action required on the user's part. It said a similar thing happened when visiting one page on the amazon.fr website. CNIL said this type of cookie "can only be placed after the user has expressed his or her consent" and thus violated regulations on receiving prior consent.

It faulted Google for providing insufficient privacy information for users as it did not let them know about the cookies which had been placed and that the procedure to block them still left one operational. CNIL also said Amazon had not provided clear or complete information about the cookies it placed on computers of users until a redesign in Sept 2020. —AFP

Business

SpaceX prototype blasts off and crashes in fireball

Construction on next prototype is almost finished

WASHINGTON: A prototype of the future giant SpaceX rocket Starship - which the company hopes will become its go-to for Mars missions - crashed in a fiery explosion during a test launch along the Texas coast Wednesday. But the company line was upbeat as a livestream of the launch displayed the on-screen message "AWESOME TEST. CONGRATS STARSHIP TEAM!"

"Mars, here we come!!" SpaceX founder Tesla's Elon Musk tweeted just minutes after the flight, explaining that a too-fast landing speed was to blame for the crash. He recounted the successful parts of the rocket's short late afternoon trip: the take-off, the change of position in flight and its (pre-explosion) precise landing trajectory. "We got all the data we needed! Congrats SpaceX team," he tweeted.

Wednesday's test launch took off and ascended properly in a seemingly straight line, before one and then another of its engines went out. After 4 minutes and 45 seconds of flight, its third engine extinguished and the rocket began its descent in its expected position. The engines were restarted just seconds before landing in an effort to slow the ship, but it crashed hard into the Earth.

Smaller prototypes have already blasted off several hundred meters into the air for less than a minute as part of a series of tests aimed at developing the next generation of rockets from

the company at lightning speed.

'Success'

After several aborted attempts this week, the flight was livestreamed on the @SpaceX Twitter account. The test flight was planned to check the huge metal body of SN8 (Starship number 8) and its three engines for their aerodynamics, including during the ship's return to Earth - which happens vertically, in the same vein as SpaceX's pioneering Falcon 9 rocket.

"With a test such as this, success is not measured by completion of specific objectives but rather how much we can learn, which will inform and improve the probability of success in the future as SpaceX rapidly advances development of Starship," a statement on the company's website said, implying even before the launch that an explosion or crash would not mean a failed mission.

Construction on SN9, the next prototype, is already almost finished. The experimental flights are taking place in a nearly deserted part of southern Texas on the Gulf of Mexico near the US-Mexican border - an area empty enough that any flight malfunction would be unlikely to cause physical or property damage. Musk recently announced he plans to move to the vast southern US state from California.

Any future completed Starship rocket will be equipped with 37 engines instead of nine, and will



BOCA CHICA, Texas: This video frame grab shows SpaceX's Starship SN8 rocket prototype crashing on landing during an attempted high-altitude launch test on Wednesday. —AFP

measure 120 m tall and be capable of carrying 100 tons of cargo into orbit around the Earth. Musk hopes to be able to one day launch several of these space ships to Mars, though they could prove useful even in the short term as NASA eyes

re-establishing an ongoing presence on the Moon in 2024. Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa is currently scheduled to pay an undisclosed sum to take Starship for a spin around the Moon in 2023 - at the earliest. —AFP

Data firm X-Mode booted from apps

SAN FRANCISCO: Google on Wednesday confirmed it is banning location tracking software developed by data collection firm X-Mode Social from apps on Android-powered mobile devices, which dominate the global market. Apple is also barring X-Mode from its coveted iOS devices, according to a Wall Street Journal report. US-based X-Mode has been the subject of recent media scrutiny for its links to the country's defense sector, particularly for selling data to government contractors involved in national security, counterterrorism and even coronavirus response.

Vice News reported last November that X-Mode was collecting the location data of people using apps intended for Muslim audiences, particularly the dating

platform Muslim Mingle. Google sent developers a warning giving them seven days to rid their apps of X-Mode software or request more time if doing so is technically complex, according to a spokesperson.

"If X-Mode is still present in the app after the timeframe, the app will be removed from Play," the Google spokesperson said, referring to the Internet giant's online shop for mobile apps and digital content. Apple did not immediately return a request for comment. However, according to the Journal, it also gave developers a warning that X-Mode tracking software must be removed from smartphone apps which otherwise risk being blocked.

Apple's iOS and Google's Android operating systems dominate the world smartphone market. The two tech giants reported their decisions on X-Mode to a team working for US Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat from Oregon, whose office is investigating the sale of location data to government agencies, the Journal said. X-Mode did not respond to AFP's request for comment. —AFP

Wealth of US billionaires soars during pandemic

NEW YORK: America's billionaires have seen their wealth rise by more than \$1 trillion since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a study Wednesday, fueling a debate about higher taxes on the rich. The collective wealth of the 651 billionaires in the United States soared from \$2.95 trillion on March 18 to \$4.01 trillion on Monday, said the Institute for Policy Studies and Americans for Tax Fairness (ATF).

"Never before has America seen such an accumulation of wealth in so few hands," said Frank Clemente, ATF's executive director, noting that the gain exceeds a relief package being considered by Congress. "Their pandemic profits are so immense that America's billionaires could pay for a major Covid relief bill and still not lose a dime of their pre-virus riches," he added.

On Tuesday, the White House unveiled a \$916 billion stimulus proposal in a final dash

to break a months-long logjam over new aid for the coronavirus-stricken US economy before President Donald Trump leaves office in January. The new proposal is slightly larger than a \$908 billion compromise unveiled by a bipartisan group of senators last week.

The authors of the study say that the \$1 trillion wealth gain would pay for stimulus checks of \$3,000 for all of the roughly 300 million Americans. The study adds to the already heated debate in the United States about taxing the rich more heavily to narrow growing wealth inequalities. For example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez - a rising star on the left wing of the Democratic Party - is pushing for higher taxes in New York, which like many states is facing a budget crisis caused by the pandemic.

A study published by UBS bank and accounting firm PwC in October found that the cumulative wealth of the world's dollar billionaires hit a new record of \$10.2 trillion, above the previous peak of \$8.9 billion recorded in 2017. The pandemic sparked a stock market crash in March, which saw some tumble out of the billionaires' club, before a sharp rebound in technology and health stocks boosted billionaires in those sectors. —AFP

Business

Finland's muddy fight over super-polluting peat energy

Nordic country is by far the EU's largest burner of peat

SIPPOLA, Finland: On a barren expanse of bog in southeast Finland the size of 180 football pitches, Taisto Raussi's yellow harvester hoovers up a thin layer of rich peat and deposits it in a heap, to be sold as fuel. The Nordic country is by far the EU's largest burner of peat and is mired in a divisive battle over a source of energy which is more polluting than coal and can cause catastrophic environmental damage.

When Raussi set up business in 1973, "We were welcomed because there was an energy crisis in Finland," he tells AFP from his farm in Sippola, two hours from the capital Helsinki. "Now it feels like everyone's against peat, there's only a few of us left who make our living from it." Less than five percent of Finland's energy comes from peat, the equivalent of 1.5 million tons of oil every year, although this amount dwarfs the EU's other peat burners: Ireland, the Baltics, Sweden and Romania.

But it is blamed for 14 percent of Finland's entire greenhouse gas emissions. Lawmakers' efforts to phase out peat for burning have stoked resentment between green-leaning urban populations and the rural communities where the industry supports up to 12,000 jobs. Once known as "brown gold", peat is a dense organic material that builds up over thousands of years in wetlands and forest floors, covering almost a third of Finland's surface area.

The world's northern peatlands are believed to store more carbon than the whole of the Ama-

zon rainforest, making peat one of the most effective carbon sinks on the planet. But these greenhouse gases are re-released when the peat is dug up or burnt, speeding up climate change.

Dead in 10 years

Despite Finland's ambition to be carbon neutral by 2035, the center-left government has pledged only to halve peat use by 2030, a target environmental groups criticize as vague and lackluster. Market forces, however, now appear to be settling Finland's peat debate for good: EU carbon prices are heading for an all-time high and industries once reliant on peat are turning to cleaner energy sources.

"It's now very clear the change will happen at least five years earlier than the target set by our government," Pasi Rantonen, head of peat operations at state-owned energy producer Vapo, told AFP. "We estimate that the fuel peat business is more or less dead in 10 years." Although the government has promised EU money to support the transition, "many companies will go bankrupt before that", Rantonen said.

Taisto Raussi, who also builds and sells peat-harvesting machinery, fears for the future of his 10 employees. "Ten years ago all of our peat always sold, there wasn't enough to last through the winter," he said. Now, towering mounds of peat covered in black plastic, unsold from last year, dot his land. The self-taught inventor is pinning his hopes on his latest creation, for which he has re-



SIPPOLA, Finland: Tractors and peat farming machinery are lined up in Taisto Raussi's peat fields on Sept 22, 2020. — AFP

ceived EU seed money - a device to produce the natural carbon-absorbing fertilizer, biochar.

Environmental legacy

The closure of the peat-burning industry will not mean an end to its environmental impact, its opponents say. Tero Mustonen, a lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), accuses the peat industry of a terrible environmental legacy lasting 75 years "that destroyed and maimed so many of our rivers, lakes and wetlands". Ten years ago Mustonen noticed

that fish in the Juhajoki river close to his village of Selkie, 70 km from the Russian border, were dying en masse.

Harmful metals and other substances were leaching from the nearby Linnunsuo peat bog, operated by Vapo. Mustonen and his wife, Kaisu, successfully campaigned to shut down the bog, which the company flooded and converted into a wetland. "However it was not too fancy, so we stepped in and re-did all of those wetlands," Mustonen, who heads a "rewilding" organization called Snowchange, told AFP. — AFP

News in brief

US regulators fine GE

WASHINGTON: US markets regulators on Wednesday hit General Electric with a \$200 million fine for misleading investors about results in its power and insurance businesses. "Investors are entitled to an accurate picture of a company's material operating results," said Stephanie Avakian, director of enforcement and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). "GE's repeated disclosure failures across multiple businesses materially misled investors about how it was generating reported earnings and cash growth as well as latent risks in its insurance business." —AFP

Uber to sell air taxi unit

SANTA CRUZ: Uber will sell off its air transport unit to flying taxi maker Joby Aviation, the company said, as it streamlines operations to navigate a ride-share market scuttled by the pandemic. The deal will see Joby acquire Uber expertise and software, and able to offer its all-electric, vertical take-off and landing passenger aircraft on the ride-hailing giant's app. While financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, they include Uber investing \$75 million into Santa Cruz-based Joby, which has said it hopes to have its flying taxis in operation as early as 2023. — AFP

DoorDash couriers racing to survive

MARINA DEL REY, California: Investors gorged on food delivery service DoorDash's US stock market debut Wednesday, but thousands of its couriers struggle to earn minimal wage and juggle working for multiple app services to get by, according to one Los Angeles worker. Driving in wealthy Marina del Rey, Devon Gutekunst scrolled through the DoorDash app and swiftly dismissed a notification offering a job that wouldn't begin to pay the bills.

"\$5.50 for 4.6 miles... which would be 30 minutes," he told AFP. "\$11 an hour, that is an automatic decline. Not enough, right?" California's minimum wage is \$15 an hour, and Gutekunst's policy is to "never accept anything less than that". "My personal minimum is \$18 an hour. I often make more than that, because I have a strategy," he explained.

Gutekunst's plan is simple - stay local, and turn down offers that require leaving his seaside stretch and trekking across sprawling and notoriously traffic-prone Los Angeles. He also simultaneously checks DoorDash's rival apps, including Grubhub, Uber Eats and Postmates, keeping a watchful eye out for the best prospects. "You can't make a living on DoorDash alone," said Gutekunst. "To make decent money... you really have to juggle, to play with all the offers to make your living."

As a result, his DoorDash delivery acceptance rate was only 12 percent on Wednesday, which is "very high" for him. "A lot of



NEW YORK: DoorDash delivery person rides their bike on Church Avenue in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn on Dec 4, 2020. — AFP

times it's two percent." Gutekunst said he made "good money" during California's summer COVID peak from May to August, when there was much more demand as residents stayed home. Despite the recent return to "stay-at-home" orders in Los Angeles, it is "a little slower now". "Or the other possibility is the market is just flooded with too many drivers, so there are not as many orders and they give you less payment." — AFP

Sports

Tiger feat: Muay Thai gym factory for UFC champions

Island gym attracts fighters from all over the globe

HONG KONG: Lightweight contender Rafael Fiziev steps into the cage in Las Vegas this weekend hoping to be the latest fighter to begin a journey to UFC glory from a production line of MMA champions on an island in Thailand. Tiger Muay Thai gym on the southern resort island of Phuket was, before the coronavirus pandemic, attracting fighters from all over the globe lured by world-class training, an idyllic tropical beach lifestyle and a growing reputation.

It has produced a string of fighters progressing into the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), the globe's biggest mixed martial arts (MMA) promotion, with several going on to become world champions. "Before lockdown we were seeing many fighters from Tiger Muay Thai sign with the UFC. It was like a wave," said Fiziev, who is from Kyrgyzstan and has an MMA record of eight wins with just one defeat. "The lockdown has kept people away but our fighters are winning and the wave will come again."

MMA was one of the first sports to restart after the pandemic shutdown, with UFC staging events in bio-secure bubbles since May and Asia's One Championship welcoming back limited crowds in Singapore since the end of October. Though quarantine and travel restrictions have hit international fighters hard, the success of UFC champions who use Tiger Muay Thai for pre-fight camps, such as bantamweight Petr Yan of Russia and Kyrgyzstan's

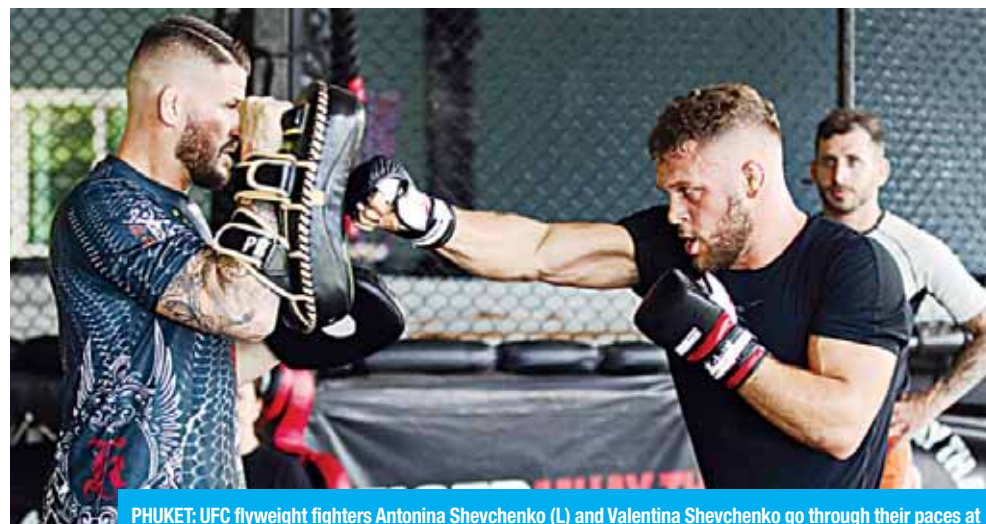
fearsome flyweight Valentina Shevchenko, is continuing to inspire the next generation.

"The fighters we have coming through help to breed success. Seeing them train inspires everyone," said George Hickman, MMA coach at Tiger Muay Thai. "You can watch someone like Petr work on his clinch game with the Muay Thai fighters, then you can see that play out in his fights. 'He's a sponge, and that's what the great fighters are. They're always looking for an edge and everyone learns from that.'"

'Art of eight limbs'

One of the most explosive UFC talents, middleweight champ Israel Adesanya of New Zealand, has also tapped into the gym as has Australian featherweight king Alexander Volkanovski. And Thailand's first UFC star, strawweight Loma Lookboonmee, has caused an explosion of interest in MMA in her home country, encouraging fighters to make the move from traditional forms of combat such as kickboxing or Muay Thai. "It takes time but we have a group of young Thai guys who are dabbling," said Hickman. "It's coming along and Loma is a big reason why."

The gym takes its name from the ancient sport of Muay Thai, also known as the "art of eight limbs." Based around strikes from elbows, knees, fists, feet and shins, Muay Thai was crafted for soldiers as far back as the 16th century.



PHUKET: UFC flyweight fighters Antonina Shevchenko (L) and Valentina Shevchenko go through their paces at the Tiger Muay Thai gym in Phuket. —AFP

Shevchenko and Fiziev were both accomplished Muay Thai exponents before concentrating on MMA. And 24-year-old Loma was renowned as one of the best female Muay Thai fighters in history with more than 300 bouts before turning to MMA in 2017.

In her recent UFC win over American Jinh Yu Frey, Loma's Muay Thai heritage clearly gave her

an advantage. "When I train with other MMA fighters I like to show them how to use elbows, and how to clinch like Muay Thai, but in a way that has been adapted to MMA," said Loma. "Muay Thai is very special and has its own personality. It's the art of eight limbs and has a full range of weapons that can be used. But it also has its own flow and rhythm." —AFP

Dad-to-be Williamson pulls out of Windies Test after abrupt U-turn

WELLINGTON: New Zealand captain Kane Williamson yesterday pulled out of the second Test against the West Indies in Wellington as he awaits the imminent arrival of his first child. The abrupt U-turn came just hours after batting mainstay Williamson had told head coach Gary Stead he would play in the match, which begins today. Williamson had flown home to Tauranga, 500 kilometers from Wellington, to be with his wife Sarah on the even of the match. After confirming his availability he flew back to Wellington where, after further discussions with Stead, he agreed it would be best if he returned to be with his wife.

"It's a decision that we've come to around the best interests for him and for Sarah, and also for our team," Stead said. Williamson had previously said the baby was due "mid-to-late December". Cricket does not allow for substitutions if he had needed to leave during the Test. "He isn't the first person to have a baby and miss a Test match so our thoughts and wishes are with Sarah and Kane at this time and we want to make sure first and foremost the mother and baby are well looked after," Stead added.

Williamson, ranked the second-best batsman in the world behind Australian Steve Smith and equal with India's Virat Kohli, provided the backbone of New Zealand's comprehensive innings victory in the first Test last weekend with an epic career-best 251. Dad-to-be Kohli will leave Australia after the opening Test in Adelaide next week to return home for the birth of his first child, meaning he will almost certainly miss the final three matches of the series. —AFP

Smith revved up for Test clashes after missing India series

SYDNEY: Steve Smith admitted yesterday he was pumped to play his first Test in almost a year, revealing how hard it was to miss India's last series in Australia when he was banned for ball-tampering. The two sides meet in a day-night Test in Adelaide from December 17, the first of four clashes over a blockbuster summer.

It will be Smith's first red-ball international since the final Test against New Zealand at the Sydney Cricket Ground in January before coronavirus caused havoc. "Very excited, I love Test cricket, it's my favorite form of the game no doubt. It challenges you in so many different ways," Smith, bubbling with enthusiasm, said on a Zoom call from Adelaide. "So excited to get back out and play some long-form cricket. It's been close to a year since our last game. Can't wait — all the boys are really keen to get out there and play as well."

Making it extra special for Smith is that he missed India's historic first Test series win in Australia in 2018-19 when he was serving his 12-month suspension. "I watched bits and pieces," he said of the tour. "It was difficult sitting on the sidelines and not being able to go out there and make a difference. "That was the toughest thing for me, knowing that I probably could make a difference if I was out there. So that was hard. But it's an exciting series coming up." Smith skippered Australia until he was banned over the brazen attempt under his watch to alter the ball with sandpaper in Cape Town.

Captaincy 'discussions'

Part of his punishment included a further year-long exile from any leadership role, which expired in March. He has yet to captain the side again but revealed yesterday "discussions" had taken place, with the issue thrust back into the spotlight at the weekend when Aaron Finch was ruled out of the second Twenty20 against India. Speculation was rampant that Smith would stand in as skipper, but Matthew Wade instead got the nod. "For me, I just said I am happy to do whatever is best for the team and that's the same going forward. I do whatever I can for the team," he said. Both teams face selection problems ahead of Adelaide.

India's opening batsman Rohit Sharma and pace bowler Ishant Sharma are both injured. Australia will be missing opener David Warner after he injured a groin in the recent white-ball series but young prospect Will Pucovski, who was heavily tipped to replace him, suffered a concussion against India A this week. Various scenarios have been touted should Pucovski fail to recover, from elevating Marnus Labuschagne or Wade to open, to recalling Marcus Harris or even Usman Khawaja. Smith said it wouldn't trouble him if Labuschagne opened and he was moved up to bat at three from four.

"That doesn't bother me too much, I've batted a fair bit at number three. Three or four, any lower than four and I wouldn't be overly happy, but anywhere out there I'm fine," he said. Smith, who has played 73 Tests, scoring more than 13,000 runs, including 26 centuries, admitted Warner's absence would be felt. "I think our depth is obviously going to be tested with Davey out and a few potentially new players coming in, so it's test for us against a good Indian outfit," he said. "Whoever is out there and in the team, hopefully we all do our job and have a successful summer." —AFP

Sports

'Homesick' Chinese teams stuck in Qatar after Champions League exit

Evergrande players desperate to return to China

SHANGHAI: Guangzhou Evergrande players say they are homesick and desperate to return to China after being stuck in Qatar following their elimination from the AFC Champions League. Fabio Cannavaro's side are among three Chinese Super League teams still in Qatar despite being knocked out of the premier Asian competition last Friday, with reports saying they are awaiting approval for a charter flight.

The others are Shanghai SIPG, who lost in the last 16 on Monday, and Shanghai Shenhua, who have been stewing for a week since their continental title bid ended. The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) suggested that the hold-up was likely due to coronavirus arrival rules in China, not because of any local difficulties.

This year's delayed Champions League is taking place behind closed doors in a secure "bubble" in Qatar because of the pandemic. Beforehand, global footballers union FIFPro accused the AFC of failing to consult players about moving the tournament to the nation hosting the 2022 World Cup. With their season over and Cannavaro seemingly on the brink of the sack, Evergrande's players have broken rank.

Midfielder Yan Dinghao wrote on the Twitter-like Weibo that he was on "the edge of collapse, really homesick".

Team-mate He Chao added: "When will we be able to return?" Forward Wei Shihao also wrote on Weibo: "I can only stay locked in my hotel room. I can't see my family. I want to go home." Yesterday's Shanghai Morning Post said CSL players were "exhausted physically and mentally" having already spent several months separated from family during the domestic season. All four Chinese teams - Beijing Guoan play in the quarter-finals later - "expressed their desire" not to go to Qatar in the first place, the newspaper said.

The Post said that the AFC subsidised meals and hotel accommodation while teams remained in the competition, but the clubs have to foot the bill once knocked out. The AFC told AFP that it was doing its utmost to help the teams, "who are currently awaiting the due process and protocols to be put in place by the Chinese authorities". "In the meantime, the AFC and LOC (local organizing committee) are also working to ensure all players and team officials are receiving the best possible support and care until the departure arrangements are finalized," it said. — AFP



GUANGZHOU: This file photo shows players of Guangzhou Evergrande lifting up their head coach Fabio Cannavaro in celebration after defeating Shanghai Shenhua to win the Chinese Super League (CSL) football championship. — AFP

Hamilton and Russell in season-ending Abu Dhabi waiting game

ABU DHABI: Lewis Hamilton is back in training and set to return for Mercedes at this weekend's season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, but only if he is passed fit and returns negative tests for COVID-19. The seven-time world champion was absent from last week's action-filled Sakhir Grand Prix in Bahrain where his replacement and fellow-Briton George Russell shone, despite a bungled Mercedes pit-stop, on his way to ninth - his first points-scoring finish.

Hamilton, 35, is expected to be given until tomorrow morning at the very latest to prove his fitness, if needed, with the team continuing with Russell in his car. Russell was nominated on Wednesday to be the Mercedes representative at a pre-event news conference at the Yas Marina Circuit yesterday. Nothing is certain, however, ahead of a race in which the champion team - for an unprecedented seven successive years - seek some redemption following their embarrassing tyre gaffes last Sunday.

"We head into the final race looking for redemption after a disappointing race in Sakhir, where both George and Valtteri (Bottas) lost the opportunity to win," said team chief Toto Wolff. "The pit stop problem has uncovered an underlying problem with our intercom and we've put measures in place, both technically and in the way we operate, to make sure it doesn't happen again." The team's blunder happened when both drivers came in for new tyres and were sent out on the wrong ones - with Bottas having to continue on a set he was prepared to discard. — AFP

US overpowers 6-0 El Salvador in friendly

LOS ANGELES: Chris Mueller made the most of his international debut and veteran Paul Arriola scored in his first start since suffering a torn Achilles tendon as the US routed El Salvador 6-0 in an international friendly on Wednesday. Mueller scored twice and Ayo Akinola, also in his first game, got a goal as the Americans closed out the pandemic-disrupted 2020 campaign with an impressive performance at Inter Miami Stadium in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Arriola was playing his first game with the national team since tearing his right Achilles in an MLS pre-season game in February. Brenden Aaronson got his first goal and goalkeeper Bill Hamid got the shutout in his first international start since 2018.

The US team decided to have fans into the stadium for the first time since the global pandemic struck, allowing 2,500 people into the building. The US has been the hardest hit country by the deadly virus with more than 3,000 deaths nationwide on Wednesday alone. Because of the pandemic the US played just four times this year, their



FLORIDA: Ivan Mancía #4 of El Salvador clears a header against the United States during the first half at Inter Miami CF Stadium on December 09, 2020 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. — AFP

fewest games since playing three in 1987. The United States is trying to rebuild its standing as one of the top teams in the Americas after failing to qualify for the 2018 World Cup. The Americans did the unthinkable, losing to Trinidad and Tobago and failing to reach the World Cup for the first time in over 30 years.

El Salvador, which has a population of about six million, has been to the World Cup just twice in their history in 1970 and 1982. The US got on the

board in the 17th minute when Arriola took a pass from Mueller and scored from 12 yards out. Mueller made it 2-0 just three minutes later with a 15-yard right-foot shot following a pass from Jackson Yueill. Sebastian Lletget got his fourth goal with an 18-yard chip in the 23rd and the rout was on. Mueller scored again in the 25th minute on a diving header off a pass from Akinola, who grew up in the Toronto area and is also eligible to play internationally for Canada. — AFP

Real Madrid, Atletico into Champions League last 16

PSG win suspended game amid racism row: Inter Milan crash out

PARIS: Karim Benzema sent Real Madrid through to the last 16 of the Champions League on Wednesday alongside their rivals Atletico, while Neymar scored a hat-trick as Paris Saint-Germain beat Istanbul Basaksehir in a match that had been delayed for 24 hours over a racism row. Real are Europe's most decorated club with 13 European Cups but they needed to beat Borussia Moenchengladbach in Madrid to be sure of making it through the group stage of the Champions League for a 24th straight year.

Benzema was their hero, easing the pressure on coach Zinedine Zidane with two fine back-post headers in the first half securing a 2-0 win in a game played behind closed doors at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium. "Each match is a final and I think that if we always play how we did today, no team can hurt us," warned Benzema, who has played in four Champions League final wins with Real in the last seven seasons.

The Frenchman also hit the bar in the second half and in the end it was a result that suited both teams, with a 0-0 draw between Inter Milan and Shakhtar Donetsk allowing Real to top Group B and Gladbach, former European Cup runners-up, to go through as runners-up. Players from the German club gathered around smartphones and laptops after full time in Madrid to follow events in Milan, where a winner for either team would have knocked Gladbach out. They celebrated wildly when their qualification was confirmed. "Moments like that live long in the memory. It was absolutely incredible and the joy was uncontrollable," said Gladbach midfielder Christoph Kramer.

Inter fail again

Shakhtar go into the Europa League while Inter finish bottom of their group, failing to reach the last 16 for a third season running. Meanwhile Atletico needed to beat Red Bull Salzburg in Austria to qualify as runners-up in Group A behind Bayern Munich, and did so with Mario Hermoso and Yannick Carrasco scoring in a 2-0 victory. "I think in the nine years we've been here, we have reached the last 16 eight times," said Atletico coach Diego Simeone. "I enjoy looking back at that. Lots of people will say it's just normal for us but I don't think it's normal." Salzburg now go into the Europa League while reigning European champions Bayern completed the group stage unbeaten as Niklas Sule and Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting gave them a 2-0 win over Lokomotiv Moscow.

Atalanta through

The other team to clinch qualification on Wednesday was Atalanta, whose 1-0 win away to Ajax secured second place in Group D behind Liverpool and a last-16 spot for the second year running. Luis Muriel scored a late win-



PARIS: Football players and referees kneel on the pitch against racism before the UEFA Champions League group H football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Istanbul Basaksehir FK at the Parc des Princes stadium on December 9, 2020. — AFP

ner for Atalanta in Amsterdam after Ryan Gravenberch was sent off for the hosts, who drop into the Europa League. Already through, Liverpool were able to give a chance to several younger players in their 1-1 draw with Midtjylland in Denmark, where Mohamed Salah put the 2019 winners ahead early on but Alexander Scholz's penalty gave the hosts an honorable draw.

Neymar hat-trick

PSG had wrapped up their qualification for the last 16 on Tuesday thanks to Manchester United's defeat at RB Leipzig, despite their own game being suspended after an unprecedented walkout. Both sets of players refused to continue after a row erupted over an alleged racist remark by the fourth official aimed at Basaksehir's assistant coach, Pierre Webo. With a new set of officials, the game restarted in the 14th minute on Wednesday and an irresistible Neymar scored a hat-trick while also winning a penalty converted by Kylian Mbappe.

That was Mbappe's first Champions League goal in 12 months, and he scored again later on after Mehmet Topal pulled one back. With their 5-1 victory, PSG go through as group winners. Pep Guardiola's Manchester City made it five wins and a draw in Group D as they eased to a 3-0 victory against Marseille with Ferran Torres and Sergio Aguero getting second-half goals before an Alvaro Gonzalez own goal. Also already qualified, Porto beat Olympiakos 2-0 in Piraeus courtesy of Otavio's early penalty and a Matheus Uribe goal. The Greeks, who ended with 10 men, finish third in the section. The draw for the last 16 is on Monday. — AFP

Long, cold wait turns Klopp against VAR

HERNING: Jurgen Klopp said his support for VAR is waning after a series of lengthy delays in Liverpool's 1-1 Champions League draw away to Midtjylland on Wednesday. Three times the game was interrupted in the second-half as the penalty that led to the Danish champions equalizer and a goal ruled out for either side were reviewed. Klopp agreed with all three calls by the officials, but was concerned that the wait in cold conditions could have led to even more injury problems for his side. "It just took too long," said Klopp after eight minutes of stoppage time were added on at the end of the game.

"The decisions were right but it was so difficult to make, it took three or four minutes and it was cold for the boys. "It is really hard and I could hear people saying, 'Oh my God'. It took really long and it was really cold, which doesn't help. "I used to be one of the people who said VAR is a good idea, I'm really not sure if I would say that again to be honest. But now we have it." Liverpool were already guaranteed top spot in Group D, allowing Klopp to make eight changes, but he did surprisingly start Mohamed Salah up front and Fabinho at centre-back despite his concerns over a gruelling December schedule.

Salah surpasses Gerrard

The decision to play Salah immediately paid off as the Egyptian seized upon a mishit back-

pass inside the first minute and slotted home his 22nd Champions League goal for Liverpool, to surpass Steven Gerrard as the club's all-time top scorer in the competition. "Absolutely exceptional player," added Klopp. "Since we worked together obviously a lot of things clicked really for all of us. He helps the team massively and he knows and appreciates the help of the team as well." However, the substitution of Fabinho at half-time to finally give the Brazilian a rest knocked the visitors off course as Midtjylland pounced on the indecision among a youthful Liverpool defense.

Klopp handed a debut to 18-year-old Billy Koumetio, who became Liverpool's youngest player in the Champions League, alongside 19-year-old Rhys Williams in central defense. Leighton Clarkson also made his debut in midfield, while Caoimhin Kelleher again deputized for the injured Alisson in goal. Right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold captained his boyhood club for the first time at 22. "It's a wonderful, wonderful thing to have your first Champions League game but a career is all about how many you will have or how many games overall you will play," said Klopp. "So the boys have a lot to learn."

Midtjylland's pressure was rewarded with a penalty after the first of a series of lengthy reviews. Anders Dreyer was brought down by Kelleher as he bore down on goal, but had originally been ruled offside. — AFP



Real Madrid, Atletico cruise into the last 16

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SALZBURG: Atletico Madrid's Portuguese midfielder Joao Felix (left) and Salzburg's Zambian midfielder Enock Mwepu vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League Group A football match RB Salzburg v Atletico Madrid on December 9, 2020. — AFP