

2 New Kuwait Fire Force law protects lives and properties



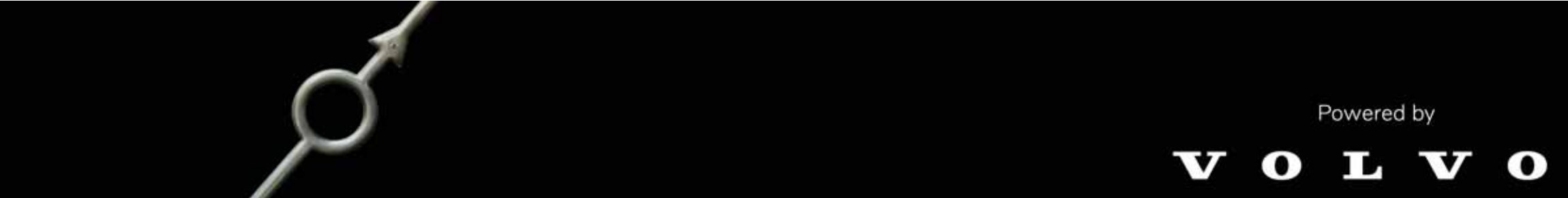
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Amir calls on lawmakers to honor aspirations of people

Ghanem storms back as National Assembly speaker as opposition crumbles



KUWAIT: (Left) HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah gestures after addressing the National Assembly's inaugural session yesterday. (Right) Marzouq Al-Ghanem reacts after he was elected speaker yesterday. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday inaugurated the National Assembly's 16th legislative session, urging MPs to honor aspirations of people who elected them. HH the Amir, in his inauguration speech, called upon parliament members to meet the aspirations of people "who placed a huge burden upon their shoulders" for the sake of achieving development.

HH the Amir said the world and region are witnessing critical circumstances, urging MPs to exercise genuine democracy and be role models. "I urge them to place an urgent reform program ... to

reach sustainable development ... which requires active cooperation between the government and National Assembly ... and to achieve common benefits," he said.

HH the Amir said parliament members should "work as one team, shoulder-to-shoulder" in order to have a prosperous and secure nation. The Amir paid tribute to the contributions of late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and reaffirmed keenness to follow his path.

Meanwhile, Marzouq Al-Ghanem yesterday scored a comfortable victory to storm back to the helm of the National Assembly for a third consecutive time, defeating an opposition-led attempt to

unseat him, although with solid government support. Ghanem won by 33 votes, presumably including all the 16 members of the Cabinet, against 28 bagged by his only rival MP Bader Al-Humaidi, a former minister. Three ballots were declared invalid as they included two names and one MP did not attend the session.

Although 42 MPs of the 50-member house pledged to support Humaidi, at least 14 of them changed their mind, exactly like what happened in 2016 when at least 28 MPs said they will vote for Ghanem's rivals, but the speaker ended up winning by an impressive 48 votes from 65, the total number of the house including Cabinet members. One

Cabinet member is also an elected MP. Political analyst Abdullah Al-Shayegi said what happened proves there is no real opposition in Kuwait. "Forty-two MPs pledged to vote for Humaidi for speaker. But he got only 28 votes, which means 14 MPs did not fulfill their pledges," Shayegi tweeted. "This confirms there is no real opposition in Kuwait. There is no discipline or commitment and coordination is meaningless. Politics is based on individual work and the government remains the most powerful player," he said.

After taking the speaker's seat, Ghanem called for a detente. "I extend my hand to all of you ... personal disputes will benefit no one," he said.

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News in brief

Saudi announces vaccine rollout

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia yesterday announced a three-phase COVID-19 vaccination program, as it began registering citizens and foreign residents after approving the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. People aged over 65 as well as those with chronic ailments or at a high risk of infection will receive the vaccine in the first stage, and those aged over 50 in the second, the official Saudi Press Agency said. Everyone else will be vaccinated in the third stage, SPA said citing the health ministry. — AFP

Singapore allows business arrivals

SINGAPORE: Singapore will allow business travellers and visiting officials from all countries to enter from next month, authorities said yesterday. Under the new arrangements, a limited number of travellers can apply for stays of up to 14 days from mid-January, the trade ministry said. Travellers must undergo virus tests before leaving their home country, on arrival in Singapore and regularly during their stay, and must reside and conduct meetings at locations selected by the government. — AFP (See Page 8)

Trump announces Barr departure

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Monday announced that Attorney General Bill Barr, who angered him by contradicting his claims of having been the victim of mass fraud in the US election, is leaving office. "Just had a very nice meeting with Attorney General Bill Barr at the White House. Our relationship has been a very good one.... Bill will be leaving just before Christmas to spend the holidays with his family," Trump tweeted. — AFP (See Page 6)

Domestic helpers begin arriving on direct flights

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The first flight carrying domestic helpers arrived in Kuwait yesterday after the Cabinet decided last month to allow domestic helpers to return directly to the country. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, passengers from 34 countries cannot fly directly to Kuwait, and have to spend at least 14 days in a third country before arriving here. After being stranded for almost a year in the Philippines, 61 Filipino domestic helpers arrived at Kuwait International Airport at 4:40 am yesterday

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KUWAIT: Filipino domestic helpers arrive on a direct flight from Manila to Kuwait early yesterday. — Photo by Ben Garcia

Biden slams Trump after win confirmed

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden said Monday that US democracy proved "resilient" against Donald Trump's "abuse of power" after the Electoral College confirmed him as the next president, shutting the door further on unprecedented efforts to overturn the results. In his first extended attack on Trump since the election, Biden said in his hometown of Wilmington, Delaware, that the president and his allies "refused to respect the will of

the people, refused to respect the rule of law, and refused to honor our constitution."

Biden was referring to a Republican lawsuit, supported by Trump, that sought to overturn the results in several key states, before it was rejected unanimously by the Supreme Court last Friday. Biden praised voters for casting ballots in record numbers on November 3 despite fears of Covid-19 and "enormous political pressure, verbal abuse and even threats of physical violence" against those running the election. "The flame of democracy was lit in this nation a long time ago. And we now know nothing, not even a pandemic or an abuse of power can extinguish that," Biden said.

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WILMINGTON, Delaware: US President-elect Joe Biden is seen with his wife Dr Jill Biden after speaking about the Electoral College vote certification process at The Queen theater on Monday. — AFP

Local

Kuwait Fire Force law meets goals of protecting lives and properties

More safety features included in new law: Maj Gen Fahad

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The new executive regulation of fire law no. 13/2020, which was recently issued, added many new safety measures to those included in the old law. Kuwait Times interviewed Maj Gen Khaled A Fahad, Deputy Chief Officer for Prevention Security at the Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) to shed light on the most important points of the new law.

"The previous fire law was over 40 years old, and Kuwait has developed in industrial, economic and architectural fields since then. Also, fire sciences have developed, which have contributed to the need to improve prevention and safety measures to meet our goals of protecting lives and properties," said Fahad.

Many safety features were not included in the old fire law. "There was a gap in the list of structures that need a fire license, including buildings, places and transportation vehicles (commercial or for carrying hazardous material)," he said. "This law also focuses on licensing, transporting, handling and using hazardous materials. This came after numerous accidents involving these materials globally and locally. We work with international organizations and governments of developed countries that are experienced in fire prevention and safety and update our safety requirements," Fahad added.

"The new law takes into account buildings under construction, fire equipment, inspection companies for elevators, accreditation of gas supply contractors and penalties for violators of safety requirements, which was increased to imprisonment of up to one year and fines of up to KD 50,000 according to the violation and the losses of lives and materials," stressed Fahad.

According to the law, imports of fire equipment should be approved by the Kuwait Fire Force. "Also, ownership of industrial properties including land, buildings and factories cannot be transferred before the approval of the Kuwait Fire Force. This simplifies our work and for those in charge to complete paperwork easily," he pointed out.

Projects' review

All projects should be reviewed by the Kuwait Fire Force before commencing any work. "The project should conform to safety and fire prevention codes and architectural requirements, have fire escapes, firefighting systems, fire alarms and lighting for entrances and exits. Also, whether it contains hazardous materials, along with engineering services in the building such as elevators, ventilators, steel structure protection, anti-fire doors and so on," Fahad said.

So what about existing buildings? "We consider the period when a building was built, and do not require some modern measures that don't suit it. We

owner of the building is obliged to provide a maintenance contract to make sure the equipment is functional. Only then we renew the license," he said.

"Regarding private houses in residential areas, we advise owners to have fire extinguishers, install fire detectors, have external gas extensions, automatic gas cutoff, gas alarms, install elevators licensed by KFF, regular maintenance of elevators and so on," Fahad told Kuwait Times.

All establishments must have an authorized plan from the fire department. "Large buildings should also have an internal draft prepared by them which shows all entrances and exits, so in case of fire, fire-fighters will have a guide to lead them where to go. Also, buildings such as hotels must have fire escape plans in the hallways and in rooms for visitors to know where to go in case of emergency. Furthermore, all floors should be marked with the floor number to ensure quick rescue of people on these floors," he noted.

Follow up

When construction starts, KFF follows up to make sure all requirements are respected. "For instance, in the first stage of construction, there are many left-overs and debris such as wood that can be a fire hazard. So there should be temporary fire equipment, and building materials should be stored properly. Also, there should be clear paths at the project site to allow firefighting vehicles to pass smoothly in case of fire," highlighted Fahad.

In the final stages of construction, KFF goes again for inspection. "We check the pipes inside the false ceiling that connect to water sprinklers. We check their size and type, whether they are placed properly, if water is reaching them or not and so on before decor work begins. If everything is correctly done, we give the approval. Our visits are repeated during construction, especially of high-rises, as we have to do this for every floor. Besides regular inspections, we go on random visits at the end of the construction to check the fire equipment and if license requirements are followed," he noted.



KUWAIT: Maj Gen Khaled A Fahad, Deputy Chief Officer for Prevention Security at the Kuwait Fire Force (KFF), speaks to Kuwait Times. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Strict penalties are imposed on violators. Penalties are graded according to the severity of the violation and can reach up to one year of imprisonment or fine of up to KD 50,000 or both. "Building setbacks and cladding are part of our inspections during construction. The setback of the building should be respected to avoid the spread of fire, and should follow the construction plan. Exterior cladding or coating should be fire-resistant, as many recent blazes in Kuwait and other countries, especially the one in the UK (Grenfell Tower in London), were caused due to the cladding of the building," Fahad said.

"Companies should meet preventive conditions and have valid licenses. They should also maintain their fire equipment. They shouldn't make any changes to the building structure without approval of the KFF. We also advise individuals to install smoke detectors and fire extinguishers in their homes to save lives," concluded Fahad.



Inspections throughout construction stages

demand basic requirements of safety and fire prevention to protect users that do not affect the structure of the building. We always provide alternatives for existing buildings to reduce risks. For instance, if there are no water sprinklers in an old building, we can demand dividing the spaces in the building, so in case of fire, it won't spread from one location to another, or we demand installing rubber hoses or fire extinguishers," explained Fahad.

All commercial, industrial, hotel and residential buildings in investment and commercial areas and public institutions should have a fire license, except private houses. "This license is renewed every two years. Our inspectors go on inspection visits every two years to make sure the equipment is in good condition and working properly. The management or



PEOPLE organizes its 2nd global mentorship webinar

KUWAIT: PEOPLE organized its 2nd Global Mentorship Webinar featuring talks from prominent regional leaders. Topics of discussion included mentorship, modern day workplace challenges, the advancement of women in business and the specific challenges they face.

PEOPLE (Pakistani Executive Organization for Promotion of Leadership and Entrepreneurship) is a networking platform that focuses on assisting Pakistanis in becoming leaders in their respective organizations and local communities. The organization was founded in 2011 by Kashif Khan, who is the Chairman for PEOPLE and has since then focused on growing PEOPLE in order for the organization to be able to achieve the goals for which it was founded. The Webinar was conducted on December 12, 2020 with business and industry leaders, its extensive panel of mentors and prospective mentees joining from across the globe. The session was started by Zeeshan Mir, General Secretary, PEOPLE, reiterating PEOPLE's vision and stressing the importance of mentorship and how guidance from a mentor could help someone to grow. The list of speakers included the following esteemed guests:

- Zeeshan Khan (Executive Director - JP Morgan Dubai) who took a very unique approach to mentorship and mentioned that the key to being successful is to ensure that you maintain a positive work life balance and to surround yourself with a strong and trusted support group.
- Hasan Chaudhry (WTE Wassertechnik GmbH, Germany and CFO - Umm Al Hayman) mentioned his experience in Financial Services Industry and the need for mentorship being clearer and more important than ever, due to the increasing levels of competition in the workplace.
- Talat Shirazi (Head of HR at Bukhatir Group) advocated her global experience and the challenges she as a Pakistani woman faced in predominantly British, male corporate environment and how her mentors helped her navigate through the various situations she faced.
- Salman Sayeed (Head of Buying and Merchandising - Alshaya Group), presented his birds eye view of leadership and narrated how having had to navigate through his career provided him with the experience to assist others through the situations he faced and the value that such mentorship would provide to others. The webinar was a great interactive session where attendees and the PEOPLE mentors were asking questions and sharing experiences. Kashif Khan then concluded the session by thanking the speakers and assured the attendees that there would be further webinars and PEOPLE would keep bringing prominent leaders to the platform to help and benefit the youth.

MP Hassan Jowhar said the Kuwaiti people are frustrated at the situation, adding that the people's frustration increased after the government's message in the speaker's election. Apparently sensing that some of the lawmakers in the opposition gathering may change their mind, opposition MPs pressed but in vain to make the voting public. As Ghanem got the winning vote, he got up from his seat and threw his fists in the air as the gallery broke out in thunderous applause. As a result, the chair of the session, MP Hamad Al-Harashani, ordered the guards to remove visitors from the chamber. MP Ahmad Al-Shuhoumi, another pro-government lawmaker, won the deputy speaker's post, defeating Jowhar by 41 votes to 19. But the opposition group won the consolation posts of the Assembly secretary and supervisor, which went to MPs Farz Al-Mutairi and Osama Al-Shaheen respectively. The Assembly postponed the election of permanent committees until next week.

Biden slams Trump after win...

Continued from Page 1

"Our democracy - pushed, tested, threatened - proved to be resilient, true and strong." Biden said that Trump has had full opportunity to contest the results in court and "in every case no cause or evidence was found to reverse or question or dispute".

With the Electoral College having formalized his victory just hours earlier, Biden told the bitterly divided country: "It's time to turn the page." "I'm convinced we can work together for the good of the nation," he said. Trump continues to maintain that he was cheated of victory, even if his lawyers have not persuaded one court that they have a case. On Monday he announced that Attorney General Bill Barr, who contradicted his fraud claims, would leave his post next week. "Bill will be leaving just before Christmas to spend the holidays with his family," Trump tweeted.

The Electoral College vote, a formality confirming the will of voters expressed at the polls, is usually ignored by all but hardcore politics buffs. This year, the somewhat arcane procedure took center stage as the US election system withstood weeks of assaults from the powerful president and much of his party.

Biden only needed 270 of the 538 Electoral College votes, which are divided up among the 50 states and he was headed for a total of 306 against Trump's 232. Counting was underway all day and when it got to California, the Democrat went over the minimum amount, making him officially the presi-

dent-elect from that point on. California's electors burst into applause as the presiding officer read out the tally. Biden, Barack Obama's former vice president, will be sworn in as the 46th president on Jan 20.

Disinformation spearheaded by the president and spread by popular commentators on Fox News and new conspiracy theory-mongering outlets like Newsmax means many Americans have all but given up faith in their own institutions. Thousands of Trump supporters, including members of far-right groups, protested in Washington at the weekend, brawling with counter-protesters, while in Georgia footage showed armed activists in camouflage parading at the state Capitol to support Trump's claims.

Polls show as few as one in four Republican voters accept the election results. Trump maintained his stream of threats and unsubstantiated claims on Twitter Monday, citing "massive VOTER FRAUD" and declaring that certifying election results would be "a severely punishable crime". The legal Electoral College vote, however, puts an official stamp on what voters already decided on Nov 3.

"Although I supported President Trump, the Electoral College vote today makes clear that Joe Biden is now President-Elect," tweeted a Republican senator, Rob Portman, signaling the changing tide. In another shift, the staunchly Trump-supporting editorial board of The Wall Street Journal told Trump that his time is up. "President Trump's legal challenges have run their course, and he and the rest of the Republican Party can help the country and themselves by acknowledging the result and moving on," it said. Ahead of Biden's inauguration, one major formality remains, when Congress, presided over by Vice President Mike Pence, opens up and counts the electoral votes on Jan 6. — AFP

Domestic helpers begin arriving...

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and were taken directly to hotels around Kuwait to spend 14 days in quarantine. According to the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait, around 20,000 Filipinos, a majority of them domestic helpers, are currently stranded in Manila. Among the returnees yesterday was Michelle Balena, 31, who left Kuwait for a vacation to the Philippines in Nov 2019. But when she was about to return to Kuwait, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte suspended deployment of Filipino domestic helpers due to killing of yet another Filipina maid in Kuwait. Her employer then rebooked her flight to Kuwait for March 20, 2020.

However on March 15, Kuwait suspended all commercial flights to curb the spread of the coronavirus. While in the Philippines, Michelle's iqama expired, but her employer managed to renew it after the Kuwaiti government allowed the renewal of all residencies even if holders are out of Kuwait. Her employer paid her airfare and also for the 14-day hotel quarantine in Kuwait. "Everything is paid for, so I am glad to be back and hope to stay with this family for more years," Balena said.

"When I was in the Philippines my employer never stopped communicating with me. She used to

call and ask what I needed, she sent money almost every month, and said she is waiting for my return," said Balena, a mother of three who hails from Tulunan. Balena had already started a new life in Cotabato selling street food with her husband. "I was making a good profit, but of course it was temporary, so I told my husband I will take the chance again to go back to Kuwait, since my employer has been good to my family. He said okay, so here I am again," she said.

Esmy Marie Zoleta, 36, from Santiago City, took her third vacation after completing almost seven years with her employer. She left Kuwait in Feb 2020. When she was about to return on March 15, she was stopped by airport authorities as all commercial flights were suspended. "I was at the airport for my return to Kuwait, but authorities at the airport told me to wait for a new announcement. So I returned to Isabela to my two children. My employer sent me money during the past 10 months, so I was able to send my children to school. I am planning to work until my kids are done with their schooling," she said.

Marlene Cayao from Sta Maria faced a similar situation. She was about to return in March but the commercial flight ban prevented her from coming back on time. "I had completed my two-year contract when I returned to the Philippines in February. In March, no one was allowed to fly back to Kuwait, so I was stuck in Pangasinan. I returned because my employers were very kind to us. They would always call and send money, and helped us a lot," she said.

Amir calls on lawmakers to...

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"During the past few weeks, I became a target of a smear campaign and I decided to remain silent. Let's open a new page ... to achieve the aspirations of the Kuwaiti people," Ghanem appealed.

Humaidi however slammed the government for backing Ghanem. "I feel the government was not neutral and it stood against the will of the people," he said. MP Saud Buslaib criticized the government for taking part in the speaker's election, but Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Mubarak Al-Harees said the government invoked its constitutional right to vote.

Local

Democracy contributes to Kuwait's fight against corruption: Premier

Prime Minister optimistic over end of Gulf crisis



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah addresses the National Assembly's inauguration session. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Amiri Diwan



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah speaks during the session.



Eventual winner Marzouq Al-Ghanem casts his vote in the speaker's election.



MP Hamad Al-Harshani talks with lawmakers during the session.



The other candidate for the speaker's post MP Bader Al-Humaidhi casts his vote.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah casts his vote in the speaker's election.



Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Al-Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah casts his vote to elect a new speaker.



People cheer in the crowd as Marzouq Al-Ghanem was announced as speaker of the house.

News in brief

Amir congratulates Speaker

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday congratulated MP Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem for his election as National Assembly Speaker, and MP Ahmad Al-Shohoumi for his election as Deputy Speaker, wishing them success for the service of the nation and citizens to achieve development and prosperity. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah also congratulated the two lawmakers. —KUNA

Amir congratulates Bahraini King

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday congratulated Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa on the Kingdom's 49th National Day. His Highness the Amir, in a cable to King Hamad, commended multi-faceted development in Bahrain and reaffirmed importance of historic relations between Kuwait and Bahrain. His Highness the Amir wished King Hamad good health, and for Bahrain and its people further progress and prosperity. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables to King Hamad. —KUNA

Amir's speech draws reform path

KUWAIT: Chairperson of the Kuwaiti Al-Nazaha national association Mohammad Al-Otaibi said His Highness the Amir's address at yesterday's parliamentary session set the stage for full scale reforms. Otaibi, in a statement, said His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's speech called for bolstering citizens' role in building state institutions. He called on all Kuwaitis to adopt the approach set by His Highness the Amir for further progress and prosperity. The association's chair also lauded the statement by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah that "set the framework for reforms, combating corruption and boosting development." —KUNA

Kuwait condemns attack

KUWAIT: Kuwait condemns and denounces, in the strongest terms, Monday's assault by an explosive-laden boat on an oil vessel anchored off Jeddah port, a Foreign Ministry statement said. The continuity of such terrorist acts—which target the security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, stability of the region, freedom of maritime navigation and global energy supplies—strongly violates the rules of international law and conventions, said the statement. This requires swift and effective action by the international community, particularly the UN Security Council, to stop these attacks, it added. Kuwait fully stands by the brotherly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and supports all measures it takes in this regard, the statement concluded. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait's leadership is pleased with the democratic process to contribute to the national fight against corruption, promote development and address the most urgent struggle against coronavirus, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah said yesterday. Addressing the inaugural session of the 16th legislative term of the National Assembly, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled welcomed the newly elected MPs who earned the trust of the public during the December 5th parliamentary election. The Prime Minister thanked the previous incarnations of the National Assembly and government for their efforts especially during these turbulent times.

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled stressed that the government and parliament should work together as a unified front to address challenges and find solutions to better Kuwait and its people. Perhaps the most trialing event this year was the loss of His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, lamented His Highness the Prime Minister, adding that it came at a time when COVID-19 had hugely impacted the economy and the way the people of Kuwait lived. While the efforts continue to deter this menace, Kuwaitis, residents, and members of the frontline — whether in the health sector, police, army, national guard, firefighters as well as state employees — all played a part in fending off COVID-19, he stressed, wishing mercy upon those who lost their lives during the pandemic and swift recovery for the infected.

Cooperation

The Prime Minister then relayed an important message concerning the respect of law, constitution, and national unity, saying that these vital tenets will help steer Kuwait as a nation toward progress and away from strife. He indicated that the Cabinet was eager to cooperate with constitutional institutes to achieve the goals of democracy, hoping that the current legislative term will usher new era of cabinet and parliament cooperation. His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled affirmed that the government will

act in accordance with the constitution — especially article 98 — to achieve the aspiration of citizens through the direct consultation with parliament to battle against corruption, boost development, and achieve goals such as the E-government. Article 98 stipulates that, "Immediately upon its formation, every Cabinet presents its program to the National Assembly. The Assembly may make comments with regard to such a program."

In regards to the government progress, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled said that it would mainly focus on fighting corruption via uprooting it from its sources and question entities and individuals behind it. He stressed that the program will be based on realistic and implementable goals. Developing the government institutions will also be a priority for the cabinet, stressed Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, adding that progress in all of its meaning was a collective responsibility of all members of society.

Visa trafficking

Touching on the subject of those who practice visa trafficking, the head of government asserted that the Cabinet will swiftly implement laws to vanquish such ill and inhumane practice, which caused a serious damage to the demographic population of Kuwait, the economy, and social structure. He went on to say that the government will focus on finding a solution to unemployment via encouraging Kuwaitis to join the private sector in accordance with article 19/2000. On housing welfare, the government is eager to provide land and funding to those eligible in accordance to the program, which focuses on a solid solution to the issue, he affirmed.

Regarding the National Assembly's draft laws, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled touched on a number of papers, which needed approval including the documents on Al-Harir (silk) city, amendments to the election law, the foreigners' residency law, and other issues of great importance. Back to the government, His Highness the Prime Minister indicated that the Cabinet believed that human resources' growth is



Kuwaiti MPs and Cabinet members attend the inaugural session of the 16th legislative term of the National Assembly yesterday.

the basic brick in the proverbial structure of national development, a step which must come through cultivating the potential in youth and progressing the national education system. Overall development is not an easy task, affirmed Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled who called on all sectors of society to drive the country's economy towards diversifying non-oil income to include lucrative commercial and financial venture, which will reach the nation's development goals and decrease the deficit.

Gulf crisis

Meanwhile, His Highness the Prime Minister expressed optimism over the end of the Gulf crisis and restoring relations back to normal among conflicting parties. In his address to the opening session, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled affirmed that the government will continue its firm stance on a foreign policy based on respecting the sovereignty and independence of other countries, and not interfering with matters of internal affairs. He added that Kuwaiti will always support causes for freedom, justice, peace, and human rights worldwide, basing that on deep-rooted Arab and Islamic values.

Concerning the GCC, His Highness the Prime Minister said that Kuwait believed in the importance of the Gulf nations' security and indicated that it was a common responsibility shared by all member states. He reaffirmed that Kuwait will use all its resources to reach a positive conclusion to the Gulf crisis to bring relations back to normal. On December fourth, Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah announced "fruitful" talks were held recently, in regards to achieving reconciliation and supporting Gulf and Arab solidarity and stability. "Within the framework of reconciliation efforts, previously led by His Highness (the late Amir) Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and in continuation of the efforts currently being carried out by His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Amir of Kuwait, and US President Donald Trump to resolve the crisis, fruitful discussions took place recently, in which all parties affirmed their keenness on Gulf and Arab solidarity and stability and to reach a final agreement that would achieve the aspirations of lasting solidarity between their countries and achieve what is good for their people," he said. —KUNA

Senior MP wishes Amir success

KUWAIT: MP Hamad Al-Harshani, who chaired yesterday's National Assembly session before the election of MP Marzouq Al-Ghanem as Speaker, expressed admiration and gratitude for the top participant, His Highness the Amir, wishing him success in Kuwait's leadership. The senior legislator has affirmed that achieving inter-GCC reconciliation is a stone's throw away and has appealed to His Highness the Amir to mercilessly clamp down on corruption and the corrupt to ensure the country's process of development. Harshani, who headed the crucial session as the oldest of the MPs elected in the December 5 parliamentary elections, thanked His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for his gracious attendance. He also expressed deep gratitude to His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who stood on the Amir side during the session, where the attendees wore protective masks and sat with an empty seat between each two, as part of precautions against the coronavirus. Harshani, who spoke after Abdullah Al-Salem Hall

resounded with a marathon applause when the Amir finished his speech, recalled the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, prayed for his soul and congratulated the prime minister and members of his newly-formed cabinet. He also congratulated the MPs who "won the people confidence" in the recent polls. The bespectacled legislator affirmed that the parliamentary elections were transparent and free. "All members of this assembly represent the diverse segments of the Kuwaiti people," Harshani added. However, he noted that the elections were held amid very hard circumstances, namely the extraordinary conditions warranted by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), hailing the Kuwaiti people who bravely succeeded in coping with the difficulties and casting their ballots without problems.

Harshani applauded the government team, tasked with tackling the coronavirus crisis, noting the transparent and professional approach in this respect. He also voiced gratitude for front-line personnel who took part in the combat against the contagion, to the volunteers and the donors who supported the efforts to "face the grave and unprecedented challenges." He expressed hope that the new parliament would meet people's aspirations, noting that the Kuwait Constitution "affirms neces-

sity of cooperation" between the authorities.

Furthermore, he underscored the longtime state approach of cooperation with "our brothers, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and boosting our external relations with others on the basis of mutual respect and equal treatment." Also at the Gulf level, he recalled the reconciliation efforts that had been exerted by the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad to tackle the inter-GCC rifts. Bolstering the relations among the GCC countries, particularly at the political and security levels, "has become an utter necessity and Your Highness (addressing the Amir) move on the same path of your late predecessor."

"Today, we are about to reap the fruits of these sincere efforts for bringing everybody back to the fold of unity and Gulf brotherhood, holding to it tightly," he affirmed. Noting that the Kuwaiti people pin high hopes on the new assembly, Harshani has acknowledged that Kuwait currently suffers from depletion of income resources thus there must be "a new era of economic and development reforms." However, he has stressed that combating corruption has become an absolute necessity amid the current financial and economic circumstances. "Your Highness, we have known you as a fighter of corruption and the corrupt," he said. —KUNA

Local

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Kuwait registered
261 new COVID
cases, one death

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MoH) registered yesterday 261 additional COVID-19 cases in a span of 24 hours, increasing the total number of infections to 146,710, while one new death was recorded taking the death toll to 913. Earlier, the ministry confirmed 242 fresh recovery cases, adding to a total of 142,599 cured people so far. Active cases amounted to 3,198 with 56 of them in intensive care units, MoH's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. Health authorities conducted 4,662 swab tests in 24 hours raising the total to 1,190,287, he revealed. Dr Sanad urged everyone in Kuwait to adhere to precautionary measures against the virus. —KUNA

Premier welcomes new ministers
during new Cabinet's first meeting

KUWAIT: The Cabinet held a meeting at Seif Palace Monday headed by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, after taking the constitutional oath in front of His Highness the Amir in Bayan Palace earlier in the day. After the meeting, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Khaled Nasser Al-Saleh said the following: His Highness the Prime Minister opened the meeting with a speech in which he welcomed the ministers, expressing his appreciation for accepting responsibility and participating in the ministerial work at this important and delicate time, wishing them success in their work with determination and effort to implement the directives of His Highness the Amir.

The premier also expressed his thanks and appreciation to his fellow ministers who participated in carrying ministerial responsibility in the past and exerted their best efforts for the sake of the State of Kuwait in exceptional and difficult circumstances, wishing them continued success in serving Kuwait from various locations. Saleh also responded to the premier's speech in which he expressed on behalf of the ministers, his appreciation for the precious trust placed in them by His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince, pledging keenness to make every effort to devote serious work to achieving national goals and the aspirations of citizens, and for everything that involves achieving the thrive of the nation.

On another front, the Cabinet listened to a briefing provided by Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Hamoud Al-Sabah about the latest developments on the pandemic of Coronavirus at the global and regional levels. The Cabinet also were



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the first meeting of the new Cabinet. —KUNA

briefed on the developments of the country's health situation, which is witnessing, according to recent statistics, a clear decline in the number of infections and deaths, whether those receiving treatment in intensive care, or the increase in recovery cases. The Council also took note of the efforts made to start a vaccination campaign against the coronavirus in the State of Kuwait, especially after the authorization to use the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against COVID-19. The Cabinet expressed its deep satisfaction with these positive steps that confirm that the tremendous efforts made by the Ministry of Health and the resolute measures that have been taken to confront the pandemic.

Then, the Council of Ministers also discussed political affairs and the latest current developments on the Arab and international arenas, and in this regard, the Council of Ministers expressed sincere and congratulations to Bahrain King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa on the occasion of the imminent arrival of the national day. The Council of Ministers also praised the estimated efforts made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to complete the arrangements related to the implementation of the mechanism to accelerate the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement signed between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council. —KUNA

US Embassy, Health
Ministry hold program
on COVID-19 vaccines

KUWAIT: As part of the US Embassy's ongoing cooperation with the Kuwaiti government to combat COVID-19, on Monday, December 14, the Embassy and the Ministry of Health hosted a virtual discussion about COVID-19 vaccines. The Embassy arranged for Dr Richard Martinello, epidemiologist at Yale University Medical School, to give a presentation about the leading vaccine options and answer questions from the public.

Ambassador of the United States of America Alina L. Romanowski gave introductory remarks to the program. Regarding the program, she said

"Since the beginning of the pandemic, the US Embassy has shared expertise from the United States in important areas such as education and health. As a leader in global health, the United States is pleased to work with Kuwaiti institutions to address the many challenges created by COVID-19. Information sessions such as this vaccine discussion will help educate policy makers, medical practitioners, and the public about how a properly administered vaccine program could lead to the beginning of the end of the pandemic."

Also speaking during the program were Kuwaiti health experts Dr Salman Al-Sabah, Chief of Surgery at Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital and Associate Professor at Kuwait University; Dr Donia Al-Bastaki, Head of the Drug Registration Department in the Ministry of Health's Drug Control Administration; and Dr Qais Al-Baghli.

Speaking about the Kuwaiti response to the

pandemic, Dr Salman Al-Sabah said: "I want to take this opportunity to express our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the frontline healthcare providers working in the Ministry of Health in Kuwait. I commend the leadership of the Governors in all the governorates. Our frontline workers continue to devote their time and energy to contain this pandemic. We are humbled by your valuable dedication, commitment, and unwavering efforts in managing COVID-19 for the benefit of our nation."

Regarding the implementation of the COVID-19 vaccine, Dr Sabah said: "The Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the government, have established committees well in advance to closely follow the development of the vaccines with the leading companies and trials to evaluate and select the vaccines. They have created a plan for the COVID-19 vaccination and set up a registration link."

Ooredoo Kuwait
wins 3 awards at
Arab Media Forum

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to launch innovated digital services in Kuwait, won three prestigious awards from the Arab Media Forum, the eighth edition in the "Best Public Relations Personality of the Year", "Advertising Creativity Award for Best National Day TVC", and a "Special Prize for Advertisements from Arab countries" categories.

The forum took place on Sunday, December 13, 2020, and happened online in light of keeping people safe and complying to Kuwait's laws. It was conducted by the General Secretary of the Arab Media Forum Madhi Al-Khamees, and attended by a number of distinguished media personalities, and celebrities from Kuwait and the region. The jury which comprised of leading industry experts assessed participations to select the winners in accordance with best creative work with value. The annual event aims to celebrate creative talents, and distinguish business achievements, both on a corporate and individuals level.

IBS honors KFH
staff for obtaining
'sharia' certificate

KUWAIT: The Institute of Banking Studies (IBS) honored 10 Kuwait Finance House (KFH) employees in appreciation of their obtaining the 'Certified Sharia Auditor' certificate, which is one of the 'Kafaa' (Arabic for competence) initiative programs officially launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait in collaboration with Kuwaiti banks and the management of the Institute of Banking Studies.

This comes within the framework of striving to strengthen the governance of Sharia supervision work in Islamic banks in Kuwait and to consolidate the foundations for Sharia audit in work.

During his speech at the honoring ceremony held at the IBS, the Director General of the Institute of Banking Studies, Dr Yaqoub S Y Al-Refaei, stressed the importance of this program, indicating that the Certified Sharia Auditor is accredited by the Central Bank of Kuwait, the Capital Markets Authority, and the Kuwait Center for Islamic Economy.

Refaei congratulated the graduates for successfully completing the program, praising their efforts and dedication during the program offered by the Institute of Banking Studies, and appreciating the efforts of the Central Bank of Kuwait and the collaboration of Kuwaiti banks in this regard.

KFH is proud of the competence and capabilities of its Sharia auditors, as they completed the 'Certified Sharia Auditor' program within one year only, despite the circular of the Central Bank for Kuwaiti Islamic banks in 2019 stipulating that a 'Certified Sharia Auditor' certificate must be obtained within two years from the date of the circular.

KFH commends the instructions and controls issued by

The award "Best Public Relations Personality of the year" was given to Mijbil Al-Ayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait. Ayoub, said on the occasion: "Year after year, the competition heats up, corporates have become more open to new and fresh ideas, and individuals are mastering innovation. It is a great honor for our company to receive these prestigious awards among such a huge number of talents, who turn every innovative idea into core value."

"I am delighted that the Arab Media Forum has recognized our positive impact in the telecom sector, country and its people. This accolade would not have been possible without the efforts and countless hours of hard work of Ooredoo's creative team, and I dedicate these awards to them. I promise to continue evolving for the future, raising the bar in the benchmark, and better connect with our customers," he added. The Arab Media Forum awards ceremony is considered as one of the renowned events that take place in the region, which brings together representatives from the different industries in one place to celebrate their tremendous revolutionary efforts in innovation and creativity.



Mijbil Al-Ayoub



the Central Bank of Kuwait regarding the importance of the availability of Sharia auditors in the Kuwaiti market and their scientific and professional qualification, in addition to the professional and organizational standards for the work of legitimate observers and the requirements of governance. The emphasis was on the importance of the program in strengthening the role of Sharia auditors in KFH in following up on business and activities in all the fields and departments and the extent of their compliance with Sharia provisions, rules and applications within the multiplicity and diversity of KFH products and services and the growth of its business volume in the local, regional and global markets.

The holders of the 'Certified Sharia Auditor' certificate are: Essa Abdullah Al-Duwaishan, Abdulrahman Abdullah Al-Matooq, Ahmed Bader Al-Awadhi, Dawood Sami Al-Jarrah, Mohammad Abdullhakim Siddiq, Abdullah Raed Al-Huzaimi, Abdulrahman Jassim Al-Mesbah, Mohammad Noor Abdullah, Fahad Ahmad Al-Mousa, and Fatma Jasem Al-Yaseen.

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Video chat only
hope for divided
Rohingya couple



LANCOK, Indonesia: In this file photo taken on June 25, 2020 Rohingya migrants sit by the beach after their boat landed on the shores of this village in Aceh. —AFP

Rohingya trafficking network sells dreams

Network involves high-seas extortion gangs, corrupt police and drug lords

COX'S BAZAR: Auto rickshaws slip easily past barbed-wire checkpoints at the world's biggest refugee camp, their drivers among the smallest players in a complex human trafficking network involving high-seas extortion gangs, corrupt police and drug lords. Aboard the spluttering rickshaws are small groups of young men, women and children hoping to escape the misery of life with other members of their stateless Rohingya group who are crowded into shanties in Bangladesh.

Nineteen-year-old Enamul Hasan was aboard one of the rickshaws early this year, taken to the coast and then by small boat into a bigger fishing vessel anchored in the Bay of Bengal where he joined hundreds of other Rohingya hoping to reach Malaysia. "I was told I'd get the opportunity to finish my studies and earn money to get my family out of poverty," Hasan said, recounting the promises of the low-level smuggler in the camp who was his main contact for organizing the trip.

Instead, after enduring beatings by crew members and watching others die during more than six weeks at sea, Hasan's boat returned to Bangladesh and he is back in his squalid home. "I will never forget what I've been through. The traffickers, the brutality of the sailors... I'd never do it again," Hasan said. AFP spoke to Hasan as part of an in-depth investigation into the people smuggling network that included dozens of interviews with refugees in Bangladesh and Indonesia, where hundreds arrived this year after months at sea.

AFP also interviewed fishermen involved in the trade, police, government officials, community leaders and aid workers. The investigation revealed a sophisticated and always-evolving operation worth many millions of dollars in which members of the Rohingya community play a key role in trafficking their own people. Thai-registered fishing boats capable of holding 1,000 people, satellite phones, a mini-armada of smaller supply vessels and corrupt officials across Southeast Asia, as well as in the Bangladeshi camp, are also integral to the network. "It's a big business that uses humanity as its cover," said Iskandar Dewantara, co-founder of the Goutanyoe Foundation, an Indonesia-based refugee advocacy group.

It can also be brutal. Hasan provided to AFP footage from a mobile phone he said had belonged to one of the Burmese crew members showing them beating the passengers. In the video, a trafficker uses what appears to be a whip to repeatedly strike shirtless men huddled together, with rake-thin children and women crowded around them. The sailor who

owned the phone left it when the crew abandoned the boat following a mutiny at sea, according to Hasan.

Brides

Muslim Rohingya have for decades endured persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, where they are not recognized as citizens, and smuggling routes out by land and sea have long existed. Relatively affluent and Muslim Malaysia has been the main destination. More than 100,000 Rohingya now live on the margins of society in Malaysia, registered as refugees but not allowed to work, forcing the men into illegal construction and other low-paid jobs. A Myanmar military crackdown in 2017, which UN investigators said amounted to genocide, turbo-charged the exodus, forcing 750,000 Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh's south-east coastal district of Cox's Bazar. That is now a sprawling refugee camp of one million people from where the only way out is the dangerous boat journeys.



Traffickers
deliver
violence,
extortion

Spurring the demand are the Rohingya men in Malaysia who pay smugglers to bring over families, or new brides from arranged marriages, according to advocacy groups and women involved. Malaysian authorities frequently turn back boats, and fears over COVID-19 have amplified their intolerance for more refugees. However, nearly 500 Rohingya made it to Malaysia in three vessels this year, according to an AFP tally from the landings. Since June, about 400 Rohingya have also landed in northern Indonesia—all trying to reach neighboring Malaysia—in the biggest wave of arrivals there in five years.

Hundreds more are believed to have died at sea from beatings, starvation or dehydration, while other boats have returned to Bangladesh. Many of the boat people who arrived in Indonesia were women. Among them was 18-year-old Janu, who told AFP at a makeshift refugee camp in

Lhokseumawe, a coastal town in Indonesia's Aceh province, that her family had arranged for her to marry a Rohingya man working as a laborer in Malaysia. "I had been waiting in the camp for two years, it was worth the risk," Janu said, hoping that like some others had already done she may now be able to find a way to Malaysia.

Escape

Escaping the Bangladesh camp starts with a down payment that can reach the equivalent of \$2,000, often paid by a refugee's husband or other relatives in Malaysia using mobile banking applications. Refugees then get a phone call typically from someone they do not know. "The call came after a few days and a man instructed us to go to the rickshaw stand in the main food market area of the camp," said 20-year-old Julekha Begum, who married a Rohingya man in Malaysia via a video chat app.

Rickshaw drivers hired by traffickers take refugees to several barbed-wire security checkpoints, where security forces typically wave them through for a bribe. Then it is a few hours' drive to half a dozen take-off zones identified by AFP that line the coast and where thousands of fishing boats make their way out to sea for nightly expeditions. The Rohingya wait until small boats that hold about a dozen people fill up before they're taken to much bigger ships far out at sea—sometimes two-storey fishing vessels capable of holding 1,000 people.

The big boats, usually piloted by crews from Myanmar, are equipped with GPS equipment, mobile communications as well as food and drinking water. "Many fishing boats nowadays carry people to the deep sea where bigger vessels wait for the victims," said Hemayetul Islam, a refugee camp police battalion commander. "When we go and check these boats, we see fishing nets and other fishing gear. It is very difficult for us to differentiate between actual fishermen and smugglers." Once on their way to Malaysia, smaller boats regularly bring food and water to the big vessels.

Rohingya interviewed by AFP said they were told they would arrive in Malaysia—roughly 4,000 kilometers in a week. In reality, the trip takes months—if they make it at all. Refugees who made it to Indonesia told stories of beatings and torture, near-starvation rations and threats to hold passengers hostage until their relatives paid more money. They told varying accounts of the main boats sailing near Malaysia and some passengers being unloaded onto smaller ones for their final destination after relatives paid more money in what were essentially ransom demands. —AFP

'Twitter killer' sentenced to death for 9 murders

TOKYO: A Japanese man dubbed the "Twitter killer" was sentenced to death by a Tokyo court yesterday for murdering and dismembering nine people he met on the social media platform. Takahiro Shiraishi, 30, admitted killing and butchering his young victims, all but one of whom were women. Shiraishi targeted social media users who posted about taking their own lives, telling them he could help them in their plans - or even die alongside them. His lawyers had argued he should receive a prison sentence rather than be executed because his victims, aged between 15 and 26, had expressed suicidal thoughts on social media and so had consented to die.

But a judge dismissed that argument and handed down the death penalty over the 2017 crimes, which he called "cunning and cruel," public broadcaster NHK said. "None of the nine victims consented to be killed, including silent consent," NHK quoted the judge as saying. "It is extremely grave that the lives of nine young people were taken away. The dignity of the victims was trampled upon," he said, adding that Shiraishi had preyed upon people who were "mentally fragile".

The judge said the case, which prompted calls for tighter control on social networks, "provoked great anxiety in society, because social networks are so commonly used." The grisly murders attracted international attention, and the case has been followed closely in Japan, with 435 people reportedly turning up to secure one of 16 available public seats. When asked if the verdict was audible, Shiraishi, wearing a white mask, stood still and only said: "I understood."

Family members of the victims have spoken emotionally of their continued pain over the case, with the brother of a 25-year-old woman killed by Shiraishi saying his "heart died" when he heard the murderer's testimony. "It didn't sound at all like he regretted it... It felt like I was being hurt with a sharp knife over and over again." Yesterday, the father of another 17-year-old victim told NHK the death sentence was "appropriate". "I feel like I want to get revenge, but bereaved families can't do anything. I don't know how to vent my anger," he said.

Shiraishi was detained three years ago by police investigating the disappearance of a 23-year-old woman who had reportedly tweeted about wanting to kill herself. After she went missing, her brother gained access to her Twitter account, and noticed a suspicious handle, eventually leading them to Shiraishi's residence, where they uncovered a house of horrors on the morning of Halloween in 2017. Nine dismembered bodies - with as many as 240 bone parts stashed in coolers and toolboxes - had been sprinkled with cat litter in a bid to hide the evidence. —AFP



TOKYO: This court sketch created on Sept 30, 2020 shows Takahiro Shiraishi at the Tokyo District Court Tachikawa branch. —AFP

Somalia cuts ties with Kenya, citing 'interference'

MOGADISHU: Somalia announced yesterday it was severing diplomatic ties with Kenya, accusing Nairobi of "recurring" interference in its political affairs as Mogadishu prepares long-awaited elections scheduled for early 2021. The move came after Kenya hosted the leadership of Somaliland, a breakaway state not recognized by Mogadishu, following months of tensions between the two neighbors.

Information Minister Osman Abukar Dubbe told reporters that Kenyan diplomats in Mogadishu had been given seven days to leave, and that Somalia's envoys were being recalled from Nairobi. "The Somali government considers the people of Kenya a peace-loving community who want to live in harmony with other societies in the region. But the current leadership of Kenya is working to drive the two sides apart," he said in Mogadishu. "The government took this decision to respond to recurring outright political violations and interference by Kenya against the sovereignty of our country."

Somalia said that a meeting of the heads of state of East African nations had been convened for December 20 in Djibouti to discuss the issue. Somalia has bristled for months over what it calls Kenya's meddling

over its border, though officials did not point to specific grievances for its decision to break off diplomatic relations. But the announcement came just a day after Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta received in Nairobi the president of the self-proclaimed independent Somaliland region of Somalia, Muse Bihi Abdi.

And Somalia has long resented what it believes is Kenya's support for Ahmed Madobe, the president of the Somali state of Jubaland. Madobe is at odds with Mogadishu and has raised disagreements with the central government's roadmap toward Somalia's elections. The Horn of Africa nation is scheduled to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections in early 2021. But the process has been hampered by political infighting between President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo and the country's regional leaders. Nairobi has in the past accused Mogadishu of using Kenya as a scapegoat for its own political problems.

Uneasy neighbors

Kenya is a major contributor of troops to AMISOM, an African Union military operation fighting Al-Shabaab-Islamist militants waging a violent insurgency across Somalia as they seek to unseat the internationally-backed government in Mogadishu. Kenyan foreign ministry spokesman Cyrus Ogunu said yesterday that Kenya had been "very kind and accommodating" to some 200,000 Somali living in refugee camps in Kenya's east. "We have a lot of commonality between these two countries, and anything that is capable of undermining that, is of course something that efforts must be put in place to ensure it is resolved," he said.



MOGADISHU: Women take part in a demonstration against Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo yesterday. —AFP

It is not the first time Kenya and Somalia's uneasy relationship has frayed in the open. Kenya and Somalia agreed to "normalize" relations and start re-issuing travel visas to each other's citizens in November 2019 after a long-running dispute over marine borders. The countries have been engaged in a long-running territorial dispute over a stretch of the Indian Ocean claimed by both nations believed to hold valuable deposits of oil and gas. The row over which nation controls access to the lucrative deposits escalated in early 2019 after Somalia decided to auction off oil and gas blocks in a disputed maritime area, prompting Kenya to recall its ambassador from Mogadishu in February of that year. —AFP

International

Boko Haram claims kidnapping in an apparent turn in conflict

Number of missing students remains unclear

KANKARA: Boko Haram yesterday claimed the abduction of hundreds of students in northwestern Nigeria, in what would be its first attack in the region since it launched a jihadist uprising more than a decade ago. Boko Haram and its rival, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) group, have until now waged an insurgency in the northeast of the country and neighboring Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

The governor of Katsina state, Aminu Bello Masari, said late Monday that the abductors “have made contacts with the government.” “Talks are ongoing to ensure their safety and return to their respective families,” he said on Twitter. The number of missing students remains unclear. Military spokesman General John Eneche spokesman told Channels TV on Monday that 333 pupils were unaccounted for after heavily armed gunmen raided the all-boys Government Science Secondary School in the town of Kankara.



KANKARA, Nigeria: A parent sit outside the Government Science School after gunmen abducted students from it in northwestern Katsina state yesterday. — AFP

leader, Abubakar Shekau, who was behind the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok that led to a global outrage. “We carried out the Katsina attack for the religion of Allah to be supreme and to debase unbelief, because western education is not Islamic and what is taught is not sanctioned by Allah and the Prophet.” The attack, if conducted by Boko Haram, would mark an expansion in a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and forced millions from their homes.

Combined insurgencies?

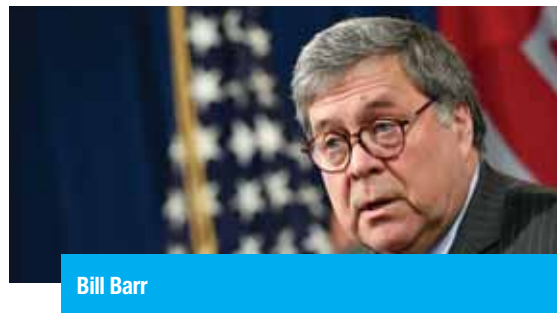
Fears that Boko Haram and ISWAP were making inroads into the northwest have been simmering for some time. “Since 2014, Shekau himself has been trying to get the bandits in the northwest to become loyal to him, and there is growing evidence from the past year that more and more bandits have claimed their loyalty to him,” said Jacob Zenn, analyst at the Washington-based research group The Jamestown Foundation. “Nigerian intelligence sources have been observing that there are logistic networks, financing networks between

Shekau and the northwest,” Zenn said. Katsina borders Niger, and a major concern has been if Boko Haram or ISWAP linked up with jihadist groups in the Sahel.

“It’s increasingly looking like the jihadist theatre in Mali and Niger and northwest Nigeria are really beginning to blend together as one,” said Zenn. The International Crisis Group issued a report in May, saying porous borders could connect “Islamic insurgencies in the central Sahel with the decade-old insurgency in the Lake Chad region.” More than 36,000 people have been killed in the conflict and two million have been displaced. UN Refugee Agency spokesman Romain Desclous said that violence in northwest Nigeria had already prompted 70,000 people to flee to the Niger border town of Maradi since the end of 2018.

Anger

#BringBackOurBoys trended on social media after the attack, in reference to a similar hashtag after the Chibok kidnappings. Angry residents heckled Katsina’s governor when he visited the area on Saturday and protesters greeted a delegation led by Defense Minister Bashir Salih-Magashi on Sunday. The kidnappings occurred in the home state of President Muhammadu Buhari, who was visiting the area when the attack happened. The president condemned the attack and ordered security stepped up in schools. Buhari has made the fight against Boko Haram a priority but the security situation in Nigeria has deteriorated since his 2015 election. “What’s worrying is that this is coinciding with the visit of the president to his home state. So if it does not gear Buhari to action, then definitely nothing will,” Idayat Hassan of the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa think tank said. The British High Commission in Nigeria said yesterday it was aware that Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the Friday attack and that it was “monitoring the situation closely.” The European Union has called “for the immediate and unconditional release of all children and their return to their families.” — AFP



Bill Barr

henchmen,” Seattle prosecutor Michael Dion wrote.

Senator Elizabeth Warren tweeted after the announcement of Barr’s departure that he “made our criminal justice system less just and @TheJusticeDept more corrupt. Good riddance.” But Republicans saw Barr as a straight-shooter bringing stability during extraordinary Washington turmoil. Senator Lindsey Graham said Barr “was the right man at the right time in overseeing highly political investigations and stood in the breach at times against both the left and the right.”

Things go sour

Early on, much of what Barr did clearly served Trump’s agenda, including backing up his claims that the FBI abused its powers by delving into the Trump-Russia connections. Earlier this year, prosecutors asked a federal court for a sentence of up to nine years in prison for Trump adviser Roger Stone, who was convicted of lying to Congress and obstructing a congressional probe into the role of Russia in the 2016 election. Trump declared the sentence “very unfair.”

Shortly after, the Justice Department recommended a far shorter sentence, and the four prosecutors handling the case resigned. Trump later went even further, commuting the sentence entirely. In the ensuing political row, featuring Trump lashing out continuously on Twitter, Barr appeared to have finally had enough, declaring that Trump was making his job “impossible.” “I’m not going to be bullied or influenced,” he told ABC. On Monday, Barr’s resignation letter and Trump’s statements stressed an amicable parting. However, after the Stone fiasco, things had only gotten more tense between the two men.

Trump hoped a Justice Department investigation into the allegedly political roots of the Russia probe would produce a bombshell report before Election Day, giving him a much needed boost against Biden. The report didn’t materialize. Trump had also hoped prosecutors would go after Biden’s son Hunter and his business dealings in Ukraine and elsewhere - again, producing a bombshell report that could change the election. The hoped-for intervention never came. — AFP

house still standing, but with its walls blackened and its windows and roof blown out. According to investigators the home in the village of Ishbuldino was registered as a non-profit organization that provided care for the elderly.

But a local official told the Interfax news agency that it did not have the legal right to provide people with overnight accommodation. The official added that the building, which was constructed in 1968 and was also fitted with a small attic, was not permitted to have more than 10 people in it at a time. Different possible causes for the fire were being considered, the official said, including faulty wiring or human error like smoking a cigarette in bed. “However, the fire alarm went off normally, which is why four people were able to escape,” the source said.

Yesterday, Bashkortostan regional head Rادی Khabirov said it was too soon to “guess what happened here” and asked for finger-pointing to be avoided “for now”. But he added: “I don’t like that there were so many people in one small house,” noting that “preventative measures” need to be taken. Bashkortostan’s labor and social protection minister Lenara Ivanova told the RIA Novosti news agency that the ministry had no information about the home, adding that it was a private organization. — AFP



Abductors ‘have made contacts with government’

The attack on Friday was initially blamed on so-called bandits - criminal groups in the unstable region who often carry out kidnappings. The army said over the weekend that it had located the hideout of the “bandits” and a military operation was under way. Boko Haram’s involvement, if confirmed, would change the narrative. The government did not immediately react to the claim. “I am Abubakar Shekau and our brothers are behind the kidnapping in Katsina,” said the voice, in a four-minute recording sent to AFP through the same channel as previous messages from Boko Haram.

The voice resembles that of the elusive jihadist

‘Hope’: Burned out health workers buoyed by vaccine

WASHINGTON: As an anesthesiologist in a slammed emergency department, Raymond Pla has to handle COVID patients’ ventilators, one of the riskiest jobs in the pandemic. On Monday he was one of five front line workers at George Washington University Hospital to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. A single word captured what it meant to him: “Hope.” The doctor might have felt excited to be among the first in the world to get injected with molecules of synthetic messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA), the cutting-edge technology proven to be 95 percent effective in preventing COVID-19.

But given the coronavirus’ stark toll - 300,000 fatalities in the US alone - that just didn’t feel right. “Excitement, in my personal view, doesn’t give the appropriate amount of deference and respect and honor to the sacrifice of my colleagues in healthcare, some of whom have gotten sick, some of whom have died,” said the visibly emotional 52-year-old. A distant light is glimmering at the end of the tunnel, but in the spring the situation appeared bleak to inundated health care workers like Pla: “I didn’t have a lot of hope back then there would be a vaccine by the end of the year.”

Leading the way

Pla and his colleagues said they felt honored as the first recipients, a group chosen through an algorithm that assessed risk levels. They also want to use their platforms to encourage others to follow their lead. Shylee Stewart, a 26-year-old registered nurse in the labor and delivery department, said the vaccine was “beneficial” given how many COVID-positive patients with unknown status come through, adding that most of the nurses in her department planned to get shots.

She encouraged ordinary people to “do your research; make sure you make the right decision for yourself.” “Nine times out of 10, that decision is to get vaccinated,” she said. Her message comes at a time of growing vaccine skepticism, not only in the United States but across much of the developed world. A new poll by NPR/PBS Newshour/Marist College found that 61 percent of Americans say they’ll choose to get the coronavirus vaccine if it is made available, against 32 percent who said they wouldn’t. — AFP



ISHBULDINO, Russia: Rescuers are seen at the site of a fire in a nursing home in this village in the region of Bashkortostan in central Russia yesterday. — AFP

Barr - Trump’s fixer or ‘big disappointment’?

WASHINGTON: As a businessman, Donald Trump always had a fixer - part-lawyer, part-law bender, someone to make bad things go away. And as president, he thought he’d gone one better: his very own Attorney General Bill Barr. Barr, 70, resigned Monday after falling out publicly with Trump, ending one of the most scrutinized and high-stakes relationships in Washington just weeks before the Republican president makes way for Democratic President-elect Joe Biden. A veteran Washington insider who had already served as the top US law enforcement official under Republican president George HW Bush, Barr took office in February 2019. In an already volatile Trump presidency, this was an especially combustible moment.

Shortly before, Trump had fired his previous attorney general, Jeff Sessions. And special counsel Robert Mueller was winding up a huge probe into Russian attempts to interfere with the 2016 presidential election and assist Trump’s surprise victory over Hillary Clinton. Trump had fired Sessions precisely because he refused to be the president’s pointman on the issue, recusing himself - and triggering the appointment of the dogged outside investigator. Barr came under almost immediate criticism that he sought to dismantle the customary firewall between the White House and the Justice Department. Although he left Mueller to finish his probe, Barr performed a deft piece of political maneuvering by getting out in front of the dense official Russia report with a short summary of his own. The four-page statement highlighted that Mueller had not found direct, provable links of conspiracy between Trump and the Russians. This dominated subsequent coverage, even if the actual report, released only shortly after, raised many troubling questions about the election and Trump’s behavior. In unusually open criticism, one federal judge accused Barr of “misleading” the public.

Polarizing figure

For some, Barr was a bigger version of the private attorneys guarding Trump during his tumultuous business career against lawsuits and criminal allegations related to everything from bankruptcy to divorce, fraud and sexual assault. Barr “is turning the Justice Department into a shield to protect the president and his

11 perish in Russia nursing home fire

MOSCOW: A fire ripped through an overcrowded retirement home in central Russia overnight, killing 11 vulnerable people as the blaze swept through the small wooden building, investigators said yesterday. The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it had opened a criminal investigation into possible negligence over the blaze in the Bashkortostan region south of the Ural Mountains. It released video showing columns of orange flame engulfing a one-storey wooden building during the night. “At the time the fire started there were 15 people in the room, four of whom managed to escape on their own,” the committee said in a statement.

“In the course of extinguishing the fire, the bodies of 11 people were found,” it added. The victims - seven men and four women - were between 57 and 83 years old, according to local news website Ufa1.ru. The emergencies ministry said it was notified about the fire at 02:53 am and that the flames were put out by 06:00 am. In broad daylight images showed the

News in brief

Tunisia: Israel ties ‘not on agenda’

PARIS: Tunisia has no plans to match Morocco’s decision to recognize Israel, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi said, insisting that establishing relations with the Jewish state was “not on the agenda”. Last week, Morocco became the fourth country in the Arab League to recognize Israel since August, in a flurry of diplomatic deals brokered by outgoing US President Donald Trump. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan have also recently normalized ties with Israel as part of a push that weakens the Arab world’s previously united front over the Palestinians’ struggle for statehood. “We respect Morocco’s choice, Morocco is a sister country that we love very much,” Mechichi told France 24 broadcaster in an interview late Monday. — AFP

Record number of journalists jailed

NEW YORK: A record number of journalists were behind bars this year, a US-based watchdog said yesterday, accusing governments worldwide of suppressing the media and fueling misinformation amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The annual report by the Committee to Protect Journalists found that 274 journalists were imprisoned in 2020 - the highest number since the non-profit organization began its survey in the 1990s. The report also found that 26 journalists and media workers had been murdered this year, with Mexico listed as the world’s most dangerous country for the press. “It’s shocking and appalling,” CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon said in a statement. — AFP

Putin’s ‘chef’ Prigozhin sues EU

MOSCOW: Kremlin-linked businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin has filed a lawsuit in an EU court to remove him from the bloc’s sanctions list, his company said yesterday. The European Union in October sanctioned Prigozhin - nicknamed “Putin’s chef” because his company Concord has catered for the Kremlin - accusing him of undermining peace in Libya by supporting the Wagner Group private military company. “The plaintiff does not possess information about the existence of an organization named ‘Wagner Group’, did not and does not have any connections to or relations with it, including financial,” Concord said in a statement on the social media network Vkontakte. — AFP

‘Transparency’ of China vaccine

BRASILIA: Brazil’s health regulator on Monday accused China of not being transparent in efforts to win emergency approval for its COVID-19 vaccine CoronaVac, currently in the final phase of trials in the hard-hit country. In a statement, Anvisa warned against the “influence of issues related to geopolitics” in promoting vaccines. “The Chinese criteria applied to grant the authorization of emergency use in China are not transparent,” it said. CoronaVac, produced by the Chinese private laboratory Sinovac in collaboration with the Butantan Institute of Sao Paulo, has been the subject of heated political debate in Brazil. President Jair Bolsonaro has worked to discredit it, painting it as a tool of both the governor of the state of Sao Paulo, Joao Doria-considered a potential rival in the next election-and of the Chinese Communist state. — AFP

Putin congratulates US’ Biden

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday congratulated Joe Biden on winning the US presidential election in November, saying he hoped the countries could set aside their differences to promote global security. Putin wished the US president-elect every success and said that, “for my part, I am ready for collaboration and contacts with you,” according to a Kremlin statement. The Russian president was one of the last remaining leaders of major world countries to have held back on congratulating Biden, who was confirmed as the next US president by the Electoral College on Monday. Officials in Moscow, including the country’s elections chief and foreign minister, had earlier criticized the US elections process, describing it as archaic and not representative of the will of the people. — AFP

German police arrest fugitives

BERLIN: German police said yesterday they have arrested one of two fugitive twin brothers from the so-called Remmo clan wanted over their suspected role in snatching priceless jewels from a museum in the city of Dresden. The 21-year-old suspect was detained in Berlin on Monday evening over what local media have dubbed one of the biggest museum heists in modern history, a spokesman for the police in the eastern city of Dresden said. The twins had eluded German authorities when they carried out raids last month and arrested three members of the Remmo clan, a family of Arab origin notorious for its ties to organized crime. Police then named them as 21-year-old Abdul Majed Remmo and Mohammed Remmo. All five suspects are accused of “serious gang robbery and two counts of arson,” Dresden prosecutors said. — AFP

International

COVID-19, pandemic, lockdown: How 2020 changed the world

Coronavirus paralyzes economies, devastates communities

PARIS: When the world celebrated the dawn of a new decade with a blaze of firework parties and revelry on January 1, few could have imagined what 2020 had in store. In the last 12 months, the novel coronavirus has paralyzed economies, devastated communities and confined nearly four billion people to their homes. It has been a year that changed the world like no other for at least a generation, possibly since World War II. More than 1.6 million people died. At least 72 million people are known to have contracted the virus, though the actual number is likely much higher. Children became orphans, grandparents were lost and partners bereaved as loved ones died alone in hospital, bedside visits considered too dangerous to risk.



More than 1.6 million killed

“This is a pandemic experience that’s unique in the lifetime of every single person on Earth,” says Sten Vermund, infectious disease epidemiologist and dean of Yale School of Public Health. “Hardly any of us haven’t been touched by it.” COVID-19 is far from the deadliest pandemic in history. Bubonic plague in the 14th Century wiped out a quarter of the population. At least 50 million succumbed to Spanish Influenza in 1918-19. Thirty-three million people died of AIDS.

But contracting coronavirus is as simple as breathing in the wrong place at the wrong time. “I went to the gate of hell and came back,” said Wan Chunhui, a 44-year-old Chinese survivor who spent 17 days in hospital. “I saw with my own eyes that others failed to recover and died, which has had a big impact on me.” The scale of the global disaster was scarcely imaginable when on December 31, Chinese authorities announced 27 cases of “viral pneumonia of unknown origin” that was baffling doctors in the city of Wuhan.

The next day, authorities quietly shut the Wuhan animal market initially linked to the outbreak. On January 7,



SEOUL: A medical staff member wearing protective gear takes a swab from a woman to test for COVID-19 coronavirus at a temporary testing station outside Seoul station on Monday. — AFP

Chinese officials announced they had identified the new virus, calling it 2019-nCoV. On January 11, China announced the first death in Wuhan. Within days, cases flared across Asia, in France and the United States. By the end of the month, countries were airlifting foreigners out of China. Borders around the world started to close and more than 50 million people living in Wuhan’s province of Hubei were in quarantine.

New disease, lockdown

AFP images of a man lying dead on his back outside a Wuhan furniture shop, wearing a face mask and holding a plastic bag, came to encapsulate the fear pervading the city. AFP could not confirm the cause of his death at the time. Emblematic of the horror and claustrophobia also was the Diamond Princess cruise ship on which more than 700 people ultimately contracted the virus and 13 died. As the horror went global, the race for a vaccine had already begun. A small German biotech company called BioNTech quietly put their cancer work aside and launched another project. Its name? “Speed of Light”.

On February 11, the World Health Organization named the new disease as Covid-19. Four days later,

France reported the first confirmed death outside Asia. Europe watched in horror as northern Italy turned into an epicenter. “It’s worse than the war,” said Orlando Gualdi, mayor of the Lombardy village of Vertova in March, where 36 people died in 25 days. “It’s absurd to think that there could be such a pandemic in 2020.” First Italy, then Spain, France and Britain went into lockdown. WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic. US borders, already closed to China, shut to much of Europe. For the first time in peacetime, the summer Olympics were delayed.

By mid-April, 3.9 billion people or half of humanity were living under some form of lockdown. From Paris to New York, from Delhi to Lagos, and from London to Buenos Aires, streets fell eerily silent, the all too frequent wail of ambulance sirens, a reminder that death loomed close. Scientists had warned for decades of a global pandemic, but few listened. Some of the richest countries in the world, let alone the poorest floundered in the face of an invisible enemy. In a globalised economy, supply chains ground to a halt. Supermarket shelves were stripped bare by panic buyers. Chronic underinvestment in healthcare was brutally exposed, as hospitals struggled to cope and intensive care units were

rapidly overwhelmed. Underpaid and overworked medics battled without personal protective equipment. “I graduated in 1994 and government hospitals were utterly neglected then,” said Nilima Vaidya-Bhamare, a doctor in Mumbai, India, one of the worst-hit countries. “Why does it take a pandemic to wake people up?” she asked in May. In New York, the city with more billionaires than any other, medics were photographed having to wear bin liners. A field hospital was erected in Central Park. Mass graves were dug on Hart Island.

“It is a scene out of a horror movie,” said Virgilio Neto, mayor of Manaus in Brazil. “We are no longer in a state of emergency but rather of absolute calamity.” Bodies were piling up in refrigerated trucks and bulldozers were digging mass graves. Businesses closed. Schools and colleges shut. Live sport was cancelled. Commercial airline travel saw its most violent contraction in history. Shops, clubs, bars and restaurants closed. Spain’s lockdown was so severe that children couldn’t leave home. People were suddenly trapped, cheek by jowl in tiny apartments for weeks on end.

Those who could, worked from home. Zoom calls replaced meetings, business travel and parties. Those whose jobs were not transferrable were often sacked or forced to risk their health and work regardless. In May, the pandemic had wiped out 20 million American jobs. The pandemic and global recession could push to 150 million the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2021, the World Bank has warned. Social inequities, which for years had been growing, were exposed like never before. Hugs, handshakes and kisses fell by the wayside. Human interaction took place behind plexiglass, face masks and hand sanitizer. Instances of domestic violence soared, so did mental health problems. As city dwellers with means congratulated themselves on riding out the pandemic at palatial second homes in the countryside and governments floundered, tempers boiled among those trapped in cities and rage spilled onto the streets. The United States, the world’s biggest economy and a country without universal healthcare, rapidly became the single worst-hit nation. More than 300,000 people have died while President Donald Trump pooh-poohed the threat and touted questionable treatments such as hydroxychloroquine and floated the idea of injecting disinfectant. —AFP



LANGKAWI, Malaysia: This picture taken on Nov 16, 2020 shows Rohingya refugee “Abdu Hamid” (a pseudonym) holding his mobile phone during a video call with his wife, who lives at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Ukhiya in southern Bangladesh. — AFP

Video chat only hope for divided Rohingya couple

KUTUPALONG: The human traffickers told Julekha Begum it would take less than a week to smuggle her to Malaysia to meet the husband she barely knows. Instead she spent two months marooned at sea in the hold of a fishing boat with 500 others. In that time, she said traffickers beat her sister to death and threw countless bodies into the sea. Eventually she was forced to return to a sprawling refugee camp in Bangladesh alongside a million other members of the stateless Rohingya group.

The video-call app they used to get married in 2017 remains the only means of contact for Julekha and her husband, Abdu Hamid, who lives on Malaysia’s Langkawi island, a common landing point for Rohingya boats. “I am waiting for the day I will meet my husband,” Begum told AFP as she broke down in tears. “We’ve been married three years but we haven’t once touched.” Begum, her mother and sister were among hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who fled mostly Buddhist Myanmar to neighboring Bangladesh in 2017 to escape a brutal military crackdown.

She was married to Hamid shortly after via imo, a video-call app popular in Bangladesh. Begum and Hamid knew each other as children and, as is the custom in Rohingya society, their match was arranged by their parents. After two years of staying in touch via video-calls, Hamid managed to arrange for Begum and her sister to take a boat. Thousands of Rohingya try to make the perilous journey each year, putting themselves at the mercy of ruthless people smugglers and corrupt authorities in multiple countries.

The voyage that Begum embarked upon in February was a disaster. As well as her sister, dozens of people died as food ran low and the boat was unable to land, according to Begum and other passengers AFP spoke with as part of a months-long investigation into the human trafficking network. “We starved, many died and the bodies were thrown into the sea,” Begum said, as she recounted the horror of her sister’s death. “The smuggler mercilessly beat her with a leather belt. I couldn’t do anything but cry and curse.”

Rohingya have flocked to Malaysia for many years, mostly by boat but also overland, fleeing Myanmar where they have been forced from their homes and seen their villages razed. The UN says the Myanmar military’s crackdown on Rohingya has amounted to genocide, Hamid escaped Myanmar about seven years ago, travelling first by boat to Thailand and then crossing on foot into Malaysia. He initially worked on a construction site before landing a job in a hotel on Langkawi, a popular holiday resort island. —AFP

Israel court allows extradition of sex abuse suspect

JERUSALEM: Israel’s highest court yesterday rejected an appeal against extradition to Australia of Malka Leifer, a former Jewish ultra-Orthodox school principal accused of sexual abuse of many of her pupils there. “With the issuance of our judgment, all the arguments are closed and the declaration of extradition takes final effect,” said the Supreme Court ruling, published by the justice ministry.

Leifer is accused of child sex abuse while she was a teacher and principal at an ultra-Orthodox school in Melbourne, where she had emigrated from her native Israel. According to Australian media, she faces 74 counts of child sex abuse against girls. After allegations



JERUSALEM: In this file photo taken on Feb 27, 2018 Malka Leifer, a former Australian teacher accused of dozens of cases of sexual abuse of girls at a school, arrives for a hearing at the District Court. — AFP

Asteroid samples leave scientists ‘speechless’

TOKYO: Scientists in Japan said yesterday they were left “speechless” when they saw how much asteroid dust was inside a capsule delivered by the Hayabusa-2 space probe in an unprecedented mission. The Japanese probe collected surface dust and pristine material last year from the asteroid Ryugu, around 300 million kilometers away, during two daring phases of its six-year mission.

This month it dropped off a capsule containing the samples, which created a fireball as it entered the Earth’s atmosphere, and landed in the Australian desert before being transported to Japan. Scientists at the Japanese space agency JAXA yesterday removed the screws to the capsule’s inner container, having already found a small amount of asteroid dust in the outer shell.

“When we actually opened it, I was speechless. It was more than we expected and there was so much that I was truly impressed,” said JAXA scientist Hiroataka Sawada. “It wasn’t fine particles like powder, but there were plenty of samples that measured several millimeters across.” Scientists hope the material will shed light on the formation of the universe and perhaps offer clues about how life began on Earth. The scientists have not yet revealed if the material inside is equal to, or perhaps even more, than the 0.1 grams they had said they hoped to discover.

against her surfaced in Australia in 2008, Leifer and her family left for Israel and moved to the Emmanuel settlement in the occupied West Bank. Israeli Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn welcomed the supreme court ruling. “After long and agonizing years, the time has come to do justice to Leifer’s victims,” he tweeted in Hebrew. “I intend to sign the extradition order without delay.”

74 court hearings

The court noted the years in which Australia’s extradition request had been bogged down in Israeli courts. “More than six years have passed since a request was filed in the Jerusalem district court to declare the appellant extradited to Australia,” it said in its Hebrew-language ruling. Since then, it continued, “there is no proceeding that the appellant has not taken” to prevent her extradition.

Extradition agreements signed by Israel “must be respected and anyone seeking to flee justice will not find sanctuary in Israel,” it said. Israeli public broadcaster KAN aired a response from one of the alleged victims, Nicole Meyer. “It has been 74 court hearings, nine years of fighting for justice,” she said. “We did not give up, we kept fighting, and finally today we heard the words that Malka Leifer will be extradited and the appeal was denied.” “We really hope to see her back in Australia very soon and face her in court,” she said.

Israeli prosecution lawyer Avital Ritner-Oron however said that it could still be “months” before Leifer is on her way. She told KAN radio that the suspect’s lawyers could try to convince Nissenkorn not to sign the extradition order or following his signature they could go back to court with an appeal against his judgment. She added that it would also take some time to coordinate the practicalities of her transfer with Australian authorities. “But we are certain and determined that in the end Malka Leifer will be extradited to Australia,” she said. “I imagine that we are talking about a limited number of months.” — AFP

Seiichiro Watanabe, a Hayabusa project scientist and professor at Nagoya University, said he was nonetheless thrilled. “There are a lot (of samples) and it seems they contain plenty of organic matter,” he said. “So I hope we can find out many things about how organic substances have developed on the parent body of Ryugu.” Half of Hayabusa-2’s samples will be shared between JAXA, US space agency NASA and other international organizations. The rest will be kept for future study as advances are made in analytic technology. But work is not over for the probe, which will now begin an extended mission targeting two new asteroids. — AFP



SAGAMIHARA, Japan: This handout photograph released yesterday shows samples of surface dust and pristine material collected from the asteroid Ryugu by the Hayabusa-2 space probe, at the JAXA SagamiHara Campus. — AFP

News in brief

Toddler feared raped in camp

LESBOS: Authorities on the Greek island of Lesbos are investigating the suspected rape of a three-year-old Afghan girl in a migrant camp, a migration ministry source said yesterday. The girl was found semi-conscious and bleeding in a lavatory in the camp of Kara Tepe late on Monday, the source told AFP. “Camp doctors have confirmed” the incident, the official said. A forensic inspection is required to determine the girl’s condition. The site housing more than 7,300 people was hastily erected in September after a fire gutted the camp of Moria, Europe’s largest. The tent camp was flooded this week after several days of rain, despite drainage work carried out in the makeshift facility in October. — AFP

Jordan approves Pfizer-BioNTech

AMMAN: Jordan announced late Monday that it had approved emergency use of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, as the United States kicked off a mass vaccination drive. The Jordanian Food and Drug Administration (JFDA) did not specify when it would begin the rollout of the vaccine by US pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech. Health Minister Nazir Obeidat said last month that the vaccine would be distributed free of charge to foreign residents as well as Jordanians. JFDA director general Nizar Mheidat told the official Petra news agency it had “concluded all stages of granting the licence, in order to approve and distribute the vaccine”. He added that a study was also under way to allow the use of two other vaccines. Jordan has previously said it was in talks on the use of two other COVID vaccines being developed by British pharmaceuticals group AstraZeneca and US group Johnson & Johnson. — AFP

UK’s Johnson to visit India

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will travel to India next month in his first major bilateral visit to another country since taking power last year, his office said yesterday. During the trip, Johnson will invite India to join next year’s G7 summit, which Britain is hosting, as one of three guest countries, alongside South Korea and Australia. The Indian trip is aimed at strengthening bilateral trade ties and investment, and cooperation in various areas including defense, security, health and climate change. It will coincide with India’s annual Republic Day celebrations on January 26, will also come just weeks after the UK leaves the European Union single market on December 31, and as it seeks new trade deals post-Brexit. “I am absolutely delighted to be visiting India next year at the start of an exciting year for Global Britain, and look forward to delivering the quantum leap in our bilateral relationship that Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi and I have pledged to achieve,” Johnson said in a statement. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2020

Business

Iraqis shed masks as economic pain grows

Majority of citizens shrug off virus amid rising job losses, deepening poverty

BAGHDAD: While much of the world fears COVID-19, Iraqis have mostly stopped wearing facemasks as they worry more about the pandemic's economic impact than the virus itself. In a war-scarred country burdened by rising job losses and deepening poverty, a majority of citizens seem to have shrugged off the global public health crisis.

In one Baghdad pharmacy, cartons of surgical masks, transparent face shields and disinfectant bottles have piled up despite being on sale at slashed prices. "There's a general sense that the pandemic has died down and that has led to being people negligent," said Nafea Firas, 23, who works at the pharmacy in the capital's Zayuna district.

Most Iraqis' minds are now far more focused on the economic hardship caused by plummeting oil revenues and huge delays in payments of state salaries and pensions. The poverty rate has jumped from 20 percent to 31.7 percent this year, said a recent joint study by the United Nations children's agency UNICEF and the World Bank. Meanwhile infection rates and deaths have indeed fallen, according to health ministry data, in an encouraging trend epidemiologists struggle to explain.

Out of 30,000 tests on December 12, only about 1,000 were positive, down from over 5,000 in a single day in September. The daily death toll fell to 16 from about 70 three months ago.

As Iraq worries less about the coronavirus, most people who entered Firas's pharmacy ignored a sign asking them to cover their faces, or a disinfectant dispenser at the door. A rare customer who did wear a mask, a retired soldier, told AFP that "when I walk the streets with my wife and we're both wearing masks, people look at us as if we're doing something wrong".

EU to unveil tough rules to curb tech giants

BRUSSELS: The European Union yesterday will unveil tough draft rules targeting tech giants like Google, Amazon and Facebook, whose power Brussels sees as a threat to competition and even democracy.

The landmark proposals—which come as Silicon Valley shakes increasing scrutiny around the world—could shape up the way Big Tech does business by menacing some of the globe's biggest firms with mammoth fines or bans from the European market. EU sources told AFP the long-trailed legislation would see the internet behemoths facing fines of up to 10 percent of their EU turnover for breaking some of the most serious competition rules.

It also proposes banning them from the EU market "in the event of serious and repeated breaches of law which endanger the security of European citizens", one of the sources said. The Digital Services Act and its accompanying Digital Markets Act will lay out strict conditions for doing business in the EU's 27 member countries as authorities aim to rein in the spread of disinformation and hate speech online, and Big Tech's business dominance.

Around ten of the largest companies—including

Volkswagen buries the hatchet in boardroom battle

FRANKFURT: Car giant Volkswagen's supervisory board on Monday announced a deal to end infighting over top jobs and strategy that risked toppling chief executive Herbert Diess, saying the boss's strategy had their "full support". Diess, 62, has come into conflict with VW's powerful worker representatives over his plans for the massive car-maker to shift towards electric vehicles and break decades-old power structures that many observers blame for its "dieselgate" emissions cheating scandal.

The company said in a statement that the supervisory board "unanimously resolved to give its full support to the strategy, in particular the orientation of the company towards electromobility and digitalization. "In the upcoming years, the board of management... will implement the strategy with Herbert Diess at the top," it added.

Press reports suggested that Diess had demanded an extension of his contract beyond its current end date in 2023 as proof he had the non-executives' backing. While the company did not grant the former BMW executive that vote of confidence, it did confirm his nominees to top roles. Arno Antlitz, finance chief at high-end subsidiary Audi, will take control of the entire group's finances from June.

Meanwhile Thomas Schmall will move from Volkswagen Components to take responsibility for "technology" across the group, while Murat Aksel will become group head of purchasing on top of the same role at the VW brand. Diess' push for change at VW has seen him lock horns with Bernd Osterloh,

'Vulnerable hurt most'

Iraq recorded its first COVID-19 cases in February and imposed a full lockdown the following month, with airports, land borders, schools, government offices and all public gathering places shuttered until the summer. Authorities announced a 50,000 dinar (about \$35) fine for unmasked commuters, but it was barely enforced. At the same time, the government has struggled with its worst financial crisis in decades, as oil prices fell sharply.

The state was no longer able to pay its employees or pensioners on time, leaving the livelihoods of entire families hanging in the balance. Firas, at the pharmacy, said he favors enforcing mask use with fines but acknowledged that "the state wouldn't be able to impose it, particularly in the lower-income neighborhoods. "And fines would hurt vulnerable people more."

A Baghdad grocer said that large families simply could not afford the masks, disinfectant spray and other hygiene products, even at their reduced prices. "Abiding by all these hygiene protocols would require financial capabilities that the poor simply don't have," he said.

Masks against teargas

Efforts to help the poor have meanwhile been hampered by Iraq's infamous bureaucracy.

Some 200,000 sets of masks and gloves have been stuck at a southern Iraqi port since August due to paperwork delays at the customs authority, a senior official from the International Federation of the Red Cross said. "These are to protect the people who can't afford buying masks or gloves—the most in need, who live in crowded places where physical distancing or water and soap are

Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft—would be designated as internet "gatekeepers" under the legislation and subjected to specific regulations to limit their power over the market. But the proposals will go through a long and complex ratification process, with the EU's 27 states, the European Parliament, and a lobbying frenzy of companies and trade associations, influencing the final law.

"The idea is not to do away with the large platforms, but to impose rules on them to prevent them from posing risks to our democracy," the EU's industry commissioner Thierry Breton said.

Illegal content

The details of the proposals have until now been carefully guarded by the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, even though a few have leaked. France and the Netherlands have already come out in favor of Europe having all the tools it needs to rein in the gatekeepers, including the power to break them up. The main intention of the new rules is to update legislation that dates back to 2004, when many of today's internet giants either did not exist or were in their infancy.

For the past decade the EU has taken the lead worldwide in trying to grapple with the power of big tech, for example slapping billions in antitrust fines on Google, but critics believe the method has been too cumbersome and done little to change behavior.

The EU has also ordered Apple to pay billions of euros in back taxes to Ireland but that decision was quashed by the EU's highest court. The Digital



FRANKFURT: Volkswagen company said in a statement that its supervisory board "unanimously resolved to give its full support to the strategy, in particular the orientation of the company towards electromobility and digitalization."

the head of the group's influential works council. As recently as June, an attack by union representatives cost the chief executive his role as head of the flagship VW brand, after they accused him of "massive failures of management" in launching two crucial new models. Now there is "total agreement between the supervisory board, the board of management and the employee representatives" on VW's objectives, Osterloh was quoted as saying.

VW is pumping more than 35 billion euros (\$43 billion) into electric vehicles and plans to sell 26 million cars from a range of 70 electric models by 2030. Diess has publicly stated his objective is to catch up with US competitor Tesla. Also in Monday's statement, the supervisory board said sportscar maker Lamborghini and motorbike company Ducati would both remain part of the VW group, although press reports and analysts regularly suggest the two world-famous brands could be sold off or floated separately on the stock market. — AFP



BAGHDAD: An Iraqi street vendor selling facemasks and disinfectants tends to customers in the capital Baghdad. — AFP

not available enough," the official said. Firas recalled similar delays in the early days of the pandemic.

He told AFP there were only two groups of people in Iraq who were known to be committed to use of the medical masks. First, anti-government protesters who hit the streets last year donned the masks to protect themselves from tear gas fired by

security forces. "I used to carry hundreds of masks and distribute them in Tahrir Square," Firas said. The other group, he said, were families with young children who doubled down on hygiene protocols as Iraqi schools reopened in late November after a two-month closure, causing a temporary rise in mask sales. "At least parents are concerned about the health of their kids," he said. — AFP

News in brief

IEA trims oil demand forecasts

PARIS: The International Energy Agency (IEA) trimmed its global oil demand forecasts yesterday as the massive coronavirus pandemic hit to the aviation industry will likely be worse than expected next year. For this year, total oil demand will fall by 8.8 million barrels per day (mbpd) to 91.2 mbpd, reflecting a marginal downward revision to the estimate given in its last monthly report in November, the IEA said. For 2021, the IEA said it had cut its oil demand growth estimate by 170,000 bpd to 5.7 mbpd "mainly because of another downgrade for jet fuel/kerosene demand." Aviation fuel demand is "not expected to recover quickly, as governments intend to keep in place border closures and travel restrictions until a vaccine is widely available." —AFP

Inditex sees sales recovery

MADRID: Spanish textile titan Inditex, owner of global fashion retailer Zara, posted yesterday a higher than expected net profit in its third quarter as sales recovered from the disruption caused by the pandemic. The group, which also owns the Bershka and Massimo Dutti brands, recorded a net profit of 866 million euros (\$1.05 billion) in the three months from August to October, a 26 percent drop from the same time last year. Analysts surveyed by financial information service Factset had expected a net profit of 821 million euros. — AFP

Adidas mulling potential sale of Reebok

FRANKFURT: German sportswear giant Adidas said Monday it was mulling a sale of its long-struggling US subsidiary Reebok. "Adidas has begun to assess strategic alternatives for Reebok," the company said in a statement, adding these "include both a potential sale of Reebok as well as Reebok remaining a part of the company". A decision will be announced on March 10, it added, when the group will present a new five-year strategy. Adidas acquired Boston-based Reebok in 2006 for 3.1 billion euros (\$3.8 billion) to take on US rival Nike.

Ola to build biggest scooter factory

NEW DELHI: Ueber rival Ola plans to build the world's largest scooter factory in India, aiming to make two million electric two-wheelers a year for Asia, Europe and Latin America. The Indian ride-hailing firm, which has financial backing from Japan's SoftBank, said Monday it will create 10,000 jobs and invest \$325 million in the plant in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The factory will help make India a "manufacturing hub for electric vehicles" as Ola gears up to launch its e-scooters in the coming months, the company said. Motorbikes and mopeds, which are much cheaper than four-wheelers, are hugely popular in India's congested cities, with sales outselling those of cars many times over. But they also add to air pollution and Ola hopes to profit from government efforts to promote electric vehicles by expanding from ride-hailing to making scooters itself. — AFP

Singapore to allow business travel arrivals

SINGAPORE: Singapore will allow business travellers and visiting officials from all countries to enter from next month, authorities said yesterday, as the financial hub seeks to recover from a coronavirus-induced downturn. Under the new arrangements, a limited number of travellers can apply for stays of up to 14 days from mid-January, the trade ministry said.

Singapore already had arrangements allowing in selected visitors from countries including China and South Korea, but the new scheme marks a significant easing of travel curbs.

There are strict conditions, however, for those wishing to visit the city-state, which has escaped the coronavirus relatively lightly. Travellers must undergo virus tests before leaving their home country, on arrival in Singapore and regularly during their stay, and must reside and conduct meetings at locations selected by the government. Arrangements are being made for visitors to hold meetings with their guests in specially designed meeting rooms outfitted with air-tight glass panels to reduce the risk of transmission, the ministry said in a statement.

The announcement came a day after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned the city-state had no choice but to ease restrictions or risk losing its status as a global hub. "Trade and travel are our lifeblood," he said. "The longer our own borders stay closed to travellers, the greater the risk of us permanently losing out as an international hub, consequently hurting our livelihoods," he said. — AFP

Business

Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer and Toyota unveil new Fortuner 2021

New Toyota Fortuner pairs stylish design and advanced connected technology with off-road capabilities



KUWAIT: Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer & Sons launched the new Fortuner 2021, introducing a refreshed design and upgraded features that promise a more refined experience for drivers and passengers. The seven-seater Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV) builds on the model's heritage as a stylish yet durable SUV with four-wheel-drive powered off-road capabilities.

In view of the current circumstances and complying with guidelines of Kuwait authorities, Al-Sayer held a digital premier, live streaming the event in Toyota Kuwait social media accounts for valued partners of Toyota as well as distinguished members of the press and media. The event was attended by Scott McNicol General Manager Sales, Bader Faisal Al-Sayer Deputy Marketing Manager representing Toyota Kuwait.

According to Scott McNicol "As you know Toyota believes always customer first. Toyota offers true peace of mind-as well as an emotional, fun to drive experience. Creating Ever Better Cars with newer technologies is more than just words-it's a mission and we are dedicated to making sure that our products

exceed all customer expectations. Fortuner, which debuted in 2006, won a solid reputation for quality and durability. So far over 800,000 units have been sold around the world."

"Over the past 15 years Fortuner has emerged as a market leading model in the mid-size SUV segment. Since its launch in Kuwait, it has achieved excellent sales and remarkable reputation in both retail and fleet sectors. Fortuner is an unstoppable SUV, adding depth to the strong Toyota SUV product line-up" commented Bader Faisal Al-Sayer.

The new Fortuner's exterior design has been notably enhanced, with its large front grille and silver bumper strips creating a stronger sense of rigidity and dependability. The SUV's appearance also benefits from newly designed Light Guiding Headlights with Daytime Running Lights, together with a pair of stylish LED Guiding Taillights that make it stand out after dark.

Drivers and passengers can enjoy a range of intelligent features designed to increase convenience and safety that not only make for a highly comfortable drive, but also a more elegant way to get out

there and explore. These include an 8-inch Audio-Visual Navigation touchscreen that comes with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto compatibility, as well as the T-Connect app by Toyota. The innovative T-Connect app creates a seamless connection between the vehicle and driver to offer peace of mind in all driving conditions, make car maintenance a much simpler task, and bring occupants a wide variety of entertainment content for a more pleasurable ride.

The Fortuner is available with a choice of highly efficient petrol engine options. The petrol engines include a 2.7-liter four-cylinder engine, which produces 164 hp and 245 nm of torque, and a 4.0-liter V6 engine that churns out 235 hp and 376 nm of torque. The Fortuner's 6-speed automatic transmission maximizes engine potential and features multi-stage gears that are optimized to improve drive force in the low-speed range. The gear ratios have been set to provide a strong acceleration with powerful torque, making the car highly capable for off-road adventures.

As with any other Toyota model, safety remains a top priority for the new Fortuner, which incorporates a comprehensive array of features designed to protect its occupants. These include SRS airbags for the front seats along with a knee airbag for the driver, Vehicle Stability Control (VSC), Electronic Brakeforce Distribution (EBD), Tire Pressure Warning System (TPWS), Hill-start Assist Control (HAC), among many others.

Available in eight distinctive exterior colors, the new Fortuner provides customers with the opportunity to express their individuality. These include the new Sparkling Black Pearl CS, which offers a



classic stylish look while emphasizing the SUV's commanding presence. Meanwhile, the interior is available in two sophisticated color palettes, Black and Chamois, which create a warm atmos-

phere and contribute to the vehicle's premium feel. Further expressing its elegant yet sporty character, the new Fortuner comes equipped with a choice of 17-inch or redesigned 18-inch alloy wheels.

Australia says China coal ban would be clear WTO breach

SYDNEY: Australia yesterday decried China's reported ban on its coal exports as an obvious breach of World Trade Organization rules, as tensions between the two countries flared again.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Beijing had yet to confirm state media reports that Australia's multibillion-dollar coal exports are now subject to an informal ban. Nationalist state-run tabloid the Global Times said Sunday that Chinese power plants are being steered toward buying their coal domestically, as well as from countries other than Australia.

"If that were the case, then that would obviously be in breach of WTO rules," Morrison said. "It would be obviously in breach of our own free-trade agreement and so we would hope that is certainly not the case." "We are seeking clarification on this," Morrison said, although ministerial-level contacts between the two countries are said to be non-existent.

China's foreign ministry on Tuesday did not confirm or deny the ban, and instead accused Australian politicians of "playing the victim to continuously insinuate accusations against China."

Foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin hit

back at Australian criticisms, saying it was Australia instead that "politicized issues including trade, investment and technology in recent years, violating market principles and international trade rules."

Strained relations

Australia-China relations are at the lowest ebb since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, with Beijing rolling out a string of economic sanctions against Australian products. Each dispute has been billed as a technical issue, but many in Canberra believe the sanctions are retribution for Australia pushing back against Chinese influence at home and in the Asia-Pacific.

At least 13 Australian sectors have been subjected to tariffs or some form of disruption, including barley, beef, copper, cotton, lobsters, sugar, timber, tourism, universities, wine, wheat and wool.

Suggestions of a coal embargo had been the subject of rumors for some time, with many Australia shipments reportedly already blocked at Chinese ports. Experts had suggested that was a regular problem at the end of the calendar year, thanks to "soft quotas" China introduced to control the amount of coal coming into the country. Policymakers in Beijing are trying to simultaneously reduce dependence on highly polluting coal for energy production and dependence on foreign sources of the fuel.

But an informal ban on Australian coal would be a dramatic escalation, targeting one of the country's most valuable exports-worth up to \$3

trillion a year-and a sector that Morrison's conservative government has been keen to champion, despite objections from environmentalists.

Australia has long hinted that it may seek WTO intervention in the disputes, but a resolution could take years, open Australia up to retaliatory claims and worsen relations further. There has so far been little indication that Australia's political allies in the United States or Europe have been willing to step in and offer support. The dispute has called into question Australia's decades-old model for stellar economic growth-namely supplying the raw materials for China's breakneck emergence as a modern economy. — AFP

rent protocols make it difficult for debt-laden firms to survive even if they have a viable strategy.

"At the heart of the challenge is the fact that while the current crisis is producing a much larger number of firms with sound underlying business models but unsound balance sheets, most jurisdictions have insolvency procedures that essentially assume a firm with an unsound balance sheet is a structurally unsound business," the report said. The report also urged a broad shift in financing structure towards equity rather than debt, adding that governments could establish policies to encourage balance sheet restructures, or take equity themselves.

"Properly structured, these government initiatives can generate substantial investment earnings to partially or fully offset the cost of the incentives or the losses governments incur from firms that collapse," the report said. — AFP



Australia's economy has seen solid growth in recent decades on the back of supplying the raw materials for China's emergence as a modern economy

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Disaster losses in 2020 jump 25% to \$187bn: Swiss Re

ZURICH: Total losses from natural and man-made disasters so far this year are estimated at \$187 billion (154 billion euros), up 25 percent from 2019, the reinsurance giant Swiss Re said yesterday.

A full \$175 billion were from natural catastrophes during a year characterized by unusual numbers of storms, wildfires and hurricanes, according to preliminary figures.

That marks a hike from 2019 when natural disasters caused losses of \$139 billion but remains below the 10-year average of \$202 billion. Insurers covered less than half of the total losses, dishing out \$83 billion, making 2020 the fifth-costliest year for the industry since 1970, Swiss Re said in a statement.

Disasters in the United States — severe thunderstorms, tornadoes, floods and wildfires accounted for a full 70 percent of the \$76 billion which went to cover losses in natural catastrophes. Swiss Re cautioned that climate change was expected to exacerbate such perils, driving more extreme weather events such as wildfires and floods.

"As with COVID-19, climate change will be a huge test of global resilience," Jerome Jean Haegeli, Swiss Re group chief economist, said in the statement. "But while COVID-19 has an expiry date, climate change does not, and failure to 'green' the global economic recovery now will increase costs for society in future," he warned. Swiss Re said its estimates excluded claims related to the coronavirus pandemic.

This year has been marked by an extremely active North Atlantic hurricane season with a record 30 named storms, Swiss Re said. That includes five that made landfall in the US state of Louisiana alone-another record. Swiss Re pointed out that most of the US landfalls did not hit densely populated areas this year, meaning insured losses from the hurricanes were relatively low at \$20 billion.

That is far lower than during less active hurricane seasons that featured fewer but more devastating storms in the US at least, such as the \$97 billion spent by insurers in 2017 to cover losses from Harvey, Irma and Maria, and \$87 billion in 2005 on Katrina. — AFP

G30 report sees big corporate shakeout after COVID

NEW YORK: Figuring out which companies to save and which to let die will be a key challenge facing governments after the pandemic, according to a G30 report released Monday.

The report sketches out a difficult post-pandemic economic environment in which firms must try to dig out from massive debt levels built up to survive the downturn.

Once massive fiscal support programs run out, the group of international economists fears a sol-

Business

Gulf Bank updates its Al-Danah account with KD 1,500,000 grand prize re-launch

Bank adds a KD 1,000,000 semi-annual draw prize in 2021

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank has announced its upcoming draws for the Al-Danah account in 2021. The bank has updated its draw prizes that are distributed throughout the year, with a remarkable increase in the semi-annual draw prize, which is now one million Kuwaiti dinars, the second largest prize following the annual grand draw prize of KD 1.5 million. Accordingly, the Al-Danah account will be announcing two millionaires in 2021!

Gulf Bank's General Manager of Consumer Banking, Mohammed Al-Qattan, encouraged Gulf Bank customers to take advantage of this opportunity, saying: "At Gulf Bank, we take pride in offering a multitude of creative solutions and programs that our customers can take advantage of. With this in mind, we have updated the structure of the Al-Danah account's draw prizes, and are proud to offer bigger and more valuable prizes to our winners. Starting in 2021, we will be naming one of our customers a new millionaire every six months, with the semi-annual prize winner taking home KD 1 million and the annual grand prize winner taking home KD 1.5 million! Throughout the year, we will also be distributing substantial quarterly and monthly draw prizes. We would like to remind everyone that the Al-Danah account is available to both Gulf Bank

clients and non-Gulf Bank clients alike, and to both Kuwaiti nationals and non-Kuwaiti residents."

As part of Gulf Bank's commitment to reward customers for their loyalty, the Al-Danah account provides account holders with loyalty chances. Loyalty chances are the total chances gained at the end of the previous year, which are then transferred to the current year to reward the customer for their loyalty to the Bank. In that way, all chances garnered by existing Al-Danah customers throughout 2020 have been transferred to the 2021 draws, and this will be repeated in 2022 and onwards. Terms and conditions apply.

Gulf Bank encourages Al-Danah account holders to increase their chances of winning by increasing the amounts deposited into their accounts. With Gulf Bank, depositing into an Al-Danah account is now easier than ever, as clients can deposit into their accounts using the ePay service, available



Mohammed Al-Qattan

through the Bank's Online/Mobile Banking services.

The annual draw for the year 2020 will be held on January 14, 2021 with a grand prize of KD 1.5 million.

The Al-Danah account provides a multitude of valuable services to its customers, including access to an exclusive Al-Danah ATM card, ideal for depositing money into their accounts at any time. Account holders can now also calculate their chances of winning the monthly, quarterly and annual draws using the Al-Danah Calculator, available on Gulf Bank's Online and Mobile Banking App.

Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account is open to both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti residents of Kuwait. A minimum of KD 200 is required to open an account and the same amount must be maintained for customers to be eligible for the upcoming Al-Danah draws. If the customer's account balance falls below KD 200 at any given time, a KD 2 fee will be charged to the account monthly until the minimum balance is met. Customers who open an account and/or deposit more will enter the daily draw within two days. To participate in this year's upcoming quarterly and annual Al-Danah draws, customers must maintain the required balance.

Starting this upcoming January, Gulf Bank's Al-Danah draws will be take place according to the following schedule

Draw	Winners	Draw Prize
Monthly	10 Winners	KD 1,000 per winner
First Quarterly Draw	One Winner	KD 100,000
Second Quarterly Draw	One Winner	KD 1,000,000
Third Quarterly Draw	One Winner	KD 100,000
Annual Grand Prize	One Winner	KD 1,500,000

To deposit into an Al-Danah account, customers can visit one of Gulf Bank's branches, or transfer directly through Gulf Bank's Online/Mobile Banking services. Customers can also direct their queries via WhatsApp on 1805805 for round-the-clock assistance from Gulf Bank representatives, or call the Customer Contact Center on the same number. In addition, customers can visit the dedicated Al-Danah account website to learn more about the account and its winners.

Japan's wasabi producers farm 'green gold'

JAPAN: If you've eaten sushi, you might assume you've tried wasabi. But chances are it was an artificial version that Japanese growers say is a world away from their 'green gold'. Unlike the spicy neon concoction familiar to many fans of Japanese cuisine—which is in fact made from horseradish—real wasabi is pale-green and offers a complex, mildly piquant flavor.

But even in Japan, it's not common fare. That's because the knobby root is so difficult to grow, and consequently expensive to buy, with most of it snapped up by wholesalers. "The most important requirement is crystal-clear water, in abundance," Yoshihiro Shioya, 62, told AFP as he pulled a wasabi root from the sodden soil at his lush, green mountain-side farm on Shizuoka province's Izu peninsula.

"It's absolutely necessary that the water temperature stays between 10 and 15 degrees Celsius, year-round," added Shioya, whose family has cultivated wasabi in the region for seven generations. Patience is key—each wasabi crop can take a whole year or even 18 months to mature in the large man-made terraces, which serve a particular design purpose. "The water flows down from the top of the mountain, which has terraces built into it covered with layers of pebbles and sand that filter and purify it," explained Yasuaki Kohari, of Izu's agricultural cooperative. Once ready, the long roots, topped with a plume of round green leaves, are harvested by hand. The leaves are stripped off and the root, known as a rhizome, is carried away in baskets.

About half of the 550 tons of fresh wasabi grown in Japan last year came from Shizuoka, southwest of the capital Tokyo. Wasabi grows naturally there and has been used in local cuisine for centuries. Legend has it that it was especially loved and popularized by 17th century shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa, a military ruler who was one of the unifiers of Japan. These days it is mostly purchased by high-end restaurants in Tokyo and Osaka.

WTO fails to net deal to halt over fishing

GENEVA: The World Trade Organization on Monday said it had failed to clinch a long-awaited deal on banning subsidies that contributed to over-fishing by a year-end deadline, adding that talks would resume in January. Fresh rounds of meetings will begin in the week starting January 18, said Colombian ambassador Santiago Wills, who has been chairing the negotiations. That means a further extension of discussions that have been going for nearly 20 years.

It is widely agreed that action is needed against over-fishing, which is stripping the seas of a hugely important resource that millions of people depend on for their livelihoods, but two decades of discussions have yet to resolve how to proceed. "It is now clear that we simply cannot make up the time we've lost due the COVID-19 pandemic and bring the negotiations to a successful outcome this year," Wills told reporters. He said there had been a lot of progress during the talks throughout the year, but not enough.

"The delegations put forward many interesting ideas and in some areas there was a willingness to compromise" but added that "major differences remain." The coronavirus crisis forced a work shutdown for several months earlier this year.

While discussions resumed a few weeks ago, the restrictions around physical meetings, as well as the multiple difficulties facing members as a result of the crisis created significant obstacles.

'The urgency is growing'

Wills said he intends to issue a new revised draft text at the end of the week for governments to consider. "The urgency is growing," he stressed. "While we talk, fish stocks continue to decline due to over-fishing. Our mandate remains unchanged."



In this picture taken on November 24, 2020, a woman carries a container of wasabi at a farm in Ikadaba in the city of Izu, Shizuoka prefecture. — AFP photos

'Spicy, but with sweet notes'

Wasabi is prepared by grating the root, usually on a small square device with fine metal teeth or topped with coarse sharkskin—a process done almost immediately before consumption, as its piquancy fades after about 20 minutes. Its spiciness is produced by a chemical called allyl isothiocyanate, which also gives mustard, radish and horseradish their pungency, and which scientists say has antibacterial properties. It is usually served as a complement to raw fish, or alongside buckwheat soba noodles.

Toshiya Matsushita, a sushi chef at a restaurant in central Tokyo with a month-long waiting list, would never dream of using imitation wasabi. "It feels powdery in your mouth and doesn't have much flavor," he said. "Fresh wasabi not only masks the smell of the raw fish, but also heightens its flavour. It is spicy, but with sweet notes." But it doesn't come cheap. He spends more than \$700 a month on wasabi and uses one whole root a day, which he grates freshly for each order at his restaurant, Sushi Matsushita. "The taste, the texture and the spiciness are different according to the way it is grated," he said. — AFP



Japanese sushi master Toshiya Matsushita spreads fresh wasabi on a shrimp at his restaurant in Tokyo. If you've eaten sushi, you might assume you've tried wasabi.



World leaders committed in 2015 to a series of UN targets and one of them mandates the WTO to strike a deal on ending government subsidies worth billions of dollars that contribute to over-fishing by 2020. — AFP

Negotiations began at the WTO in Doha in 2001 and got a much-needed boost with the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. That set the end of 2020 as the non-binding deadline for eliminating subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

WTO's inability to conclude the negotiations by the end of this year marks a clear setback not only for the global trade body, but for the overall UN system which will miss that target.

Despite the years of discussion, multiple fault lines still exist, including over whether there are good subsidies and bad subsidies. European countries and others such as Japan and South Korea want a ban on subsidies, except where it has a positive impact and any potential negative effects can be cancelled out. Others believe, on the contrary, that any subsidy is inherently bad and should be removed, while there are also voices calling for subsidy caps. One of the main stumbling blocks appears to be how developing countries and the poorest nations will be treated. — AFP

Poland taps coal region for first electric car plant

WASRSAW: Poland's first state-backed electric car plant is expected to begin production by 2024 in a region of the EU country that now relies heavily on coal mining for jobs, the ElectroMobility Poland (EMP) carmaker said.

Lagging behind its smaller EU neighbours the Czech Republic and Slovakia in making electric vehicles, Poland presented its own SUV and hatchback prototypes earlier this year under the Izera brand name.

Meeting with local officials there, EMP's president Piotr Zaremba said the plant would be built in Jaworzno, a mining town in the southern Silesian coal basin. With production targeted to begin in three years, the plant is expected to employ some 3,000 people while an additional 12,000 jobs will be created by suppliers and subcontractors.

The value of the investment in the new plant was not immediately clear. A key figure in Poland's plan to transition away from coal, Climate and Environment Minister Michal Kurtyka told local media the investment was "an important element in... creating permanent jobs," in the region as it shifts away from coal.

Now relying on coal for around 80 percent of its electricity and some 80,000 mining sector jobs, Poland plans to phase out its coal mines by 2049. The move puts Poland within reach of meeting the European Union's climate target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, something Warsaw had previously rejected arguing it needed more time to make the transition.

Poland's populist Law and Justice (PiS) government has vowed to create new jobs in coal regions as mines are phased out. Employment in the coal sector is a politically sensitive issue in Poland, a country of 38 million people where miners and their families are still a powerful voting bloc.

Launched in 2016, EMP was formed by four Polish state-owned energy companies including PGE, Energa, Enea and Tauron Polska as part of moves to transition away from fossil fuels. — AFP

UAW auto union settles massive US corruption case

WASHINGTON: The main American auto union announced Monday it had reached an agreement with US authorities to bring to an end a far-reaching corruption scandal that has ensnared two union presidents. United Autoworkers (UAW), which represents workers at the "Big Three" carmakers, has been working for a year to clean up following the theft and bribery scandal that led to convictions for 15 union or Fiat Chrysler executives.

"This civil resolution brings to a close the government's investigation and is testament to the hard work that has been done to make the necessary structural and cultural changes," UAW President Rory Gamble said in a statement. "Under our current leadership, the UAW has proactively weeded out individuals who put their personal benefit over our members' interests and who abused their positions of trust to defraud our union and our membership," he said.

Under the terms of the proposed settlement to the corruption and fraud charges, a federal court would appoint an independent monitor with powers to investigate possible misconduct and discipline UAW officials. The oversight would last for six years but could be ended earlier, according to the statement. The scandal that shook up the once all-powerful union involved two UAW presidents and their underlings who siphoned off \$1.5 million from the membership.

In addition, a UAW vice president and other executives received \$2 million in kickbacks involving contracts with worker-training centers.

The union said it already paid back over \$15 million to the training centers. The UAW also agreed to resolve a tax investigation by making a payment of \$1.5 million to the Internal Revenue Service.

Cigars and golf

The scandal—which took down former UAW presidents Gary Jones and Denis Williams—involved several years of bribes and kickbacks as well as revelations that some union officials and auto executives effectively stole money meant for worker training and spent it on golfing outings, pricey cigars and fancy meals. Alphons Jacobelli, former Fiat Chrysler US labor relations chief, was also convicted in the case, for among other things buying jewelry, designer clothes, furniture, electronics and other luxuries for FCA UAW members, and paying off the mortgage of former UAW vice president General Holiefield, who died in 2015.

Under the settlement, the union will hold a referendum on changing the UAW's election method to a direct model, where the entire membership can vote for the president and executive board members.

US Attorney Matthew Schneider praised Gamble for his efforts to reform the union. "The men and women of the UAW deserve honest and faithful leaders dedicated to serving the best interests of the membership," he said in the statement. — AFP

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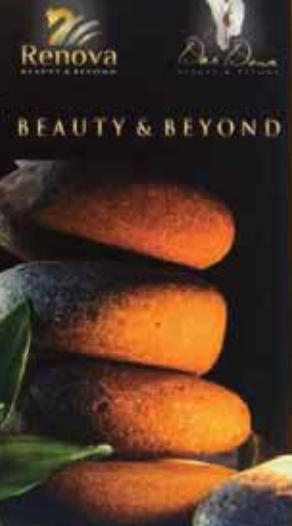
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Lifestyle | Features

OVERCOMING WAR AND DISABILITY: YEMEN'S WOMEN BASKETBALL PLAYERS HIT THE COURT

In Yemen's capital Sanaa, women in long-sleeved athletics shirts raced down a basketball court in wheelchairs, dribbling and passing as a small crowd cheered them on. "If the Yemeni people are suffering from the war, then those with disabilities are suffering twice as much," said Amal Hizam from the sidelines, herself also in a wheelchair. The Arab world's poorest country is devastated by conflict, the novel coronavirus and a humanitarian crisis that the United Nations has called the world's worst. But all that didn't stop a local wheelchair basketball championship going ahead in Sanaa this month.



Five all-women teams were part of the competition, only the second of its kind, including Al-Erada-Arabic for "The Will", and Al-Mustaqbal, or "The Future". Tens of thousands have been killed in Yemen since 2015, when a Saudi-led coalition intervened to support the government after Huthi rebels took control of Sanaa the year before. A UN-brokered agreement reached two years ago between the government and the Iran-backed Huthis offered some hope, but a peaceful settlement has yet to materialize. The female players, some wearing face coverings as well as their headscarves, jostled and shot baskets from sports wheelchairs painted red and light-green at the indoor court. Hizam, assistant director of Yemen's sports federation for people with disabilities, said initiatives such as the tournament were "practically non-existent".

'A gift, not an obstacle'

"I wish society wouldn't look down on those who are disabled, and that it would see our capabilities," said one of the Al-Erada players, 28-year-old Tahani Al-Omari. "Disability is a gift, not an obstacle," she told AFP, wearing her team's striped orange vest. Teenage girls in the bleachers squirmed with excitement, throwing their arms into the air to cheer on the players. Yemen's conflict has displaced some 3.3 million people, and around 80 percent of the population needs humanitarian aid and protection, according to the UN.

There are estimated to be around four



Disabled Yemeni women take part in a local wheelchair basketball championship in Yemen's capital Sanaa. — AFP photos

Cartoon cat helps keep Tunisia's revolutionary flame alight

When Tunisia's embattled dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali delivered a last-ditch speech promising new freedoms to a country in revolt, Nadia Khiari sketched her cat delivering the same address to a group of mice. The next day, on January 14, 2011, Ben Ali fled into exile, forced out by weeks of unprecedented mass protests against his rule. Ten years later, the cat remains in rude health, and his cartoon alter-ego Willis from Tunis has become an icon of the revolution. "I decided to use this character to tell the story of what was happening in my country," said Khiari, a painter and lecturer in fine arts. Pouncing on Tunisia's unprecedented new freedoms, she began posting bitter and witty political cartoons on Facebook, all featuring cats.

"For me as an artist, it was a true revolution, because from one day to the next I was able to express myself freely," she said. Her audience, initially just family and friends, has grown to over 55,000 followers today. In November she published her latest Willis from Tunis book, a selection of her best work over the decade since the uprising. Tunisia's revolution, with its demands for "work, freedom and national dignity", sparked a string of revolts across the Arab world. The North African country has since been praised for its democratic transition. But many Tunisians, disillusioned by economic woes, official corruption and pitiful public services, say they have gained little apart from to right to say what they think.

In one of Khiari's cartoons from 2018, Willis lies silently on the floor, a boot



This image grab from AFP TV shows Tunisian cartoonist Nadia Khiari, creator of the "Willis from Tunis" cartoon cat series, poses with her latest Willis book published in November.

stamped on his face. "Before the revolution," reads the caption. The next frame shows the same cat under the same boot, but letting out a scream: "AAAAIIIE!" The caption reads: "Today, happily we have freedom of expression."

Growing corruption

Khiari says she has always enjoyed drawing, but Ben Ali's fall let her creativity out of the bag. Before the protests against his rule, she had hinted at political subjects in the titles of her paintings, but "a satirical picture as such, a political cartoon-no, never," she said. Today, she no longer pussyfoots around tough subjects. Instead, she takes regular swipes at Tunisia's post-revolt political class, seen by many as just as corrupt as Ben Ali's regime. "Hide your wallet," one of her cartoon cats tells another as they walk towards the government's head-

quarters in Tunis. "There are lots of robberies in this area."

This Thursday will mark 10 years since Tunisian fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi, 26, set fire to himself, sparking the uprising. Ahead of the anniversary, Tunisia has seen protests demanding jobs and investment in long-marginalized regions, amid an economic crisis amplified by the coronavirus pandemic. Thousands of medics from crumbling public hospitals protested last week to demand the health minister's resignation, after a young doctor plunged to his death in a hospital lift shaft.

The tragedy was widely blamed on official corruption and indifference. In this environment, Khiari's cartoons have struck a chord. "The government fights corruption," reads the title of another of her cartoons, showing a cat in suit and tie sitting behind a desk. "If you want to speed up the process," the cat purrs with a wide grin, "that can be arranged."

Taboos swept away

Khiari says that while the media describes Tunisia as a "laboratory of democracy", the messy reality is closer to that of a building site. But, she told AFP at a chic art and craft boutique she runs with her husband, the revolution did sweep away "lots of taboos." "We talk about religious questions. We talk about sexual questions, homosexuals, women's bodies, power," she said.

She regularly tackles themes of women's rights and gender inequality in her work. In one cartoon, a female kitten asks why her brother gets more pocket money than herself. "It's to prepare you for later on," her mother replies. Khiari is on the board of Cartooning for Peace, set up by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and French cartoonist Plantu to "fight with humor for the respect of cultures and freedoms". That is an ongoing battle in Tunisia, where press freedom watchdog RSF says the climate for the media and journalists has worsened since the election of a new president, Kais Saied, in October 2019. For Khiari, that means the fight that began a decade ago is far from over. "The attempts to silence us again have never ended, never, because freedom of expression bothers (some people)," she said. "So unfortunately it's a struggle every day to preserve that freedom of expression." — AFP



Tunisian cartoonist Nadia Khiari, creator of the "Willis from Tunis" cartoon cat series, poses with her latest Willis book published in November. — AFP photos

Cairo restored hieroglyph typecaster tells new stories

The French-made typecasting machine is over a century old, the Egyptian hieroglyphs 5,000 years. Now, in a Cairo workshop, the mechanical marvel has come to life once again. Out of action for about three decades, a massive Foucher hot metal typecaster built in 1902 has been restored to its former glory. The French Institute of Oriental Archaeology in Cairo, or IFAO, recently showed off the machine which allows the printing of ancient Egyptian inscriptions. Over a century ago designers created a font of thousands of hieroglyphs and cast them in lead, so they could be arranged line by line, covered in ink and printed onto paper.

"We managed to restart it in September after several repairs and purchasing new parts," said Mathieu Gousse, the IFAO's publishing director, of the typecaster. "We were very moved," he told AFP, when he saw an ancient Egyptian symbol, the Ankh or key of life, printed onto paper from one of the letters shaped from molten lead. "We are at a pivotal moment... when we

will be able to transmit knowledge and manual labour skills to a younger generation."

Veteran machine operator Hossam Saad, 63, has come out of retirement to train staff on how to use the machine. "It's probably the only workshop in the world using this machine, which really doesn't exist anymore," he said. Hani Moawad, 37, one of the apprentices, was impressed by the device dating back to an age long before modern off-set or digital printing technology.

"I've never seen anything like this before, from that era," he marveled. "And it actually still works perfectly fine." Gousse, the director, said he would like to collaborate with calligraphers and artists to publish one-off, special edition productions. The IFAO, founded in 1880, boasts a unique library with some 92,000 volumes in the field of Egyptology, and its archaeologists are deployed around 35 excavation sites throughout Egypt. — AFP



Women walk outside the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology in Cairo.



A man operates a machine which allows the printing of ancient Egyptian inscriptions.



A picture shows text in French, Arabic and Egyptian hieroglyphs behind a machine which allows the printing of ancient Egyptian inscriptions.



Puppets of Grilli's family collection are pictured on the stage at the "Alfa Theatre" in Turin. — AFP photos



Marco Grilli holds two puppets in the parterre at the "Alfa Theatre" in Turin.



Augusto Grilli holds a puppet in his "Alfa Theatre" laboratory in Turin.



Augusto Grilli repairs a puppet.



Puppet heads lies in a drawer at the "Alfa Theatre" laboratory in Turin.



From left Marco, Maria Rosa and Augusto Grilli pose for a picture.

CHRISTMAS GIFT SPARKS LIFELONG PASSION FOR PUPPETEER

Augusto Grilli's eyes still light up when he recalls receiving the little theatre and 12 puppets almost 75 years ago, a childhood gift that sparked a career and a lifelong passion. "It was in 1946, the first Christmas after the war, a moment of celebration, of joy—a very special atmosphere," recounted the elegantly-dressed Italian, now 80. "I woke up and among the gifts from 'Baby Jesus' was a big box containing a theatre and puppets. It was love at first sight." He turned out to have a talent for marionettes-puppets with strings—and soon became something of a star in his school in Turin, northern Italy. "I used to put on a show, they made me go to all the classes in primary school because the children had so much fun," he told AFP. But while he was happy to show off his toys, "no child was allowed to touch them", Grilli said: "The theatre was always a sacred place."

A family affair

The little gold and white theatre is today carefully preserved in one of the countless plastic boxes waiting to be taken to the new International Puppet Museum. A long-time dream of Grilli and his wife Mariarosa, 78, the museum is due to open in 2023 in Turin, financed both privately and publicly with the help of different institutions. The Grilli family has a collection of more than 20,000 objects from



Augusto Grilli checks his puppets on the stage at the "Alfa Theatre" in Turin.

around the world, everything from theatres, marionettes and glove puppets to shadow figures and silhouettes. There are around 2,000 from Asia, and some of the items date back to the 18th century.

As well as hosting exhibitions, the museum will put on shows in a 120-seat theatre, hold restoration workshops and maintain an archive. The couple came up with the idea 20 years ago but have finally brought it to fruition with the help of their son Marco, himself a puppeteer. "We want to set up a foundation so that this heritage is protected," Grilli said, to ensure that "the tradition is not lost".

Mozart and Rossini

Puppetry has a rich history in both Asia and Europe, taking many different forms on both small and big stages—but Grilli warns it is becoming a lost art form. Before World War II, he says, Italy had around 40,000 companies of puppeteers, but afterwards, there were just 7,000. "Today, there are only two or three puppeteers working with string puppets and 400 or 500 working with hand puppets—but only 10 to 20 are worth seeing," he said. Initially, for Grilli, it was just a hobby.

Due to what he calls "paternal demands", he studied mechanical engineering and kept the puppets to show

friends. But in 1978, he took the leap and went professional, putting on shows for children and adults alike, including lyrical works such as Mozart's "The Magic Flute" or Rossini's "The Barber of Seville". "It's impossible to describe how I feel when I'm on stage, it's so profound. The puppeteer is part of the puppet, which is itself part of the puppeteer," he enthused. In his tiny workshop near Alfa Teatro, the theatre he opened aged just 30 with his wife, Grilli works on his precious puppets.

A drawer is filled with heads, while hundreds of eyes look out from an old wooden box. "The puppets get damaged when they are used," he explained, pointing to a ripped shoe. His son Marco has lived and breathed this magical world since childhood, and at 14 put on his first public show. Now 47, he has sought to carve out his own path by using hand puppets, and in 2010 was crowned the best in his field in Italy. He says puppetry is about "entertainment and expression of the childish part of all of us, and our desire to keep playing".

"It's also the pure expression of an actor who sacrifices his ego to pass the emotions onto the puppets," he said. "When you enter this world, you can't let go," he added, saying he was keen to "carry the puppet concept into the future". — AFP

Grassed up: Hapless drug suspect's phone reveals stash to cops

A suspected drug dealer stopped by British police caught a lucky break when they found nothing in his car—until he pulled out his phone to access a translation app and inadvertently showed officers a video of his cannabis farm.

Police in Sunderland made a routine stop of a Mercedes car and noticed a strong smell of cannabis when they interviewed its driver and passenger, Northumbria Police said in a statement on Monday.

A search of the vehicle yielded nothing

suspicious, but then one of the suspects, who did not speak English, gave the game away. "In a bid to fully understand officers, he opened up his phone to click on Google Translate," police said. "Much to his horror, a video appeared on his screen

which showed a significant cannabis farm in operation," said Sergeant Steve Passey. "It's safe to say the suspect was a little shocked and tried to quickly lock his phone in the hope that nobody had seen." Police later raided the farm and found a

"sophisticated cannabis operation" of 600 cannabis plants over three floors. The two men were arrested on suspicion of the production of a Class B drug and were released on police bail. — AFP



People dressed as Santa Claus take part in a charity event in Pristina to raise funds for families in need in Kosovo, amid the COVID-19 outbreak, caused by the novel coronavirus. — AFP

Santa 'immune' to COVID, can still make Christmas rounds

The pandemic need not deter Santa from travelling the world and handing out gifts this coming Christmas because he is immune to COVID-19, a World Health Organization official said Monday. As the coronavirus pandemic continues to rage, WHO's lead on the crisis Maria Van Kerkhove told a press briefing she understood many children were worried how the virus could impact Father Christmas. "I understand the concern for Santa, because he is of older age," she said, responding to a journalist's question about whether the fantasy, gift-bearing figure, known for his grey whiskers and big belly, might not be at heightened risk from COVID.

"I can tell you that Santa Claus is immune to this virus," said Van Kerkhove, who herself has two young sons. "We had a brief chat with him and he is doing very well and Mrs Claus is doing very well, and they are very busy right now," she said. She also said WHO had heard from a number of world leaders, who said they had relaxed the quarantine measures that are hampering global travel and would allow Santa and his flying reindeer to enter their airspace. "So he will be able to travel in and out of the airspace and be able to deliver presents to children," she said. But while seeming eager to help spread the holiday cheer, Van Kerkhove also stuck to

the WHO's role of advising how best to stay safe and halt transmission of the virus that has killed more than 1.6 million people in the past year.

"I think it is very important that all the children of the world understand that physical distancing by Santa Claus and also of the children themselves must be strictly enforced," she said. Kids should listen to their parents and "make sure that they go to bed early on Christmas Eve," she said, stressing that "Santa will be able to travel around the world to deliver presents." — AFP

Alligator that survived Berlin WWII bombing on display in Moscow

An alligator believed to have belonged to Adolf Hitler that died aged 84 has been taxidermied and put on display in Moscow. The Darwin Museum said the alligator named Saturn was put on public display several months after the Moscow Zoo donated his remains. "The installation of Saturn in the permanent exhibition is the culmination of six months of work by our taxidermists and the entire museum," it said in a statement. The museum said specialists began work in June, treating Saturn's scales with a special solution.

Born in the United States in 1936, Saturn was moved to the Berlin zoo where he escaped on November 23,

1943, after a bombing raid that killed several of his fellow reptiles. In 1946, he was found by British soldiers who handed him over to the Soviet authorities. His whereabouts during the intervening three years are "a mystery", the Moscow Zoo said when Saturn died May 24. When Saturn was brought to Moscow in July 1946, rumors began circulating that he had been part of Adolf Hitler's personal collection, the zoo said. Museums in Russia however are closed until January 16 as part of efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus. — AFP



A picture shows specialists working on the taxidermied alligator named Saturn at a workshop of the Darwin Museum in Moscow. — AFP

Photo of the day



Egor Posokhin performs at Rosa Khutor Peak in Sochi, Russia. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Dalin leads Vendee Globe down to the ‘freezing’ south

PARIS: A gripping Vendee Globe entered a new phase on Monday as the three leaders, separated by just 70 nautical miles, headed towards the Antarctic Exclusion Zone (AEZ) in search of the winds that will drive them up into the Pacific Ocean. Charlie Dalin still leads in Apivia, as he has done for the last three weeks, but the gap has shrunk from 300nm last week to just 65nm at 1700GMT Monday. Yannick Bestaven, who is second in Maitre Coq IV, and Thomas Ruyant, another 5nm back in LinkedOut, give chase.

The three frontrunners crossed the longitude of Cape Leeuwin, on the south-western tip of Australia, on Sunday within three hours and 20 minutes of each other, making this ninth edition of the solo non-stop round-the-world race the tightest yet. On the back of a low pressure system, these three now have the chance to take advantage of fast sailing conditions to open up a big lead on the rest of the fleet that has been chasing them hard.

Fourth-placed Damien Seguin is 321nm behind Dalin. The 33-strong fleet, now down to 27, left Les Sables d'Olonne on November 8 and the leaders, all with the new generation 'foiler' boats, are now approaching the halfway point in the race which takes them on a 24,296 nautical mile trip. Sailing to the south of Australia, Dalin has chosen to move away from New Zealand to navigate along the AEZ, set in place by the race director to protect the skipper from 'growlers', small blocks that have detached from larger icebergs and are drifting across the sea.

"I passed Cape Leeuwin in the lead and now we can dive further south to get strong winds along the ice zone," Dalin said Monday as he braced himself for more cold days and freezing nights. "In the next few days, we will change the system, we will have a slightly different wind along the ice zone, we will continue to advance, but the wind will gradually turn." —AFP

Laxman and ‘Monkeygate’: Five classic Australia v India clashes

Australia and India renew their rivalry in Adelaide

ADELAIDE: Australia and India have been playing Test cricket against each other since 1947 and they renew their rivalry in Adelaide tomorrow. Some of the most competitive clashes have come since they began contesting the Border-Gavaskar Trophy - named after the first two batsmen to pass 10,000 runs - in the 1996-97 season. AFP looks back at five memorable Tests:

Tendulkar conquers Warne

Sachin Tendulkar and spin king Shane Warne had many epic battles. But in 1998 at the Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai, Warne drew first blood by having the batting master caught for four in the slips, then he ran through the middle order to restrict India to 257 in their first innings. In reply, Australia made 328, helped by Ian Healy's 90. This set the stage for Warne v Tendulkar round two, and it was the batsman who came out on top on a dusty, spin-friendly wicket. He produced one of his most dazzling innings, taking apart Warne and fellow spinner Gavin Robertson in a magnificent unbeaten 155 from 191 balls that changed the course of the match. India declared and set Australia 348 to win, and they were bundled out for just 168 on the final day with Tendulkar, not surprisingly, named man of the match.

Laxman's epic stand

The second Test at Eden Gardens, Kolkata, in 2001 was all about one of India's greatest comebacks, and is regarded among the most exciting matches of all time. After Australia posted a big total of 445, with Matthew

Hayden making 97 and Steve Waugh 110, their bowling attack led by Glenn McGrath skittled the home side for 171. The follow-on was enforced with India in real danger of going 2-0 down in the series before VVS Laxman (281) and Rahul Dravid (180) knuckled down in a memorable and gritty 376-run stand for the fifth wicket as India made 657 for 7 before declaring. Australia were left with a victory target of 384, but six wickets from Harbhajan Singh steered India to an unlikely 171-run win.

'Monkeygate' scandal

Perhaps the most controversial and spiteful Test between the two nations, the 2008 Sydney encounter was dubbed the "Monkeygate" affair, marred by umpiring errors and accusations of racism. Ricky Ponting's men won by 122 runs for a record-breaking 16th consecutive Test victory with just seven balls remaining in a breathless finish after part-time spinner Michael Clarke took three wickets in five deliveries. But it is infamously remembered for Harbhajan Singh being charged with racial abuse and banned for three Tests for allegedly calling Andrew Symonds - who has West Indian ancestry - a "monkey" during the third day's play. The row saw India threaten to pull out of the tour and on appeal the ban was lifted and the charge downgraded to abusive language, leaving relations between the teams tense.

Spinners rule in Bangalore

Australia took a 1-0 lead into the fiery Test in Bangalore in 2017 and when Nathan Lyon took 8-50 to bamboozle

the Indian batsmen for 189, it looked like the tourists would go 2-0 up. But in a bad-tempered few days, Ravi Jadeja picked up 6-63 to ensure the tourists led by just 87. A stylish 92 from Cheteshwar Pujara coupled with six wickets for Josh Hazlewood then saw India all out for 274 to set Australia 188 to win. They crumbled for 112 with Ravi Ashwin becoming the fourth bowler in the match to claim six wickets — the first time this had happened in Test history. But the landmark was overshadowed by Virat Kohli accusing Australia of consulting their dressing room over DRS decisions from the field. Asked whether Australia cheated, a fired-up Kohli said "I didn't say that, you did."

Long drought ends in Adelaide

With Steve Smith and David Warner banned for ball-tampering, India capitalized to end a decade-long wait for a Test victory in Australia when they bowled out the home side for 291 to clinch the first game of their four-match series in 2018-19. The hosts were set 323 to win, a score never before successfully achieved in a fourth innings run chase at the Adelaide Oval, with Australia falling a nail-biting 31 runs short despite a battling 60 from Shaun Marsh. India put themselves in a position to win on the back of Cheteshwar Pujara's 123 in the first innings and 71 in the second during a match where wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant equalled the world record of most catches taken in a Test at 11. The last Test India had won in Australia was at the WACA Ground in Perth in 2008, and it helped set them up for their first-ever series win Down Under. —AFP

you're a little bit out of control."

There are four teams involved in this week's warm-up events - Team NZ and the challengers Italy's Luna Rossa, American Magic and INEOS Team UK. There will be three days of America's Cup World Series racing from December 17-19, followed by the Christmas Cup race on December 20. Results will have no bearing on the America's Cup proper, it is more a chance to test technology and size up the competition in race conditions.

Aucklanders will also have the chance to watch the racing in the city's harbor from the shoreline for the first time, unlike previous regattas at the venue, which were staged well off the coast. Defender TNZ appears to be the early pacesetter, dominating practice sessions, followed by Luna Rossa, American Magic and Team UK. Bookmakers have the New Zealanders as short-priced favorites for the overall event, predicting they will retain the trophy in March. —AFP

America's Cup 'flying machines' lift off for opening dogfights

AUCKLAND: The cutting-edge "flying" yachts created for next year's America's Cup will be tested in race conditions for the first time when a series of warm-up events begins in Auckland tomorrow. The 23-metre (75-foot) yachts feature innovative foil arms, which lift the hull above the surface of the water into the air, reducing drag and increasing speed.

In full flight, the yachts exceed 50 knots while the entire vessel is balanced precariously mid-air on carbon fibre foils. Team New Zealand skipper Glenn Ashby said he felt like an astronaut when

sailing the defending champion's boat, Te Rehutai. "It is a boat and it has to go through the water, but it's also a flying machine," he said. "The hairs on the back of your neck stand up when this thing goes in the water." Ashby led the Team NZ campaign that won the America's Cup in Bermuda in 2017, giving the Kiwis hosting rights for the next regatta in March 2021.

The yachts used in Bermuda also foiled, but they were much smaller at 15 meters and had added stability because they were twin-hulled catamarans. The team NZ helmsman said the new class of monohull yachts were bigger and faster than their predecessors, producing "knife-edge" sailing that pushed the foiling concept to the limit. "The margins of getting it right and wrong are pretty tight," Ashby said. "You're in control while being on that knife-edge, all the time you're deciding how hard you want to push things, there are definitely times

Khaitan Sports Club thump Yarmouk 2-1

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Khaitan Sports Club Tennis team defeated their Yarmouk counterpart in the open tennis tournament by 2-1. The final match was attended by Kuwait Tennis Federation treasurer Ali Al-Daihani, Board member Khalid Al-Musallam and technical director Abbas Al-Busairi. Yarmouk's player Essa Qabazard defeated Khaitan's Abdallah Al-Qallaf 6/1-6/1 in the first individual match, then Khaitan's Ali Abdelreda equalized for his team by defeating Yarmouk's Bader Abdelaziz 6/2-6/3.

In the doubles' decisive match, Khaitan's Ahmad Abdelrahman and Hamid Al-Sulaiteen defeated Yarmouk's Abdelhameed Al-Shatti and Ali Al-Shatti 6/0-7/5. KTF treasurer Ali Al-Daihani congratulated the winners and wished the rest good luck in the rest of tournaments. Al-Daihani lauded the players. He said that the federation is preparing for Kuwait Open Tennis tournament in February to coincide with Kuwait's celebration of its national and liberation days.



News in brief

Newcastle players 'not well'

LONDON: Newcastle coach Steve Bruce said yesterday two of his players are "not well at all" after contracting coronavirus. The Magpies' Premier League match against Aston Villa on December 4 was postponed and the club's training ground was closed for more than a week after an outbreak of the illness among Bruce's squad. Defender Federico Fernandez was one of a number of players infected, but he is in contention to face Leeds on Wednesday after his latest negative test. Bruce refused to reveal the identities of the players still dealing with the virus, but admitted he is concerned about their health, as well as two members of his backroom staff who also remain ill. "One of the players who had coronavirus is back - that's Fernandez," Bruce said yesterday. —AFP

Cyclist Ricco banned for life

ROME: Italian cyclist Riccardo Ricco, who was thrown off the Tour de France in 2008 for taking a blood-boosting drug, has been banned for life, the national anti-doping agency announced. The 37-year-old had already been handed a 12-year ban that was due to expire in 2024. He must also pay a 4,000 euro (\$4,850) fine and costs of 378 euros, Nado Italia said in a statement issued Monday. "The first section of the national anti-doping court, in the disciplinary proceedings against Mr Riccardo Ricco... imposes a life ban," the statement said. A once promising rider known as "The Cobra", Ricco's career collapsed when he was found to have taken the banned blood-booster CERA during the 2008 tour. —AFP

Federer in 'race against time'

GENEVA: Swiss tennis great Roger Federer said he was in a "race against time" to be fit for the Australian Open as his recovery from two rounds of knee surgery takes longer than expected. The 39-year-old has been out of action since February, when he underwent keyhole surgery on his right knee. In June, Federer revealed a follow-up operation and called off his 2020 season. But despite months of rehabilitation, the 20-time Grand Slam champion said he was still not "100 percent" for the Australian Open, which looks likely to be delayed from January to February over coronavirus restrictions. "It's a race against time. Of course it would help if I had a little bit more time. But it's going to be close," Federer said at an awards ceremony in Switzerland, according to Swiss media. "I would have hoped that I'd be at a 100 percent already in October. But I'm not at this level even today. It will be a close call for the Australian Open," he added. —AFP

Ulissi forced out of action

PARIS: Italian cyclist Diego Ulissi will miss at least the next few months of competition due to myocarditis, his team UAE Emirates announced on Monday. The 31-year-old, who has notably won eight Giro d'Italia stages including two last month, said he could not "hide" his "feeling of worry". "I never had any signs. I will now take a break which I hope will be temporary, knowing that health is the priority," he said. Myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle, was detected during routine examinations requested by the International Cycling Union (UCI). —AFP

Sports

Tokyo unveils plan for socially distanced Olympic torch relay

Tokyo governor sees 'no circumstances' for cancelling Olympics

TOKYO: Tokyo 2020 organizers said yesterday they will press ahead with a nationwide, socially distanced torch relay - 100 days before the Olympic flame begins its coronavirus-delayed journey around Japan. Despite a recent spike in infections, Games officials believe the relay can be held safely-and in front of spectators-with around 10,000 runners carrying the torch around Japan's 47 prefectures. The torch relay was postponed just two days before it was due to begin earlier this year when the decision was taken to delay the Games by 12 months because of the pandemic.

Now it will start on March 25, 2021, with Olympic officials to lay out detailed anti-virus measures in the coming weeks. "We want to make sure that everyone's health is secure-the spectators, the torchbearers, the officials and the citizens in the local areas," said Tokyo Games Vice-Director General Yukihiko Nunomura. "We want the runners to smile and we want the spectators to smile as they welcome the torch. We want to generate excitement so that people really feel that the Tokyo Olympics are coming."

The announcement comes after a poll released earlier Tuesday by national broadcaster NHK showed a majority of Japanese people oppose holding the Games next year, favoring another delay or cancellation of the massive event. Japan has seen a relatively small Covid-19 outbreak overall, but has been battling record numbers of new cases in recent weeks. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on Monday suspended a controversial domestic tourism campaign and urged residents to reconsider New Year travel plans. Guidelines on whether Olympic torchbearers will need to wear masks have not yet been issued, but this month an interim report said participants will be told to keep their distance and refrain from talking loudly.

Local celebrations

The Olympic flame, which had already arrived in

Japan from Greece when the relay was postponed, is currently on display in Tokyo. Starting in the Fukushima region-which was hit by nuclear disaster after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami-it will crisscross Japan before arriving in Tokyo for the July 23 opening ceremony. Organizers announced some minor changes to the relay route yesterday, but reaffirmed their commitment to visiting every part of the country. "We hope that the power of the torch relay can be exposed to as big an audience as possible," said Nunomura. "We also will be providing online opportunities for people to watch the torch go around Japan, and we will be sharing that with the entire world."

Torchbearers who were selected for the original relay will be invited back next year, although Tokyo 2020 chiefs acknowledged not everyone will be able to do so. The relay will visit 859 municipalities around Japan, with a local celebration welcoming the flame to be held at the end of each day. Organizers announced changes to several celebration venues, with festivities set to be simplified in a bid to cut costs. The postponement of the Games has added at least an extra \$2.4 billion to an already outsized budget, set last year at around \$13 billion.

Cancelling Olympics?

Meanwhile, Tokyo's governor said she can see "no circumstances" under which the virus-postponed 2020 Olympics will be cancelled, despite rising coronavirus infections in Japan and continued public scepticism. In an interview with AFP, Yuriko Koike warned that the fate of the Tokyo Games would impact future Olympics, including the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing and the 2024 Summer Games in Paris. She acknowledged that a majority of the Japanese public now opposes hosting the Games next year, but said she was convinced those concerns could be overcome.

"The Japanese public and Tokyo residents are



TOKYO: Tokyo 2020 employee Hanae Ito (right) and representatives from four prefectures, Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima and Tokyo who are displayed on a remote television, attend a press conference yesterday. —AFP

looking at the current conditions," Koike said yesterday. "We are preparing for the future." The 2020 Games are the first to be postponed during peacetime, and organizers and officials have been at pains to insist that they can go ahead next year. A further postponement has been ruled out by Olympic and Japanese officials, and Koike said "there are no circumstances" under which she could envisage the Games being cancelled.

"Citizens of the world are seeing the Tokyo Games as a symbol that humanity will have defeated the coronavirus, that will lead to the Beijing Winter Games and then the Paris Games

after that," she said. "Unless Tokyo takes full efforts against the coronavirus, then what will happen to Paris four years from now?" she said. "I think we have to make Tokyo a success first, otherwise it will leave a serious impact on Paris." Domestic opinion appears at odds with the confident tones sounded by Japanese officials and organizers. A poll released yesterday by national broadcaster NHK found just 27 percent of respondents support holding the Games next year, with 32 percent backing cancellation and 31 percent favoring a further postponement.—Agencies

Kim A-Lim storms to US Women's Open crown

HOUSTON: South Korea's Kim A-Lim produced a stunning finish to snatch her maiden major victory with a one-shot win in the delayed finale to the US Women's Open on Monday. The 25-year-old, who had never won a tournament outside of South Korea before, rattled in three consecutive birdies on the 16th, 17th and 18th holes to finish with a four-under-par 67 at Champions Golf Club in Houston.

That finish left Kim on three under for the tournament, one shot clear of compatriot and world number one Ko Jin-Young and Amy Olson of the United States, who had led for much of the final round. Japan's Hinako Shibuno was fourth on one under after draining a monstrous 30-foot birdie putt on the 18th. "I decided to come out today, be aggressive, attack the pin," Kim said afterwards. "It worked out today."

Kim, playing in the US Women's Open for the first time, had started the day as a long-shot for the title, five shots adrift of third round leader Shibuno. However she climbed up the leaderboard with a superb performance over the front nine, making birdies on the 5th, 6th and 8th holes to reach the turn at two under for the tournament. Her progress looked to have stalled when she posted back-to-

back bogeys on the 10th and 11th holes to drop to even par. Olson, meanwhile, who had started the day just one shot adrift of Shibuno, took sole possession of the lead after recovering from a nightmare start.

Family tragedy

The 28-year-old from North Dakota - chasing her first ever win on the LPGA Tour - had been rocked by a family tragedy after it emerged on Sunday her father-in-law had died suddenly on Saturday. Olson, one of 18 players who never teed off their final round on Sunday after heavy rain deluged the course, started sluggishly, with a trio of bogeys on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th holes threatening to torpedo her hopes. However she bounced back with consecutive birdies on the 5th and 6th holes to move back to two under for the tournament. By the time she reached the 11th hole, Olson was sitting on a two-shot lead and looking increasingly comfortable. However Kim's late charge changed the complexion of the round, with her birdie on the 16th leaving her one behind Olson.

Another birdie on the 17th gave her a share of the lead with the American, and on the 18th a superb wedge from 119 yards left her with an eight foot birdie to take the lead which she duly rolled in. That piled the pressure on Olson, who was suddenly left needing to pick up shots to get back in contention. Instead, her composure deserted her. She bogeyed the par-three 16th after hitting through the green with her tee shot, leaving her two off the pace with two to play. Olson however could only manage

"You can just see that France are really building a team at the moment of great depth. You can see that all their planning is around 2023," Foster said after Monday's draw in Paris. "We'll be expecting a vibrant French team in a country that love their rugby. We know they'll have massive support behind them. "But that's what makes World Cups so special, those sort of games. And they're games that we thrive on. That we look forward to. We know that if you're not at your best, you're going to struggle."

England were drawn with Japan and Argentina in Pool D, Australia have Wales and Fiji in Pool C and South Africa will play Six Nations sides Ireland and Scotland in a treacherous Pool B. Australian media said the draw was a "dream" for the Wallabies, as well as England. But Australia coach Dave Rennie said: "There's no easy pool." "If you look at the three teams that we know are confirmed in this pool they're all really tough," he added. "We're all three years away, our teams are going to change a lot, there'll be other



TEXAS: Kim A-Lim of Korea poses for a photo with the trophy after winning the 75th US Women's Open Championship at Champions Golf Club Cypress Creek Course on December 14, 2020. —AFP

a par on the 17th, leaving her needing an eagle on the 18th to force a tie.

That proved to be beyond her though, although a long birdie putt gave the American a share of second place alongside Ko. "It's been a long two days, that's for sure," said Olson, who wiped away tears as she left the 18th green. "The Lord carried me through today. I definitely didn't have a lot of strength on my own. It's been really tough. "It just makes you realize how much bigger life is than golf." The tournament - the final major of the season - had been shifted from its slot in early June because of disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic.—AFP

guys that will come through and I imagine we'll all be better in three years time."

Upset specialists Japan, who beat South Africa in 2015 when led by current England coach Eddie Jones, and stunned Ireland and Scotland en route to the 2019 quarter-finals, were hoping Jones takes them lightly. "I hope that he thinks that we're far too behind England to be worried about at this stage," Japan coach Jamie Joseph said.

"He's got an intimate knowledge of pretty much everything in rugby apart from what we do. We're adapting all the time." Meanwhile South Africa face an uphill battle to become the World Cup's first four-time winners as they take on both Ireland and Scotland in Pool B. "It's exciting, really, to know who your RWC pool opponents will be," Springboks skipper Siya Kolisi said. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, seeding levels for the tournament draw were based on the world rankings on January 1, 2020, instead of after the autumn internationals as originally intended.—AFP

'Massive support': All Blacks drawn with WCup hosts

PARIS: The All Blacks were left to contemplate a tough pool fixture with hosts France at the 2023 Rugby World Cup on Tuesday, while England and Australia secured a "dream" ride - but champions South Africa were plunged into the tournament's deadliest group. New Zealand coach Ian Foster, under fire after a mixed first season in charge, admitted the three-time World Cup-winners faced a challenge from an increasingly impressive France and their home fans. The All Blacks beat France in the 1987 and 2011 finals, but they famously went down to Les Bleus in the 1999 semis and 2007 quarters.

Integrated plan to increase women's presence in sports

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: A member of Kuwait Olympic Committee Board Fatima Hayat said there is an integrated plan to increase women's presence on sports federations' boards and women's role in taking sports decisions. Speaking during a seminar titled "Equality between the two genders in sports", Hayat said Kuwaiti female athletes are at the start of their sports activities at both the technical and administrative levels. The seminar was moderated by Asrar Al-Ansari.

Hayat gave an example that there are two women board members among 78 positions in 16 sports federations, while women only have a 2 percent representation in comprehensive clubs. She said women's

membership in specialized clubs stands at 15 percent (34 women out of 234 members). Hayat lauded the efforts of the Public Authority for Sports, represented by Director General Dr Humoud Fulait and his deputy Dr Saqer Al-Mulla, as well as the Olympic Committee and its Chairman Sheikh Fahad Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad, and their keen interest in advancing women's sport.

"We are working at the women's sports committee of KOC in cooperation PAS to prepare an integrated plan to develop women's sport in order to increase women's representation," Hayat said. Kuwait Club Board Member Balsam Al-Ayoub said there are several stages to enable women's sports, which will start with the family and the society before



reaching the sports sector.

She said women's presence on the board of Kuwait Club is exceptional. Ayoub said women's sports witnessed a good period in the seven-

ties, which later waned. Captain Fajer Ahmad said the bad results of women's sports abroad are due to a lack of correct sporting upbringing at an early age.

Live Matches on TV (Local Timings)	
ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE	
Arsenal v Southampton	21:00
beIN Sports HD 1	
Leeds United v Newcastle United	21:00
beIN Sports HD 7	
Leicester City v Everton	21:00
beIN Sports HD 2	
Liverpool v Tottenham Hotspur	23:00
beIN Sports HD 1	
Fulham v Brighton & Hove Albion	23:00
beIN Sports HD 7	
West Ham United v Crystal Palace	23:00
beIN Sports HD 2	
SPANISH LEAGUE	
Real Madrid CF v Athletic de Bilbao	00:00
beIN Sports HD 3	
FC Barcelona v Real Sociedad	23:00
beIN Sports HD 3	
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE	
Juventus v Atalanta	20:30
beIN Sports HD 4	
ACF Fiorentina v US Sassuolo Calcio	22:45
beIN Sports	
Genoa CFC v AC Milan	22:45
beIN Sports HD 5	
Internazionale Milano v SSC Napoli	22:45
beIN Sports HD 4	
Parma Calcio 1913 v Cagliari Calcio	22:45
beIN Sports	
Spezia Calcio v Bologna FC	22:45
beIN Sports	
Hellas Verona FC v UC Sampdoria	22:45
beIN Sports	
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA	
FC Schalke 04 v SC Freiburg	20:30
beIN Sports	
FC Koln v Bayer 04 Leverkusen	22:30
beIN Sports	
DSC Arminia Bielefeld v FC Augsburg	22:30
beIN Sports	
FC Bayern Munich v VfL Wolfsburg	22:30
beIN Sports	
TSG 1899 Hoffenheim v RB Leipzig	22:30
beIN Sports	
FRENCH LEAGUE	
Angers SCO v RC Strasbourg	21:00
beIN Sports HD 9	
FCO Dijon v LOSC Lille	21:00
beIN Sports HD 6	
HSC Montpellier v FC Metz	21:00
beIN Sports HD 8	
Nimes Olympique v OGC Nice	21:00
beIN Sports HD 10	
Stade Reims v FC Nantes	21:00
beIN Sports	
Bordeaux v Saint Etienne	23:00
beIN Sports	
Lyonnais v Stade brestois	23:00
beIN Sports HD 9	
AS Monaco FC v Racing Club	23:00
beIN Sports HD 10	
Paris Saint-Germain v Lorient	23:00
beIN Sports HD 6	
Stade Rennais v Olympique Marseille	23:00
beIN Sports HD 8	

14 America's Cup 'flying machines' lift off for opening dogfights



15 Kim A-Lim storms to US Women's Open crown

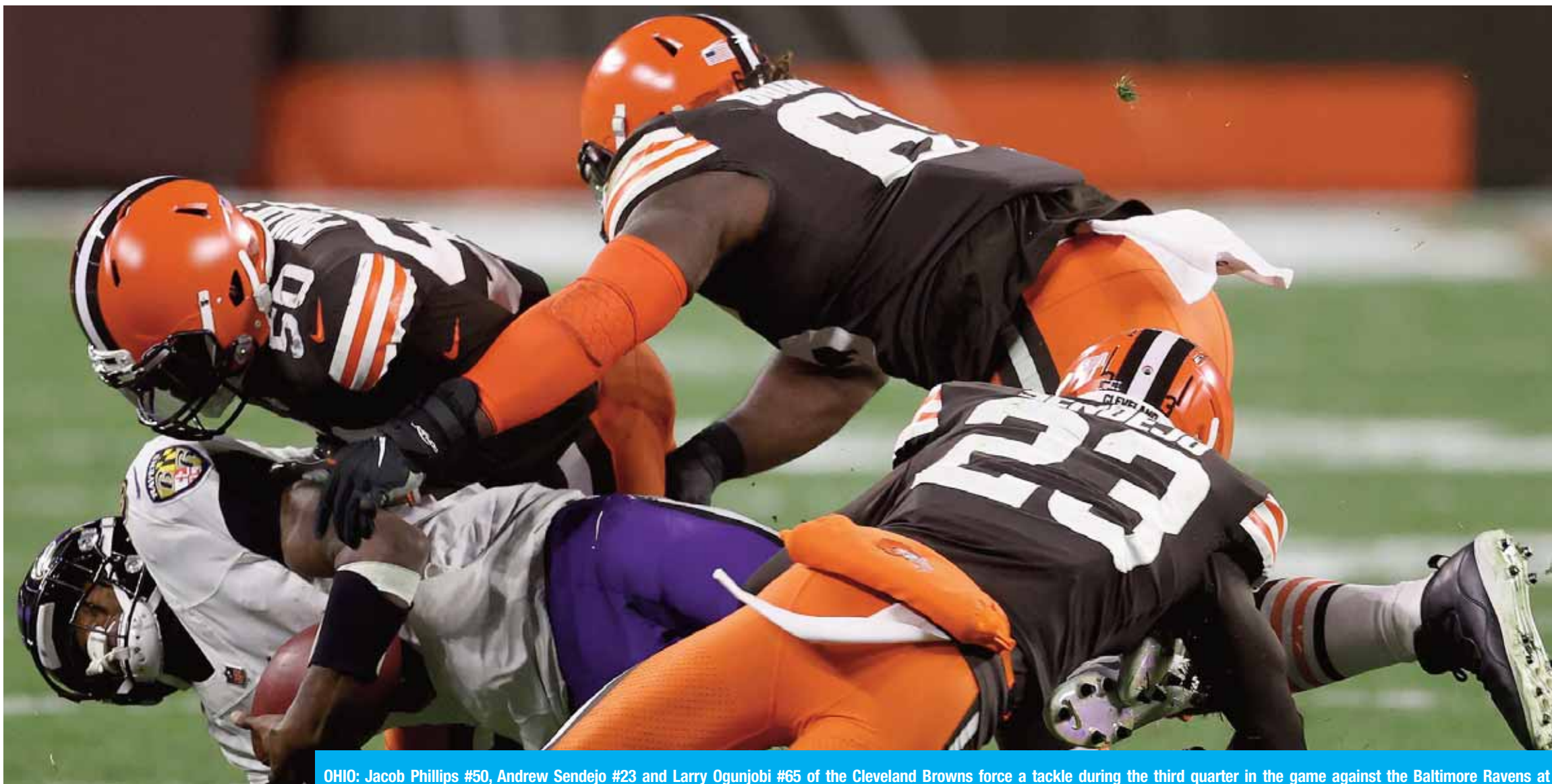


15 Tokyo unveils plan for socially distanced Olympic torch relay



Cleveland Browns lose thriller

Action Jackson rescues Ravens 47-42



OHIO: Jacob Phillips #50, Andrew Sendejo #23 and Larry Ogunjobi #65 of the Cleveland Browns force a tackle during the third quarter in the game against the Baltimore Ravens at FirstEnergy Stadium on December 14, 2020. - AFP

LOS ANGELES: Lamar Jackson inspired a dramatic fourth quarter comeback as the Baltimore Ravens kept their playoff hopes alive with a wild 47-42 victory over the Cleveland Browns on Monday. A thrilling AFC North divisional battle saw Cleveland recover from a 34-20 deficit at the end of the third quarter to take a 35-34 lead with just over six minutes remaining after quarterback Baker Mayfield rushed for a touchdown.

However Baltimore quarterback Jackson, who had been off the field after complaining of cramp, returned to the fray and scrambled to set up a 44-yard touchdown pass to Marquise Brown as the Ravens regained the lead.

Ravens running back JK Dobbins blasted over for a two-point conversion to give Baltimore a 42-35 lead with under two minutes remaining. Cleveland were anything but

finished as Mayfield led another drive 75 yards upfield to set up a tying touchdown score for Kareem Hunt to make it 42-42. Jackson however had the final say, advancing the Ravens 38 yards and into field goal range as the seconds ticked down. Kicker Justin Tucker duly converted a 55-yard field goal to effectively seal victory with two seconds remaining. From the restart, Browns receiver Jarvis Landry was forced out of his own end zone to concede a safety as the Ravens escaped with a win that sees them remain in contention for a playoff berth.

Jackson said he had demanded to return to the field after seeing back-up quarterback Trace McSorley go down following a heavy hit in the fourth quarter. "I was cramping. Back in the locker room, when I saw Trace go down, I'm like - I gotta go out there," the Ravens quarterback said. Browns quarterback Mayfield praised his opposite number's

late rescue act. "It was like a scene out of a movie," Mayfield said of Jackson's re-entry to the field. "As soon as Trace went down, to look up and see Lamar trotting back out onto the field, I was like 'Jeez'. He's just an unbelievable player."

The Ravens are now third in the AFC North with an 8-5 record, one game behind the Browns who are second on 9-4. The Pittsburgh Steelers lead the division on 11-2. The thrilling finale at Cleveland's FirstEnergy Stadium came after a roller coaster game dominated by rushing. The first eight touchdowns of a frenzied encounter came via rushing, with Jackson bagging two touchdowns in the first and second quarters. Baltimore running back Gus Edwards also had two touchdowns. The Browns ground game was led by Nick Chubb, who had 17 carries for 82 yards and two touchdowns. — AFP



OHIO: Trace McSorley #7 of the Baltimore Ravens injures his leg during the fourth quarter in the game against the Cleveland Browns at FirstEnergy Stadium on December 14, 2020 in Cleveland, Ohio. — AFP

Under-fire Arteta vows to stop Arsenal 'blip'

LONDON: Mikel Arteta insists he is strong enough to cope with the pressure of Arsenal's dismal run as the Gunners boss dismissed their recent struggles as merely a "blip". Arteta has faced calls for his sacking after Sunday's 1-0 home defeat against Burnley condemned Arsenal to their worst start to a season since 1974.

Arsenal have lost their last four home league games-their worst sequence since 1959 - and another defeat at the Emirates Stadium against in-form Southampton on Wednesday would pile further pressure on Arteta. The Spaniard was given a vote of confidence by Arsenal technical director Edu on Monday, but Arteta admitted he had to shoulder the responsibility for the team's five-match winless run in the league.

Adamant he still retains the backing of his players, Arteta told reporters on Tuesday: "My feeling is yes but this is a question for them obviously. When I see the reaction and the way they try, there's not one bit that wor-

ries me that they're not trying their best, that's for sure. "And in terms of Edu and (Manchester City manager) Pep (Guardiola), they obviously showed their appreciation, because in good moments it's very easy. "In difficult moments when you have people like them giving you support and two people that know very, very well what we've been through here, obviously it's much appreciated."

'Take the bullets'

Languishing in 15th place after seven defeats in their first 12 league games, Arsenal are closer to the relegation zone than the top four. Arteta is not concerned that Arsenal now face an unthinkable relegation battle and is confident that results will turn soon. "I want to think that we are in a blip, losing football matches makes me believe that but we need to start to win," he said. "Because just dropping and dropping down the table is not the situation we want to be in. "But this is our reality right now and we have to face it

and we have to face it being brave, fighting and no one giving up or anything. "It's not time to hide, it's time to put your face and your body on the line and at the moment, I'm sorry, but we have to take the bullets."

Arteta said he accepted that he bore "maximum responsibility" for the bad results. "At the end of the day you have to win football matches and this club is too big to accept this many losses in the last weeks. So my chest is here and hit me, guys." Granit Xhaka's needless red card for grabbing Burnley's Ashley Westwood around the neck played a key role in Arsenal's latest flop. Angry Arsenal fans have called for the volatile Swiss midfielder to be sold, but he retains Arteta's support for now.

Asked if Xhaka had apologized to Arteta and his team-mates, the Arsenal boss said the matter had been resolved "internally". "He has had tough times here and he's not the only one, there's a lot of players that have had rocky moments. "But what I can say about Granit is that his professionalism and his commitment with the club and with his team-mates is maximal. "He knows and we all know that he had a moment where he's lost it and I know the reason why. But what I cannot do is just throw everything that he has done away because he's made a mistake." — AFP

China FA to introduce salary caps in top-tier

BEIJING: China's football association will introduce salary caps for top players from January 1, in a move that could dampen the country's allure for foreign talent. Chinese nationals playing in the top-tier Chinese Super League will have their annual salaries capped at five million yuan (\$764,000) before tax, while foreigners can be paid a maximum of three million euros (\$3.65 million), the CFA said in a statement Monday.

It said the move was aimed at "curbing 'money football' and an investment bubble." Salary caps will also be for China League One and China League Two players. The caps are the latest effort in recent years to rein in spending among Chinese clubs after a series of well-

known foreign stars moved to the country on eye-watering contracts.

Brazilian attacking midfielder Oscar joined CSL side Shanghai SIPG in January 2017 for an Asian-record 60 million euros on what were reportedly some of the highest wages in football.

Argentine striker Carlos Tevez was also lured over in the same transfer window on a reported world-leading 730,000 euros a week. CFA president Chen Xuyuan told state news agency Xinhua on Monday that "the CSL club expenditure is about 10 times higher than South Korea's K-League and three times higher than Japan's J-league." "But our national team is lagging far behind," Chen said. — AFP